

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JACK R. DEWITT
14th Armored Division, US Army, World War II
1994

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DeWitt, Jack R., (b. 1918). Oral History Interview, 1994.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (116 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (116 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

DeWitt, an Oklahoma native who grew up in Lancaster, Wis. relates his World War II career as an Armory officer with Cos. A and C, 19th Armored Infantry Battalion and 14th Armored Division. DeWitt discusses his training at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas and the regional differences and the problems this caused the men at camp. He tells of his deployment overseas, and his position as a first Lieutenant of a rifle platoon. DeWitt relates perspectives on leadership in combat, enlisted-officer relations, standing army vs. draftee relations, fatalism, religion, logistics, differences between those who attended West Point and other officers, communications, looting, alcohol use, combat fatigue, use of the atomic bomb, and the capabilities of Germans weapons. He comments on the relationship developed between to service personal when one saves the other's life, and the tension and resentment between those on the front line and those stationed at headquarters. DeWitt talks about being stationed in Germany, occupying houses, and guarding prisoners. He comments on his return to Madison, resentment toward those who built up careers while he was at war, programs for returning veterans at the University of Wisconsin- Madison Law School, difficulty finding housing, and later use of a VA home loan. He touches upon his work in the 84th Airborne Division Reserves, where he served as a Brigadier General, and financial motivation for remaining in the Reserves. DeWitt details involvement in the VFW working for a veteran bonus, the Reserve Officers Association, and appointment to the County Veterans Service Commission.

Biographical Sketch

DeWitt (b. December 15, 1918), served in the 14th Armored Division during World War II and achieved the rank of Captain. He was honorably discharged February 11, 1946 and settled in Madison.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, n.d.

Transcription reviewed by David S. DeHorse and Abigail Miller, 2002

Interview Transcript

Van Ellis: The date is July 1, 1994. I'm Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history today with Mr. Jack DeWitt, a World War II veteran. Jack, is that John?

DeWitt: No, Jack.

Van Ellis: Is your given name. Okay. Often times--

DeWitt: --by Dick but I go mostly by Jack.

Van Ellis: As we were discussing before we turned the tape on, Mr. DeWitt has a fine memoir and it's in the archives of the Museum and any researcher using this should first consult this fine text that he wrote. And the questions that I'm going to be asking today are an attempt to expand upon that. The first thing I wanted to ask was some personal memories about the outbreak of World War II and especially Pearl Harbor. Now you were born a little earlier. You were older than a lot of the soldiers who were fighting so you, perhaps, have little more memory of Hitler's invasion of Poland, perhaps? Do you remember this?

DeWitt: Yes, I do. I remember I was a student at the time going to Law School at the University of Wisconsin and I also had a full-time job at Oscar Mayer as a laborer. At first I didn't pay very much attention to it. One of the things that I really remember is that when I was going to Law School during summer school someone put a swastika on the front steps of the Law School. A bunch of us were standing around in front, didn't pay any attention, didn't mean much to us, you know, and our professor, Ray Brown, was a very gentlemanly fellow who seldom raised his voice. He talked with an Eastern accent, but all of a sudden he came up to, at class, he ripped that thing off the wall, off the door and when he went into class he told us that this was a terrible thing to put on there and so forth. That was the first time that I really paid an awful lot of attention to it.

Van Ellis: This was about what year?

DeWitt: This would be in, it would have to be '40 I would think. Probably. I'm not sure just exactly when these events occurred. I do definitely remember Pearl Harbor Day and I remember before that at the packinghouse the fellows would talk. You know, the Russians, the Germans and Russians were fighting and probably more of them wanted the Germans to win than the Russians. For the most part people would like to have them kill each other off. You know, they weren't favoring either one of them, really.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Van Ellis: So, you remember the exact time you first heard about the Pearl Harbor bombing. You know, you hear people say they remember when Kennedy was shot. Was this a memory like that for you?

DeWitt: I'd been off at a party the night before and woke up to hear of it. Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

Van Ellis: And what did you think? Do you remember?

DeWitt: My god, we're in it. I mean it was pretty obvious that we were edging more and more toward it but it was very, very different. It was interesting to me to observe the fellows at the packing house. They didn't care anything about, you know, the Germans and Russians looked pretty much like us. But once the Japanese got in it, let's get those 'slant eyed son-of-a-bitches'. You know, there was enough different racially than most fellows working up there. That was the attitude. It really brought America, unified us a great deal, the fact that, and reading since, it looks like the Japanese were kind of pushed into what they had to do there but at the time it was portrayed as a sneak attack against the Americans and these people are different and, you know, they demonized the Japanese.

Van Ellis: On this information sheet here, it says you were born in 1918?

DeWitt: Yeah, I was born just after World War I ended. I was born December 15 and the war ended the 11th of November. My dad was still overseas.

Van Ellis: Oh, your dad was in World War I? Oh, you mentioned that here, I do recall that actually. Were you born in Madison here?

DeWitt: No. I was born in Oklahoma.

Van Ellis: Oh, Oklahoma.

DeWitt: An Okie from Muskogee.

Van Ellis: How'd you get up here?

Interview Transcript (continued)

DeWitt: Well, my dad was a Wisconsin boy and when he went to Oklahoma, married my mother down there who had lived there since she moved from Arkansas in the Indian Territories as a girl and when dad made a lot of money down there but then he went through bankruptcy, went broke, and we moved to Wisconsin. We lived for a while with my uncle in Bloomer, Wisconsin. Then we moved to Lancaster. I went to high school there.

Van Ellis: I see. Okay. Had you thought about a military career prior to Pearl Harbor? I didn't get that impression in the memoir.

DeWitt: No. The only time I thought at all about a military career is that we didn't have much money and my mother thought that West Point was an opportunity to get a free education, so I was interested in going there, willing to be a soldier if necessary to get an education. She hadn't had the opportunity for an education herself and was very insistent that I get one. So, other than that I didn't have any great desire to be a soldier.

Van Ellis: I see. Okay. And then you entered the military and you were training in the South, at Fort Chaffee?

DeWitt:: It was then called Camp Chaffee.

Van Ellis: Chaffee.

DeWitt: Chaffee is how they pronounce it.

Van Ellis: See I was in the Air Force. I don't know. And again, in this memoir, you describe your activities down there in excellent detail. I'm wondering if you could comment, perhaps, on your reflections on life in the South at the time. Did you get off the base much? As a Northern guy, well you were born down there too. That complicates my question.

DeWitt: That wasn't a problem for me really because my mother was born near Fayetteville, Arkansas, a little town of Farmington, and so, and her name was Smith, so we had a few relatives down there in the Ozark Hills and I had 2 of my mother's first cousins, my second cousins. One was a teacher at Fort Smith and the other one worked for the Red Cross at Fort Smith. And I looked them up so I had a place to go there, visit with them, they'd fix a nice meal. So it was no problem for me and no cultural difference that I wasn't familiar with. See Muskogee is just across the line and they played Fort Smith in baseball and that sort of thing so I had no problem with the culture shock.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Van Ellis: For you personally. But did you notice some of the people you were with, perhaps. Because you were out in the town and you could see both sides, I would imagine.

DeWitt: I could. It was comical. One fellow I speak about in there named Walter Yankee from over at Watertown. He had--when he met, they hooked on a train of Southern fellows when we were moving down there and he just about went crazy trying to communicate because, you know, he talked with a German accent, you know, and these people were Crackers and they got along fine once we got down there and knew each other. But it was just a strange thing to him, you know.

Van Ellis: Uh hum.

DeWitt: But we found out, the people I had the least contact with were those fellows. I worked in West Texas as a boy and, of course, I lived in Oklahoma until I was about 14, and so I was familiar with the Southwest and the Midwest. The people that were new to me were the Easterners. I'd known a few of those fellows in college that came here as students from New York. But I hadn't known many of the guys that were street smart off the streets of Brooklyn and places like that. But you know, you find out we're all pretty much alike.

Van Ellis: Okay. Let's move on a little here. And so you went over to Europe in 194?

DeWitt: '44.

Van Ellis: 13th Armored Division?

DeWitt: No, 14th.

Van Ellis: 14th. I'm sorry. I just read this. I'm wondering, you were a lieutenant.

DeWitt: When we went overseas. I enlisted as a private but, yes, I was a first lieutenant when we went overseas. I'd been real well trained because I'd, see I'd been a battalion staff officer for a while and I commanded a headquarters company, a tank battalion throughout maneuvers. Then they shipped me down to the infantry a few months before we went overseas. I was fortunate that I got assigned to the commander of a rifle platoon but it was really the best rifle platoon in the division because every time we had a contest, we won it.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Van Ellis: Well, congratulations. I wonder if you could comment on officer/enlisted relationships. When I was in the service, I was in the Air Force, and I worked in the hospital clinic, and it wasn't, it was kind of like M-A-S-H. The discipline wasn't--

DeWitt: Yeah. I started out in the medics, you know. It's a different deal. The thing I noticed there was that the, I thought that as far as the medical officers were concerned, they respected a guy more for his medical abilities than for his rank because some higher ranking guys were simply guys that had been in the guard or something like that, you know. And most of those officers were newly in the service. Didn't know anything more about the military. They'd had a little orientation but they, some didn't know their left foot from their right foot, you know. But it didn't mean they weren't good doctors. But, it was a different; it depended on the particular individuals. I think that, you know, there's more of a disciplinary problem when you get into a tank outfit or an infantry than there is in the medics because you're working in treatment and medics or you are working in a litter platoon or an ambulance platoon or something like this. Well, there in the tanks, you've got to have, the crew's got to know that when the sergeant or lieutenant whose in charge that they immediately do their job and there's team work and they've got to be disciplined to do that. And the same thing in the infantry. Each man in the squad has a job to do and he's got to respond like a quarterback in a football game. They've got to learn to immediately respond to what that sergeant or the lieutenant or whoever it might be, says. I'd say that the relationship between officers and enlisted men was typically a lot different. The place where I noticed it the, worst arrangement that I saw, was with West Pointers that I commanded at Headquarters Company. We had a lieutenant colonel, West Point, and a major, West Point, who, in my opinion, didn't give a damn about the men and were more interested in their own comfort and so forth and felt they should be something extra special because they were wearing the West Point ring. I think that other than that most guard officers and most reserve officers and fellows that went to OCS recognized that I've got a job to do. They put this bar or railroad tracks or leaf or whatever it is on my shoulder to do a job and I mean these people are the same as I am and, you know, I treat them right they're going to treat me right. You know, just the golden rule. But I, it's hard for a young fellow to spend 4 years and everyone there that is doing something because they wanted to do it and being told that you're better than other people and you know more and so forth and then you come to an outfit that has some old sergeant whose been there for 20 years would the lieutenant like a cup of coffee, you know, and acted like you're god or something. Some of them were smart enough not to buy that but sometimes it goes to their head and some of them never seem to get over it. That's not unique to them. I mean, they're officers that no matter how they got their commission that think they're something special because they got to

Interview Transcript (continued)

be an officer rather than--Uncle Sam's Army and I've got a role to play and do the best job I can.

