

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RICHARD T. MELAND
Communications, Anti-Aircraft Artillery, Army, World War II.

1995

OH
198

OH
198

Meland, Richard T., (1924-2009). Oral History Interview, 1995.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Richard T. "Dick" Meland, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his Army service in the European theater of World War II with the 438th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion. Meland states he thought the war would be over quickly and tells of enlisting in the Army. He details basic training at Camp Callan (California), radio mechanics school at the University of Southern California, radar mechanics school at Camp Murphy (Florida), and studying engineering in the Army Specialized Training Program at Georgia Tech. Shipped to Europe as a replacement, he tells of joining Battery D, 438th Anti-Aircraft Artillery, Automatic Weapons Battalion, attached to the 1st Division in Ipswich (England) and two months of training in Sherborne (England). Meland details landing at Utah Beach on D+6, his first night in a foxhole, and making eye contact with a German pilot who was flying overhead. He speaks of duty in the Command Post working with communications. Meland touches on his activities while off duty and taking up smoking. After advancing into Germany, he tells of his unit getting bogged down in one spot for two months and he describes the make-shift buildings and deluxe foxholes they built. He comments on the relaxation of military discipline in the field. Meland explains how he would make ice cream by mixing chocolate and snow in his helmet. He mentions being pulled back during the Battle of the Bulge and pushing the German troops back into Germany. He reflects on the devastation of German towns, his respect for German troops, and noticing how young the German soldiers were by the end of the war. Meland states his unit once suffered friendly fire from British airplanes. He discusses celebrating V-E Day while in Czechoslovakia, being sent to Metz (France) for two weeks of Military Police school, and celebrating V-J Day. He tells of Military Police duty directing troops and convoys. Shipped back to the States, he describes his hurried discharge and a quiet homecoming. Meland discusses using the GI Bill to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison, living in an apartment with his wife, facing a tough job market after graduation, and buying a plant nursery in Madison. He states that he had bad dreams for a few months after coming home. Meland touches on eventually joining VFW Post 1318, trips to Europe, attending 438th AAA AW reunions, and celebrating the 50th anniversary of D-Day in England and France.

Biographical Sketch:

Meland (b.1924-2009) served in the Army from 1942 to 1945. After the war, he earned a degree in landscape architecture from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He owned Arrowood Nursery and Greenhouses in Madison for forty years and retired to Minocqua (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1995.

Transcribed by Karen M. Emery, WDVA Staff, 1998.

Transcript checked by Channing Welch, 2008.

Corrections typed by Katy Marty, 2008.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011.

Interview Transcript:

- Mark: Okay. Today's date is September 19, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. R. T. Meland of Madison, Wisconsin, a veteran of the European Theater in the Second World War. Good morning. Thanks for coming in.
- Meland: Good morning.
- Mark: I appreciate you coming in on this cold, rainy day.
- Meland: A little rainy out there.
- Mark: I suppose we should start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.
- Meland: Well, I was born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin and went to West High School here in Madison. On December 7, 1941 I was sitting down to a chicken dinner with my folks at about noon or 1:00 o'clock when President Roosevelt came across on the radio announcing the attack on Pearl Harbor.
- Mark: You were how old at this time? You must have been--
- Meland: Well, I was--
- Mark: --my math isn't very good. 17?
- Meland: I was 17 years old. It was just a year to that date that I enlisted in the Army, on December 7, 1942.
- Mark: When you first learned of the attack, do you remember your reaction? Do you remember what you thought?
- Meland: Well, we thought the war would last two weeks. Little Japan attacking us. We couldn't imagine how the war could last more than two weeks. We thought send a couple of bombers over there and that would be it.
- Mark: But then we got involved with the Germans as well. Did that change your perception of the war?
- Meland: Once we got into war with Japan then of course, especially after it got to be six months and eight months, as far as the war was it became a different story.

