

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
H. ROBERT ESSER
Infantry, U. S. Army, World War II
1996

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Esser, H. Robert, (1923-). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 130 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 130 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

H. Robert Esser, a Dane, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a messenger with Company F, 127th Infantry, 30th Division. Esser tells of basic training at Fort Jackson (South Carolina) and maneuvers in Tennessee. He speaks of regional differences and his impressions of the South. He describes leaving Fort Dix (New Jersey), being absent without leave (AWOL) to propose to his wife, his voyage to England, and the scene at Normandy Beach a few days after the first invasion. Esser talks about combat in France including fighting at St. Lô and Mortain, equipment, food supplies, replacements, and the effectiveness of artillery. As a runner during the Battle of the Bulge, he comments on equipment and supplies, establishing communications between units, and being wounded by mortar fire. He tells of the travels of his unit across Europe from Normandy through Belgium and Holland until they reached Northern Germany. Esser provides an interesting discussion on the psychological effects of World War II and he talks about psychological problems both during combat and his own combat-related nightmares. He mentions V-J Day celebrations in London, attending college using Public Law 16, and membership in the American Legion.

Biographical Sketch

Esser was originally assigned to the 106th Infantry, but served in Europe with Company F, 127th Infantry, 30th Division during World War II. He was honorably discharged in 1945 and attended school using Public Law 16.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996.
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, 2002.
Transcription edited by Abigail Miller, 2002.

Interview Transcript

Mark: Okay. Today's date is June 18, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Bob Esser, of, well, you presently live in Madison. West side. A veteran of the European Theater in the Second World War. Good morning, and thanks for coming in.

Esser: Good morning.

Mark: Did you bring your boat in this morning, or did you drive?

Esser: No, I managed to stay on dry land.

Mark: That's good. Let's start at the top, as they say. Why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised, and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pear Harbor in 1941.

Esser: Okay, Mark. I was born on July 23, 1923, in the village of Dane, which is about eighteen miles outside of Madison. I've managed to stay in this area all my life. I like it here. I grew up in Dane. My dad was a grain dealer there and I thought that I would be following in his footsteps, but Depression changed that. The grain business went down the tube along with a lot of other businesses. And my dad changed jobs. So I switched. I went to high school in Lodi. I graduated in 1940. So, we were aware of the world wide activities. I always was a student of civics, and I was quite interested in it.

Mark: So, you paid perhaps a little closer attention than most young people at the time to what was going on?

Esser: I think so.

Mark: What were your impressions?

Esser: Well, I was interested in the, particularly Europe, and the Germans' movements. I recall being very interested in their movements into Poland, and the Russians invading Finland, and the tremendous resistance the Finns put up against tremendous odds. So those were things that I recall being interested in.

Mark: Did you think that the U. S. was going to be able to avoid going into war? And I am wondering if you watched — read Life magazine, or read newspapers, or whatever, and what you saw for yourself in these events.

Esser: I'm not sure how I felt about the inevitability of our getting involved with it. But I

do remember growing up in a small town in Wisconsin, everybody in my village were hunters, and I still am a hunter. And we were having a party, a group of us young fellows from — celebrating some deer hunting parties. And it happened that the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor on the day of our party. And we wanted dance music on the radio, and all we got were continual interruptions, reports on it. And I think all of our impressions, at that time, were that this was just a big inconvenience. We were sure that we would promptly stomp the Japanese, and it would be a minor inconvenience. We had no conception of the size of the conflict that we were going to be a part of.

Mark: Yes.

Esser: So, that is my recollection of our evaluation of how serious this really was.

Mark: Now, it wasn't until 1943 that you actually entered the service.

Esser: Right.

Mark: So, you were working for a couple of years.

Esser: I graduated in 1940 and went in the service in 1943. Dane is a small community. I wound up working on farms. My folks moved to Baraboo because my dad's grain business went down the tubes, and he found employment in Baraboo. I was reluctant to move up with my friends, and so I worked in the Dane area for part of that interim, and about a year before going in the service, I moved to Baraboo. Worked for Mason and Hanger, which was the general contractor involved in building Badger Ordnance powder plant. So I wound up working there. And still commuting back to my friends', and my girlfriend's, places.

Mark: Now, there had been a depression but, as a result of the military build-up, just before and then, especially after, Pearl Harbor, did you notice that the economy changed, and did your own economic situation change? You mentioned that you started to work in relation to the Badger Ordnance there.

Esser: Yea. I am sure that we could see the employment situation changing. Again, in my small town, because my dad went bankrupt in the grain business. There was no employment for him in that kind of work. There was employment on farms. And I do recall, I worked on farms while I was going to high school. But I worked for seventy-five cents a day, and I was getting thirty dollars a month when I left and went to Badger Ordnance. And I don't remember what I earned at Badger Ordnance, but it was at least twice that. So, you could sense that there was more money and more affluence because of that. Whether we directly attributed it to the war or not, I doubt. But I don't remember.

- Mark: What did you do at Badger Ordnance?
- Esser: I was a time-keeper. I've always been — accounting and figures have been easy for me. I wound up getting a job as a time-keeper. And did that until I went into service.
- Mark: And it was in 1943 that you got your very courteous greetings from Selective Service?
- Esser: Yes.
- Mark: What were your thoughts on that? And was it expected? Were you surprised? And what were your personal reactions to it?
- Esser: Well, by that time, we were more, of course, much more involved in the war and I was anxious to be a part of it. Actually, I had gone down and enlisted in the Marines. My dad was in the service in World War I, and he was not very happy when he found out that I had enlisted in the Marines.
- Mark: Why the Marines?
- Esser: Because I am a hunter, and I wanted to be involved in something that involved the combat part of it. In retrospect, that was a dumb move. My dad was right. But—
- Mark: In the Marines, you were almost guaranteed that you would go into combat.
- Esser: But, as it turned out, the conscription, or the draft, took me before the Marines. My enlistment, because I was already lined up to go there. I wound up being taken into the draft before that happened. As it turned out, I wound up in the infantry and it probably wasn't that much different. Who knows?
- Mark: Now, I went off to basic training, myself. About forty years after you did. I'm sort of familiar with some of the process of induction. Why don't you just walk me through your induction process. Where did you report to? Where did you do your basic training? And any sort of advanced, individual training that you did?
- Esser: Sure. Well, I went in with a couple of other fellows from Baraboo. We went to Camp Grant, by Rockford. Which happened to be the same camp my dad had been in. But that was just the induction point. And from there, I was sent to Fort Jackson, Columbia, South Carolina. I was a part of a new division, the One Hundred and Sixth Infantry Division, there. And that is where we took our basic training.
- Mark: And what did basic training consist of at the time?

