

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
DONALD J. MAY  
Military Police Escort, Army, World War II.

1994

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**May, Donald J.**, (1919-2002). Oral History Interview, 1994.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 88 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 88 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

**Abstract:**

Donald May, a Fond du Lac, Wisconsin native, discusses his service with the 421<sup>st</sup> Military Police Escort Guard Company during World War II. He was born in North Saint Paul (Minnesota) but grew up in Fond du Lac (Wisconsin), graduating from high school there in 1941. May recalls hearing about the Pearl Harbor attack while working at Retlaw Hotel in Fond du Lac. People at the hotel were outraged that a “little pipsqueak country like Japan” would attack the USA, and they thought the war would be over in a weekend. May explains he took a better-paying job as a lumberjack at a Badger Ordnance Plant in Baraboo (Wisconsin) that made ammunition. In fall 1942, May started college at the University of Wisconsin but was drafted into the Army after one semester. At his induction in 1943 at Fort Sheridan (Illinois), he describes Army officers testing his German language skills. May is modest about his abilities but mentions his grandmother spoke German. He explains a large group of German-Americans from Fond du Lac, West Bend, and Milwaukee (Wisconsin) were assigned to the 421<sup>st</sup> Military Police Escort Guard Company to escort German prisoners of war. May remarks his childhood best friend, George, remained in this company with him throughout the war. May brags that the 421<sup>st</sup> Military Police Company “could speak every language in every dialect on the European continent” and mentions there were Italian-Americans as well as German-Americans in his outfit. May touches upon his basic training at Fort Custer (Michigan) and Camp Campbell (Tennessee) where he encountered General Patton’s tank crew. May discusses his first mission: he took a train to Canada and escorted German POWs from Rommel’s Africa Corps back to Camp Campbell. Next, May describes at length travelling on a ship called the *Louis Pasteur* from Nova Scotia (Canada) to Liverpool (England) in January 1944. He calls the ride “the scariest time of my thirty-three months in the service.” The *Pasteur* was a French luxury liner that Hitler wanted to keep for himself after the French lost a naval battle in North Africa, but the French, to spite Hitler, ran the ship to England and later Canada. According to May, Hitler sent U-boats after the *Pasteur* in the North Atlantic. The ship had been stripped of its guns and had no destroyer escort, which caused May to fear submarine attacks. Once in England, May describes Americans interacting with the British: they drank in British pubs and got into fights. He states a unit of African American troops had arrived in Liverpool before his company. May frankly discusses racial tensions between white Southern soldiers and African Americans and implies the Southerners were jealous and angry that the Black soldiers dated White English women. May comments that he witnessed “riots” between Black and White soldiers. After landing in Liverpool, May’s unit went to the Midlands (England), staying in Birmingham and Stratford-upon-Avon. On June 2, 1944, May was moved to

Portland Bill (England). He recalls watching planes take off for the D-Day attack, covering the sky “just like locusts.” May describes the first and second wave of wounded soldiers returning to England after the D-Day invasion. He reveals his mission was to transport German prisoners of war across the English Channel from Normandy to England. He jokes that he volunteered for extra missions because the Navy and the Coast Guard cooked better food than the Army. May mentions his MP Company followed the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division from Utah and Omaha beaches to Brest (Brittany), in search of POWs. He describes at length interactions with German prisoners of war. May portrays the S.S. officers as arrogant and intimidating. He tells how they accused the German-American MPs of being “traitors to the fatherland.” May contrasts the “die hard” S.S. troops who were indoctrinated in Nazism from a young age with the “regular” German troops, farmers and machinists, who wanted “to get rid of this dumb war and go back home.” He reveals the POWs communicated with the German Army from camp, using radios. In the day, they divided the radio into several parts so the Americans could not find them, then reassembled the radios at night. May spends time discussing food: he states the German-Americans in his company disliked French and English food and mentions they replaced the American cooks in their mess hall with German POWs who made potato pancakes like their grandmothers back in Wisconsin. May also comments he went to Catholic mass with the German POWs. May frequently discusses military life and alcohol consumption among the troops. He comments that, after D-Day, wounded soldiers returned to England with calvados (brandy) and cognac from Normandy. He tells a story of getting drunk one night near Caen (Normandy), which was still occupied by the Germans. His jeep got lost behind enemy lines, and May and the other MPs yelled in German as they sped through Caen, fooling the Nazis. He tells another humorous anecdote of crossing the English Channel for the first time on an escort mission; May and his buddies were nervous until, to cut the tension, troops on another ship in the convoy blew up their Army-issue condoms like balloons and floated them in the water. Next May describes guarding prisoners at a camp in Brest (France). He reports there were 38,000 POWs in Brest and only 135 MPs to guard them. May reports escape was a problem, but often prisoners would escape for a day, go to a pub in town, and return at night. May mentions a group of French Underground fighters, the Maquis, helped the MPs guard the POWs. He depicts the Maquis as “17-year-olds with burp guns” who did not conduct themselves “in a military fashion.” They hid in hedgerows around the camp and jumped out at POWs who tried to enter the woods. May also reveals there were Russian prisoners of war in Brest who the Germans had used as slave labor. May portrays the Russians unfavorably, stating they were “dirty” compared to the “clean” German POWs. He claims the Russians sent boys to the fence to taunt the German prisoners, knowing “American soldiers would not stand for any brutality [towards children].” Next, May discusses sending V-mail to his family and taking leave with his friend George in Saint-Brieuc (France). He also describes traveling through Saint Malo, Le Havre, and Cherbourg and witnessing destruction in Saint-Lô and the Brittany Peninsula. In December 1944, May was sent to the Marshal Foch Barracks in Rennes (France) during the Battle of the Bulge. He recalls listening to Bing Crosby sing “White Christmas” on the radio and feeling homesick. May reports he and George were sent to a replacement depot in the Compiègne Forest (France) where they underwent more infantry training to prepare them for the

Pacific Front. He explains General Ben Lear made them simulate war games, which May characterizes as dangerous; he tells of being wounded in the eye when a live hand-grenade exploded during training. May spent a month in the hospital and suffered lifelong problems and increasing loss of vision in his eye. May touches upon the psychological effects of being alone in the hospital without his buddy George, and of learning he would be sent to the Pacific. In 1945, May was sent home on a thirty-day furlough. He describes arriving in Milwaukee (Wisconsin) on V-J Day, not knowing the Japanese had surrendered, and finding people dancing in the streets. Although May was not sent to the Pacific, he had to finish the last few months of his contract at Camp McCoy (Wisconsin); he was discharged in December 1945. After the war, May states he took a year off and worked part-time before returning to UW-Madison in 1946. His freshman year, May roomed with George on Langdon Street; he describes eating at Memorial Union and avoiding the rowdiness of a campus full of G.I.s. May got married in 1947 and moved to an apartment on Williamson Street. He considered himself lucky to find an apartment because most of his G.I. friends lived in the Badger trailer park by the University. May states he graduated in 1949 with a degree in sociology and criminology. He mentions using the G.I. Bill for his education, a veteran's loan to buy his first home, and VA Hospital benefits to treat his wounded eye. Finally, May says of his experience: "I was a student and carrying a gun, and I probably wouldn't know what the hell to do with it if I got caught in a tight spot."

**Biographical Sketch:**

May (1919-2002) was born in North Saint Paul (Minnesota) and grew up in Fond du Lac (Wisconsin). He graduated high school in 1941 and spent one semester at the University of Wisconsin before he was drafted into the Army. During World War II, he served in France and England, guarding German prisoners of war with the 421<sup>st</sup> Military Police Escort Guard Company. In 1945, he was wounded in the eye during a training maneuver and suffered lifelong vision problems. After the war, May studied sociology and criminology at the University of Wisconsin. He married in 1947 and worked as a manager for J.C. Penney in St. Paul (Minnesota) for eight years. May retired in Brodhead (Wisconsin) and was a member of the Disabled Veterans of America.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1994

Transcribed by Joanna D. Glen, WDVA staff, 1997.

Checked by Channing Welch, 2008.

Abstract by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2009.

**Interview Transcript:**

**[Interview was conducted by telephone]**

May: Let me – I've got all my papers here.

Mark: Okay.

May: I hope I've got it organized. Boy, what a messy day!

Mark: Is it?

May: Yeah. It's just rain and just a lousy day for being outside.

Mark: I'm stuck in the basement. I wouldn't know. Which is kind of lousy itself.

May: Yeah, I 'suppose. Well, you aren't missing anything out there today.

Mark: Oh, well, that's too bad, I guess.

Mary: Okay.