- Mark: Now, as a senior in high school, did it dawn upon you that you might end up in this war?
- Meland: Everyone wanted to go.
- Mark: Why was that?
- Meland: There was a lot of talk about war. About the glamour of war as far as heroes and that sort of thing and every young man wanted to get in. Most, nine out of ten anyway.
- Mark: For what reason? Was it motivated by patriotism, or testing your manhood?
- Meland: Well, I think both, I think both. Us young kids, we grew up fast when the war came along.
- Mark: So, you graduated high school then that summer.
- Meland: That's right.
- Mark: And then you enlisted in the Army.
- Meland: Enlisted in the Army in December.
- Mark: Why did you choose the Army over some of the other services?
- Meland: Well, I wanted to go into the Marines. That was the big hero thing, was to be a Marine. And I went up to the recruiting office to enlist in the Marines, and I went up alone, and the recruiting officer was busy or something happened there. I didn't get in to see him. And then that night I was talking with a couple of my buddies and they wanted to go into the Army. So we decided a week later that all three of us would go in the Army together and we enlisted and went to Fort Sheridan.
- Mark: That's where you got your, got inducted. Do you recall your actual induction? Do you remember how it went?
- Meland: Well, we just raised our hand and said that we would go and serve the country, and they outfitted us in winter clothes – overcoats and everything. They gave us a weekend pass to go home, and we were proud of our uniforms, and back we went to Fort Sheridan. Got on the train, didn't know where we were going, and when the train stopped running, rolling, we were in California. Eighty degrees with overcoats. San Diego.

- Mark: San Diego, California. For Army training?
- Meland: For Army training.
- Mark: What post was that?
- Meland: Camp Callan which was in La Jolla which is now a golf course, Torrey Pines.
- Mark: If you would, describe your basic training. I went to Air Force basic training 40 years later and I remember screaming and yelling, four-letter words, and that sort of thing, and drill sergeants. What was your experience?
- Meland: Thing I remember about basic training was the taps at lights out, and taps. That's one thing I will always remember. Other than that, there was all the drilling and everything, forced hikes and guard duty. We were at Camp Callan, California which is right on the ocean and we had to walk guard duty along the ocean looking for Japanese submarine (laughs). I walked guard duty one night when Bob Hope gave a program for the camp and as I walked guard duty I could see the lights of the show off in the distance and everyone clapping. I was walking guard duty out in the dark (laughs).
- Mark: Not the best place to be I suppose. Now, in terms of the type of training you were doing, you mention there's a lot of drilling and marching, that sort of thing. Did you also get your weapons training there? Did you learn how to fire the rifle and that sort of thing?
- Meland: That's right. We all qualified on the rifle course. I qualified as a sharpshooter and I thought because I qualified as a sharpshooter that I'd be going to the Pacific Theater as a sniper or something like that, but training mostly was on a 90 millimeter antiaircraft gun which was the larger antiaircraft gun that the Army had.
- Mark: How do you train with that sort of gun? Did they have flying targets for you to shoot at?
- Meland: Yes, they had sleeves that they would drag behind the plane and we'd shoot at those sleeves.
- Mark: I would hate to be the guy flying that plane. (Meland laughs) Did you have any accidents or any sort of thing?
- Meland: No, none that I can recall.

- Mark: I would imagine you'd remember such a thing too. Now, in terms of the guys who were in your unit, what sort of backgrounds did they come from? Was there any sort of regional distinction?
- Meland: They came from all over. We had fellows from Oklahoma, New York. We even had a couple Native Indians from Rosebud, South Dakota. A couple Mexicans. No blacks, no blacks.
- Mark: Now, it still sounds like it's quite a mixture of people and cultures. How did everyone get along in training?
- Meland: Well, I don't recall any differences really.
- Mark: There were no Rebels still fighting the Civil War, for example?
- Meland: No. We had a drill sergeant that was drunk half the time. He was old Army. He had been in the Army since about 1935 and kept everybody in line. (laughs) He called us a "bunch of green bananas." (laughs)
- Mark: I've been called worse in my day. That brings up the subject of discipline. Was it, the military is known to be sort of precise and harsh, some people never finish basic training because they can't handle that. What sort of discipline were you subject to and how did you and those around you deal with that?
- Meland: Well, I don't recall having any problems that way. You just obeyed your sergeants and you obeyed your corporal. If he said "out in front" in your raincoat, you went out there in front and stood in line with your raincoat on. (laughs)
- Mark: So there were no discipline problems for example?
- Meland: I don't recall any discipline problems at all, really.
- Mark: So, this training lasted how long?
- Meland: What was it? Nine weeks. I guess it was nine weeks of training.
- Mark: Then you went where after that?
- Meland: Yeah, up until March 1. Then I was assigned to a radio show at University of Southern California. It was a radio mechanics school and they taught us how to break down radios and build them and also sending, operating and sending. We were there until July and then we graduated as radio mechanics.