- Esser: Basic training involved, being an infantry division, it involved a lot of walking. I thought we had good training. I never felt that we were inadequately trained. We did a lot of maneuvering in the swamps of South Carolina. A lot of practice with all the weapons that the infantry uses. And we wound up, from there, going up into — which was pretty standard, I think — to the Tennessee area, for maneuvers. Which, also, I found to be practical. Growing up in a small town, I was used to hunting and dressing game, cooking it myself, and in the Tennessee maneuvers, we lived off the land quite a bit. We were wandering around the hills. It was a good experience. But it turned out that, in Europe, we did quite a bit of the same. Of foraging. We hardly ever saw our kitchens, and we very seldom got any food from them. So, it was good training.
- Mark: I want to come back to that. It sounds interesting. I want to go back to a couple of other topics in basic training. Did you have any troubles adjusting to military life? Say, the discipline? Or, perhaps, the salty language, or anything like that? Or was it — did you adjust fairly well?
- Esser: I don't recall having any problem adjusting to that. The language part of it, that wasn't a surprise to me. I think I have always been able to get along well with other people, so I didn't have any conflicts there. I don't — the regimentation, taking orders, I've never been very good at that, but it was one of those things where you really didn't have much choice. So I managed to tolerate that. I didn't like it. Not a problem.
- Mark: How about some of those around you?
- Esser: It was different. Some of them around me. A good friend, who I met in our outfit, who was from Chicago. The tough part of Chicago. I thought he was a really nice guy. But he got — I don't remember the incident — but, anyway, he either was absent without leave, or something, and got thrown in the guard house and, from what he told me, the people he met there convinced him that he was stupid to be out in, following the rules, and his chances of surviving this were better if he stayed in the guard house. And he pretty systematically would violate again. I was doing guard duty and actually wound up guarding him with live ammunition. And I did speculate, cause he would have been capable of taking off, what I would have done if he had. Fortunately, that never happened. But the last that I heard of him, he was in — I can't think of the name of it but it is a prison in Missouri. And I lost track of him from there. I suspect he spent his entire military career in there, and I have no idea what happened after that. He just got off on the wrong foot.
- Mark: Now, when you go to basic training, you often meet people from different parts of the country, from different cultures, different accents, that sort of thing. Was that your experience?

Esser: Yes.

Mark: And, if so, how did everyone get along, or were there cultural and regional problems, or tensions?

Esser: Yea, we — it was the first experience for me, growing up in this small town. I had never been very far from home. To meet fellows from all over the country. And I, again, had no problem with it. I was impressed, I guess I still am, at how strongly the fellows south of the Mason-Dixon felt about the Civil War, even still at that time. I've always felt that the Southerners were, probably, not better citizens, but I think they were more serious about defending our country, than a lot of us from the North.

Mark: Some were more gung-ho, you mean?

Esser: Yea, I think so.

Mark: Enthusiastic about the military service.

Esser: Yea. And were good soldiers.

Mark: Now, in basic training, and again, on these maneuvers, you were in the southern part of the country and, as you mentioned, you hadn't traveled much beyond Dane County at the time. Did you have any particular impressions of the South? Because that is a very common experience. Most of the training went on the South, and that is a pretty unique region of the country.

Esser: My experience was, of course, involved South Carolina and I had never been in a hot humid climate. Where you perspired twenty-four hours a day, nine months out of the year, at least. I have never cared for that part of the country since, as a result of that. I didn't like the weather. I liked the Tennessee hills. I still do. My wife and I go back there.

Mark: Smokey Mountains?

Esser: Every spring, with a just a little trailer. And I just like that part of the country. I liked the people. The fact that they had the drawl didn't bother me at all. And that, actually, was the only area that I was in until I went over seas. That area. I was very impressed with it.

Mark: Did you get to try some grits?

Esser: Oh, yea. And sweet potatoes. In the Tennessee hills, Christ, we'd buy eggs from the people back in the hills, and saw some of the remote areas. Surprisingly, the

poorest people we saw were — which surprised me — were whites.

Mark: Up in the hills?

Esser: In the hills. And the kids were as wild as partridges. We'd come into a little clearing, why, they'd all scatter and run like rabbits. Which really surprised me.

Mark: Now, as you mentioned, you were with the One Hundred and Sixth. But you didn't go over seas with them?

Esser: No.

Mark: What transpired to get you in the Thirtieth Division

Esser: I think that was pretty standard, at that time. The One Hundred and Sixth was a newly formed division when I joined it. And I think the average age — I was nineteen, and that was the average age of all of the fellows in that division. And, after training, and after maneuvers, most of the division was cleaned out and sent over as replacements. And I was also. So I wound up shipping over to England, and then into Normandy, as a replacement. And that is how I wound up in the Thirtieth Division. And that was pretty standard procedure. As it happened, because I don't have any idea what happened to the One Hundred and Sixth Division after that, until, in December 24, as a matter of fact, when I was hit with some mortar shrapnel, and wound up in a hospital, eventually, in a hospital train going back towards Normandy, and there was a lieutenant in the bunk across from me in the train whom I recognized. And he was from the One Hundred and Sixth Division. And I found out from him that the One Hundred and Sixth had been finally put on line in the Battle of the Bulge, and were just decimated. And that, actually, he was not wounded, but his feet were so badly frozen that he, I don't know, he was in bad shape because of that. So, that was the first time after being pulled out of it, that I ever found out what happened to it.

Mark: Why don't you describe your voyage over seas? Where did you leave from, and the boat ride.

Esser: Well, we were at Fort Dix, which was the camp where we were prepared to ship over seas. And on the morning that we were — these were all replacements, of course — we were ready to leave. We were packing our gear and one of the fellows I had met, said, "Esser, what's wrong with you?" And I said, "Ain't noting wrong with me." Well, he said, "Your face looks funny." And so they sent me down to the sick bay and the medical officer took one look at me, and told me to go and stand over the corner, away from everybody else. And I had the chicken pox. Which I somehow managed to not get when I was a kid. And so, all of the fellows I was with left and I wound up staying in the base hospital for whatever it

took, ten days or something like that. And, because I was going over seas, then, I had the gal who is now my wife, we were, had been going together for a long time. And about that time, I was wishing I had more of a commitment with her. So, when I got out of the hospital, I got a weekend pass to go to town. I don't remember which town that would have been, at Fort Dix. And I didn't go to town. I got on the train and went back to Madison, Wisconsin, as fast as I could. Borrowed money from my dad and bought a ring. And put the ring on my wife's finger. What is now my wife. And headed back, which meant I was AWOL about three days, I think, by the time I got back.

Mark: What happened? Did they catch you at all, even?

Esser: Well, I got a dressing down. I had to paint the mess hall, for my penance. I have no regrets having done that. So, anyhow, I managed to get engaged as the result of my unfortunate bout with chicken pox. And then, of course, went over seas. In convoy, which, of course, was all a new experience to me. The convoy, I have no idea how big it was. You couldn't see across it. Well, we were in a troop ship that was, we were told, was a German vessel that had been confiscated and re-fitted into a troop ship. A couple of incidents in then. We had fire drill, the first fire we had, every unit is supposed to go back to their area in the ship, and then, when they call your units, you come up on board to be evacuated. We went to our area, and they kept calling all the units, and we were still waiting, and eventually, they said, "All clear." And we were still waiting down there. Some how, we didn't get on the list. So, it was a good thing that we had the practice. I remember that incident. The other incident was that, it was extremely rough going over there. And I'd say two-thirds of our fellows who were sea sick all the time. For some reason, I was not one of them. But suddenly there was a tremendous orders, and horn squawking, and it turns out that the rudder on the ship broke, and the ship narrowly missed the bow of a tanker, which was the next one to us. The ship, of course, had to stop. The convoy kept going. And we sat there rolling in the rough water for a couple of days. They left one destroyer behind to keep track of us. At any rate, somehow, they managed to repair the rudder, and we took off, and convoys being as slow as they are, we caught up with the convoy before we ever got to Scotland, is I think where we landed. So it was a first experience to me. I had never been on anything bigger than a row boat before that.

Mark: You landed in Scotland, somewhere. And you were transported down to Normandy.