Van Ellis: Did you find, perhaps, it's just a suspicion I would have, that the career Army officers might be more interested in their prerogatives as opposed to National Guardsmen or someone such as yourself that came in simply because of the war. I'm interested in the tension between the old Army and then the new guys coming in.

DeWitt: Well, I think there was tension not only between the officers and the enlisted men, but officers and officers because you'd find that, as you suggest, some of the regular officers, the West Point boys and so forth, are thinking more of their own career and how good they're going to look whether than what the hell I've got a job to do, I've got someplace to go and this is all over, which is the way most of us felt. Similarly, with the enlisted men. You'd have some old line NCOs that, you know, it was their career. And they're concerned about someone getting ahead of them and what happened to a lot of these fellows because the Army expanded so greatly, they were moved up in positions where they're really in over their heads. The Peter Principle, and there were smarter guys coming in. We saw that a lot shortly before we went overseas and we had all of our table organization positions for sergeants and corporals and so forth filled, then you've got an influx. They cashiered the Air Corps Cadet Program. Here were fellows that all would have been officers, they're younger guys for the most part, but all of a sudden they're sent to the infantry. Similarly, there was the ASTP Program where the young men were going to college and all these people were officer material. Practically all of them were, all of a sudden they cancelled that program and they're sent down to the infantry. And that was quite a shock to these fellows from the Air Corps Cadets and from ASTP because, well, they'd been going to colleges and being treated like gentlemen and so forth and all of a sudden, 'Fall in you sons-of-bitches' and so it was a very shocking thing to some of them to suddenly be in the infantry.

Van Ellis: Okay.

DeWitt: And it was hard for these older, regular NCOs who could see that these fellows were smarter than they were in many instances and yet they had to be in command of them because, as long as you didn't do anything bad enough to loose their rank, you couldn't just say here's a sergeant or a corporal that's been doing the job, thought he was good enough to have it, just because someone is more able than him that could do the job better, you can't just suddenly change that. It created tension there.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Van Ellis: Interesting. As a combat officer, I'm wondering if you could comment on the importance of leadership in combat. I know officers are, I was enlisted, but from what I've been able to gather, leadership is an important principle.

DeWitt: Not only officers but NCOs, too. It's crucial, absolutely crucial because the people that you're, you've got two things to really think about. You've got an objective or a mission to take care of and the next thing you've got to do is to take care of the men that are, you've been assigned to command. If you aren't concerned about them and looking after them, they're going to lose confidence in you and if you don't, of course the most important thing in leadership is knowing your job. You can't fool a GI if you are really bluffing and don't know what the hell you're doing they'll find out real fast. But if you know your job, whether you've got a poor or a great personality, and they like you a lot, they're still going to respect you a lot if you know the job and they're going to respect you still more if they feel that you've got their interests at heart and try to bring back as many of them safely as you can. That was the main thing about leadership. There are lots of other things. The idea there in the infantry, you can't go out there every time and be in front, there's certain jobs, the worst job that people don't understand, they've got the idea that everyone makes an attack at the same time. Most of the time, what you're doing, you've got two guys out there as scouts in a rifle platoon and they're out there and their the first ones the enemies got the chance to see. Hopefully, they see the enemy first. But they're up there time after time after time after time. But they're not going to keep going up there unless the sergeant is commanding them, or the lieutenant, gets up there with them quite a bit and you really can't do a good job as a sergeant or lieutenant unless you're up there close to the scouts where you can see what's developing and you can make the proper orders to try to accomplish your mission.

Van Ellis: Do you see many examples of bad leadership? My impression from your memoir was that you seemed generally happy with your colleagues.

DeWitt: Overseas, for the most part, I was pretty happy with most of the guys. I was very unhappy with the leadership demonstrated on maneuvers by several, by the commander of the battalion.

Van Ellis: What was the problem?

DeWitt: Incidentally, he got shot in his first battle over there.

Van Ellis: By the Germans?

Interview Transcript (continued)

DeWitt: By the Germans, yea. A fellow from Madison here was in the tank with him, in fact was the fellow that dragged him out of the burning tank and he said this fellow never so much as sent him a Christmas card. That tells you kind of the sort of guy he was. I didn't have much respect for him or the staff that he put around me. But overseas, for the most part, yea, there were people that I lost respect for over there. You know the fellow that put me in for the Distinguished Service Cross, I lost a lot of respect for. He was a very aggressive guy in the states. I didn't have much dealing with him in the states but he had a reputation as a very tough, aggressive guy and overseas he was well in the rear it seemed to me, all the time and then talking to us about how tough we should be. When we were in the Alps he was way down in a very pleasant place in the Riviera there. When we, at the time, when we were assigned to protect his headquarters, I've got this in the book, he and his staff were all laying on their stomachs in this headquarters and a plane came over and it dropped a flare which calls for us to give a signal of where the front lines are. Well, you need to know what signals to give, you have to have a document called Signal Operating Instructions, and I didn't have that as a lieutenant. I was asking them for it and no one could get that for me. As a consequence, a plane dropped a bomb. I don't think it killed anybody but it shook some people up. I wasn't impressed with him there and I wasn't impressed with him in our most serious battle up at Hatton where he stayed back in a blockhouse miles behind where we were and didn't come up himself a single time to visit. We were there over a week; between one and two weeks there, and neither he came or nor had a staff officer come up to that town where we were fighting. I--my idea of leadership. There's an instance at high headquarters that I didn't have confidence in him and I had a very dim view of our division's chief of staff. Someone put him in for a Silver Star because he sent some donuts up to us when we were up that at Hatton wondering if we were going to be alive the next minute and he'd send down his aid to loot things and then they'd issued these orders--don't let the men do any looting.

Van Ellis: You mentioned that in your--

DeWitt: There's some guys overseas that I didn't have respect for, that I lost respect for. But for the most part, the guys that I was most immediately with, I had a lot of respect for my battalion commander. I had a lot of respect for the guy who had initially been my regimental commander, Iron Mike Westby, I thought did a pretty good job overseas and, certainly, the colleagues that I had in my battalion and most of the tankers and the engineers and the artillerymen that were attached to us, in support of us, and so forth.

Van Ellis: What about NCOs?

Interview Transcript (continued)

DeWitt: I had some great NCOs. I think the best soldier I ever ran across was a guy who was a squad leader when we went overseas and he became my platoon sergeant. And after the war, he got, he took over my old platoon when I transferred to another company and he kept in touch over the years. He saved my life a few times, I guess about 80 or so.

Van Ellis: You send him a Christmas card?

DeWitt: More than that. I'm in touch and I've got his picture in my office and every time I used to think things were a little tough, I'd look over there--think a little. I'd see his face.

Van Ellis: That's interesting. I wonder if you could kind of back track a little bit. I wonder if you could comment on some of the training you received. Now you were being trained in '43 or so.

DeWitt: We were being trained, let's see. I went to, I got out of OCS at the end of 1942 and went to this tank, it was a tank regiment at that time and I was in the 2nd battalion of the 48th Armored Regiment. And I think we had very good training. It was an awful lot of what the Army knows as chicken shit, you know, pettiness.

Van Ellis: We'll save that concept for later portion.

DeWitt: But in terms of training, we had I think the finest officer that I knew of who was General Pritchard who commanded the division and he was a guy that I tried to pattern myself after as an officer. He was insistent about training and he knew his business, he was a fine looking soldier and he was a very bright, able guy and a person that had a lot of rapport with the men. He could talk to senior officers at the highest level and he could talk to a private or a sergeant and he'd be down there checking the training. So it was--when you had officer schools there and so forth and I was fortunate enough to be, after I was there a short period of time, well, I was immediately assigned as liaison officer--most the time at headquarters company men training in basic stuff but then shortly thereafter they made me what they call S3--battalion staff job which was really a captain's job although I was only a 2nd lieutenant but it permitted me to go to command post exercises and so forth and I could see, I was in touch with regiments, getting orders from regiment and I'd have to prepare orders and send them down to the companies and so forth, so I got an understanding about staff work and had a chance to participate in problems and a lot of material came over my desk about combat tips and so forth, which I assiduously read so I had a better opportunity than most officers did to improve myself and keep up-to-date on things.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Van Ellis: You felt well-prepared then going in, when you went to Europe?

DeWitt: Yea, because I had, you see, I normally had a company all through maneuvers. I then went down and trained for several months with the same platoon so I knew these men--and I was out there just about every day. The captain would stay in and do administrative stuff and almost every day I had the whole company. There'd be other officers with me sometimes. I wouldn't necessarily be in charge but I was with the men every day so I knew not only the men in my platoon but I knew every man in that company, some of them much better. The ones in my own platoon, of course, I knew best. I felt that, yes, I was well trained and my platoon was well trained. We'd been, when I went to the infantry, they'd already been on Tennessee maneuvers and I, of course, had been there as a tanker and headquarters company commander. But after that, you were running squad and platoon problems all the time and then we'd have battalion problems and so forth. It was really pretty realistic training so I felt, you know, when I talked to other veterans and who hastily some of them were trained and shoved in the circumstances that they really didn't know what to do, I felt I had been well trained and I knew my job when I got over there and the men that I had, the sergeants particularly, knew their job and so we were, you know, we hadn't been blooded but we knew essentially what we were supposed to do.

Van Ellis: Let's get back to 'chicken shit'. Give me your definition of what it is.