Mark: I just need to make a brief introduction for the transcribers here. Today's date is September 23, 1994. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview today with Mr. Donald May, World War II veteran of the European theater. Good morning, I guess it's afternoon, isn't it. Good afternoon, Mister

May. How you doing?

May: Well, all right and good afternoon to you.

Mark: Okay, thanks. I suppose the place to start would be at the beginning and perhaps you could tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what it was like growing up where you did. Did you grow up in Brodhead? No, Fond du Lac it says here.

May: Fond du Lac, right.

Mark: Yeah. You were born in 1923?

May: Right.

Mark: You finished high school, geez when, 1941?

May: 1941.

Mark: '41. Perhaps describe some what it was like growing up in Fond du Lac. It was the Depression, did the Depression strike your family hard? Or ---

May: Well, pretty much so as anybody else's, I guess. I was born in North St. Paul, MN, a small town which my grandfather, Peter Schneweiss (??) was the first white settler and that was in 1923 and then in 1925, that was my mother's home town and then in 1925 we moved to Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, my father's home town in, the Fox River Valley and that was in 1925 and that's where I grew up until I went in the service.

Mark: I see. Do you recall when Pearl Harbor was bombed? Do you remember where you were?

May: Oh, my, yes.

Mark: Perhaps you can describe that for me.

May: Okay, let's see, that was - I graduated from Fond du Lac High School in June 1941 and then I wanted to wait a year to save some money because it was Depression days and I wanted to go to the University of Wisconsin for college and making 25 cents an hour it was, you know, - you had to do a lot of saving. But I was never a spend thrift. I'm still not, so I will count my nickels. But anyway, I got a job as a desk clerk at the Retlaw Hotel in Fond du Lac and I was on duty, I was on night duty and when we heard of Pearl Harbor bombing on December 7<sup>th</sup> on Sunday early in the morning and everybody said "How dare Japan, that little pip-squeak country attack the United States! We'll whip them out on a weekend." Well, that weekend lasted almost four years.

Mark: When you first heard the news, did you think, "Oh, gee, I'm going to end up in the Army. "Did that thought occur to you? What were your thoughts?

May: Well, not really too much. I really didn't know, except back in those days, we had a lot of propaganda films on the, well, "The Halls of Montezuma" and you know the Marines and they were pushing military and you know a lot of my buddies, when they go to the movies, they went back to enlist. It was a war where everybody was united, I'd say. We kind of took it for granted I guess, that if it keeps on going, then we're gonna have to go in.

Mark: So you went into the military then in 1943.

May: Right.

Mark: Did you continue to work at the Retlaw, was it the Retlaw Hotel?

May: Retlaw Hotel.

Mark: Yeah. You continued to work there until the time you were drafted, apparently.

May: No, no, no, I saved my money and then I left home in Fond du Lac in June of 1942 and I had to have some more money so I went to work as a laborer in the Badger Ordnance Plant in Baraboo and that was an ammunition plant. I started there when the federal government first bought the farm from the farmers and I worked with the lumberjack crew, in which I had no knowledge of cutting down trees, but I'll tell you one thing, at least it made me some money - making a buck an hour and I finally got put on a carpenter crew and I made \$1.25 That's pretty good.

Mark: Back in those days, I'm sure it was.

May: I worked out there all summer of '42 and then in September of '42 was my first semester freshman year.

Mark: At UW Madison?

May: Right, right, and then I went through the first semester and I was examined in Madison, Christmas Day weekend for induction into the Army and they let me stay in school until the end of the semester. I suppose that would be January of 1943.

Mark: So, you actually got your draft notice somewhere at the end of 1942?

May: Yes.

Mark: Do you remember what you thought when that greeting came in the mail? Any particular recollections?

May: Well, I don't think so. I don't know. You know we were pretty gung ho you know only, what, let's see, 1943, I was 20 years old and we were always looking for a little more excitement. It was a war that we knew that Europe was overrun with the Nazis and eventually we get into it because we could see all the films, you know, John Wayne and all those guys in the old films which were propaganda films.

Mark: So then you entered the military in early '43. Perhaps you could describe your steps as to your induction into the service. I assume you went to Camp Grant or someplace like that and then off to a training base?

May: Well, no, I was inducted, let's see, March 23, 1943 in Fond du Lac, and that morning my dad took me to the train and my mother wouldn't come because she just stayed in the kitchen crying 'cause her little boy was heading to military. Then my dad took me to the train, and his brother, my uncle Henry May came and saw us off and a whole and heading for, Fort Sheridan and that's where we wound up and then from there we were given our different destinations.

Mark: All from Fond du Lac and Fond du Lac County . Well, as that time heading for Fort Sheridan.

May: All from Fond du Lac

Mark: And you went to where?

May: I-- after being interviewed, one of the officers spoke to me in German and I answered him and I can't speak much German, never could, but he spoke to me and I answered back and they put me in the Infantry Military Police Escort Guard Company and that was - and so the Military Police Post at that time, was up at Fort Custer in Battle Creek, Michigan. So, we were sent up there - most of us guys because practically everybody was of German descent from Fond du Lac and West Bend and Milwaukee and we wound up with a whole bunch of you know guys that sounded - their last names sounded like a German roster.

Mark: Sounds interesting.

May: We went up there, let's see, Battle Creek we had basic training up there in the infantry because our company was going to be a military police company that escorted German prisoners of war. So, we had to be close to the infantry to go up and get to the front lines to get the German prisoners of war back to the rear echelon. Then our first contact with German prisoners of war was Rommel's Africa Corps. We left Battle Creek, Michigan, Fort Custer and we went down for more training down to the Camp Campbell which is now Fort Campbell on the Kentucky and Tennessee border. That's where General Patton's tank crew, 100,000 soldiers there, most of 'em were Patton's tank crew - tough as nails. They were tough.

Mark: That's what I hear.

May: They were tough, and we went up into Canada from there on a train to pick up Rommel's Africa Corps prisoners of war.

Mark: You went to Montreal or Quebec or someplace like that?



May: Well, I don't know just where we picked them up in Canada. I really can't say. I know we went through Boston and I told my family, I've never traveled the east coast in my life and I went through it on a train and never set foot on the ground. Then we took them back to Camp Campbell and we stayed down there and had more infantry training and then we moved back up to Battle Creek, MI for more training at the military police camp.

Mark: Now what sort of training did you get for military police duties? I mean what sort of things were you instructed in? Besides the regular infantry training, what sort of specialized training did you get?

May: Pretty much infantry training and then in our company of military police we were trained that if we got close to the front lines and the infantry needed us, we had to go into combat. Then we had to have town patrol which we did in England.

Mark: Which is kind of like shore patrol in the Navy or the MPs or something like that?

May: Town patrol?

Mark: Shore patrol in the Navy?

May: Well, no, well, yeah, but town patrol, see, we didn't do that until we got-- well I'm getting ahead of my story here.

Mark: That's okay.

May: All right?

Mark: Sure, sure. We'll hop around. That's okay.

May: All right. I tell ya, town patrol is when we left the United States and then we went to England we landed at Liverpool, England and we went to the Midlands of England up near Birmingham and Stratford-on-Avon, which was Shakespeare's birthplace, and it's a beautiful country, but this is where the 8th Air Force was training too. This is where the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force was training and then we would have to go into town, patrol the town and when the American soldiers got in there in town at night, the English pubs close and all that at 10:00 at night - I can still hear that "Time please, time please". At 10:00 at night the American GIs had drunk everything they had in their pub and then some of the towns we patrolled with the black military police were black and white towns. Well, that didn't go over very great 'cause when those southern soldiers, white soldiers, got into town and the blacks and they got drinking, there was hell to pay.

Mark: They fought a lot and that sort of thing?

May: Oh, my yes.

Mark: What did the English think of all this? Or did they just kind of lay low?

May: Well, see when the blacks came over there, from what I understand, this is all from memory now, the blacks came over there before I got there, they told their English girls that they were American Indians so when we got over there, they were pretty well all settled with the white girls and those guys from down in the south, Georgia and Alabama and North and South Carolina, didn't even like us at that time because we were Yankees. In fact, we had a couple of MP companies that the United States military had no control of as far as shipping in soldiers in there because they allowed nobody in there, like a North Carolina company allowed nobody in there from the north and the military sometimes goofed up and sent somebody in there and they got him out of there pretty quick. They wouldn't – I mean this was back before any integration and back, when was it, Eisenhower put out a communication it was getting so bad that he would court martial any whites with disturbing, you know starting an instigation of a riot and I've seen whole towns got on riots.

Mark: So that happened kind of a lot, I guess, from your perspective anyway.