- Mark: And then went where? I'm trying to trace your steps.
- Meland: Yeah. Then they shipped us to radar school. We were to be radar technicians. And radar at that time was very new. No one knew what radar was really. And they shipped us to West Palm Beach, Florida, by train. And that was a long trip.
- Mark: I bet it was.
- Meland: Hot. There wasn't any air conditioning in those days. You rode with the windows down and that was in July of '43. The camp itself was Camp Murphy, right out in the Everglades. They took and bulldozed a lot of the Everglades and made a camp with some barracks and all I remember about that camp was the large cockroaches, the big spiders and the heat. The heat was just unbearable. This is July, August, that summer. They fed us watermelon every night for supper, along with beans, and the usual GI fare. It was really unbearable. I was there for about, oh, a month or so and then they, there was a notice on the bulletin board one that that I could take a test for ASTP which was the Army Student [Specialized] Training Program put on by universities. So I said maybe I can get out of this camp by taking this test. So I took the test with some other fellows and passed it. And they assigned me to, and then I had to give up my corporal stripes, and they shipped me to Atlanta, Georgia to Georgia Tech.
- Mark: What did you study there?
- Meland: That was engineering. It was supposed to be a year-and-a-half course in engineering, equivalent to four years of engineering. It was, and things looked pretty rosy then. Back in civilian life really, on campus at Georgia Tech. Went to a football game or two. We became rambling wreck with Georgia Tech. (laughs) And then the war got serious over in Europe and they were talking about invasion and then they started weeding out students in the ASTP program.
- Mark: Including you, I take it.
- Meland: Including me. And that was around Christmas time. They gave me a pass, furlough to go home for a week. When I came back they shipped me to Fort Hustis, Virginia for reassignment of some sort, and then on up to Fort Shank, Camp Shanks, New York, and before I knew it I was on a boat going to Europe. (laughs) All this time, from radio school on, I had been a corporal and at Georgia Tech I had been a cadet. We were told after finishing at Georgia Tech we'd be 2nd lieutenants. Well, when I shipped out on the boat out of New York, I was a private. (laughs)
- Mark: Funny how that works.

Meland: Yeah. (laughs)

Mark: And so when you went overseas it was an individual or where you attached to a unit at this time?

Meland: I was an individual with 3,000 other replacements. We were all replacements to be filled in to different outfits in Europe.

Mark: I see.

Meland: And we were told when we got on this ship we would have, they said it would probably take about ten days to get to Europe and that we would have at least an hour onboard, on deck for calisthenics and for fresh air, for out of the hole. There were 3,000 of us on that ship. We hit heavy seas and never got to Europe for 13 days and never got on deck. We were in the hole the whole 13 days. And talk about 3,000 sick soldiers. (laughs) The bunks were five tiers high on that ship and if the fellow on top was sick, you were in trouble.

Mark: I bet you were. And so you landed where? Liverpool or something.

Meland: Landed at Port Barry, Wales and we didn't know where we were. Most of us didn't even know where Wales was. We heard of England, knew where England was. But Wales, unless you were a geography major you didn't really know where Wales was. But Port Barry, Wales. And then from there we were sent all over the place. I was sent to Ipswich, northeast of London, to the 438th AAA AW Battalion and they were at an airfield up there called Watersham. It was a P-38 base. Their job was to protect the airstrip there with their guns and we were there for about a month and then moved south to southwest England into Dorset to a little town called Sherborne. And was in April and for about two months we trained for in the invasion.

Mark: Now, as the invasion was coming, you of course didn't have any advanced knowledge of that I assume.

Meland: We all thought that when we invaded we'd probably invade through Marseilles, or through southern France, through the Mediterranean. That was the scuttlebutt that was going around. But we didn't know when it was going to come off. Whether it would be this month, or next month, or when.

Mark: Or where for that matter.

Meland: Or where.

Mark: Now, as it turns out you eventually landed at Normandy, D Plus 6 it says here?

Meland: Yeah.

Mark: Now, as to preparation for the D-Day invasion are going on, what is your role and did you have some inkling that an invasion was imminent? Did you see any signs of movement or any of that sort of thing? Increased activities?

Meland: No. We didn't even know. When D-Day happened we were still in Sherborne, June 6, and we didn't know it was D-Day or anything. I think it was the very next day or so that we assembled and drove by trucks and everything to Portsmouth which is the, you might say, the sea port for Southampton and we were at Portsmouth for a day or so and then boarded an LST. And for three days we sat in the harbor waiting to go and while they were loading equipment and such and it was only about that time that we realized that the invasion was in force and that others had gone before us. We had no idea whether others had gone before us or not.

Mark: That's interesting actually. Um, so you eventually did go over.