DeWitt: It's petty. It's pettiness. It's doing things that really don't do a damn thing towards accomplish your mission. It's just harassing people and showing them that you're the boss and they're something beneath you and you want them to lick your boots or kiss your ass and that's the kind of thing that people deeply resent and there's an awful lot of it in the Army. When we were in the old armored regiment, there's never a night that these men could go to town hardly because they always were cleaning those damned tanks and so forth. One of the things I remember, they're going to an inspection. These men were ordered to go in the night before and show the company commander -- now this is, the job's sergeant, the job's corporal should be given to see if the men have got their shoes polished. Their job's sergeant should be given, their job's officer should be given, junior officers and seniors. Well here, they're always having, the NCOs didn't have much of a chance to develop in that situation because you had officers doing what should have been done by corporals and sergeants. As a consequence, there wasn't the development there should have been by the NCOs and there was resentment because you were, things that every soldier should have been able to take care of himself, were being harassed by the NCO because they're getting chewed out by the lieutenants. They're getting chewed out by the

Interview Transcript (continued)

captains and just a constant -- I was explaining this one situation. We're having a division inspection so they're bucking to have less gigs than the next regiment. So each man had to go in and not show one of the lieutenants or sergeants, you've got to show the company commander, that he's got a clean set of fatigues to wear at inspection. Then they marched the men down in their underwear to the motor pool, get in the tanks, drive them out there, then put on their uniforms so they look clean. You have to have, every man as a practical matter, had to have a, some things that make sense are basically just driven to the ground by people being ridiculous about them. Anyone with any brains knows that it's a good idea in giving instruction, to have a training aid. Well, one of things that I, some fellow was talking about malaria control. So what does he have as a training aid? Well obviously, a screen will help to keep mosquitoes out of a barracks. This guy has a screen door brought in as a training aid. Well, there's a screen door on every barracks, you know. So it isn't too difficult for the men to visualize what a screen door is you know. But that's his idea of, getting brownie points, showing, 'hey, I've got a training aid for my lecture.' There was, as far as the lieutenants were concerned, in Iron Mike Gillespie's outfit, he just dreamed up things for them to do so that they were constantly harassed. I mean, they had, one of the things that they had to do, they had officers--obviously have to have guard duty. You have officer of the day, officer of the guard and that sort of thing and certain man on guard. But in addition to that, he had, one of the things, was that officers were assigned each night to go through the barracks and see that enough windows were up so that the men had enough fresh air in there. Well, I mean, it's hardly necessary that, you know, no one should even be promoted to corporal that hasn't got enough sense to have the responsibility to see that the windows were up. But he didn't trust anybody. Iron Mike had been a, I think he was over in World War I and he got to be a First Lieutenant for a long time in the MPs, is what I heard, in the islands. And of course, the guy, he didn't believe that anyone but him and a few of his superiors really was out to do the job for the Army when everybody else was trying to screw the service. So he was constantly chewing people out. One of the things that I cite in there which I thought was the height of 'chicken shit' is there's a fellow named Caption Orion where he was temporarily acting as battalion commander and I was his staff. We needed to go over to the laundry for something and we had this driver, a fellow named Beecher, who drove us over there and on the way back we were stopped by some people from ordinance. And what these guys would do, they were just absolutely nuts--

Van Ellis: Hang on a second. [Interruption] Okay.

DeWitt: So Beecher was driving and what they were always emphasizing the maintenance of these damned vehicles. I often wanted to buy one of those,

Interview Transcript (continued)

we called them 'peeps' in the Army, people called them 'jeeps' usually, buy one and just weld the hood down because I think that more damage was done by this constant inspection of them. There's always on deadline, those tanks, there's always a bunch of them on deadline. And one of the things that we were taught to go down and respect, you know. Well, this maintenance officer. Well, there's always one thing you could get them on. You're supposed to have grease on your battery terminal. You can always go in and run your finger over and say 'too much grease on battery terminal' or 'not enough grease on battery terminal.' Who's to say whether there's too much or too little? You felt like an idiot going in and here are guys who've been studied, were mechanics in civilian life. I don't know anything about mechanics, to go in there and inspect these things, you know. But some of these guys just gloried in that. And of course, the ordinance people are the higher echelon as far as maintenance of vehicles are concerned, and they would give, they would stop vehicles, any vehicle--2 1/2 ton truck, a 'peep' or anything else, and make, no matter what kind of a mission the guy was on, this has high priority. You had to stop and these guys would practically take the thing apart and put it back together again to check everything out 'cause there were certain things that the driver had to do. Well, we stopped and they went through Beecher's 'peep' and they couldn't find anything wrong with it. Well, the following day, a day or so later, I happened to be in Regimental Headquarters and Iron Mike, every day, had captains, company commanders and first sergeants up there and I saw the headquarters company guy was commanding and the first sergeant and Beecher sitting up there waiting to go in and see Iron Mike, along with a bunch of other captains and first sergeants and people. What the hell is this? What's Beecher doing up here? Well, they said he got gigged on a TI inspection. What the hell, I said. I was there. They couldn't find anything wrong. I told Captain Ore he ought to write him a letter of commendation because it's the only time I've ever seen it that they couldn't find anything wrong. Well, he said he didn't have the second key wrapped around the steering wheel. This is the big deal. He's taking the time of a company commander, a first sergeant, and a soldier who's supposed to be driving a jeep for somebody. To cool their heels there in this office to go in and get their butt chewed by Iron Mike because he forgot one little thing that hadn't got a goddamn thing to do with whether or not the jeep will operate. So it was that kind of thing.

Van Ellis: So, what's the purpose of this? Is there, I mean 'cause you were in a leadership position. Perhaps you were--

DeWitt: The purpose of some things makes some sense. You say if the officers don't carry it too far. There's a reason for saying you make your bed in a certain way and that you hang your clothes in a certain way and that you have certain things available for inspection because you want, as far as inspection

Interview Transcript (continued)

is concerned having a razor and this sort of thing, that's in case you get suddenly called to the field. You know the guy has got everything that he needs in terms of personal stuff. The idea of making a bed so that you can bounce a quarter off it and so forth, that obviously, is not going to make a difference as how well a guy fights. The one thing it does, it shows you that when we tell you to do it our way, you're going to do it. It's the same thing as a quarterback if you say you're playing guard and that quarterback gives a signal, you're supposed to pull out on this particular thing and do your job. So you get them used to hearing the command voice of that sergeant, that lieutenant, that corporal, and so forth, and get them used to doing it, when you say 'I want it done my way, you do it this way'. So, there's a purpose in that. But where it gets to the point where we're going around and obviously you want the men to have a clean barracks but if there's a broom straw that's left in the latrine someplace, it isn't the end of the world you know and some poor devil that's the latrine orderly is getting chewed out for that and every little detail that they make, if a guy really thinks that's important, he's crazy. But there are officers, people have got, I was trained as a lawyer before I went into the service. So I got a sense of well-uppence and some people have and some people don't. I mean, you've got some things are important, some things are unimportant. And you want to stress the important things. Sure you've got to give these other things a whack and a promise. But there, unfortunately, officers as well as NCOs in the Army that think it's the biggest deal in the world to have the cleanest barracks. Well, you want it clean but I don't think there's any, I'm much more honored by having a platoon or a company that does better in a field exercise than I am in having the cleanest barracks or the tastiest mess. Sure you want the men to have good food and so forth but I, it's a question. Some officers get obsessed with that; some NCOs get obsessed with that stuff. They don't have a sense of relative

importance of these things and that's were a lot of the 'chicken shit' comes in.

Van Ellis: And did you notice that 'chicken shit' had changed from stateside to overseas? How was it different while you were in combat, on the line? Or was it different?

DeWitt: I think it was a lot different overseas because you had to work with this people and you began to respect people for what they did in combat rather than for what was on their shoulder. There were certain, when you really got down to the fighting it was done by an awfully small group of guys. When we'd take an objective, I'd look around and much of the same guys up there on the front. Time after time, after time, the same officers, the same NCOs, the same privates. Some of the guys were 8-balls overseas, in the states, damn good soldiers because you're, the discipline is looser in some respects

Interview Transcript (continued)

and it's tougher in others. I mean, if some guy is going to bug out or something like that, you're going to go over and kick him in the butt overseas when you might just chew him out a little in the states because lives are on the line there and you've got to insist that things be done right. But, as far as the pettiness and so forth, there's a lot less than that overseas than there was in the states.

Van Ellis: I wonder if you could comment on--

DeWitt: I would say though, there was a difference in the states, too. When I went down to the infantry, there was a lot less 'chicken shit' there than there was in the tanks. And a lot less work for the men to do really because, yeah, they had Half-tracks but they're a lot easier to clean than a tank. You see, a tank has got, you know, in those days you've got 75 mm. Then you had a 50 caliber typically for the tank commander. You had a, there was a coaxial 30 caliber machine gun and there was a bow gunner's machine gun. Then each man had his individual weapon. Well, the infantry, those 1/2 tracks, you've either got a 30 or 50 caliber machine gun. Then each man has got his own weapon. Then you've got a whole squad of guys to clean the Half-track and so forth while, in the tanks, you've only got at most 5 guys and someone's usually away on leave or in the hospital or something so you've got sometimes only 3 guys to do all of that damn cleaning. So it was, there was a lot less of that sort of housekeeping work that you had to do in the infantry and a lot more people to do it. And a lot less 'chicken shit'.

Van Ellis: I wonder if you could comment on the tension, perhaps, between front line soldiers and those in the rear. Was there a lot of resentment? A kind of a front ideology?

DeWitt: Yes, yes. Absolutely. I read War and Peace after the war, and I, there's a relationship between two guys that are close friends and one becomes on the staff and the other's a front line soldier. You go back and read it, there's the tension. And I had the same thing. I felt the same thing about guys who had been my buddies in the states. This one fellow was in a battalion, in a combat command staff at the time of Beronthal when we were protecting that headquarters. And he left his post there. He was supposed to be running this fancy radio and I lost respect for the guy and of course there's a completely different feeling because this is the first time he's really been anywhere near combat and I'm seeing it day after day. And when we used to say, we'd call someone in a rear echelon a 'son of a bitch' the rear echelon was more appropriate than, not more appropriate, but a sign of approval rather than 'son of a bitch' because the resentment was that those guys were back there and they were always living better and they're not facing danger. And, in many instances, they were drawing goose eggs on a map and telling

Interview Transcript (continued)

you where to go and then bitching because you didn't get there soon enough. And so, there is a lot of resentment.