May: It happened a lot. I've seen MPs when they got in there get cut up almost into ribbons with razor blades sewn into the skullcap of the GI and they could swing that and cut a guy's cheek open. So, what we finally learned after all that when there is a big riot going on, was that we got in our jeep and went out of town and came back when it was all over with, and then picked up the bodies 'cause we couldn't do anything.

Mark: Blacks in this kind of thing? Or just a lot of injured people in these riots?

May: You mean in the riots?

Mark: Yeah.

May: Oh, my yes.

Mark: Really.

May: My yes, my yes. Oh yes, we had a number of 'em.

Mark: Really.

May: And the military would send home the information that the GI was killed in the line of duty. I usually walked, you know I wasn't, I was just, I don't know how I

got into all this rough stuff, because I'm just a very normal university student. Well, we've got more to go on that, so ---

Mark: I've got a question about some of your fellow policemen. You mentioned a lot of them were of German descent.

May: Yeah.

Mark: As you may or may not know in World War I, German Americans had kind of a rough time, they were accused of disloyalty and all those things.

May: Oh, that's right.

Mark: Did you experience anything like that in your unit and with some of the German American people that you served with? Was it an issue in World War II at all?

May: Well, not really because see in our company we had 130, I think, 130 – 135 men in our company and our company from the company commander on down being an escort guard company was being trained to help the infantry and being trained to escort German prisoners of war back, and so we had to speak a lot of languages. Our company could speak every language in every dialect on the European continent. But we had to reverse when we captured Brest, France which is a peninsula in the province of Brittany. After D-Day, Normandy, Utah Beach and Omaha Beach, when we captured that, here's where we had 38,000 prisoners of war and we were 135 or less so you can imagine how much strength we had against them and these were all slave laborers from all of Lithuanian countries and Russia and then all of the German troops were SS troops, and you've heard of them.

Mark: Yeah, oh yeah.

May: SS troops, and here's where the reverse comes in. The SS troops came after us verbally and said that we were disloyal to our fatherland because we were German Americans and I'm a, what am I, second generation American, a third, I'm a third generation – no, no, no – my father was first – second generation – my grandfather came from Germany, and then my father born here, so I would be. They said "You are disloyal to the fatherland you should be fighting on our side." They were the most – what, let's see, I was only, 21 at that time and these guys were my age and they were the most arrogant SOBs you ever did – you ever wanted to run into. In fact, they were so arrogant that we captured from Brest that their general of the SS troops told our Colonel that he wanted all of us court marshaled because we wouldn't salute him in the prisoner of war camp, and that was just a great big field with fence around it.

Mark: Where was this?

May: That was at St. The'gonnec, France. That was in at. You want the spelling?

Mark: That'd be helpful, I think.

May: I tell you what. I got all my pictures here of the airborne and the gliders going over, going over the English Channel, and I got ships that were disabled right after D-Day. I mean, if ever you – I showed those to you, a lot of those to Dr. –

Mark: McIntosh?

May: McIntosh, but he said we couldn't blow 'em up, so I didn't know if I should just donate those to you guys of if you need 'em or whatever. Anyway, okay, here, I got a picture ---

Mark: We can talk about that afterwards.

May: Here's St. The'gonnec. That's S-T, period, St. The'gonnec, is T-H-E and then there's an apostrophe there, G – O – N – N – E – C, France. That's where we set up our big camp. What happened going up to that camp, see we were never assigned to any army or any big group. We were attached, so when you're attached you can move on the Commanders, Colonel or the General on verbal orders, assigned you have to move on written orders. So we were running all over the place. When we were headin' for St. The'gonnec and got our orders to go up there- to be ready to receive the prisoners from Brest, France, which was a big submarine base in Brittany, our Captain was so concerned that we wouldn't get there on time that we were going down the road from Normandy and Brittany and going to St. The'gonnec and we started to pass a big, big column of American infantry and tanks and all of a sudden the Colonel stopped and he said "Where the hell do you think you're going?" Our Captain told him he said "We're going to St. The'gonnec. He said "You get your ass back behind us because we haven't even taken it yet." So --- See all of this is coming back since I've been talkin' to you.

Mark: Yeah. Well, that's good. Let's discuss a little bit your actually going overseas.

May: OK. That's exactly what I wanted because I think you're probably not going to run into another thing like this in all your interviews.

Mark: Okay.

May: Okay?

Mark: Yeah, let's hear it.

May: All right. Okay. We're gonna try. Okay, okay. Let's see. The last time I was home was December, Christmas of 1943 and I told my brother privately who was a 4F that we were slated to go over to England in January of 1944 and then I wrote to my mother and dad and told them that we were going. So I didn't want to tell them because that would spoil the whole Christmas. But anyway we left from, let's see, from up at Boston, Taunton, Mass. by train up to Halifax, Nova Scotia. We got on a ship there. We had never saw any big ships like that coming from Wisconsin, you know and we thought, "Gee, looks pretty nice." So when we got on that ship they put us in a little cubby hole, 135 of us, down below the water level and I tell ya it was the most cramped space I've ever been in my whole life. It was just like three layers of bunks and three layers of hammocks. This was probably the scariest time of my 33 months in the service.

Mark: Really.

May: We got out from the docks of Halifax and we got out to the North Atlantic a little bit and the Captain told us the history of the ship. When France fell in 1940, and they surrendered to Germany, the British Navy was down in the Mediterranean with the French sailors and one of the ships down there was the luxury liner of France, The *Louis Pasteur* and that's the ship we were on going to England. Hitler, when France told his German Navy to bring, 'cause that was going to be his private luxury liner, well the French sailors and the British sailors down there in some way decided to hell with him, we're going to take this ship across the English Channel. Well, they did and Hitler was furious that his German Navy couldn't keep that ship for him. So, he told his wolf pack of German submarines in the North Atlantic the Commander of any German submarine that sinks that ship would receive the highest military honor Germany can bestow. Well, they all wanted that. So we were out at sea and the Captain said, "Now, we have stripped this is the fastest ship on an ocean. We have stripped everything off of here. All heavy metal, all guns." We had no guns. The only guns in there were our rifles and our .45 hand guns. He said "We have speed. There's nothing can catch us. No submarine could catch us unless we have motor trouble. Then we're sitting ducks. We went over all alone. No convoy Nothing. Just by ourselves. If you ever think that you're important, get out on the North Atlantic in January and go across all by yourself and you have no protection and the Captain said there are submarines out there right now, looking for us. And then we hit, but we went, let's see, I think he said if I remember correctly, 33 knots an hour and we had a keel, which I think was a 45 degree list to the side, a 45 degree angle, and then we hit a North Atlantic storm and they are vicious. Boy, if you ever think you're important, go out in the North Atlantic in a storm. You're a cork bobbing out there. There were submarines. I guess they spotted submarines out there, but see we never had any trouble. The Captain said if anybody falls overboard, we're not stopping. "No cigarettes, nothing, nothing thrown overboard. It took us; I don't know whatever happened to that ship, called *Louis Pasteur* after the scientist.

Mark: It took you how long to get across the sea?

May: Well, it's strange. It took us five days, which was unheard of at that time.

Mark: Yeah. Pretty fast.

May: That's very fast. Well, 33 knots an hour, I don't know what that is, but if I recall correctly, you know, but he said it was the fastest ship on the – but I'll tell ya when you're down below the water level and those big waves, 30 foot waves splash against that ship and you don't know if those engines are going to keep running and then you know that those German Wolf Pack captains are just looking for you, and you're all alone, there's nothing no escort. We saw nothing except I think we whales and these seagulls kept following us all the way across. I never knew that, and then we got to Liverpool and by God; we sat in that dock waiting to disembark the ship for another five days. Took us as long to get off the ship.

Mark: I see. So let's discuss your involvement with the D-Day invasion in June '44.

May: OK. Let's see, let's see. I went to the Midlands. Let's see, we got to the Midlands and I, let's see, I left the United States January 19<sup>th</sup> for Europe, '44 and then we stayed in the Midlands until probably about June 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> and then we got orders to move down to the docks of England to a little place called Portland Bill and that wasn't too far from Portsmouth and Weymouth and Southampton and when we got some time away from the coast area, we saw nothing but the movement of tanks and infantry and every type of personnel. It was just one right after the other, just crowded the whole coast. We knew that something was coming up pretty quick. Then we put our tents right at Portland Bill and then we're all having bets on - we knew it was coming fast because if we move that close to the coast, we knew that we were going to get prisoners of war - and then we had bets what was going to happen. Well, when we were all sleeping on June - went to bed June 5, 1944 at 3:00 in the morning we heard a tremendous humming in the sky - just like millions and millions of humming birds or bees flying and we went outside and here the whole sky was nothing - just like locusts - of planes pulling gliders with cables in them and then we know – oh, here it goes - here goes the invasion. This was the planes pulling the gliders with the 101st and the 82nd and the American Rangers Division who landed behind the lines, well, before beach hour on D-Day. I got pictures of that too.