Meland: We went over and the first night was low tide apparently because the LST hit a sandbar and we couldn't proceed any farther. That night I remember being on a deck of the LST when a couple of German planes came over and it was like the 4th of July.

Mark: Were they going after like an ammo dump or something?

Meland: Well, they were going after some of the landing troops, and beachhead, and such. The beachhead at that time was probably a couple of miles wide or deep and we were landing on Utah Beach where there was less German resistance than there was at Omaha. The next day the tide came in and we, the LST, moved in farther and we went ashore. I remember riding ashore in the back of a weapons carrier wondering where we're going. (laughs) I was, along with two other fellows, I was the radio operator for Battery D of the 438th.

Mark: Now, after you landed, when did you hook up with the 1st Division?

Meland: Well, we were 1st Division all along.

Mark: Oh, you were.

- Meland: Yeah. Seventh Corps, First Division and we were all the way through. All the way from Normandy all the way to Czechoslovakia.
- Mark: So, once you landed, how long was it until you were in the combat situation? I mean, once you landed, where did you go?
- Meland: Well, we pulled into a hedgerow that very first night and a sergeant came by and said, "Fellows, I think you'd better dig in tonight. We think they may have German paratroopers landing in this area tonight." So we all started digging foxholes.
- Mark: And what are you thinking at this time? I mean, was this the adventure you wanted in high school? (Melad laughs) Or are you thinking, "Oh my God, what's going on here?" I'm interested what a green troop like you in this situation--
- Meland: We were all scared silly, I'll tell you. The night was a black night. German paratroopers landing? Where? Right here next to you or where? Apparently, in the end I went to sleep of course and woke up in the morning and there was a Jewish fellow next to me and he was still digging. He had dug a hole twice as deep as I had and he was still digging. And the sergeant came up and said, "Sorry fellas, but we're moving out." And he was very disappointed because he had a nice hole. (laughs)
- Mark: But I'm sure there were other opportunities to dig holes. And so, in these initial days, that the invasion into Normandy was extremely slow. It took a long time to break out of that pocket.
- Meland: It was slow because of the hedgerows. You never knew what was beyond the next hedgerow.
- Mark: As so I assume you were like a mile behind the front lines or something. How far were you from the actual front?
- Meland: Well, I think most of the time we were probably about a mile from the infantry that was attacking along the front because we were with the artillery and most of your artillery was back about that far. What we were concerned about was strafing from German planes.
- Mark: And was there any?
- Meland: We had a few but nothing like what we expected. We were surprised at the few German planes that there were. The first live German I saw was a pilot of a 109, Messerschmidt 109. I was walking across this field between two hedgerows and I heard this plane coming and just as it came across the tree-top height he dropped a wing so that he could look down and I

swear he looked at me and smiled as he went by and I just took off out of there. But he was the first live German I saw. (laughs)

Mark: So, as the battle progresses and there aren't too many German fighters, what is your role? What are you and your colleagues doing?

Meland: Well, we're advancing. In Normandy we were advancing almost every day, moving. We got tired of digging foxholes and sometimes the fellows would be lax and not dig foxholes but if a few German shells started coming in--

Mark: Which happened occasionally.

Meland: Which happened occasionally. And we never knew when they were going to come in. Boy, then the boys started digging their foxholes again. But then you go along for a day or two and maybe there wouldn't be any German shells coming in and no one would be digging foxholes again unless a sergeant said "dig." Our job in the communications center -- we had two radios and equipment -- we had to dig the equipment into a hole every day to protect it from shells and that got to be quite a job digging quite a large hole.

Mark: Yeah, it would have to be quite a large hole.

Meland: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah, I was going to ask you to describe your work place, your work situation in the anti-aircraft guns. Now, you weren't firing the guns yourself. You were in the communications.

Meland: Right. We were the CP you might say -- the Command Post -- in the center with the guns around us. I was never actually into any gun pit where there was firing going on. You could hear the guns firing at times but where I was located I was concerned with communications, with phone lines and such.

Mark: So I suppose you have the commanding officer there.