Van Ellis: Looking back on it--

DeWitt: Then we'd go back and these guys would very often, you know, you see these pictures of, you know 'Join the Army'. Here's a guy with his rifle at high court. It looks like he's All American football player. And you look to some of those guys you had, some guy that was dragged down to the draft board, hanging onto the bed post, 40 years old or some little shrimp that can hardly carry his rifle and yet you've got, they've got to go with all the rest of the guys that are really in better condition and better prepared and better soldiers. So you go back and see someone who's an All American fullback handing out socks at the quartermaster or something like that, you know, why isn't that son-of-a-bitch up here with us. There's that feeling, you know, and then if you had someone who had political influence that you'd read about that had some kind of a cushy job or you'd go back to one of these headquarters and you just led a patrol and you've reported back where the enemy was and you go back to a headquarters where they're relatively pretty safe and those bastards haven't even posted on the map and you're sending someone else out there, not letting them know that there's enemy out there, you resent that sort of thing.

Van Ellis: For the guys out in the front line, how did you view people back in the States? Not just the women and children but guys working in the factories or whatever?

DeWitt: Oh, I think we resented it. I mean, I remember we had a fellow named Perry, I write about him, he's a real idiot. Perry got a Section 8, put out of the Army. I remember we were over there, one of the guys got a letter from Perry and he's making \$3.00 and something at some defense plant and I had to wonder, who's crazy? Him or us? We were getting shot at and he's back there with a good job someplace in upstate New York. So, yeah, there's resentment about guys back in the States that are making good money and sleeping with the girls and so forth and we're over there getting shot at. I think there is one thing about it, we knew about sacrifices being made by civilians because we hear from all over the States to know that you had to have points to get meat, you had to have points to get gasoline and all this sort of thing. So there was sacrifices being made. Relatively pretty small, sacrifices about life but still people are behind in trying to do things. And then when we'd get mail from home, people would tell us and we know that maybe, the interesting thing, a lot of times someone would save up points and send us a can of Spam or something like that which we had plenty of and didn't need more of but it was a sacrifice to them. We knew that they'd

Interview Transcript (continued)

given up red meat points or what the hell it was to get that over to us. I don't think that, generally there was deep--

[SIDE A, TAPE 1, ENDS]

DeWitt: -- understand the resentment we had, I think, was really only about those guys that we thought were ducking servicing.

Van Ellis: Shirkers?

DeWitt: Yeah.

Van Ellis: That was the term? In your book here, you make some references to religious convictions. And I was reading Paul Fussell and he seems to contend that a lot of the guys on the front weren't religious and it wasn't necessarily so much that there's no atheist in a fox hole but guys were kind of fatalistic. I'm wondering if you could comment on that.

DeWitt: Well, I think you get fatalistic because when there's no reason on Earth to say 'Why did that shell hit the guy next to me and not me?' You feel a little guilty about it, as a matter of fact. But I do think that, my own reaction was that I became a lot more religious and I think this is true of most of the guys. Of course, you've got all kinds of people there. But the main reason we're fighting is not because of the flag. You're fighting because the guys over there that you're depending on and depending on you and each night I prayed real hard 'Please God, don't let me let these guys down.' I think most of the guys were pretty religious when we crossed the border.

Van Ellis: Okay. So, it's pretty much true that there are no atheists in the foxhole?

DeWitt: I think that's pretty true. I was one of them that weren't an atheist. First time I went to church over there, the captain said 'I think the church is going to cave in.' That artillery is coming in; there's nothing you can really do about it except pray.

Van Ellis: Overseas, especially in this book by Lee Kennett here. I was reading about black market activities. Did you see much of that? And what sort of alcohol and--

DeWitt: The only thing I saw about it, we got a PX ration that came up from time to time. There was, you had all kinds of, they sent up candy and chewing gum, cigarettes, that sort of thing. Well, what we'd do if a guy was lucky enough to get a pass to go back to Paris or somewhere like that, a lot of the guys didn't smoke so we, a lot of the stuff and guys took them in and if they ran out of money they just sell some of these or they'd use the cigarettes as tips,

Interview Transcript (continued)

you know, and so forth, because the French were eager to get those things. We read a lot about black marketing but we weren't around big cities, typically. We were fighting to take these villages and so forth. We were in Alsace, except for the very first part, we were down in those mountains on the Italian border, we were in Alsace. And then we went from Alsace into Germany. So I didn't see any evidence of black marketing during that period. I knew there was black marketing in Paris. I make no bones about it. I went in myself. I took cigarettes along with me--and sold them on the black market.

Van Ellis: I see. My next thing on the list here is 'quality of equipment.' Could you--could you comment on, like for example, I made a note here, US versus German tanks. The Panzers were very feared.

DeWitt: I think that they had, they had the 88 you know on their Tiger tank which was certainly better than, at the time we got over there we initially had 75s. They got 76s which had a higher muzzle velocity but they were still outgunned by the 90s. And then we got some 105s over there. But I don't think the 105 had as high a muzzle velocity as the 88 did. I think that 88 was a superior weapon, the Tiger tank generally was a better tank. The great advantage the Americans had was the tremendous ability to grind, to get more and more and more of them and our equipment was such that we had the supply and logistical setup for not only moving in new equipment but getting spare parts. And the ability to cannibalize from one tank, one truck, one jeep to another, gave us a tremendous advantage over the Germans because once their equipment got knocked out, they couldn't replace it as efficiently. We had a better system; we had more of it. I think our rifle was as good as the German rifle. It was pretty comparable. That burp gun that they had had an extremely high rate of fire and one thing, they had smokeless powder and our machine guns could be detected easier than their machine guns. I'd say that their ammunition was advantageous there. Other than that, I thought generally our equipment was pretty good. One thing that was disappointing to me but I knew it, found out about in the States, was the communications. Theoretically, we had wonderful communications with all these radios we had. But you noticed over there, just at the time you'd need the damn things they'd go out. So wherever, I always tried to have wire with us, that we always had runner, that if the wire was cut and the radio wasn't working, we'd have some--because communications was absolutely crucial if you're going to control a battle.

Van Ellis: Did you ever find yourself having equipment shortages or anything like that?

DeWitt: Yeah, there was sometimes various things that would come up. I don't recall any specific instances, however.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Van Ellis: Let's move on to the Germans. Did you find them a worthy adversary? Were they, in your opinion, how would you rate the German soldier and the-
-in general?

DeWitt: They were tough. Towards the end we were fighting against older men and kids and so forth but they all knew how to pull a trigger. A lot of men were still dying. I was not one of those that was eager to have Patton go ahead and take Berlin or anything like that. I was happy about the Russians, take as many as they could. Save as many of our men as we could. But I think that was Eisenhower's attitude, too.

Van Ellis: You found them effective fighters?

DeWitt: Sure. The way I look at it whether a guy's German or a Frenchman or an Englishman, there is a very small number of men that were actually aggressive and real top rate soldiers. Small number of them. And a lot of those guys were gravitating, the Germans would have like the SS--and we've got them and the paratroopers and we've got them in the Marines and so forth. But in these other outfits, there's a small number of guys just as good. There's a lot of guys that aren't that good but they'll do their job and you got some real 8-balls that aren't worth a damn. You've got to push and drag them and kick them to get them to fight. And that's true, I'm sure, in everyplace. I can remember very early in the game seeing a German patrol down there, I wrote about it in the book I think, down on the, we were in the mountains on the Italian border. There was a German squad leader doing just a first rate job. One 8-ball that didn't take advantage of covering and concealment, he stands up, we spot him and then, once you spot that first guy, you know there's going to be others around. Then you spot the rest of them and you start dropping some shells in there. They had 8-balls, we had 8-balls. The English and the French and the Japanese, everyone else has them and we all have some--soldiers. Yeah, I thought the Germans were a worthy adversary from the standpoint of fighting. I hated what they stood for. The idea of racial superiority. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to separate that from hating the people.

Van Ellis: That leads into what I was getting into next. I'm wondering if you could comment on you and your soldier's relationships with the French when you were in Alsace and then how that changed when you moved into Germany.

DeWitt: Well, we didn't trust the Alsatians too much. We had decent relationships with them and they were generally nice to us but we were suspicious because many of them, as many of them speak German as speak French. That Alsace--has been changed back and forth between France and Germany a

Interview Transcript (continued)

number of times. They had a number of those people had been taken into the German army just like some had been taken into the French army. So it was a place where I was, I personally was always wary about them although they were allies and I tried to treat them decently but at the same time I didn't feel that they could be completely trusted.

Van Ellis: Did you have a lot of contact with them? There are sometimes in here where you mention--

DeWitt: We lived in the houses with them, yeah. And we did in Germany, too. I mean, we were, these higher headquarters were telling us we should let these people stay in the houses and we live out in the field. Well, what the hell, that's not my idea if we're over there to liberate their country they damn well better make room for us in their houses. And they were generally willing to but, and in Germany. The interesting thing with the Germans, every German you came to, you'd come to the house, '*Nicht Nazi*' and they'd point down the street, '*Grosse Nazi*' and then they'd always tell them '*Haben Sie zimmer for soldaten slaufen?.*' Said they had room for soldiers to sleep here. '*Nein. Ein kleine house*', I've got a little house and--and down the street there's a big Nazi, you should go and live in that house. Of course, we didn't buy that stuff. '*Achtung!*' we'd send them down the cellar to stay usually when we take over their house. That was pretty true. Voluntarily, they usually did it in Alsace but I think if they hadn't been voluntary I think I'd have pushed them down the rail. My idea is that you do the best job you can. Take care of the men that are depending on you. You need to depend on them when the fighting takes place.

Van Ellis: Now, when you crossed into Germany, was there a noticeable--'cause that's kind of ambiguous in there.

DeWitt: Well, the first thing, when we first went into Germany, was just after we took that little town of Sammbach and that's the time I was put in to get the Silver Star. And--lead patrols were going into Germany. This was just across the Lauter River and I told the men, we'd been in friendly places. Now, once you're in enemy territory anything that we want or need, we take. The hell with what they tell you, and of course the captain was more, you know, need more discipline and so forth but I have got to be honest with you, as far as I was concerned, the Germans were supporting Hitler and you want to loot something, loot it. The first thing we did when we got there was one of my sergeants killed a cow over in Germany and hauled it back in the half-track and some Alsatian gave him the skin and the--and they ate very well for a while.

Van Ellis: Was there a lot of that looting type thing?