Mark: Oh, do you? Taken at night?

May: No, no the next morning.

Mark: That's what I thought.

May: Yeah, next morning. No, no, not at night. We weren't supposed to but, you know, 'cause we could have got a general court martial, but being in the Military Police we got away with a few things.

Mark: So, when the invasion started, what happened to you and the people in your unit?

May: Well, let's see. We were right on the docks so we started to do dock patrol and I was at a dock patrol lot at Portland Bill and I was there when the first wounded came back.

Mark: This was on June the 6th?

May: Well, no, it was probably June 7th or 8th when they got back across the Channel. You know that's one of the roughest bodies of water in the world. They had to be careful coming back. That was the first wounded coming back. The Germans were pretty well prepared. It was probably the second or third wave that was coming back, I would say. Part of the first I guess, but see the Germans weren't set for the first or second, but boy I'll tell you, they were set for the third wave coming in there. It was a terrible sight. These guys coming in on stretchers and the Germans had those mines that they planted that when you stepped on them or detonated they would pop up in the air about three feet and they'd detonate and they'd cut off a man's genitals and his legs. These guys would say. Telling you – "Please shoot me. You know I'm no good for anything. I'll never be able to be married or have children," and they were under morphine, you know.

Mark: Those were the Bouncing Betty's they were called? The Bouncing Betty mine.

May: I don't know what the name was, but I know they were treacherous. They were treacherous. Then we had a comedy scene while I was out there once-- I was watching for all the de-embarkation of the soldiers you know, and not very old you know, and all the wounded and here comes one of the LCIs, coming across there. They came across the whole Channel in that and of course, in Normandy, they got hold of all this cognac - the GI's over there and the calvados, and the - the calvados was the **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** the killer, you know, for drinking.

Mark: Yeah, I've heard of it.

May: Have ya?

Mark: Yes.

May: Well, we used to use it in our cigarette lighters. I remember the first time, I don't know if it was the first day I was out there, whatever, but anyway the time here comes the ramp down for the GIs to invade and they came down and they came down and they had a woman on there. I mean these were rough GIs, infantry, and I

said "What the hell are you doing with that woman?" She said she was a French girl. She wanted a ride across the Channel so they gave her one. It kind of broke up the horror of everything. Bunch of GIs. Some pretty girl wanted a ride across the English Channel. I mean you run across that kind of stuff.

Mark: On this data sheet I had you fill out here, you made several trips across the Channel and back?

May: Yes, well see what we had to do is go over to France and go behind the front lines and pick up the German prisoners of war from the infantry and then put them back on board ship and take them back to England. Then we put them in prisoner of war camps in England. I made that trip, in fact I volunteered cause I was kind of a chow hound and I wasn't too happy with all the American food but I liked the Navy food and the Navy was good but the Coast Guard was better so whenever they asked for volunteers I went across so I made six trips across there.

Mark: I see.

May: Six trips.

Mark: And that's when you came across your first German prisoners?

May: Well, the first German prisoner was that one I told you ---

Mark: You're right. In North America you saw some but in Europe ---

May: In Europe, the first prisoners?

Mark: Yeah.

May: They were the, the first ones were the, let's see infantry that the 29th Division sent back. We traveled to the 29th Division quite a bit 'cause whenever Eisenhower needed an infantry company to really do a job, he picked on them 'cause they were tough! In fact we followed them all the way from Utah Beach and Omaha Beach right up into Normandy and into Brest, Brittany, the peninsula. German prisoners. The SS troops from out of Brest were arrogant. Oh they were - and their front lines, in fact when they were in our camp, they were communicating by radio with their front line troops.

Mark: The SS troops were?

May: Ya, our prisoners.

Mark: How'd they manage that?



May: Well, we still haven't figured that out. Our intelligence said that some way in your camp of 38,000 prisoners, that they're getting communications back to the front line for attack and takeover the camp. So, we'd get up, we stormed the entire camp looking for those radios and you know we never did find them. Never did, and from what I understand from Intelligence, we worked very close with the CIC which was the Criminal Investigation Corps which was the forerunner of the CIA, that we went in there and took – got everybody out of the barracks and you know we went through that barracks and we never did find anything. What we understand is what they'd do is they'd take them all apart during the day and each prisoner would have a little part, like a little screw or something. Then at night they'd reassemble them. And they used to tell us, the SS troops used to tell us that they think we're traitors to the fatherland, we should be fighting together not against each other and they said "When our troops come back and they were only a couple miles away – "When our troops come through here and free us, we're going to personally look you guys up." Well, that was kinda a little scary.

Mark: Did you think so? You thought that was kind of scary?

May: Well, it was because we weren't very far away, you know. It was a little scary, yeah, but really, I can't remember ever being frightened to death except on that darned ship, you know. Oh, I guess I was, you know, I guess I was scared. I was scared in France and then when I got wounded in the eye then I was afraid because I thought I was going to go blind. But I'll tell you those SS troops were – they were arrogant. Terrible, terrible. Is this making sense?

Mark: Sure. Oh, yeah.

May: Good. Maybe I can give you something that you haven't – let's see ---

Mark: No, you're the second military policeman I've interviewed. The other one was in Iran. So he wasn't in combat, but ---

May: Well, I wasn't right at the front lines, but when we were in Normandy, we couldn't use any lights and some of those American truck drivers they'd get that calvados and cognac in them you know. They'd go hell bent for election through those country roads and we'd get lost. I know we lost one of our guys in a jeep - a couple of them from West Bend and they were real German-American krautheads. They got lost and they had been drinking, which a lot of us did, you know, and they wound up, we were on the - let's see in Normandy on the beaches and the Germans were in Caen, France, and they wound up, we always got lost, you know we don't know where we're going at night. Well these two guys from West Bend wound up on the other side of Caen so they had between, the Americans and them were all the German forces so they went through Caen in their jeep at night, waited until night, shouting in German you know and the Germans just figured,

and the guards just figured they were German soldiers so they let them get through. That's another one of the little gimmicks, you know.

Mark: That's a good story. I was wondering if you could perhaps comment from your perspective guarding the German POWs about the morale of the German soldiers. The SS troops obviously, to make these radios and try to communicate, they were very well motivated.

Mary: Right.

Mark: Was that the same with some of the other German troops that you came across, regular infantry men or the prisoners or, I mean what could you tell about the morale of the German Army at the time from your perspective guarding the prisoners?

May: The only ones I ran into who were die-hards were the SS troops and they had been trained into Nazism since they were 6-7 years old, so they were die-hards and they really believed that Hitler was God you know and their "Lagerfuhrers" that's what I remember calling them, their first sergeants were arrogant. I have seen one of those SS troops coming up to get a drink of water and they weren't supposed to get water, they'd kick them right in the face. I mean they were mean. They were just mean people. But when the regular army, then I ran across guys who all they wanted to do was get rid of this dumb war and go back home to their farm or their being a mechanic or whatever. And they could speak English.

Mark: Yeah, and some of you could speak German, too, and many of the policeman could obviously speak German, too.

May: Most of my company could speak German. Many of them were fluent. That was their basic language then.

Mark: What were the relations like between the American guards and the German prisoners? Because there were some, for example, there were some German POWs that were in Wisconsin--

May: Right.

Mark: --who worked on farms and generally got along well with the people that were here. Many of them came back here to settle after the war. I'm wondering, in a prison camp in Europe for example, how the relations were between the Americans and the Germans in the prisoner camp.

May: You mean like the ones that we American MPs that were guarding the Germans?

Mark: Yeah. I mean, were you hostile toward the Germans at all times? Were they hostile toward you? Or did you get along or ---

May: No, not really, not really. I tell you what we did when we first got the first Germans when we got over there. We were so sick of GI food that the first ones we called out in German was all the cooks from Germany because, see, we were used to eating our grandparents' food and our mom and dad's food that was the old German recipes, you know, pork hocks and sauerkraut, mashed potatoes and gravy, and got the cooks out. We threw out the American cooks and we put the Germans in charge and the first thing one night I remember I told them that we wanted was some homemade potato pancakes and they made them for us and it was just like home. We don't like the English food and the French food we hated.

Mark: Really?

May: Yeah, we didn't like that. Well, they didn't make it the way, we were young kids you know, and we liked pork hocks and sauerkraut and chicken and dumplings and that kind -- and the Germans, we got along -- In fact, I'm Catholic and I went to Mass with the Germans. We used to say, "what kind of business is this, here we're at war with one another, shooting at one another and now we're going up to communion at Mass, Catholic Mass, together?" The normal ones, but of course they had to watch it too because they were in the same barracks with some of the hard line, you know. I've had guys that we had to pull out of there because the Germans would have killed them, for even being sociable with us. The only ones were the SS troops and that was Hitler's elite guard that was Himmler's, yeah Himmler.