Esser: Yea, we landed in Scotland, and I can't recall. We were transferred by rail down to the southern part of England, to some staging area there. And I don't remember how long we were there, but we went across the channel. The invasion had already occurred then. And when we transferred over there, I think we shipped out

of the States in early June, as I recall, approximately, then. And about mid-July we were sent across in a troop ship, as replacements. And landed at Normandy.

Mark: Now, had the breakout from Normandy occurred at this time?

Esser: No.

Mark: So, you were pretty close to the front lines.

Esser: It was still in the hedgerows. We still landed in an LST, and had to jump out in water up to your arms, and wade ashore from there. But, Christ, there was evidence of the landing battle all over the place. Still dead people floating around in the water and a lot of evidence of artillery and bombing, etc. I think that the approximately eight miles that the front was in land, eight miles or so from where we landed.

Mark: I would imagine, well, as you got to the Normandy coast, did you have any particular reaction? Did it suddenly seem more serious? As a young person, you just happy-go-lucky?

Esser: Yea. It was pretty sobering, because, as I mentioned, we saw several GIs still floating around in the water. And what else? They eventually would be recovered, I think. But, anyhow, it was obvious that there was a lot of serious fighting going on. We could still see all of the artillery flashes—

Mark: Off in the distance?

Esser: Yea. In the evening, you could see the flicker of their artillery. But everything was all torn up, of course, they had scuttled a row of ships.

Mark: The Germans?

Esser: No, the Americans had, in order to form a breakwater and even that looked rather gruesomeness because all these ships were, the hulls were sticking out of the water and it was a pretty sobering affair. And it was pretty obvious that things were going to get worse instead of better, as far as my own predicament was concerned.

Mark: Now, as you mentioned, you went to a replacement area. But I can't imagine you stayed there very long, given the way the battle was going.

Esser: No, That is fifty years ago but I can remember going ashore and then we — I don't remember how many of us, but it was a fairly small group — joining the Thirtieth Division. And some officer talking to us. And while we were talking,

some artillery came in and we were — we had to scatter and take cover. The training part of it was beginning to pay off then. Already. Because we knew that was the thing to do. Anyhow, from there, we were assigned to Company F, in my case. And still in the hedgerow country. And my recollection is that, probably still that same day, that we got involved in a lot of artillery. Dug a foxhole. One of the things, minor thing, I guess, everybody puts covers on their foxhole in the hedgerows.

Mark: Why?

Esser: Because there was brush on every hedgerow, and the mortar or artillery hit the brush, you got a tree burst and the shrapnel came down instead of going up.

Mark: So, these covers are like made of wood, or something?

Esser: Yea. You'd cut a little brush and make a frame, and then put dirt or rocks, or anything you could over it. Part of the foxhole. I learned that there. I hadn't never — I didn't know there was such a thing. I also remember, in some of the artillery that came in, the fellow who was in the next foxhole to me, got hit with shrapnel. It must have been in the lung, because the blood was coming out of his mouth. He was still conscious. But I helped get him out of the hole. Got a couple of first aid people came and we put him on a stretcher. And we carried him to some point and more artillery. So, that was a sudden initiation to the combat. And, actually, that was kind of the way it went, from then on. It was serious business.

Mark: Now, you had to be equipped to go to the front, somewhere along the line. As you came over from the U. S. on the ship, you didn't come over in combat gear. Somewhere you had to be equipped and given your rifle, and the whole business.

Esser: My recollection is that we were issued rifles and that equipment in England, I believe.

Mark: But when you crossed the channel, you were—

Esser: I am pretty foggy on that. But we had all our gear, then. I even remember I was, again, very rough, we weren't even able to land when we got there on , I think, the next day. They pulled the LST up alongside, and they had a canvas chute, and you threw your gear in, and you jumped in, and you came shooting out the bottom. But the boat was going up and down, alongside. And we were fully equipped. Probably had gas masks, then, too. We were issued gas masks several times and, it may not have been the smart thing to do, but we usually threw the gas mask away and used the container to carry whatever you could scrounge up in the way of valuables, and good, etc.,

- Mark: So, what sort of equipment did you have when you went into combat?
- Esser: Well, I would have had an M-1 rifle and a full field pack.
- Mark: Containing what? A sleeping bag—
- Esser: Oh, no. Blanket and a shelter-half, which was standard then. A mess kit, gas mask, canteen, and cartridge belt. I think that was pretty much it.
- Mark: Entrenching tool? Did you mention that?
- Esser: Oh, yea. A trenching shovel, or a pick-mattock. Usually, the shovel was the favorite. Then that was a high priority item. I guess you would part with most anything before you would part with the shovel.
- Mark: Now, you were a messenger. Eventually.
- Esser: Eventually.
- Mark: Well, when you first got to Normandy, you were just given a rifle and turned into a rifleman.
- Esser: Yea. I was part of a squad, then. Well, I should say, when I joined in this sudden initiation, we were — that was just about my birthday. Close to it, in July. And it turned out that the breakthrough at St. Lo, there was a big bombing and that enabled the breakthrough, for the troops to break out of the hedgerow area. I had no conception of that at that time. Except, I do remember, before I was actually assigned to a squad, seeing these waves of bombers coming over. And it was close enough so that you could even feel the ground tremble from the bombing, back then. And that was the bombing of St. Lo. General McNair, who was killed at—I think it was our third battalion CP in that bombing. And a lot of the fellows in the Thirtieth Division were either killed or wounded by our own bombers in that fracas. And this is when I joined the Thirtieth. At that point.
- Mark: After the St. Lo bombing?
- Esser: Yep. Fortunately, I was back, just in the process of being assigned to a unit. And I was assigned as just an infantryman in a squad and somewhere in that next week or ten days, I wound up as a scout. I don't remember, in the infantry — I don't know if you were in that.
- Mark: No.
- Esser: But the procedure then, there were two scouts. Well, when you were going in,

they were decoys, really, what it amounted to. And there was the first scout, and the second scout. And I was one or the other. I don't remember which. But you kept going until somebody started shooting at you, what it amounts to. And then you knew where the enemy was. Then the combat ensued. And I wound up being either the first or second scout. For a part of that period. Was part of a BAR team. By the time we got to Mortain, which was the first really major battle that I got in, and probably the biggest battle that I was a part of. And it was at that point, after the battle of Mortain, that I wound up being a messenger in a part of the company headquarters group.

Mark: How did you get in that position? Was it simply through attrition? That other people had been killed in combat?