Interview Transcript (continued)

DeWitt: Yes.

Van Ellis: Maybe I shouldn't say anything and just let you go with that.

DeWitt: No, there was looting done. I mean I don't think so much by infantry people because we're going through these towns and you're concerned about getting shot in the next house so you're not in a position to haul things but I had a forward observer with me from the artillery and he, of course, would have to be just an artillery force but he had a jeep driver and then--he had two vehicles. He had a jeep and a driver that he rode in and there was a half-track. They had a sergeant and a squad leader in their and so this jeep driver, you know, once you're in--you didn't have anything to do. I called him the 'King of the Looters.' He always had a jeep full of stuff that I--had, you know.

Van Ellis: What were some of the things that were, that people would be looking for?

DeWitt: Well, I had a first sergeant who would get a banker. I think he picked up some samples of one of these banks, you know. One of the things that was very interesting, just after we went into Germany, there was a, our division headquarters --has got pictures. There was a, either a tank battalion or a tank destroyer battalion that caught this German horse-drawn artillery in the road. We're having to bulldoze the things out of the way and so forth. There must have been either a battery or a battalion payroll there and I told the men don't pick up any of that money. It's going to be worthless. Well, some of the men didn't pay any attention to me and all that money was made good. So some, we had enlisted men that had a lot of money in some instances. And other people would pick up various other things. I sent some weapons home. I came home with a big Nazi flag someone gave me and a few things like that. I didn't get anything of real value. Well, there was, I take it back. I got a, everyone had a camera, just about everyone. I didn't have one. And there was a radio that I had inherited when I took over another company and we had a three-way swap. Some German brought in some kind of portrait camera--I brought home. I let the sergeant have that, this fancy radio that I had there--home and then he had some deal with this German to give this German something and--but other guys, they brought all kinds of things. They'd pick up things at these houses. I don't know who got back what things. The people liked this jeep driver. We're in a position where he doesn't really have to do any fighting and yet they were in there early in the game. The first thing that we would tell people when we took the town, is to bring all the weapons and all the watches and all the binoculars into the headquarters there. So they'd bring those in and GIs would take what they wanted there.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Van Ellis: It's interesting because, when you work in a museum, you see these things come back. You know, the arm. My impression would be like the armbands. Anything that had swastikas on or Nazi things that were. From the prospective here, 50 years later, they seem to be rather interesting.

DeWitt: I think I had one of those armbands. I had a sign 'Achtung Lieben' picked up at different times. A guy gave me some pistols and I had some rifles and most of the stuff I've given all to my son now. He may be giving them to the museum--LAUGHTER--Don't need anymore of that crap I don't bet.

Van Ellis: No, not really. Okay, interesting. In your book here you mention a little bit, the subject of alcohol comes up a lot. And I was in the service too. I remember you could, and of course, you were in the military long after World War II. Would you comment a little on alcohol abuse?

DeWitt: I think it's a part of the tradition of the service. And a lot, a lot of hard drinking done. I mean, when I was an enlisted man, we used to go to town and the idea we were trying to find three things. Trying to find a steak, a bottle, and a woman. And, you know, this is pretty traditional in the service and in Arkansas they didn't have, you couldn't legally go in and just have a drink or two, which would have sufficed I think for us you know. You had to buy a bottle and then you could go and buy setups in a club or something. What would happen, we'd have to get back by a certain time, if there's anything left in the bottle we'd go into a bathroom and pass the bottle around and, you know, because we were making \$21 a month and all of that they took out for laundry and other things. You had very little cash. So it was, when you're chipping in to buy a bottle, it's a substantial investment in those days so you're not about, and you get in trouble if you try to take the bottle back to camp. So when those chips back from Fort Smith back to Camp Chaffee, it was full of drunks. I love to hear these guys from the Appalachians sing in that keening voice, you know. There'd be a lot of singing and--sometimes. I think that after I became an officer the same thing. You had a little bit more often some officer would have a car or something. You'd didn't have to take the bus all the time. But again, you go in there and you're drinking hard and of course, then you've got an officer's club you can go to. And they had drinks there. And, in my case, I was a single man and every time that one of these guys that, married guys, could live off the post. If one of them got stuck, they all knew me because I was in battalion headquarters and the building officer, the first officer they met when they came, just about, so they knew I'd be there and maybe I was going to get ready for class or doing something. 'Come on, Jack. Let's go down to the club.'--Aren't you my old buddy? So we'd go down to the club and

Interview Transcript (continued)

you're drinking and so there's a lot of drinking. There was a lot of drinking overseas.

Van Ellis: I was going to ask how this manifested itself overseas.

DeWitt: Some of these guys, you know, we had some guys that were simply alcoholics. As far as I myself was concerned, I made up my mind when I went overseas I'm not going to drink because, at night I might take one drink or something like that, but I'm not going to risk other men's lives by my getting drunk, you know. So, the only time that I would do very much drinking was if we were back--say if I got a pass, lucky enough to get a pass into Paris a time or two or something like that. I'd get, I drank hard. And I think that was true with most of my colleagues. You've got to, had a, the men got a beer ration from time to time and the officers got hard liquor. And what I usually did, I passed that liquor around. When I was a lieutenant, I passed it around with the sergeants and some of the guys in the headquarters squad. When I was a captain, I passed it around with the people in there. But one thing I did after becoming captain, they always, see you had, typically you'd get a bottle of Scotch, a bottle of some cheap whiskey, Three Feathers was one, bourbon. Then you'd get something a cordial like Perinot Fee and that I never drank. Always gave it to the mess sergeant. I think I put that in the book. He would take it back when they draw rations and, I'm sure what he did, he gave it to some guy that was guarding the ration dump to turn his head and he had certain people that he wanted to take including the guy that drove my 'peep' that they all were the best thieves in the company down there, to be sure that we got something more than our share at the ration dump. So, that's what I used the cordial for. The rest of it passed around and drank.

Van Ellis: When you were in France, was there, I mean France is the country of wine, of course.

DeWitt: Yup. We had wine there. But, you know, what people don't realize is that they probably drink more beer than wine, both in France and Germany. They both drink--wine. But I saw very few drunken French or Germans and I saw a hell of a lot of drunks in Americans. And when you're back, if you're, I remember I was lucky enough after the war to go to England. You see, Australians were great for getting drunk, you know. It was, well, drinking, there's just no question about it, is it's a problem. I mean, I think it's going to be a real problem is they cut down the size of the Army and these guys are frustrated about losing that career and so forth.

Van Ellis: I was leading up to this.

Interview Transcript (continued)

DeWitt: Were you?

Van Ellis: What do you suppose the reason was for this sometimes excessive drinking?

DeWitt: Well, part of it was simply cultural. A lot of it's done, you know, I was not a teetotaler when I was going to Law School and working at the packinghouse. I'd look forward to the weekend and I'd drink hard on the weekend. I probably wouldn't drink during the week. And I think that, I don't think that I was unusual in that respect. And I think that, my observation was that there was some folks who didn't drink. But for the most part, these guys were eager to get to town and one of the first things that they wanted to do was to get a drink. And where they had the opportunity on a post like the men could go in the PX and buy beer, they drink beer and some of them did it to excess. They got too much and if someone wasn't taking care of them, they'd get into trouble. But then sometimes it lead to fights and so forth. I mentioned some of these things, I think, in the book there. It's a serious problem because people tend to loose their inhibitions, you know. And they tend to say things that they probably wouldn't say if they weren't drunk. And antagonize other people and sometimes have fights and this sort of thing. And I, it's, there were, we had one fellow that I wrote about there, Wagner Magnus was, you know, the guy was an alcoholic. I mean, right in the middle of attack he'd be down with his bayonet shoving it at an Alsatian or a German and saying 'Schnapps, schnapps'. He tried to stay drunk as much as he could. Except for him, I don't know too many guys that just wanted to stay drunk all the time. Although, a lot of guys drank more than they should because they should have kept themselves maybe more alert when you're in combat situation. But that didn't work for all of them.

Van Ellis: I'm wondering if you could comment on combat fatigue? Did you see a lot of that? Did it get worse over time? What was the effect of being in combat?

DeWitt: It's the same old story of just having the pitcher going to the well too many times. Some guys that started out as good soldiers, I think eventually--we probably had less of it because we had a much shorter career than a lot of these people did. See we didn't, when we went in, we didn't get there, we left on Columbus Day so it was November before we got there and we spent several days getting our equipment and so forth and then we were lucky enough to go and spend a couple of weeks over there in the Alps where the fighting was not--the whole activity and so forth. So, we were, we really didn't do any fighting until about, I'd say, probably December of '44. November and December of '44. And of course the war ended in Europe in April of '45. So it wasn't like the 3rd Division or the 1st Division or

Interview Transcript (continued)

someone like that was in North Africa and Italy and D-Day and all that sort of thing. So, I didn't really see too many people. There were individuals that cracked up.

Van Ellis: There was one situation you mentioned in the book.

DeWitt: My buddy, Bingham, cracked up there. He and I were drinking companions and everything and he had never done, you know, he'd been a maintenance officer all the time. Down in the motor pool there. And he was about, Bing was about 35 or 36 years old at that time. And he hadn't really commanded a tour or anything in a long time and all of a sudden they told him he was in command of a company during an attack and the pressure was just too much for him. I didn't see him. I was simply told, you know, you take over both the companies and get them into town. So, but there were other guys besides him. I just don't think, off hand, who they were. But there were guys who simply got too much. I think another guy that, well in some instances people got in above their head in things. They were placed in a position that their background and training really hadn't made them ready for. What the hell, movement up in the infantry is really a process of elimination. Someone gets knocked off and so you simply have to take the best man available and give him that job. And that instance, about Bingham, that's what happened. As a matter of fact, I had them, when I was a captain, I had a motor officer named Bill Shervy and Bill, there was, they needed a platoon leader someplace and they wanted to give Bill that platoon and I told the captain, or the colonel, I said, 'Colonel, Bill can't do that. I don't think he's qualified to do that job.' 'He's an infantry officer, he's a lieutenant. Why can't he do the job?' I'm not thinking so much of him as I am the men that he's going to be leading. And I saw some instances of that. They had another motor officer there just after we took Sammbach that was attacking through our position there. And he was staying back in the house where we were. The men were out there and this sergeant said to me, 'If that was your platoon out there, lieutenant, you wouldn't be in this house.' And that's true. But the guy didn't know any better. So he couldn't control those guys from back where he was because a lot of it has got to be communicating direct because you've got a radio that's supposed to work at platoon headquarters but these squad leaders, in those days, didn't have radios. So you've got to be able to get the word to them either by signals or by having a runner going over there, or going over there yourself.