Mark: Right.

May: That was Himmler, General Himmler's crew that would -- they were ruthless! They're the ones that were the head of solving the Jewish problem and I saw a little bit of that when they surrendered in France. I never got past France, but it was just that oven we were coming up to and then all of a sudden the CIC put a clamp on everything including us. Nobody was to go near it. These were the ovens, you know -- the gas chambers.

Mark: Yeah, yeah. In some of the camps you were working in, were there any attempts at escape or what sort of problems did you have guarding the prisoners?

May: Well, now that's a good question. Can you hang on a minute?

Mark: Sure, sure, I mean hang on.

May: Okay, let's see, escapes. And general problems guarding the prisoners. Okay, let's go back up to the Brest, the big submarine base at Brest, Brittany, and I have a big

map from National Geographic here that's got all of those towns on it. That's where we had our 38,000 prisoners of war with that SS general and his troops. When we had them in that camp, all it was a great big farmer's field with barb wire around it, encircling it, you know. So, then 135 of us, sometimes I had 500 prisoners out doing work detail. Well, we couldn't - they were escaping. We used to see them in town. We'd go into town, one of those little towns for an hour or so and we'd see them. They had escaped and gone to a bar, pub or whatever, they call 'em in France, and then they'd come back.

Mark: They'd come back into prison camp?

May: Yeah they'd come back in it. Then we said we gotta have more help, so what they sent to us, which I guess we didn't even know existed was the French underground. The Maquis. They sent us a bunch of 16 and 17-year-old kids and that's the first time we ever heard of a burp gun. That's that gun without a stock on it, just a metal wire that - we never seen one of those. But you know around that camp when - so they came to help us guard the prisoners. So then, when the American soldier walked the post in a military fashion when we were guarding the German prisoners of war but not these kids, Maquis. They didn't do that. What they did was hid in the bushes and anybody comes and they say "Halt" and you didn't halt in a second, man you were dead. They scared the hell out of us.

Mark: They were much tougher.

May: Well, they didn't do it in a military fashion, you know. We'd be coming to relieve somebody on post and all of a sudden we'd hear "Halt" but there was nobody there. Well, they were hiding in the hedgerows and they were never trained in military fashion so that was probably even better. Then they loved it when one of the Germans would try to escape because we had people trying to escape, so one of the first things I recall is they were using our American jeeps and when there was an escape, they were just like a bunch of hunters after a rabbit. I remember the one time they came back and they had a German prisoner of war, dead, straddled on the front of their jeep. This was SS troops and they had everybody come out of the barracks, well, not barracks. They didn't have barracks. We had just that great big field, and I don't know what we had for them to sleep in up there, but anyway they paraded up and down and the head of the Maquis, the French Underground told the Germans that we appreciate all of you trying to escape, go ahead 'cause it just gives us a lot of fun and they paraded that guy he was just strapped - looked like a deer across the front of his jeep. And the Germans, boy, I tell ya, that cut down a lot of that.

Mark: I bet it did.

May: Because they didn't take any prisoners, they killed them.

Mark: That brings up an interesting point, actually about the relationship between the French and the Germans. I assume that the French - it sounds to me like the French were kind of ready to get even with the Germans.

May: They were.

Mark: Did you have trouble other than the Maquis; did you have trouble with other Frenchmen trying to attack the Germans in some way? Was there much tension between the French people around you and all these Germans in this camp?

May: Well, I don't know about attacking them. I'll tell ya, one thing of attack was with the 38,000 German SS troops that we had, we had a lot of slave labor that the Germans used up in the Brest area. So we had all of them in camp. Well, the Russians that we had, they were right from Russia, they were prisoners of war, but they were used as slave labor. We had to separate them because everybody hated the Germans, so the Russians got kind of smart. So in the area where we had the Russians, in the camp, almost immediately, the Germans were very clean and they had little flowers growing and they were the cleanest in the whole area, as far as keeping their area clean. But the Slavic people were very dirty. So what the Russians decided to do is they would send one of the young kids, like 11 or 12 years old, he'd sneak across the wires, and he would go in by the Germans and taunt the Germans. The Russians knew that American soldiers would not stand for any brutality, nobody picking on kids. That kid would go over to the German area and provoke some German SS officer and the German SS officer would "Raus mach dich," "Get the hell out of here," and kick 'em in the pants. Well, that's all the Russians needed, because then they'd go across the fence and I'll tell ya, boy, they just mauled those German people. They knew that the Americans would not do much to them because Americans don't like the brutality. Well, in the \_\_\_\_ (??) today we - even today it's the same way. We had a time to go in with half-tracks with machine guns mounted on there to quiet them down. The Russians, boy, they were tough! Then they brought all that Russian vodka out you know and gee we got on that after that, and then we went on that, and boy, I'll tell you - they drank it by the glassful and we had a glass of that and we were out like a light.

Mark: That brings up another topic I was gonna ask about and that involves what you and your colleagues, or your comrades, whatever, did during your free time. I assume there were times when you were on duty and off duty. What sort of things did you do to occupy yourself when you were off duty? Did you write letters? Drinking, gambling is another thing a lot of veterans will talk about. What sort of things did you and your comrades do to occupy your free time?

May: Well, I wrote a lot of letters home, lots of letters. Let's see, what was it? V-Mail?

Mark: Yeah.

May: Think it's called V-Mail. Lot of letters home to my family and friends and girlfriends, you know. Then if we could, I know we got a pass one time to Saint Brieuc. It's up in the Brittany Peninsula near Brest. Saint – Brieuc and we used to call it St. Breck. I got that on the map, I don't know if you want that spelling or not.

Mark: Yeah, why not?

May: Hang on a minute. I've gotta get that map over here. You see my eyes are gettin' kind of bad. I've gone totally blind in this one eye here and I have been up to the Veterans Hospital in Madison for probably 30-40 years and it finally went totally blind and the other one's got glaucoma so I have to kind of squint a little bit. Hang on a minute.

Mark: Sure.

May: Let's see. Saint – Brieuc, up with the Brittany, Brest Peninsula. Oh, here it is. St. B-R- --- I think it is. Saint-Brieuc. It's right up by Saint Malo. See this – you've probably heard a lot about – it you know – you've got knowledge of WWII, right?

Mark: A little.

May: A little.

Mark: As much as I can.

May: Okay, I was in all of these all the way from Le Havre to Cherbourg. Right after Saint Lô the day after the infantry went through there 101st. Saint Lô, the whole town was demolished. St. Michel Eglise, all up in the Brittany Peninsula and we were running around in there like, if the Germans had counterattacked and got through, we'd been dead. 'Cause we were only a couple of miles behind the front line. When I went up to Saint Malo, I remember the guy's name: Charlie. He could speak perfect English and we got in there and stayed there overnight, my buddy from Fond du Lac and I who were in the same outfit and we delivered papers when we were in grade school, in Fond du Lac went into the Army together, got in the same outfit together, went to Europe together then I got wounded and I got separated because I was in the hospital and our company went down to Southern France and then I came home after that. But he and I went up to Saint-Brieuc and that was a beautiful resort area. Met a lovely family who were very wealthy I guess, and they had their summer home up there. They were outside of Paris, which I never did get into, never did get to Paris, but we had a lovely time there, and I gave the grandmother some coffee. I was always giving somebody something, you know, oranges or tobacco or pipe tobacco or cigarettes,

but I gave the grandma coffee which they hadn't seen for years, regular coffee, American coffee and that of course put me in good with the grandma.

Mark: I'm sure. I get the impression that--did the Americans get along well with the French - where you were at least anyway?

May: Well, I think we did. I was never that fond of the French people that I met, but of course, that was war time. The English were-- that's probably one of the things that kept them stable during WWII is that the English are kind of cold and calculated and whatever comes they can handle, but the French, it seemed like they were after almost anything they could get a hold of. Like when we were in Compiegne Forest when I was training to go up to the front line, I don't know if you know the history of the Compiegne Forest, but in WWI that's where the French humiliated the Germans by making them sign unconditional surrender in WWI in that boxcar. Well, that's where I was training in there at a "Repo Depot", replacement depot for infantry, and that's where Hitler humiliated the French by making them sign unconditional surrender in WWII in 1940. I saw that boxcar but I don't think I ever did go in there. It was kind of a museum piece you know. But I know when we used to be eating out -- because, you know, we always ate outside and in France it's raining constantly. We said no wonder they call them Frogs. You'd have to be a frog to live in his climate, and the nights were black-black. They weren't just moonlight. They were black-black. But anyway, we'd be eating out there and it would be raining and here would come a little kid about 3-years-old with a little pail, that wanted whatever we were going to throw in the garbage that he could have and I've seen some of the toughest sergeants, he sat down -- and I got along with all our guys, I mean guys that would cut a German's throat like nothing, just sit down and cry. One of our toughest sergeants said, "How the hell can I eat? Look at that little kid standing over there and he's got a little two-year-old sister along with a pail to pick up --How can I possibly eat anything?" So, I've seen a lot of guys take a couple of spoonfuls and put it over there and the kids loved it, but there was nothing left, the Germans took everything. France was not my favorite place, but of course I was in the military you know.