Esser: No. I think it was because — the Mortain thing was a hell of an affair. And I don't know just how to start on this. Mortain is a fairly small village, a French village. And we were being bombed during the day. One of the few humorous incidents of this whole scrap, being a small town boy, there was a cow wandering there, and I found a wine bottle, and I was — I got the cow into a corner and I was squeezing some milk into the bottle, and I looked up, and this plane was coming down, and I could see the bomb separate from it. And it was sort of coming in my direction, so I forgot about the cow. I don't know what happened to the milk. But I dived into some little stone building. And most of them were made of stone. All while this bomb was on its way down. And there were more than one. But, anyhow, there was a big commotion around there. And a rabbit came buzzing in through this same door. And the rabbit and I were both hiding in this same building. And he was shaking, and I think, probably, I was, too. Obviously, I survived that all right. But that was quite the initiation. That went on all of that day. Our squad was stationed, we were relieving the Second Armored Division. We did relieve the Second Armored Division. We were spread out along a sort of hedgerow, still there. And it was a particularly bright night. Clear and a bright, full moon. And there was a lot of shooting going on, but none of it close to, not near to us. We had a new squad leader who had just been assigned to us. We were who — we were veterans because they had been in combat for like two weeks, already, then. Compared to him. Anyhow, this hedgerow that I was in, we could hear voices coming. And we thought, well, we are getting some reinforcements. But, as it got closer, these were German voices. And here is a column of Germans — that bright moonlight — four abreast, something like that, and as far as you could see, there were Germans coming up there. And there were six of us scattered along there. And we decided that those weren't very good odds, so we stayed in the shadows of the hedgerow. And I came down to this squad leader, through the shadows, and he was just — he'd lost — he was just jibberish, and didn't know what to do. He didn't make any decisions. So I took the group and we went down along the hedgerow. And the machine guns opened on us just as we got over the edge of it. The tracers were going over us, so you could tell they were shooting over the top.

Anyhow, we got down below that and met a couple of other guys who were in the same shape we were. Then we met one of our lieutenants who formed — we kept collecting until we had, maybe, twenty guys, including this one officer. And he led us into the center of town. At least, he had some idea of what was going on. And we set up our own little defense area there. Because, there were Germans and Americans all going in different directions. We stayed there through most of the night. If some guy came down the street with hob-nails, he got shot. That was the criteria. I mean, the Germans all wore hob-nails, and we had rubber soles. And that happened several times during the night. This same lieutenant is the one who was the platoon leader of the platoon that I was part of then, and he was the one who asked me to be his messenger after this whole fracas was over. He led us to the company commander in the wee hours of the morning. The company commander knew of the high ground, and by that time we had accumulated more people. We ran into a group of Germans as he was leading us up the hill to take over this high ground, and try to establish a defense line. Which we did. The Germans we ran into had machine pistols. I can still see some German up in a tree opening up. The barrel of the machine pistol turned red. I don't know how many — there's probably twenty rounds in there. But he just cut loose. In the darkness, that was a weird sight. He got shot as a result of it, and I don't think he heard any of us. And that is the kind of a night it was. We wound up on this high ground with elements of other parts of the third battalion. Company F, actually there were eight of us from Company F up there, the heart of the whole company. We thought that was all there was left. As it turned out, there was part of another platoon that survived. So, all together, I think there were like twenty of us, out of two hundred guys, who managed to come out of there a week later. So, it was quite the experience. But that is how I wound up being a messenger for Lieutenant Kibling, was the lieutenant's name. And that was my job from then on.

Mark: I will come back to that. But I want to go back to some of the aspects of your initial combat experiences in Normandy. When you first got into combat, how long was it until you got any sort of respite at all from that? It was at least—

Esser: Oh, it was much longer than that. When you say a respite, if it meant being relieved and going back for R & R, or something like that, that hardly ever happened. I can think of two occasions in the year

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

Esser: or whatever it was, well, it wasn't a year.

Mark: Almost a year.

Esser: Actually, I was hit with some shrapnel in the Mortain thing. But it just grazed me, and I didn't make any issue of it. Then, I wished I would have, because when it

came time to go home, the decorations you had, including Purple Hearts, got you to the front of the line. That was — well, it wasn't serious.

Mark: Well, the point I am getting at, even in combat, somewhere or other, you had to eat. Somewhere or other, you had to sleep, I'd imagine.

Esser: Yes.

Mark: How do you make those sorts of personal arrangements in combat?

Esser: Well, first of all, the food part of it, we almost never got hot food from our kitchen. There would be, let's see, very, very rare occasions where we would C-rations and K-rations, sometimes. Some of them. If we got food from the traditional food source, that was it. If we happened to be on an attack with some armor, usually, you would have two or three tanks as a point and infantry with it. The fellows in the armored divisions always had a box of C-rations hanging on their tanks someplace. And they knew we never got anything to eat, so they'd — we got more food from the guys in the armor than our own kitchens, I think. But, as I mentioned earlier, we were in— the civilians were gone. In all the areas we got into. And we used to routinely raid the farmhouses. Most of them in the hedgerow had cider. Canned vegetables, we'd raid those. We'd kill off the chickens. I even remember we even got a turkey one time, in there. Which was a rare discovery.

Mark: Was that in Normandy, somewhere?

Esser: Yea. I wound up shooting the turkey, and it took several shots. I was trying to show off and hit him in the head. But, at any rate, most of our food was as we could scrounge it up. But we'd also get C-rations and K-rations. As far as rest was concerned, that was whenever you could, wherever you could. Most of the time you would have fellows who would be, at least, someone would be on alert, and a couple guys sleeping. You never took your clothes off, of course.

Mark: I can't imagine it was a very deep sleep, either.

Esser: No, but you — we'd even learned to do that in our training. On the hikes, and stuff, you'd take a ten minute break with every hour of hiking, and lay down in the ditch, and you could get eight minutes sleep out of a ten minute break, probably. You just learned when you had a break, you could sleep quickly. And in the Mortain thing, when we were on this bright, moonlight thing, when things were really serious, you would think you wouldn't have trouble staying awake, but you did. I mean, we'd keep dozing off. You just got tired enough, you could sleep almost instantly. So, you slept when you could do it. And that was not a problem.

Mark: Well, I've never been in combat, myself. So perhaps you can explain to me, and to anyone else, for that matter, the experience. If you watch a war movie, for example, what is it that is not accurate about the combat experiences that people don't seem to understand. Some veterans I've spoken to, for example, mention the noise. It's just an undescrivable type of thing. What was it that struck you about the experience that you don't think is easily conveyed to those who haven't been there?

Esser: First of all, I avoid watching combat movies. I always have, and I think part of that is because it is not realistic, and I would have to say that I don't think it is possible to make a realistic combat movie. I think there are some films of combat that were actually taken and those would be realistic. I think that it's, first of all, in Europe, anyhow, the most of the combat involved artillery and air support, and small arms were not that important. We did a lot of shooting, but most of the time it was the artillery and armor and air support that made things move. We would have P-47s, if we were making an attack, that would be — they never made a mistake when we had them. Two experiences with heavy bombers and we got bombed by our own people both times. But our real support were P-47s. And I never saw them make a mistake. But, you'd have them flying over, and the .50 caliber machine gun bullets were snapping somewhere up over your head. Artillery, the noise, I guess, is sort of not that important, but the actual artillery hitting, that is the serious part of it. It is just, I don't think it is possible to portray that. I think, in our outfit, I suppose they are all like that, because of the replacement idea, they kept moving replacements up into a company. And you knew then the odds are almost certain that you were going to get either killed or wounded at some point in there, but you tried to delay that as long as you could, obviously. But sooner or later, something was going to get you. I guess artillery, I guess, I would say, in my experience, was the most worrisome — but not for everyone. I had a good friend who hated machine pistols. And they are really not much of a danger, compared to artillery. But that happened to be the way he felt about it.

Mark: There is a statistic that is often kicked around in the history books that, in any particular engagement, an infantry soldier only fires his rifle about twenty or twenty-five percent of the time. And a lot of people have trouble understanding why that is. It's because of the artillery.