Van Ellis: Okay. In your book here, you talk a bit about occupation in Germany. You spent how long, after the war was over, in Europe?

DeWitt: We were there from, let's see, in April the war ended. We left Germany, it must have been about October or November, probably November of '45.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Then we were stationed in France near Reims for a while and then went down to Marseilles to take the boat.

Van Ellis: So you were in Europe for quite a while after the war ended? Now I would imagine that you and your men would be very, very anxious to get home. Could you, perhaps, discuss some of the feelings?

DeWitt: Oh, there's no question. First of all, there was the tremendous relief that the war was over and we immediately got assigned at the end of the war to run a prison camp. They had a huge bunch of German prisoners there. Our company was made the guard company and I was the, they called me the Provost Marshall and commander of troops. There was a more senior officer that was the commander of the camp and I was directly under him and I controlled all of the men. We had that duty until, initially we were in a place called Talfkirchen and then we sent, I sent a platoon over there to build a place near Earding. That's where we moved all the prisoners over there and we guarded them in the enclosure that we'd built there. Then, after that, they were getting ready to send people home and they were breaking us down into generally, based on the number of points that you had for going home which depending, you got 12 points if you were married and you got, I think, 5 points if you had a child and for every decoration you got you had 5 points and so forth. And then, what happened, one of my nicest military experiences really was that there was a West Point major who was given a command of a tank destroyer outfit and he was permitted to select any officers he wanted in the home division to be his staff and command the company. Those people selected were able to, each of the company commanders, could select certain key people to take with them. So we really had a great bunch of guys. One of the people I didn't know him before and he had a fine officer from one of the combat commands named Dan Gentry as executive officer. And I knew a lot of the guys but I had, the nice thing for me was that I was able to pick the guys that I wanted for lieutenants in my company and I was able to pick my first sergeant. I had some great guys that. Of course, we had a, we moved first up near Dachau. We lived in a castle. Not a great big one--and I took along all of these German prisoners to just to slave for us, really. Then we moved from there, this was just a small village. Other companies were scattered around in different villages there. Then we moved to a beautiful area in Bavaria there at Bad Reichenhall. It was a resort area and the men were in a, what they call a concern. A nice stone or brick barracks and the officers were billeted in hotels down there. It was a resort area. We spent all of our time trying to find amusing things for the men to do. There was a little bit of training but very little. It was pretty apparent that, initially we would all anticipate that we'd be going over to Japan.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Van Ellis: Yeah, and I noticed in here that, I was kind of skimming through it--I couldn't pay as close attention as I wanted but I don't remember reading about the bomb and the surrender of Japan and I would have thought that would have been a landmark. I wonder if you could comment a little bit on hearing that.

DeWitt: Yeah, we were so delighted to hear that. We couldn't believe it when we first started to hear over there. I think that the Japs--we didn't have to go. We were visualizing, planning to take that island. Whenever I hear preachers and editors something about what a terrible thing it was for Harry Truman to drop that bomb. Man oh man; he saved a lot of American lives. I want to be a good citizen of the world and all that but when it comes down to us or them, it's just like whether you kill a guy or not. It's a real easy decision. He's going to get me if I don't get him. Same thing here. It's a very personal thing as far as I'm concerned and Harry Truman dropping that bomb. It ended the chance of me certainly getting killed. A lot of them were my friends getting killed. If you saw that, if you saw anything on television about D-Day, you can imagine what that would be like in Japan. Those people are tough fighters too. And it's a lot different; it's a lot different, when you're defending your own country. As far as I was concerned and I've said this many times, whether we moved forward or went back. One of those French towns, one of those German towns were nothing to me. Just another place that we were, someone gave us as our objective. But it would be different if they were here. And I used to kid these guys from Brooklyn and Texas who were great with their mouth. Kind of like, 'It's sure nice of you guys to let the rest of us come along and watch you win this war.' And I say, well if they came over here and if they took Brooklyn or Texas I probably wouldn't get too exercised about it. When they get to Chicago and my mother and my sister, people I care about are in there, I'm going to be one tough son-of-a-bitch to dig out of a hole. That's the way I felt about it. And I think that's a natural thing. When you get into Germany, those people are fighting for their country and it isn't like giving up a town in France. I think the Japanese would have been, they were tough enough at places that didn't really mean anything to them so I visualized, and I think most people did, the tremendous number of casualties trying to take that island.

Van Ellis: And that was August and yet you were in Europe for another four, maybe even five months.

DeWitt: Yeah, we didn't get back home, I got home in December but it took a long time on the ship coming back.

Van Ellis: So after the surrender of Japan and you knew then that you weren't going to go over there. In those four months you were still over in Europe--

Interview Transcript (continued)

DeWitt: I was going to live it up. I mean, we ate high on the hog, as the saying goes. We had a hell of a good time. We were down there, once we got down to, there was nothing really much to do when we were up there near Dachau. We were in a small village but when I was there we ate well. We had some horses that we rode. We had, could play catch and that sort of thing and try to keep the men amused as best we could. Do a little bit of training. Once the war was over, there really isn't a hell of a lot of point in doing a lot of training, once the Japs were out of it. We're interesting in how we're going to take over a theater for the men to go to, send a bunch of trucks down to the Brenner Pass to let each man order whatever booze he wants and bring it back for him and provide fishing equipment and this sort of thing. And we were, the officers were lending them these hotels. Every night these women would come there and we had a guy, a Kraut, that played the violin. We'd drink and dance and party there. We weren't in any strain 'cause we were living off the fat of the land.

Van Ellis: Interesting.

DeWitt: It was not; we all would have preferred to come on home. But, you're asking me if it was difficult duty, no, it wasn't.

Van Ellis: And fraternization with the Germans. Now, technically, you weren't supposed to do that but it was pretty hard--

DeWitt: Initially, Eisenhower put out an order that there would be no fraternization. I was determined I was going to enforce it but I went back to division headquarters and I see these guys living with these German women and I'll be damned if I'll tell the guys that do the fighting that they can't take these women out if headquarters is not going to enforce it. I told them that. So these guys, you know, where we were, we were in the prison camp, we were out in the field living in tents and, but they were pretty nice tents. And the Germans did all the work there--you know, and the Germans, except for the SS, were living in some old barracks that they moved from someplace else and put up but the SS were living like animals out in the cage, more or less. What was your question now, precisely what did you want to know about? You asked--

Van Ellis: I don't think it was a precise question. It was just about fraternization.

DeWitt: Fraternization. Yeah, okay. One of the things I remember, there was a Polish lager. What they did with Polish people after the war, it seems an anomaly, but they were put in an enclosure there because they were afraid

Interview Transcript (continued)

they'd go out and take revenge on these Germans. As far as I was concerned, my attitude was, why not let them? But the main reason was that America was providing food in these lagers and it was easier to feed them there. We had a guy from Chicago, of Polish extraction who, of course, could speak Polish, and the men wanted to have a party. I think I wrote about this in there. They went down and got this and they wanted to get the women up there but to get the women, they had to take the men and children, too. They had this, these Poles, had a band of sorts that knew about four or five tunes. We'd go out in the mess hall to fix stuff up so we had a big party there but that was about--there weren't very many women around there because we were at a distance from town and some guys would go in there. Yes, we'd go into town on occasion. We found some women around there but there were not an awful lot of them because we were at a distance from town.

Van Ellis: Did anyone you know come back with a German war bride?

DeWitt: None of the guys in my outfit that I know of. I mean, some subsequently married German women but I don't know of any that married German women over there. There were guys that got involved with German women but my attitude was for the most part what we're seeing, when we were there at Bad Reichenenthal, those camp followers, they'd been at German headquarters down there and those camp followers were the same ones that had been with the German officers that were with the American officers. They were all, you know, claimed to be something other than German and how many of them were, I don't know. Of course, you never found any of those displaced people that didn't claim to be countesses or something. Most all of our GIs were passing themselves off as beggars or something--garbage man or whatever, so I don't think anyone took that stuff very seriously.

Van Ellis: So you returned to Madison December of '45.

DeWitt: Yeah, I got out, was separated the day before my birthday. I was separated on the 14th of December and my dad and an old friend, Dr. Dolittle, got me when I got out and then I came up to Madison.

Van Ellis: And you drove up to town and you sat in your Mom's living room and what did you think?

DeWitt: How great to be home. Yeah, my mother was a housemother at a sorority so I didn't see, she had a little room in there--would have seen her.

Van Ellis: Was this up on Langdon Street?

DeWitt: Yeah, she was at the Delta Gamma off Langdon Street. As a matter of fact, I think the day that I got back to Madison, I think they had a party and she

Interview Transcript (continued)

fixed me up with one of the girls to have a date. So I went out with them to the party. I think it was the same day that I got back.

Van Ellis: Now, most of the World War II vets that I've been speaking to went to college after the war and they used the GI Bill. You had finished college by this time, had you not?

DeWitt: Yeah. See when I, I had been going to school every summer because I had that full-time job at the packing house so I was credits ahead of most of the guys in my Law class. So what happened is that I petitioned the faculty to give me my degree. They said I had to write a satisfactory paper, which are the worse things you ever wrote, and it got approved, so they gave me a degree then. As soon as I--so what would have been my last semester, the spring semester, I didn't have to go to school. I enlisted in the Army in March when I got my degree.

Van Ellis: So when you came back, what did you do to get yourself reestablished in town?

DeWitt: I looked for a job immediately. I started pounding the pavement. Went out to the Law School to see if they knew of anything. They didn't have much of a setup then for getting people jobs. You certainly got a splendid Army record, you had a fine record here at school, hope you have good luck. That was about it. Well, I did have a guy in town who, an older lawyer that knew me because when I was in--he was our advisor and I managed a fraternity for awhile and he got to know me and liked me. So he started calling law firms up and telling what a fine student I'd been and what a fine officer and so forth and I went around and had a couple of openings and I got hired and I was the envy of most of my colleagues because they were going to pay me \$100 a month. I was getting \$55 from Uncle Sam, you see.