Mark: I suppose it is not the best way to see another country.

May: No, but I'll always remember -- see, you brought - after I saw Dr. McIntosh all this stuff is coming back and I got all my old pictures, it may be something that if you needed for your dissertation or whatever that you might want to see actual photographs of the gliders going over the channel and where the plane was pulling the glider and all of a sudden the cable would break and the glider would go right down in the English Channel and then when they were getting Omaha Beach cemetery ready, the cemetery crews that were putting the bodies, American bodies in mattress covers they put 'em in and before that there was so many bodies that they had like bulldozers just to put in a great big hole and cover them up. I've seen where they put like 400 bodies in one big hole cause they had to move forward

and then they'd come back and dig them up and put them in individual graves but I think at this time [**Approx. 10 second gap in tape**] Let's see. We got to where we'd go - we went to town but we didn't have that much - bein' in to town, I don't know, it seemed like there wasn't that much. We'd get into a little village in France. When we were in England my buddy, George Laird from Fond du Lac who is dead now, who was with me until I got married in 1947. We were college roommates when we got back. Soon as I got back December 5, 1945, and then in June, I started my summer semester back to the University after my first semester freshman and he and I were roommates.

Mark: Let's talk briefly about some of the men in your unit. Pretty much the people you entered the service with from Wisconsin you served with throughout most of the war. Is that right?

May: Right, right. Just about - we all went in - many of us that left on the train wound up in the same outfit. The 421st Military Police Escort Guard Company. That's M-P-E-G Company and we had many guys from Chicago too and Milwaukee. Lots of Italians.

Mark: Lots of Italians too.

May: Lots of Italians. Well, Italian-Americans you know.

Mark: Yeah.

May: In fact we had one of them used to be the chauffeur for Al Capone and he carried his own private .38 in his foot locker and you know something? Nobody ever took it away from him! But he used to be a chauffeur for Al Capone in the old days, and on one of those ship trips coming back from France back to England across the English Channel, something you might like to know, that while we were guarding all those German prisoners of war, and we had a bunch of them, those were on LSTs, the big ships that had the mouth open up in the front and the tanks would roll off, from there, that all of a sudden we heard Italian friends in our outfit hooting and hollering in Italian in their language. They could all speak Italian language and they ran down to those German lines and they pulled a little guy out of there who was from the Italian Army and the way they explained it to us that he said he got lost from his outfit in Italy and the Germans picked him up and they threw him in the German Army and he hated the Germans. And was he happy to come in with the Americans, especially all of his brothers from Chicago and Milwaukee. It's one of those interesting little anecdotes.

Mark: Yeah, sounds very interesting. So, you were wounded.

May: I was wounded, but not at the front.



Mark: Perhaps you could describe, because it's my impression that it's those wounds that got you out of the service then, that pretty much ended your war career is that right?

May: No.

Mark: Excuse me?

May: No, no, no, the wound didn't.

Mark: Okay.

May: No, the wound didn't. When I was at – when Hitler was making – well, Hitler said in December of 1944 that he would retake Paris before Christmas, that was the last big German push and I was at the Marshall Foch (??) barracks in Rennes, France R-E-N-N-E-S, Rennes, France and that was the saddest period of my Army experience, is sitting listening to Bing Crosby sing White Christmas. I was sitting with a full field pack ready to go up to the front line, the Battle of the Bulge, and listening to Bing Crosby singing White Christmas which was my mother's favorite song. Well at 21, you know, that didn't make me very happy and I'll tell you one thing, we were pretty tipsy by the time the night came. Anyway, I never did go up to the Battle of the Bulge. But then when we headed out of there. Let's see what – oh, and then Hitler's last big push, offensive killed off so many infantry guys that we had to - they had to replace those who were killed to fill the infantry companies up at the front. So they pulled a bunch of us guys out of the rear echelon and that was General Ben Lear, "Yoo- Hoo, Lear" Now I'll tell you that little interesting story. Anyway, he was the head of rear echelon and they took so many people out of the rear echelon and of course I was picked and my buddy George from Fond du Lac were picked to go up to a "repo depot" in Compiegne Forest and we went up there and these were war games getting ready to go to the front. Well, then the war ended but they still kept us up there because they were going to ship us back to the States for a 30-day furlough then over to the Pacific and boy, we weren't very happy about that, you know cause we **[End of Tape 1, Side B ca. 30 min.]** were marchin' for home. So we played war games and they were rough. I mean these were really simulated. There were a lot of guys wounded and killed. There were guys from Iceland who had been in the Army for almost five years you know and they were nuttier than a fruitcake. They'd shoot in the rifle range and somebody would shoot close to the colonel and things like that. We got out one morning to go through trench warfare and we're using live hand grenades and our captain had us too close and a piece of the hand grenade went into my right eye. So I have a hole in there yet, because they can't operate and I had a piece of metal in there and Dr. James Allen, the Chief of Staff of the Eye Clinic at the Veterans Hospital in Madison has been looking at this three or four times a year for many, many years and so that's where I was wounded but not at the front.

Mark: I see.

May: So, I went into the hospital for a month, said good-bye to my friend George and the whole company left and I'll tell you, when you're away from your whole company, like just like family and then your family is back 3,000 miles away, that's a very depressing time.

Mark: I'm sure.

May: Very depressing.

Mark: I'm sure.

May: So then I went back to camp and that was in July of 1945 and then of course rumors in the Army are just like - nobody spreads rumors like GIs and they said we're gonna go back home. Well, we couldn't believe it 'cause I had already been gone from home from January in '44 overseas until July of 1945 and then we finally got ordered we were gonna go back to the States. Well, when Germany surrendered then we went back to the States for a 30-day furlough going to Pacific. But then as soon as I got back to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin by Sparta, that's where we went to be discharged and then August 15, VJ Day, I didn't even know that the Japanese surrendered, I was home on furlough and I went to Milwaukee to see my sister and they were all dancing in the streets. I couldn't imagine what was going on. Anyway I found out it was VJ Day and then I took the train to Fond du Lac and my parents had moved and I had my big duffel bag on my shoulders and I went to the train depot master and I asked him where the street was where my parents lived and I said "How come there is no buses or anything running?" "He said, "Don't you understand soldier?" "There's a war just ended." Well, I could tell him a thing or two, but anyway, I found my parents and boy that was a happy day! I surprised them. They knew I was coming but they didn't know when. So my eye didn't bring me home, but from what I understand from 1945 on that eye surgeon said that I should have been totally blind in both eyes, but fortunately somewhere along the line I got either God helped me or something, but I kept my other one good eye and it's still good.

Mark: Well, that's good.

May: Still good.

Mark: So you were officially discharged from the military when?

May: December 5, 1945.

Mark: That was at Camp McCoy?

May: Camp McCoy. When I came back overseas with my luck, you had to have 60 points to get discharged and I had 59. Boy, I'll tell you that was a disheartening thing. So instead of getting discharged at Camp McCoy, when I got home August 15th or 16th of 1945, I had to go back to Camp McCoy for a couple of months to help discharge the rest of the guys. I worked at the discharge center there.

Mark: What did you do?

May: Just going over all their records and history and all their health records and see if they had this - each GI - and there were thousands of them coming through there. Lots, lots of them coming through there. In fact I have copy of my discharge - you mentioned something you wanted one of those.

Mark: Yeah, I would like to have one if you could make a copy of it for me.

May: I could make a copy, sure.

Mark: That'd be great. So then you finally got home for good and that was December of '45.

May: December '45.

Mark: What did you do when you first got out of the service? What were your priorities, what did you want to do, what did you do, did you find a job, did you go to school? Perhaps briefly just discuss what you did the first couple of years after the war.

May: Well, when I got out you know I just took a few months off, lived with my mother and dad and got back to see some old friends coming back, and some never made it back. Of course we always went down to the taverns and that. They were loaded six deep at all the taverns, you know, coming home.