Esser: Yea. Because most of the time you're — if you fired rifles — there were exceptions to that. You'd see some German and then you'd have something to shoot at, but most of the time, even if you were firing a rifle, it would be laying down a fire to make somebody button up so you could get up to him. The artillery would do that much more effectively. And they did. And I think that it was our artillery, personally, I think, that was the greatest asset we had in our combat. They were extremely effective, and active, even though, sometimes, we'd get hit

by our own artillery. But that was not often. And they were what enabled us to take an objective, more than anything else. The small arms were not a big part of it.

Mark: And, so, what is the role of the infantry, then?

Esser: I think it's probably changed now, but then, I think, it was to occupy and hold areas, objectives. And the procedure would be, they might use P-47s and artillery. Most of it was the 105 howitzers. But sometimes we'd get support from corps, the big guns, but the 105 howitzer was the thing that enabled us to do most of what we did.

Mark: So, you became a messenger right at about the same time that the breakout occurred. And I calculating this correctly?

Esser: Pretty close. The real — Mortain was the hinge between the First and the Third Armies. And that was the — the breakthrough had occurred then. And that was the Germans' objective, to cut the hinge and cut off Patton and the Third Army. And it didn't work, partly because we held the high ground up there, and prevented it from happening. So, the breakthrough had occurred there, and we managed to sustain the breakthrough, at that point.

Mark: Now, as you mentioned, you remained in combat, but I would imagine that the nature of that combat changed a little bit. You were moving much faster.

Esser: Much more fluid, yes.

Mark: I was just going to ask you to elaborate on how things changed after the breakthrough, for you. Your own experiences.

Esser: From the breakthrough, first of all, we formed part of — and I know nothing of this when I was in combat, and I find out about it afterwards — it was called the Filet Gap, and that was a pocket that was formed when the Germans weren't successful in cutting — they committed a lot of their forces to cut the First and the Third Army. We were a part of that Filet Gap. And from then on, we moved quite rapidly. By foot, across northern France.

Mark: I was going to ask, the they put you in trucks, and drive you some where?

Esser: At that point, we made, and this is from the typical GI, one guy tells another, and it goes on, but the rumor was that Patton had hi-jacked all the gasoline for his mechanization, and we didn't have gas for trucks. I have no idea how accurate that was. But we made — the rumor was — eighty-seven miles in three days, across northern France.

Mark: That was pretty good on foot.

Esser: And that was, I mean, we hit practically no resistance in that period of time, because that is as fast as you can walk, without any resistance. I can remember seeing the fringe of Paris, off in the distance. We just went around the north end of it.

Mark: I was going to ask, where were you going, and did you know, at the time, where you were headed?

Esser: If we knew where we were going, it would have been very little of it. Nobody had any of the grand strategy, at all. We'd know objectives and so forth, but most of the thing all they would tell us was we want to take this town, or that hill. But we were heading across northern France, and we were the first troops into Belgium. The Thirtieth Division was. And we were part of that. And we met resistance across there. But it was not organized resistance. A typical town that we'd take would be to have a point of armor, and infantry on foot. We'd come in one side, there'd be a few shots fired, and the Germans would take off out the other side, and retreat, again. And in that particular area, we were the heroes, of course. We would have chased the Germans out of this town, and the French people would come out. We'd get kissed by all the French girls. That was the glory part of it. That went through, was true in Belgium, as well. We went into the fringe of Holland and then we got to the Siegfried Line, and the honeymoon was over for a while, there.

Mark: So as you are sweeping across northern France and Belgium, the resistance was light?

Esser: Yes.

Mark: Relatively.

Esser: Very light.

Mark: But, when you hit the Siegfried Line, then, like — was it in western Germany? Where was this?

Esser: Well, actually, this was right on the German-Dutch border. We were in Herlien, Holland.

Mark: It's that little tail of Holland that sticks down into the Maas district.

Esser: The little tip that sticks down. That's right. We were in that area.

- Mark: How long did it take you to get there? I get the impression that it wasn't terribly long.
- Esser: No, but my recollection of the time element is pretty foggy. It wouldn't be along time. Two weeks, something like that. Although that's a wild guess. On my part. There was practically no combat there. It was probably the easiest part of — as a matter of fact, compared to Mortain, it was all easy, until all the way across there, until we got involved in the Battle of the Bulge. And then that got heavy, again. But, in the meantime, we had been in combat, but nothing like when we had been in there.
- Mark: All right. Now, of course, during the period summer turns into fall, you had to get new equipment, and that sort of thing. Did you find yourself equipped for the winter that came?
- Esser: It didn't change much, really. Again, we scrounged — I carried a German blanket most of the time. One blanket was standard, and I wound up with a German gray blanket because it was warmer than the GI OD colored one. Just happened to be my choice. As a runner, I carried a carbine, then. I also, everybody seemed to carry a knife of one kind, sticking in their leggings. I also carried a 9 millimeter Browning automatic that I had liberated, which I still have. One of the few possessions I managed to bring back with me.
- Mark: As a runner, why don't you describe, well, I think we are about at the end of this side of the tape right here. [There is a ten second pause in the tape.] I want to talk about the Siegfried Line and the Battle of the Bulge, but first, at this point, it might be helpful to discuss exactly what it is that a messenger does, and what your role was during this period.
- Esser: I'll give you my recollection of it.
- Mark: That's all I can ask.
- Esser: After a long time. Well, it was pretty much what the word implies. I was the liaison from headquarters to my platoon. And I would — if we were going to move out, or if there was any message by the platoon, you could get there with sound power. Our communications inter-company then was the sound powered phone. You had to have a wire for that. So, normally, I would help string the wire, to establish the phone conversation. There were lots of times that got cut, or for one reason or another it was not effective. Then I would verbally take the message down. Many times, if we were going to move out, I would go and bring the unit, and guide them back to where we were supposed to rendezvous at whatever the point was. And so, if there was anything to be delivered, I would be the one either

to deliver it or take somebody there. That was pretty much it.

Mark: This headquarters, how far back from the front lines was it?

Esser: Not very far. It would, again, I suppose that varies, but normally I'd say we'd be quarter-mile.

Mark: Oh, that close?

Esser: Yea. Not more than that.

Mark: So you were walking, more running, as circumstances dictated?

Esser: Yea. You know, it's — lots of times, if there is artillery and stuff coming in, it's the safest thing is to be in a hole in the ground, or in a basement. And if you got to get from here to there, well, you are running then, literally. That was part of the job.

Mark: Yea. So, as we mentioned, you got to the Siegfried Line, then. And the battle became much more static by that time?

Esser: Yes. There was a considerable build-up, as I recall. As we got built-up in order to try to break the Siegfried Line. Again, I knew nothing of the grand picture, at that time. But we had, I can recall, in Holland, they brought up, I think they were probably eight inch either howitzers or rifles. Rifles, I guess. Long barreled. And we happened to be right near them, and all the houses had tiled roofs. And the first time they opened up, all the tile fell off the roofs. There was that much vibration coming. And a terrific lot of noise. We were in no danger, at that point. It was just an inconvenience. But that went on for quite a while.

Mark: And, was there any movement at all? Did you take a mile of ground, and the Germans retreated. Did they counter-attack?

Esser: It went slowly. We took some objectives in there, and there was some pretty heavy combat. I can recall being in one small German — I think that was actually in Germany itself — there. Where we were in that spot for several days, any how. Took a terrific lot of artillery from the Germans at that spot. We had a new company commander. I don't know, the other one was moved up to battalion, and this was a new man. Ane he might even have been a West Pointer. But he was just stopped. And they didn't last very many days, and he was a mental case. And,

fortunately, we got somebody else who was better qualified. But it was a hot spot.