Van Ellis: I was going to ask about the GI Bill.

DeWitt: But then very shortly there was a President of the American Bar Association was a guy named Carl Ricks from Milwaukee and he made the observation that he didn't think that lawyers should get anything from the government. They're a lawyer you know. Of course, Carl Ricks, they sent him home to Milwaukee making money while I'm over there getting shot at. Carl Ricks has clientele. I don't have any clients. I'd forgotten what little law--

[SIDE B, TAPE 1, ENDS]

Van Ellis: Okay, I'm sorry.

Interview Transcript (continued)

DeWitt: What were we saying? We were talking about what?

Van Ellis: We were talking about lawyers not taking money from the government.

DeWitt: Okay. So, you were supposed to get \$90 a month if you got married. So I met this girl that my mother introduced me to and got married. Came back from my honeymoon and found out instead of getting \$90--change the objective. You have a law degree, therefore, you get nothing. So I was in a position instead of having \$190 a month, I've got \$100 a month. The law firm took pity on me and raised by from \$100 to \$200. That was, I'd been working there, I went to work the 2nd of January, I think it was, in '46. I got married that August so I'd practiced that long getting the \$55 and then when I got back from my honeymoon they said no more. And then they raised me. I worked there until October of '47 and then went off to teach at the Law School.

Van Ellis: Now this was the 5220 Club?

DeWitt: No. I was never in the 5220 Club. Those were guys that didn't have jobs and so forth. You see, I got out of the service the 14th of December and I wind up a job--

Van Ellis: Oh, by January.

DeWitt: --in December and I worked in January. I was still on terminal leave with the Army. See, what happened, you were separated from the service but there's a period of time that you're on terminal leave and that ended some time in February.

Van Ellis: I see. Okay. Now, there were other aspects of the GI Bill other than the education, of course. There was 5220 and there were housing loans and all sorts of things. Did you use any of that?

DeWitt: I used the VA loan to buy a house but that was several years later. I was in no position; I couldn't afford to buy a house. I had to rent and try to save a little money.

Van Ellis: And they had--

DeWitt: A terrible job to try to find a place to rent. I was, for months, looking for a place to live so when we got married. I had to know four different people finally to get a place to live. I saw some sorry places and, it was soon enough after the war. I had a certain amount of bitterness. Guys that were behind me in Law School that didn't go in the service had been sitting there with a couple of years of practice under their belt. And I'd forgotten a lot of

Interview Transcript (continued)

what I knew about the law and, of course, I had no clients. And then when I'd go around to try and find a place to live and knock on these doors the people tell me they didn't have anything and had been so recent I'd simply, when someone told me they didn't have a room, I simply grabbed them by the shirt and told them that's where we're going to stay, you know. That was kind of difficult. You still, it wasn't an easy transition in the sense that you're taking calculated risks in the Army. That's what you're getting paid for. As a lawyer, the kind of things that you're doing is to try and be careful for people and advise them how to be as careful as possible then if they say well we don't want to be that careful, we'll take a chance you can. But you've got to, it was hard for me to sit down and examine an abstract and be concerned about whether the lady that took a deed in 1890 as Mary Jane Smith is the same lady as Mary Smith that deeded it ten years later. Or you've been deciding, you've been in charge of a company of 256 men that their lives are depending on what you do then you've got the attachments of engineers and tanks and so forth and all of a sudden you've got to be worried about some of these petty things. I spent a lot of time pacing around that office. It was hard to make that transition and it was, I had some bitterness about seeing these guys that were behind me in school that were ahead of me in the profession, you know. One of my bosses told me, he said, 'If you'd have been here. People don't give young lawyers an awful lot of good work. You'd have been running around handling cats and dogs and that sort of thing. You've had some experience of responsibility--which I think has happened.

Van Ellis: You think you did catch up, eventually?

DeWitt: Yeah.

Van Ellis: I'm interested in this 'getting rusty' in your professional skills. How did you make up for that? Did you hit the books at night or just on the job?

DeWitt: Well, fortunately for me, there was a professor of mine named Jacob--and Jake set up a program on the Law School for returning veterans. He got mostly practicing lawyers would come. I think it was about 4:00, 4:30 in the afternoon, we could go out there and it was probably some nominal charge or maybe it was even free, but these lawyers and judges would give speeches about various aspects of practice. And, of course, I'd depended on asking the guys down there that I was practicing with were prominent lawyers and I hit the books. It was a relearning process. You see, what happened to me, you used to have to have six months of office practice before you got your degree. Law students would go and get a job in some lawyer's office for the summer and do that after the first or second year. And then when

Interview Transcript (continued)

they're finished, they've had some exposure to some practical things. Well, I didn't have that because I was working at the packinghouse full-time and going to school. So I had someone come in and said I'd like to have a deed drawn, which was routine.--Told him and present a very interesting question. You come back tomorrow and I'll get it taken care of. Then I'd hit the books 'cause no one had ever really, once I drew a deed over Christmas vacation or something in one of my courses, but the practical kinds of things I didn't, I really didn't know. So I was, some of the things that were done--more practical nature. Years later I was hired, just a couple of years later, I was hired to go out and set up a course at the Law School. Some of these "how to do it" things. People expect and wonder how to do but they don't have time to teach you in Law School. Of course, they're teaching you about something, law procedure. I was at a great loss there. I never had been in a law office except to deliver a telegram when I was a boy.

Van Ellis: That's interesting. I've just got two more things I want to bring up. Immediately after the war or long afterward, did you, were you ever active in any veteran's organizations?

DeWitt: Yes.

Van Ellis: Which ones?

DeWitt: I was very active in the Veterans of Foreign Wars. What happened is that I, there was a bill in for a veteran's bonus and I talked to one of the senior partners there who knew what was going to happen. It made sense to me, says that if you give a veteran's bonus, you fellows don't have washing machines, you don't have any of these appliances and if you get, each of you gets \$400 or \$500 what's going to happen is the fellow, because it's a time of shortage and people are just going to raise the prices because there's that much more demand. And they did have in place, which mostly was done by World War I veterans, there was a veterans program here, you see, that you could get loans and even grants under some certain, depended on need. So I went over and appeared against that bonus because I thought it made more sense to take care of the people that were in need rather than just give it to everyone and simply put more money in the pockets of someone that had a washing machine to sell or something that all the GIs, or a lot of us, would need. So, Lyall Beggs was in the Legislature and was a proponent of this bill and Lyle observed me and thought that I made a pretty effective appearance. Subsequently, the way I got into the VFW was that I was practicing law and I was representing a divorce case, this guy who'd pulled his colonel out of a burning tank, was a Madison guy, was a policeman here I think. So, in those days, you appeared before a court commissioner in certain of these preliminary matters. And Lyle Beggs was a court commissioner and we

Interview Transcript (continued)

went before him and the other lawyer had picked Lyle and so I was anticipating that he'd lean towards the other guy. Well, everything went in our favor. Well, as soon as the hearing was over Beggs said, 'Why don't you join the VFW?' I said, 'I'm a little short, I can speak for myself I think, I'm a little short on cash.' And my client says, 'Well, Jack, I'll give you the money to join.' So I joined the VFW and Beggs became the national commander and made me an aid de camp and then they had this Veterans House. By this time I was out at the Law School teaching. And there was a veterans housing program set up that the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional because it was--so it would be necessary to get the constitution amended. So I was made the legislative chairman of the VFW then they set up--

Van Ellis: The State?

DeWitt: The State, yeah. The government set up a joint veterans housing committee and it was composed of representatives, a couple of us in the VFW--Lake who was later a judge over in Janesville and I was from the VFW. They had the Legion representative was someone named George Bullman, who was later a circuit judge in Milwaukee. A fellow named Bill Harbs over in the Eastern part of the state. They had the American Veterans Committee was Horace Wilke who was later Chief Justice, and professor Jacob Boiser. And AMVETS had Ken Kumby who was later a legislator. I forget who their other guy was. The Purple Hearts, then they elected me chairman of the committee. And we were successful in getting the constitution amended. First we had to have it passed twice by the Legislature and then, of course, it was amended. So I was very, very active in the--We got that done.

Van Ellis: And that was a 1949 bill, if I recall?

DeWitt: I would have gone off to Law School in '47. Now, whether we passed, it had to pass two sessions. I don't know, I would have been active in '49 and I think that's maybe when the final one was passed. I might have been active in, I don't think I was active in '47. I'd just gotten out of Law School in October of that year. Maybe they had passed it one time, I'm not sure. But, you know, usually the second passage is the crucial thing there because they pass anything the first time. They can always debate it. I spent a lot of time on that and it was a gratis deal but I thought it was important because we were, we felt most veterans in major cities weren't in a position to buy a house. They needed rental housing, you know. In smaller communities they could, typically, swing it for a house because the building costs were less. So we got that thing through. After that I was less involved. I'm a life member at the VFW but I haven't done much more. And I was, they got me involved in the ROA.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Van Ellis: What's the ROA?

DeWitt: Reserve Officers Association.

Van Ellis: Oh, yeah. Okay.

DeWitt: So I was appointed, I was on the County Veterans Service Commission. A county judge appointed me there. And then I was appointed, I was the chairman of the advisory committee of this department at one time. I was working for the state at that time I think. 1950's some time. So I had some of those things concurrent. But I've been very active in veteran's matters subsequently.

Van Ellis: I want to backtrack about one thing real quick. When you went before the Legislature, you did this on your initiative as a veteran and a citizen? No one prompted you to go up?

DeWitt: Professor Boyser, what got me in initially, I was in the Junior Chamber of Commerce here. And I was on a parking committee and with me on the committee was Horace Wilke, who was later Chief Justice. Well, when we analyzed the thing from looking for parking, found out that one of the problems, one of the logical places to get parking were places, were houses and people were desperately in need of houses. So you had this housing problem that veterans were living doubled up and I knew the problem I had had in trying to get, I spent weeks and my mother had ads in the paper and she was calling people. It was a hell of a job to get a place to live so, and Jake Borchard got me interested in this as a lawyer, interested in the problem. He had helped Art Field who was a year behind, a year or two behind be in Law School, was I think, appointed head of the Department of Veterans Affairs. And Art came out of Law School and Jake was working with him and briefed the Supreme Court and so forth. Jake and I were good friends--on the faculty with him and Jake knew, well what he wanted me for was my military record there, and so that's, Jake got me interested in it. Horace, and so I got on this committee. What appeared, I appeared there as a veteran. I appeared there representing the VFW.