Mark: Lots of GIs

May: GIs yeah, and we had our \$300 mustering out pay, you know, but I knew I wanted to go back to school so rather than go back in January, I wasn't ready then yet, then I worked around part-times jobs and then I knew I wanted to go back in June so I started again in June of '46 for my second semester freshman year.

Mark: At Madison?

May: At Madison.

Mark: What did you major in? What were you going to school for?

May: I went into sociology and studied under some of the big names. Back in those days they had big names in all schools at the University. Key Kapler(??) who used to have his German Shepherd dog on the stage when he lectured. Professor Heseltine, you know him -

Mark: Oh, yeah, not personally. I know of him through reputation.

May: We used to go over to his house and discuss history and his hobby was baking cakes and Dr. McIntosh says he was a neighbor, and I studied sociology with emphasis on criminology and I got my B.A. degree, let's see, I got married August 9, 1947 during my Sophomore year, 'cause I had been running back and forth to my girlfriend in Fond du Lac and my grades went up substantially after that and we had Michael, my oldest son and I graduated in 1949 and then I went on into graduate work and I was a TA in Criminology and Sociology for two years.

Mark: At Madison?

May: At Madison.

Mark: I did a lot of research and seminar work. In fact some of the papers I did research on are probably in the University of Wisconsin Library.

Mark: I'm sure they are.

May: See, I never followed into Ph.D. There was not much help in those days you know. I went under the GI Bill and then ---

Mark: I was gonna ask about G I Bill. So you financed your education with the G.I. Bill?

May: Right.

Mark: Exclusively?

May: Pretty much so and then I worked 30-35 hours a week on a job so I could help support my wife and my child and I took a full course load. One of my best jobs was working for the forest - when Eagle Heights - you ever hear of Eagle Heights?

Mark: I used to live in Eagle Heights.

May: You did?

Mark: Yes.

May: Well, I tell ya, I worked there with the landscaping crew out of what is – Forest Laboratory? No.

Mark: The Forest Products Laboratory?

May: That's it. Okay. I got a job there working a buck an hour and all of that shrubbery, if it's still there, back in 1949 and '50, shrubbery and cleaning those little French windows. That's before anybody lived there. This is when they first were built. I worked on the crew for that. I must have cleaned 10,000 little French window inside and out - scraping paint off of it, washing them and then planted all that shrubbery around there. Eagle Heights - \$130 a month – I think was the most expensive one at that time was \$137.50.

Mark: It's more than that now. Trust me.

May: We thought that was just out of this world even then!

Mark: So, with your wife and family on campus, where did you live at that time? Did you live in one of the trailer parks that were near the campus or did you have an apartment off campus?

May: No. A lot of my friends who got married were GIs champing at the bit to get married and they were all over the campus and a lot of my friends lived out at the trailer park at the Badger Ordnance Works out on Highway 12, but my wife and I found one of the only remaining apartments when we got married over on Williamson Street, East Williamson, and of course back in those days all of that was a pretty safe street you know. We had our own little apartment and paid \$55 a month . I remember and that included everything, all the heat, water, rent and everything. Of course, we only made – what did I make? Eileen and I got \$90 a month, and then I think we got \$15 for Michael so that was \$105 a month, for that's besides the schooling, of course.

Mark: There were other parts to the GI Bill as well. There was a housing provision. Did you use GI Bill benefits to purchase your first home or anything like that?

May: Yes. When I left school, I didn't get my Masters, I had a lot of work in there but I just didn't have any money to go anymore and then I joined the JC Penney Company in their management training program and went right up the ladder with them and I went up to be Assistant Manager after 8 years with the Penney Company, I got to be the Assistant Manager up at the St. Paul store, new St. Paul suburban - this was when the shopping centers were first coming out. That was in 1955 and '56. I got a federal grant for buyin' that house up there. Then I got state help for buying – in fact they're still on this house. I don't have this one completely paid for yet. That's what's keeping me going I guess, to make sure I gotta stay alive long enough to pay off all my mortgage.

Mark: That's what my parents say too.

May: Well, that gives you a purpose. It gives you a purpose.

Mark: I wonder if you could comment a little bit on going back to life on campus with the veterans. Perhaps you could comment on some of your social life. Did you socialize with a lot of other veterans? In your experience was it mostly vets on campus? Did you have any contact with some of the students who were not veterans? Perhaps just describe what it was like to be on campus as a veteran at the time.

May: Well, let's see, when we got back, I tell you where I used to live in 1942 for my first time away from Mom and Dad, I lived at 202 North Park Street and that is an empty lot right now. Then when we came back, my good friend George, who was just a real buddy you know, they used to call us the Gold Dust twins, he and I roomed together and we got a room at 210 Langdon Street. That's just off of the curve there and right beside a big white pilloried sorority house and in this place, we were the renegades of the whole neighborhood because we were nothing but GIs in that house, 210 Langdon Street, But George and I were pretty serious students. We didn't – well, we didn't have any money in the first place and we were pretty studious. So we didn't do much. We didn't have any money to carouse around. We'd go down and have a glass of beer once or twice a week and that was 10 cents a glass and then we'd go down to the Memorial Union, that's where we ate most of the time and we'd go down there, this is before I got married now, when we first got back, and we'd eat in the cafeteria and then we'd sit with some of our friends. We were pretty good students. George and I belonged to the honorary fraternities - not social fraternities. National Sociological Honorary Fraternity and he was in Law School. We were pretty serious, and we used to get into these round table discussions with some pretty brainy guys. I mean these guys were pretty brainy. I tell ya, I had to really pay attention so I could try to compete with them. I was a poor kid, but I had a good head on my shoulders. Never made much money, but raised four kids and four grandchildren.

Mark: Me neither so don't feel bad. I don't make much money at this either, so don't feel bad.

May: Now how old are you?

Mark: 32.

May: 32? Good heavens, I'm 71. I got you (laughs) ---

Mark: More then doubled I know.

May: Yeah. I never made much money, but I just – you don't have to make – I tell ya when you get older that money doesn't make it 'cause I've seen guys that I knew that had tons of money and you know they would up with dying of cancer and they couldn't buy their way out of anything like that. So let's see what other notes I got. Can you hang on a minute?

Mark: Sure.

May: When you reach my age you have to go to the bathroom quite a bit. Hang on. They put me in the hospital because my bad eye was bulging out of the socket and they may have to take it out and I was up there for 6 days in June and he'd been after me and his staff to-- 'cause I do a lot of -- So when I was up there, they hardly could ever find me in my room because I was out introducing myself to all the GIs from WWII up on that floor and he said "you're just like a goodwill ambassador. We need you up here. You better sell your house in Brodhead and move back to Madison." So I may even do that.

Mark: Oh, I see.

May: I tell ya one thing.

Mark: You could find a wealth of guys up in that area.

Mark: I'm sure. Now this brings up the subject I was going to discuss anyway. I just have two things I want to cover and that's readjustment problems you perhaps had, and then veterans organizations and reunions and those sorts of things. With your war injuries, you had contact with the VA Medical system. How would you characterize your care with the VA system?

May: Like at Madison?

Mark: Yeah.

May: Finest I think in the whole country.

Mark: Really.

May: Oh, my. In fact I had a note that I should write to Herb Kohl and others to back the veterans for all the money they can get because these guys up there - the Madison, Dr. Allen, the Eye Clinic and the service is just tremendous.

Mark: Well, good. Did you have much contact with the VA right after the war, like when you were in college did you have to come to the hospital at all for your injuries or did these sorts of things happen only as you got older?

May: As I got older.

Mark: I see.

May: The eye had kind of stabilized. I never could see too much out of it, but as I got older where the hand grenade, a piece of metal that was in there it shattered the tissues in my eye so badly that as I got older the tissues began to deteriorate until a year ago in June I woke up at 3:00 a.m. and I'm a widower and being here alone, and very frightening to wake up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning and you feel up and your eye is almost protruding out of its socket and that's when it started a year ago and it has given me a lot of problems. It still does so I have to take a lot of eye medication. Just super service, I have nothing but praise for them.

Mark: Well, Good. After the war did you have any sort of other readjustment problems? Now we're familiar with the Vietnam veterans problems were all in the news, and those sorts of things. I was interviewing a WWII veteran a couple of week ago and he described how he would have dreams about how he would jump out of his plane without his parachute and those sorts of things. Did you have any problems like that when you got out of the service? Or, were you able to put the military experience behind you and just move on with your life?

May: Pretty much so because all my life I grew up in, you know, my family was rich in love but very poor financially, and I had a dream of going to school, college, and that's what egged me on, so I pushed everything else aside so I really didn't have any nightmares or anything like that. Not really that much problem, really. I wanted to get back in school.