And we lost quite a few people, just from the artillery. There was no actual small arms firing at all. It was just a matter of our shooting artillery at them, and them at us.

Mark: You mentioned the sort of combat fatigue, as it was called at the time. And with this particular commander. What about young guys in the trenches, such as yourself. Especially with artillery. That seemed to have done it in World War I. Was there much of that, in your experience?

Esser: Yea. We had some of it. Guys just, it just finally got to where they reached the breaking point. It was no disgrace, at all. Just that some of them just couldn't take it any more, and they'd just go all to pieces.

Mark: In what sense? Crying?

Esser: Yea. They'd cry. And you'd want to move out, and they wouldn't go. They just had lost their effectiveness. In varying stages. A sad thing. It wasn't real common, but it certainly happened quite often. And it usually was somebody that just got hit, or faced with this, all of a sudden. That was the biggest shock, I guess.

Mark: A new guy, in other words.

Esser: Yea.

Mark: I was going to ask, could you predict who was going to be more likely to succumb to it? I mean, is there a point where, I wonder, is there a point where you, or anyone, gets just too much combat, and they can't take it any more? Or would it be more likely to be the new guy?

Esser: It would be more likely to be the new guy. I think, after a while, you get kind of numb, and don't know any better. But you seem to tolerate it.

Mark: That brings up the issue of replacements. I mean, I would imagine, as you go on in combat, more and more people are killed or wounded, or are psychological casualties. You get new people in there. If you have studied the history of the Viet Nam War, that was one of the major problems with the rotation policy. You always had new guys in, and they couldn't always integrate them into a tight-knit combat unit. In World War II, on the Siegfried Line, how did that go for you?

Esser: Well, I don't have any strong recollections of that, except that I think that most of the guys that came up as replacements were accepted, and nobody looked down on them, because we had all come there under the same circumstances.

Mark: So, on one said, for example, the new guy is going to screw up and get me killed,

so I'm—

- Esser: No, I didn't see any of that. I think you'd try to help prepare them as much as you could. But I didn't see anyone who was afraid the guy was going to screw up and get you killed.
- Mark: So, when the Bulge occurred, you were still on the Siegfried Line, maybe five or ten miles further that you had been in September or October, or so. Why don't you tell me your experience in the Bulge. When did you learn of the German counter-offensive, and how did that impact upon you?
- Esser: We were in the north, one of the few times when we weren't involved in any combat. And getting ready for Christmas. I can recall someone even promoted a keg of German beer. One of the jeep drivers and somebody went and, it was a big event, anyhow. We had promoted this keg of beer. Well, that meant, it had been rattling around in the jeep for I don't know how many kilometers. We all got around to tap the beer. Nobody thinking about how wild it was. And, Christ, we lost two-thirds of it going up. This was in a house. It was a disaster. At any rate, we were recuperating and having a pretty normal time there, when the orders came to go down there. We had no concept ourselves of the Bulge happening. I can recall moving down there by truck and a horrendous traffic snarl that there were. There'd be armor, trucks, equipment, as far as you could see at some crossroads. I recall that. We got down into the area of the Bulge and I wasn't in it that long. But we were assigned to another regiment for part of that. We were assigned to the regiment and we were actually in reserve. So we could see a hell of a battle going on below us but we were not a part of it. I happened to have, again, a part of the runner's, or messenger's, job — it was runner or messenger, simultaneous. My platoon needed to set out some anti-tank mines for a defense and they sent them over by two guys in a jeep. And we had to go across a bald hill in order to get to my platoon. And I was going to get in the back of the jeep, and I decided that I'd rather be on the hood, because I could get off quicker. So I changed positions. I sat up on the hood and we were going across this opening as fast as was reasonable in the jeep. And I heard this explosion, which I thought was an artillery shell, because that is what we were trying to avoid. And I bailed off. The jeep rolled into a wire, or something, and stopped. It turned out that one of the jeep drivers had a hand grenade hanging, well, I think it was by the pin. The pin wore off and the hand grenade went off in the back seat, beside I don't know how many anti-tank mines. It was a miracle that they didn't explode. But both the driver and the other guy got sprayed with the hand grenade. Luckily, I was on the hood. And so that was the only time I got to drive a jeep, all the time I was over there. I loaded the two guys up in a hurry and got back, before the artillery cut into us.
- Mark: Were they killed, or just wounded?

Esser: Just wounded. And I don't think terribly seriously. And so, eventually, I got the mines over to my platoon. But it was a narrow escape. Back to the Bulge part, from there we were brought back and actually near the Ste. Vis massacre, which I believe were the One Hundred and Sixth Division people that were massacred up there. We didn't know nothing about that. We did know that there were First SS troopers in that area and we'd run into them in the Mortain before. Early in that, we were making an attack in the woods and we called for artillery support, which was standard procedure for us. We knew where the Germans were, and if we could soften them up with artillery, that made our job a lot easier. This was a forest that's fairly high trees, and our own artillery snagged the trees and we lost several people, who were wounded. From the tree bursts. One of them was the observer for the 81 millimeter, the heavy mortar section of our company, that got hit. And I was busy patching him up when we got hit with mortar fire. More tree bursts.

Mark: Was it American or German?

Esser: That was German. Well, we were not even sure then. Anyhow, that's when I, and several of us got hit by the mortar fire, then. I have absolutely no recollection whatever happened to the fellow who I knew well. I have no idea at all whatever happened to him. And never will. At any rate, that was the end of my participation in the Battle of the Bulge. I was able to walk out. So I got bandaged up and there were several of us who were able to walk back out of the actual combat zone. And that same time was when we had heavy bomber support, again. And our kitchens, and I suppose it would be the battalion headquarters, was at Stabalon, I think was the name of the town. Anyhow, they bombed our own kitchens, and a lot of civilians were injured in that too. They had to be eight miles behind where we were. I don't know how they got so confused. But they did. So, I wound up in an ambulance after going through the aid station. And there were a lot of civilians that had been injured in the bombing, along with the GI's. And that was the extent of my involvement in the Battle of the Bulge. I do remember when we first got down into this mountainous area, which was a lot like Tennessee, mountainous, we could hear these strange noises. But it was so foggy down there that you couldn't see anything. Eventually, the fog lifted and they were buzz bombs that were being launched nearby. Heading for—I'm not sure. But it was a strange sound to us. And we finally got to see them. That same fog prevented our planes from giving us air support. So, once that cleared, why it was a big advantage to us. For support.

Mark: Now, this Bulge had to be beaten back. But you were sent back up north again?

Esser: Well, after the Bulge, because I wound up going to Liege, to the hospital, and eventually to England, to the hospital in England.

Mark: So this was the end of your combat experience, then?

Esser: No. That was an interruption in it. I was, and I can't remember how long I was in England. But, eventually, I rejoined my outfit. And it was right after they crossed the Ruhr River, which was heavy combat, again. And, fortunately, I was not sent back until after they had made the crossing. And, from the Ruhr, it was fairly easy going across northern Germany. Again, typically, it would be a point of armor, and in a lot of areas, we had trucks, also even got to ride. Across northern Germany, and we — the last real battle that we had was at Magdeburg. And even that wasn't a real battle, by previous standards. We took the city of Magdeburg and occupied it. And the Russians had occupied the east bank of the Elbe River. And I think we were like sixty kilometers from Berlin. And this is where the combat part of our phase ended.