Van Ellis: Okay.

DeWitt: I remember one of the things that was kind of interesting, a fellow named Foster Porter was the state senator from down in Grant County, which is where I'd come from. He said, 'Well, Jack, what you're telling me about the need for housing for veterans and so forth, you're saying, how come you purport to speak for all these veterans?' I said, 'Well, yes.' And I explained what the deal was, all of these organizations had their presence. Their

Interview Transcript (continued)

appointed representatives and all of these representatives and all of us are taking the same position. I'm a former constituent of yours and we are voting on something up here, we elected you, we elect you to use your judgment on these things and I don't recall you're ever calling me. In fact some people in Grant County that don't agree with this doesn't mean that we aren't here speaking for other representatives because I might not have agreed to some of the things that you were voting on up here. You didn't check with me on it. So it's truly representative. So we were successful and we worked like hell to get the real estate people didn't like to too well because they wanted people to be forced to buy rather than to rent, you know. And this program didn't keep you from buying, obviously. But it permitted money to be used for rental housing, too.

Van Ellis: I see. It's interesting. I'm interested in veterans type things, too. Could you comment on some of the veteran's organization politics of the late '40s, and not all these groups got along with each other. You mentioned that APC, they were more liberal. I'm sure there were--

DeWitt: I think the most knowledgeable guys, in terms of the need and so forth, were really Jake Boucher and Klause Buchen who were with APC and Bill Harms was a very knowledgeable guy with--I think it was good training for me as a lobbyist and interesting because Jake would get up and Jake was a real persuasive guy, real folksy kind of guy. Horace was a very knowledgeable guy but he would lecture these guys. These guys have got a vote to give and you've got to persuade them to your way of thinking. They don't like to be lectured to. And the other guy, and the worse guy, was this George Bulb, whom I had known in school. He was about my age. George would come in and try to, the Legion's going to do this as though the Legion could do it without, and pounding the table. What the hell, well he's alienating these people you know, so Jake and I have got to try to bring these people around to our point of view, tactfully, you know, and not alienate them. Mel Laird and Warren Knowles and Art Lambert were all on the committee, the senate committee of veteran's affairs. A fellow named John O'Melia was the president, was the chairman, commander of the American Legion at the time. John, Mel Laird would contact John and he'd contact me. Well, Mel thought I was lying to him in saying that John supported these things. What John would be doing is playing a double game. He was telling Mel Laird what he wanted to hear and he was telling the guys at the Legion that were on our committee what they wanted to hear. So it was a long time before Mel found out that I was telling him the truth and that John was the guy who was playing a double. The Legion and the VFW are set up quite differently. The Legion has an executive committee which really ran things and the rank and file really don't have a hell of a lot to say about it. The VFW is a much more democratic organization. They fight it out at their meetings and so

Interview Transcript (continued)

forth and I was active in that. I'd go up there, these guys, one thing I had a clear understanding when I was, I'll be glad to be your lobbyist but I'm never going to be in favor of a bonus because you hand it out and it's gone. This way, what the hell, any of us can get on--and need a loan or need under some circumstances a grant and the way the program's set up, they can get that and it's a damn site more valuable than just hand every guy \$400 or \$250 or something like a lot of the states did and say, well, we've taken care of the veterans. So I wanted to be taken care of long range. And the would, these guys talked big. It's the same thing that you see in a democratic or republican convention. They don't, they can be very doctrinaire. Go down there and demand this, we're going to demand this. But when you call the these guys for support, they're hard to find. You're down there and it's just like being in the army. You're up there in the front lines and these bastards are all telling you to be more aggressive, and why don't you do this, and why don't you do that? But they're damn hard to find. They're not up there doing it. It was the same way in the Legislature. These guys at the convention, well they're going to be wonders and they're really support things and they get down there and you need their help, you have one hell of a time getting them to collar their representatives and so forth. It was an interesting experience for me.

Van Ellis: Now the Legion and the VFW were older groups. Then there were the specifically World War II groups, AVC and AMVETS.

DeWitt: There was the AMVETS and there was the AVC, the American Veterans Committee, were both strictly World War II guys. They both were represented on this joint veterans housing thing. The AVC was composed of a lot of college people, university folks that were inclined to be more liberal than the others were. AMVETS were more--

Van Ellis: How did, you were in the VFW. How did the older groups react to the younger groups?

DeWitt: They always treated me great.

Van Ellis: Okay, good. One last thing. I don't mean to play psychologist here, but I was reading in here and you mentioned being talked into joining the Army Reserve. You, of course, had a long career with the Army Reserve. I had trouble every time you mentioned being talked into it. Explain how and why you got into the Army Reserve.

DeWitt: Well, what happened was that, after the war they had these, they had meetings that you were invited to attend. My feeling was, we'd just fought a war and I believe in preparedness so you don't get caught with your pants

Interview Transcript (continued)

down like we were at the outside of World War II. But I went over there a few times, these meetings, where someone just got up and tell war stories or something and I couldn't see that it amounted to a damn thing really and I wasn't very interested in that. I'd see some guys I knew, friends and so forth, but it wasn't, didn't amount to a damn thing. Then they formed this, it was the 84th Airborne Division and I was on the list of staff. And I went down and to...hell, I'm not interested in going around in a bunch of damned parades and so forth, and so I made an appointment to see Ralph Fillmore who was designated as the commanding general. I told Ralph, if we're in something and the country needs Mr. Blue, what the hell, I want to do my part. I said I'm not a damn bit interested in going around with a bunch of parades and walking around in uniform, this sort of thing. He said, 'You're the kind of guy we're looking for.' I said, 'Hell, I've seen enough parades. If I never saw another one, it would suit me fine.' He said, 'You're the kind of guy we're looking for.' That's got the ability and when they need you, you show up, it's your way of helping to be ready. So I joined up. Still I went to these meetings and they were still stupid meetings that didn't have too much to say and they were making a big deal about being Airborne and having you tying knots and so forth, show you how to load planes. At first they were hardly even this and I was pretty disgusted with it. Gordon Smith was a, there was an older officer there, a colonel, and Gordy was a major. Gordy had a lot of rapport with the guys. He was a year or two older than I am but he knew a lot of my friends like Steve Gavin, had known him in school. He persuaded me to stick around, it will get better. So it gradually improved, the training got better and better as the years went on and they tightened up. At first you simply had to show up. I remember getting pretty disgusted. We had one guy that I thought was pretty--for heavy duty. He was a first lieutenant. They were going to make him a captain and I said what the hell are they talking about making Dave a captain. He said, 'Yeah.--if he'd show up.' I said, 'For Christ's sake. He's got crossed rifles and if you put railroad tracks on him it means he's qualified to command the company of infantrymen in battle. Hell, I wouldn't want that guy commanding my kids and I wouldn't want him commanding yours.' He said, 'Jack, you know, the colonel was all for it. We told him that we'd promote him and so forth.' I said, 'Well, any promotion for a guy, sure he's a nice guy, he could warm a chair. But you're asking me if I think this guy can command an infantry company and do a job, my answer is hell no, I wouldn't want my kid serving under him.' Well they did promote the guy and he was about as useful as breasts on a bore pig but you know, a nice guy. But later on it improved. They insisted before guys got moved up that they take certain courses in correspondence or go away and go to these schools and so forth. The time that I got out the standards were a lot higher; they had a lot better outfits than initially.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Van Ellis: And that was, I forget the exact--

DeWitt: I think I got out about '66 or '67 or something like that.

Van Ellis: You rose to the rank of General.

DeWitt: Yeah. Brigadier General. I ended up as assistant division commander in the 84th Division. It has a much more realistic mission than it did initially. We're talking about making an airborne division. Well, you know, you don't have time to train your reserve divisions even to be pretty infantrymen, to say nothing of putting all this airborne. It's tough. It requires a lot of physical training and so forth and a lot of specialized knowledge. Now they've got it, it's a training division where they're getting basic training and these guys, that they can do, you know. In the reserves you're training people to be teachers, really, and they can specialize and they can specialize in teaching the machine gun or the tank gun or teaching tactics or whatever on an individual basis.

Van Ellis: I'm interested in your motivation for staying so long in the Reserves. Initially, I would, perhaps, suspect even maybe an economic motive but it seems to me there's a lot more than--

DeWitt: Yup. There's more to it because once you had over four years in there then you took a look at what it would cost you to get and buy an annuity, I thought, gee, this looks like a pretty good deal if I can stay in. And I met a lot of great guys in there that I'd never met otherwise because I am not involved in law and litigation, that sort of thing, you know. Then I could see opportunities to move up. It wasn't long at all before I got, made major. That's a significant; you're suddenly a field grade officer instead of a captain. So I could see possibilities ahead for promotion, which enhanced what you're ultimately going to get paid. But it was, I had plenty of pressure from home to drop out. My wife didn't like my spending two weeks every year at some god forsaken army camp instead of taking the family on a vacation, you know. Or a lot of the time that I spent on weekend drills and so forth and gone down there nights. I knew that from an economic standpoint, it made a lot of sense and in the country's standpoint, I had a lot of confidence in myself as a capable officer and I felt that I could train a lot of guys to be better officers, which I think they did.

Van Ellis: Yeah, I was going to ask. Did you think your World War II experience had any--

DeWitt: Absolutely. Absolutely. And the people know that you've been there and how you performed under pressure and so forth, and so it lent something, someone else could tell them the same thing but it doesn't have the same

Interview Transcript (continued)

force. It's the same thing as when I was teaching in the faculty out there. There was some things I could have told the students but by bringing in a judge or experienced lawyer to tell them, it's going to be more meaningful to them. This guy's out in the--and he's doing it, you know. So, yeah, I think so. And I did what I could to enhance my abilities because I went to some of these various schools and so forth. I continued to learn on the job.

Van Ellis: Good. Those are all the questions I had. Is there anything you'd like to add?

DeWitt: Well, I don't think so. I think I've told you most of what I felt about it. I've written a book there about, telling about the details of the experiences. I, my military experience I think, generally, has been a lot of unpleasant things but for the most part, you erase those things from your mind and you think about the great guys that you got to know. That's really what it's all about. Thanks a lot.

Van Ellis: Excellent. Thanks.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]