Mark: Yeah, I see. The last area I wanted to cover had to do with veterans organizations. Did you join any groups while you were on campus or afterwards like the American Legion and things like that? I know there were student veterans groups active on campus after the war. Did you ever join groups like that?

May: No. The only one I joined about ten years ago, was the Disabled American Veterans.

Mark: What made you do that and why at that time?

May: Well, I guess I just at that time like ten years ago, what was I? Just 60, 61, and I was just – you know at that time you start thinking about going back and you'll do the same thing – going back to the old day. You live more in the past. Like I read lots of WWII books. I just – I don't know how I ever joined, but anyway, somebody talked to me, I guess or I mean, they're my favorite, I mean non-fiction. I was up at the Veterans and I talked to a Larry Haugen up there who's the head of the DAV or something, and I joined that 10 years ago and then just this last year I became paid up membership for life. I became a life member. Very good.



Mark: Good. Have you gone to any reunions with some of the men you served with? If a lot of them came from Fond du Lac perhaps you have had contact with the people you served with in the war. Do you get together with some of these guys at all?

May: Well, not anymore now. I've lost contact, but we used to probably for the first, oh 1945 when I got out to 1950, you know first eight or ten years we'd get together in Fond du Lac or West Bend. A Milwaukee group would come into West Bend and then we'd go from Fond du Lac and meet there and have a get together, but only a part of it because really our company, you know, there was some from all over. I was not much of a military man. I wasn't much for killing. I'm not a hunter, killing animals and I wasn't much for shooting at people. I was a student and carrying a gun, and I probably wouldn't know what the hell to do with it if I got caught in a tight spot. So I wasn't that much of a - I was there because I had to be and we had no question in our minds that we were that this is something that we're going to do. We never questioned - if we were 1-A in our physical and we were inducted into the Army, so be it. We accepted it.

Mark: Yeah. Okay. Those were all the questions that I had, do you have anything you would like to add?

May: Well, let's see. What have we got here? What else have I got? Oh, I could tell you one incident going across that English Channel.

Mark: Okay.

May: One of the first trips, if you want to hear some more.

Mark: Oh, sure.

May: Hang on.[**Approx. 17 second gap in tape**] I've also got ships on the Channel, too. Pictures of those. Yeah. Well. We were going across in a convoy going back over to France, you know, I went back and forth all the time 'cause I was a chow hound and I loved to go with the Coast Guard 'cause they had the best food available. Going across the English Channel, this was one of the early times like maybe ten days after D-Day, and we didn't know what we were going to run into. But back in the Army in those days we had to carry a prophylactic in our billfold and it had to be shown upon demand. I had that in there and you know back in the '40s we guys were pretty straight-laced. We weren't that promiscuous and we were going across the English Channel, and everybody out of probably about six ships out there and everybody was very tense because we didn't know what we're gonna run into when we got to France. All of a sudden, bein' on board ship, we looked out and somebody, over on one of those other ships blew up one of those condoms and let it fly in the air like a balloon and all of a sudden another one, and

another one and then hundreds and then thousands and the whole English Channel was littered with condoms floating up, and it just broke the ice. I was so happy to get out of that because I thought if I get killed on the English Channel and they send my personal effects over to my mother and dad, even being dead I'd be horrified that my mother would find the condom in my billfold. It's one of those little things.

Mark: Yeah, yeah. That's a funny story.

May: All of this stuff is coming back to me now, you know, that --- so ---

Mark: Well, I thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

May: Let's see. Where in the world? Let's see. Did I tell you where I was – Portland Bill, not Portsmouth. Portland Bill on the coast.

Mark: Yeah. Portland Bill.

May: Portland - I can't even find it on the map.

Mark: It's probably a really small place.

May: Oh, little place, yes, little place. Let's see. I told you about *Louis Pasteur*. I don't know whatever happened to that ship. Induction and – you know I don't know – what – I often tell my kids, I say I don't know what your dad was doing because I was a student, not a military man, and here I was running around when I got to France with the 101st Airborne, the 82nd Airborne, American Rangers and the British Commandos, the toughest outfits in the whole world and that's where we were getting all the German prisoners from.

Mark: Yeah.

May: Oh, I might tell you also. Ya got another minute?

Mark: Sure.

May: You got me going here now.

Mark: I've got about ten minutes of tape left.

May: I'm glad you're paying for this. When we first got to France, when we first got over there, a lot of the front line troops in the American Rangers and the Airborne were not taking German prisoners of war, they were shooting them. So Eisenhower put out a communiqué that they weren't getting enough German

prisoners of war of any consequence for the CIC to interrogate them for their outfit and their movement. The German soldier was so proud of all his medals and his company they would never take their insignia off, where the Americans take everything off - you didn't know a Colonel from a Private, and they were shooting them so the American Rangers decided as long as Eisenhower was going to do that and court martial them, then what they would do was put them in relay and run them to death. So they did. They did that for awhile. War is hell. So I think that's probably my - I think that's my story, I guess.

Mark: Okay.

May: I don't know if it helped you.

Mark: No, it was just great, just great.

May: If I can do any more - Do you want anybody else from this area to talk to you?

Mark: You know I would actually. I've interviewed a lot of veterans from Madison and I'd like to start interviewing more from out in the state more. So, if you've got some friends that you think would make good interviews, have them give me a call or write me a note or give me their address and phone number and I'll contact them myself. Whatever you think.

May: Well, I know of one that got a lot much closer to the front line. He's the one - a Major from WWII. See the doctors don't want me to drive up to Madison to the hospital-- and this is quite a twist where the Major is driving the Private around. He'd be happy to - He's got a lot of records.

Mark: He'd be interesting to talk to.

May: Well, I can give you his name and phone number.

Mark: Why, sure.

May: His name is John Polka, P-O-L-K-A, and his phone number is 608-897-2472.

Mark: Do you happen to have his address? I prefer to write to people first.

May: Okay, hang on a minute now. Let me get his address here. **[approx. 35 sec. gap in tape]** Okay, I told you its John Polka, P-O-L-K-A. 703 West 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave, Brodhead, Wisconsin 53520.

Mark: I'll drop him a line. I find if I call people sometimes they seem a little put off, and so I prefer to write 'em first and then call 'em later.

May: Well, you won't – this guy won't. You know, he takes me on my trips. He likes to drive me up there, to the Veterans Hospital, and he knows all about this talk today. Soon as I get off the phone with you I'll call him.

Mark: Okay. That'd be great.

May: He's a great – and I'll tell him you're gonna get in contact with him.

Mark: Sure.

May: He has got some – he went a lot further right up to the front lines, you know, into Germany and with – he's got some stories and photographs, and I think he might be able to fill you in a lot more than I could.

Mark: That'd be great. I'll probably drop him a line before the end of the day.

May: We got another one here that was a prisoner of war of Germany during the Battle of the Bulge.

Mark: Oh, is that right?

May: Yeah. I don't know his last name even. He's got some horror stories to tell about the Battle of the Bulge, but I don't know him that well, but John does.

Mark: I see.

May: But it may help your research. Anything else I can do for you?

Mark: Not at this point. Now, if you want to donate those photographs you can just drop them off here or you can put them in the mail, if you want to do that, but you can drop them off here anytime you want.

May: Well, okay.

Mark: I was gonna tell you, when you're in town again, stop in. I know you've been here before.

May: Yeah, with Dr. McIntosh. You give him my best regards, will ya?

Mark: I certainly will. I see him every couple of days.

May: I enjoyed – we enjoyed – John was with me when Dr. McIntosh took us through the museum.

Mark: Oh, is that right?

May: Yeah, and I'll call John and tell him you're gonna contact him.

Mark: Great. I'd appreciate it.

May: Right, and if I can help you anywhere else, you know we guys, at our age from WWII, we live in the WWII history. I don't remember what happened yesterday or the day before, but I remember 1944.

Mark: Well, that's good from my perspective anyway.

May: Okay. Listen if I can help you with veterans, different campaigns, or we got plenty of 'em around here.

Mark: Sure. I know how to get a hold of you so it won't be a problem. So I'll be sending you a release to sign in the next couple days. Just mail it back to me. I mentioned that in the letter and that's it. I'll send you a transcript of this when it gets typed up. It'll be a little while. They're kind of slow up there. The person who did the typing left so it'll be awhile, but I'll send you a transcript of this so we can correct it. Other than that, that's great. I appreciate your taking time to talk to me today.

May: Oh, I love research. I still do it a lot myself, you know, and if I can help ya, you know it's all free.

Mark: I'll be letting you know.

May: All right.

Mark: Excellent.

May: Thank you.

Mark: Thanks again.

May: Thanks a lot.

Mark: Bye.

May: Bye-bye.

**[End of Interview]**