Mark: Did you get to meet the Russians?

Esser: Yea.

Mark: Why don't you describe that?

Esser: We didn't — I didn't meet any of them there. It was a humorous event, though, and I have to tell you about it, at Magdeburg. A good friend of mine, who just died a year ago, who was also a small town, country boy, we had taken the town and we noticed this pond there. And it looked fishy, to us. So, there was a boat tied up. Actually, it was padlocked there. So, this would be a day or two after the actual combat had — after we had taken the town. We got some quarter-pound blocks of TNT from somebody, in the engineers, or someone. And we always had hand grenades. So, we went down and shot the lock off the boat. There were three of us. I don't remember the third guy. Anyhow, we went out, and we were fishing with TNT and hand grenades. And we got two or three northern pike, that were normal size. So, it was a successful trip. We beached the boat, to go back to our outfit, and there was one block of TNT left. So, my friend, who we nicknamed "The Brow." He had a habit of always raising his eyebrows. The Brow threw that last block out, and I thought it was just — he didn't make a good choice of where he threw it, in my opinion. The TNT went off, and there was this big roll of water, and this huge fish came rolling up. It looked like an alligator out there, to us. So we quickly got the boat and went out, and retrieved this northern pike, which we took back. This was food, a welcome change to whatever else we had. We had a stick with the northern tied to it, and two of us carried it, and the tail would drag on the ground. That tells you how big it was. So, that was a high point in Magdeburg, to us. From there, we moved down to a town in the Hartz Mountains called Ilsenburg, on a mountain, a little resort town. It was used by the Germans as, wounded people were recovering there. It was full of German wounded. And

that is where the war officially ended. V-E Day. When we were in Magdeburg. And that is where we met some Russians. How they got there, I don't know, but, at any rate, we got to meet some of them. And we got to have some drinks with them. We liberated three thousand bottles of champagne at Ilsenburg. That is, for one company, rare finding. So we celebrated V-E Day there in great fashion. Our first sergeant was a football coach and a teetotaler. He was the only sober guy in the outfit, I am sure.

Mark: I am sure someone had to be.

Esser: It was a good thing there was one. That was, I thought, a very pretty spot. Incidentally, I met a girl, a German girl, in my afterwards, who was married to a fellow that I worked with, and it turns out that her dad brought her family, sort of like the Trapp family, out of the hills down there, to Ilsenburg. And got through the Germans, to the American side, from the Russians. That was what they were really after. But it was a pretty town.

Mark: So your reception by the Germans? Were you afraid of guerrilla activities, and that sort of thing? I mean, as you went through villages in France and liberated them, they were obviously very happy. But as you went through Germany and captured villages, what was the reaction?

Esser: Well, most of the time, there wouldn't be any of them there. But when we started moving quickly, we would meet teams of civilians carrying, pushing carts, whatever they could.

Mark: And going which way? In your direction or going away?

Esser: I can't be honest about that. I think it would depend on, well, they all were afraid of the Russians. That was true, wherever they went. And they all hated the Russians. And we, I can recall, meeting some, well, not meeting, but some German prisoners that we'd taken, who could speak English. And there really wasn't a lot of animosity between us and those people. The only ones we really disliked were the SS troopers, who were a bunch of fanatics. And I can remember several times German soldiers, prisoners that we had taken, some day we'll be fighting the Russians together. And that seemed like the most ridiculous thing I could ever think of. And, of course, it almost happened. They were right.

Mark: So, after V-E Day, how long was it until you got back to the States? You had been in combat for a long, long time. And I know there was a point system. I would imagine that you had racked up quite a few by this time.

Esser: Well, I had, but I could have used that extra piece of shrapnel that almost finished me off. I actually, I can't recall, but by that time, I had accumulated two Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart. And those were all worth points. But I still, there were

guys who were more qualified than I. And I still went back with my division, through France, to England, and we were on our way back to the States to regroup and go to the Pacific. That was already established. We were in England, as a matter of fact, I was in downtown London, on V-J Day, which was a great place to be for that celebration. And so we really got a head start coming home because of our being headed for the States. Actually, to go to the Pacific.

Mark: But that, of course, didn't happen. Fortunately enough.

Esser: Fortunately, yea.

Mark: And so, having been scheduled to go back to the States already, even after V-J Day, was that schedule still maintained?

Esser: Yea.

Mark: You still went back?

Esser: Yea. We weren't in England that long. We all celebrated V-J Day and, I can't recall, but it wasn't too long after that, and we headed home on the Queen Mary. Came back on the Queen Mary. I'm not sure if they got the whole division on there, but I know the stateroom we had, there were twenty of us in that stateroom, and then you spent one night in the stateroom, and then you slept on the deck the next night. And I would have slept hanging on anything, of course, to get home. So, that was no inconvenience, at all.

Mark: And where did you make land fall? New York or Boston?

Esser: New York. Came past the grand old lady. And I was, well, I was married on September 1. And I always said, I walked off the gangplank and right up the aisle. I was not home very many days.

Mark: And so your fiancée met you in New York?

Esser: No.

[End of Side B of Tape 1.]

Mark: Oh, when you got back to Wisconsin?

Esser: Actually, we were sent back. I say we. The Brow and I came back together, and we went to, oh, Camp McCoy, and that is where I met my folks, and my fiancée. And I was still in service. When I was married. They just sent us home until they could — and then they'd call you back to actually be discharged. And I even sat

around so long, I went to work for Gamble's until I could get discharged. I went to the university under Public Law 16.

Mark: Right. Which was for wounded and disabled veterans. You qualified for that.

Esser: Yea. For some reason. It wasn't my idea. But that is the way it turned out.

Mark: Well, I'm interested in this. And, being part of the Department of Veterans Affairs, you know, I've got an interest in the benefits, and their use, and how you find out about them. So, you got back, by September, even?

Esser: Yep.

Mark: And, I don't suppose you got back in time to enroll for the fall, '45, semester.

Esser: No, the second semester.

Mark: So, you worked? You worked when you got back, right away.

Esser: Yep.

Mark: Did you have trouble finding work? And this is before the big flood of GI's started to come back.

Esser: No. I didn't have any problem. Actually, a real close friend of mine, he and I still hell around together. And we used to date together. And he married his date, and I married mine. She worked for Gambles, and so she got me a job up there. But I would have had no problem getting a job.

Mark: Now, what is Gambles, again?

Esser: Ah, it was a hardware store.

Mark: Up in Dane, or Lodi?

Esser: Right near here. It was right on State Street.

Mark: Okay. So you get — you started school then. It would be the spring semester.

Esser: Second semester, yea.

Mark: When it came to finding out what benefits you were eligible for, I mean, and that fort of thing, how did you go about finding that out? Did the Army tell you that before you left?

- Esser: Ah, when I went to Camp McCoy, no, went to, at St. Paul, I can't think of the name of it.
- Mark: Starts with an S. Fort Snelling.
- Esser: Yes, Fort Snelling. And I can't recall. I was home quite a long time before they called me up there to be discharged. At any rate, that's where they knew that I had been wounded and the medical officer who examined me said, "You really should file a claim for disability. So, if you ever have any problems," — and I wasn't having any problems, then. I shouldn't say that. It was, what, a big deal. You could tell when it was going to storm. It would — I would feel it. And not serious at all. And even that doesn't bother me any more. "File a claim," he said. And so, I did. So it was through them, and I wound up, I still get a ten percent disability check. Which, as long as the government is giving it away, I guess I am as bad as any body else. But that is how I wound up filing the claim, and this is how I wound up. I took the, what is the right word for it? Aptitude tests. That was part of Public Law 16, too.
- Mark: Right. You had to qualify to get to go to the particular school.
- Esser: Yea, and they wanted, that was part of their training, to decide what field you are best suited for. And, I wound up, I was trained in accounting. And the guy showed me on the graph, I went over the top of the graph. So there was no doubt that I was to be an accountant. I really liked forestry. I liked forestry ever since I was in the Ardennes Forest, and saw these huge fir trees that I — it is a classic forest. Incidentally, it was filled so much with shrapnel that they had to destroy most of them. Wasn't useable any more. So, at any rate, I liked forestry, but I wound up being an accountant.
- Mark: So you went to the UW here?
- Esser: Yes.
- Mark: Had it not been for Public Law 16, do you think you would have gone to school?
- Esser: Yea. I'm not sure that I would have gone into accounting, because I wouldn't have taken the aptitude tests. But, yea, I would have gone to the U.
- Mark: Now, did those benefits cover all your needs, and expenses. Tuition and books and housing, and all that sort of thing?
- Esser: Yea. Yea. Tremendous opportunity. Of course, I was married. My wife was working as a beautician. We lived with my folks. So we paid part of the rent, but

we lived there cheap. Actually, we saved money while I was in school. And I worked half-time at the Wisconsin Power and Light. Almost all the time I went to school. So, it was a good deal.

Mark: Now, as I said before, you got back earlier than a lot of GI's. I was wondering if you could describe the UW campus and how it changed as the result of the veterans coming back.

Esser: Well, I was never there until I was a veteran. But most of the guys were veterans then. So it was pretty much common place and I think that we probably — oh, we'd play poker and drink beer but we weren't the playboys that — because we were married and we traveled together as varied groups, really. So it was an entirely different type of campus life because of that. And being older.

Mark: And in your classes, mostly veterans? A lot of veterans?

Esser: The guys, yea. The gals were—

Mark: Civilians?

Esser: Nine looking. Still are.

Mark: So, you finished school. And then it came time to find work. Did you have any trouble?

Esser: No, I worked part time for the Power and Light, and when I graduated, I went full time with Power and Light, as a traveling auditor for two years. And while I was with them, I wound up interviewing for— with a management, two guys who were starting a management firm. And I joined then. And I spent the rest of my working life with that, a part of that group. I knew from working at the Power and Light that I didn't want to sit behind a desk all the time. I even explored going back and taking forestry when I was half-way through the U. And I would have had to start all over, actually. So that wasn't practical. And, in retrospect, it's been my hobby, and I think I was lucky that I went the way I did.

Mark: So, finding employment after the war wasn't hard?

Esser: No.

Mark: Housing?

Esser: No. Not a housing problem, either. We lived with my folks until our first son was born, the same month I graduated. It was not planned. It was a fortunate accident. But, at any rate, we then rented a house long enough until I could build a house.

So housing was never a problem.

Mark: I don't want to pry into your personal finances, so I will just ask you briefly, did you use the GI loan to help finance the home that you built? Or did you do that all on your own?

Esser: I didn't use the GI loan. We built the house with my folks. It was a two-level. And we got a conventional first mortgage on it. But I did use the GI loan to buy some tree lands.

Mark: Was this federal, or state? Do you remember?

Esser: Federal. It was a loan against my GI insurance, which was a little different. But I borrowed against it, and at four percent interest. So I still haven't paid it back. But, anyhow, I was serious about the forestry thing. And I still am. I now have roughly three hundred acres of tree land up there in Adams County, and it is still my hobby.

Mark: I've got just a couple more questions. Two things, really. First of all, while we are talking about readjustment to civilian life, medical readjustment. As you mentioned, you were wounded and it didn't seem to affect your ability to perform your work at all. But you did get a disability. As the years went on, did you find that your war wounds became a problem at any point?

Esser: No. I still have some of the shrapnel, which is pretty common. And it used to bother me, some. Hasn't bothered me. Even the weather doesn't bother me now.

Mark: And we talked about psychological — we talked about combat fatigue, and that sort of thing. And you were involved in some of the most fierce battles of the war. After you left the service, did you find that that experience affected you psychologically? Did you have nightmares, or that sort of thing? You hear about post-traumatic stress disorder with the Vietnam veterans, and I understood—

Esser: I never felt like it was interfering with my work, or anything. I used to dream about it, and I guess I think that's why I avoided, I didn't even like to talk about it because then I'd wind up, I'd be back dodging the artillery, and it was like I was back in it again. So, that part of it was a drawback, but I just steered away from it. I tried to put it off, and I think I did. Just put it off—

Mark: Until when?

Esser: Gradually, it starts wearing off. I can talk about this, now, and I am almost certain that is not going to make me dream about it tonight. So I think that fifty years has finally mellowed it some.

- Mark: In terms of the dreams, how long did those last? A couple of months after the war? Years?
- Esser: No, it was years. Years. Quite a few years. And I've never been violent about it but some of the friends I had were.
- Mark: What do you mean, violent?
- Esser: They'd be choking someone. Back in the U, this one friend of mine, actually, was choking his wife, but he was back in combat.
- Mark: Right. I've just got one last area of questions, and that might not even apply to you. And that involves veterans organizations and veterans reunions, and that sort of thing. When you first came home, the first couple of years, did you join any of these groups? The major groups like the Legion, the VFW?
- Esser: Yea. I belong — I did belong to the Legion at Dane, where I grew up. I live in Madison now. But my farm is near there, and I still spend time out around there. I belonged to the Dane Legion for several years.
- Mark: Was this soon after the war, or later on in life?
- Esser: No, soon after the war.
- Mark: For what reasons?
- Esser: There were, I guess, patriotism was a part of it. And there were lots of my friends who had similar experiences, and we just thought that was a way to — I think, mostly, patriotism.
- Mark: At the time, were you what you consider an active member of the post? I mean, did you attend the meetings, and, perhaps hold an office, or was it more a social and cultural experience for you?
- Esser: I think I probably would have even been part of organizing it. But, I didn't live there, and I was busy raising a family, and it just gradually thinned out. And I don't belong to any of them now.
- Mark: Oh, I was going to ask. As you got later in life, and had a little more leisure time, and that sort of thing, did you rekindle those?
- Esser: No. I still, if I go to a funeral of where the Legion is involved, and it is usually the Legion, and my dad was a Legion member, I think, hey, I like that. Honor guard,

type thing. But I haven't done anything about it.

Mark: So, it's not a conscious decision. It's just the way things—

Esser: Yea.

Mark: And in terms of reunions, I know there are a lot of divisional reunion associations, and that sort of thing. Have you been involved in that at all?

Esser: No. Originally, I have a good physician friend who was a medical officer in the Thirtieth Division. I knew him before I was in service, but I had no idea he was in that division. He went to a couple of them, so I knew they were happening. But that was back when I didn't really want to rekindle that kind of thing. So I was not interested.

Mark: You have exhausted my general line of questions. Is there anything you'd like to add? Anything you think we skipped over? Or missed?

Esser: No. This lasted lots longer than I expected. And I thought twenty minutes was going to cover all of this.

Mark: I knew it would take a little longer than that. Very productive, though. Very, very interesting. Thanks for coming in.

Esser: Well, my pleasure.

[End of Interview]