Meland: We had the officers with us, the captain and the lieutenant and communications sergeant and such. And then there were three of us that pulled duty and our duty was on four, off eight. On the eight hours we were off, you usually crawled into a foxhole and slept or you played cards with another fellow or you just sat and talked and smoked cigarettes. I never smoked until I got in the service, but I learned how to smoke when I was in service. (laughs)

- Mark: As did a lot of guys. On these eight hours off, did you have, you mentioned cigarettes. You did mention gambling, didn't you?
- Meland: We gambled; played poker and that sort of thing, sure.
- Mark: Did you have alcohol?
- Meland: No.
- Mark: Beer or anything?
- Meland: There was no alcohol. We never had any alcohol until we got into Germany and then the officers one day found a schnapps warehouse, German schnapps warehouse, and they started distributing bottles of schnapps around to all the troops. And that was the first time that anyone had any of the alcohol. (laughs)
- Mark: Now, so in about August there was the breakout. Paris had been liberated. And then the front started to move very quickly.
- Meland: That's right.
- Mark: And I assume you had to move quickly, too.
- Meland: There were days there where we moved oh, at least 100 kilometers a day, chasing the Germans across France.
- Mark: Now it's got to be quite an operation to take all these gig guns and all this equipment, pack it up, and move it at such a speed. How did you manage to do all that?
- Meland: Well, each gun had a tow bar that would attach to a 2 ½ ton truck. We used to call them 6-by-6s. It was almost like a, well, not a self-propelled gun but it was like pulling a trailer behind a truck and the Bofors or 40 millimeter gun, is not a real big gun like you would think of as artillery.
- Mark: Yeah, I've seen one. Actually, there's one upstairs. I don't know if you've seen it.
- Meland: Is there.
- Mark: I'll show it to you when we're done. And then you got, you went across France and started to get into Germany.

- Meland: We were some of the first troops to go into Germany past the Siegfried Line and that was east of Aachen. Then it became a stalemate. That was in September.
- Mark: Right.
- Meland: It became a stalemate and there was a period there of about two months when we didn't move; we stayed in the same location. And some of the fellows in our outfit had some very deluxe foxholes. They kept improving them every day with a roof and everything else. We even had two fellow who joined up together and had a foxhole, a double foxhole, and put a chimney in it so they could have a little fire in there. Had a tin roof on it. And I wish I had a picture of that. (laughs)
- Mark: Was this sort of thing allowed by your superiors?
- Meland: Oh, yes, sure, yeah. They were very lax in battle. During the war officers were very lax about discipline and that sort of thing. As long as you did your job.
- Mark: I see. Now, how lax did you get? I mean, you wouldn't call a lieutenant by his first name for example, would you?
- Meland: Well, no, we never got that way, but officers had, usually had a nickname when you talked about the, when they weren't around. For instance, our captain. His name was George Thesin and everybody called him "Uncle George." And we had another lieutenant that was known as "Bill." Officers didn't, they did not wear their bars in combat because of snipers.
- Mark: Right.
- Meland: But in that one location where we were for two months we constructed a shed or small building out of pieces of wood and everything else that we could find. Two-by-fours, tar paper, anything we could find that we could pick up and bring in. We made a light-proof room. We tested it with candles inside at night to see if any leakage of light and found that we had done a pretty good job. And then we put a table in there and we'd go in there and play cards at night. (laughs)
- Mark: That doesn't sound too bad for a wartime solution I suppose.
- Meland: No.
- Mark: So, out in the front lines, pardon my French, but what they would call "chicken shit" wasn't as prominent I take it. Wasn't as prevalent, I mean,

when you were back in England, was it more snappy salutes and that sort of thing?

Meland: Oh, yes. Sure, sure. Once we got into battle everybody became your buddy and the officers took off their bars and you knew they were officers only because you knew them.

Mark: So it was a different kind of situation.

Meland: Right.

Mark: Now, in this stalemate period, did you get any passes? You know, there's always the famous pass to Paris and that sort of thing. Did you get any leave time? Did you get any breaks at all?

Meland: No. We were in the stalemate with the Germans at that point but we never knew when there was going to be a breakout or a thrust by the Germans into our lines. It was just a day-to-day thing and we never thought in September that we'd still be in that same location in November. And when the snow started coming we were concerned. We thought the war would be over after, you know, when Paris fell and the Germans were running, most of us thought, well, the war can't last more than another month or two. And here in November we're still up there in the line, near the Siegfried Line east of Aachen, and it's starting to snow and the temperatures are getting down into the 30s and 20s and it gets to be miserable.

Mark: Did you have much contact with some of the native Europeans around?

Meland: Well, they warned us about fraternizing.

Mark: What did they tell you?

Meland: Down the road from where we were dug in there was an older couple that lived in there with some young children. We were just told not to go down there, stay away. Never went down there. We watched them one day kill a pig, from where our vantage point was. They had a big iron kettle and they scalded the pig to get the hair off. We watched the whole operation but we didn't go down there. We just stayed away.

Mark: And ate your C-rations.

Meland: Ate our C-rations and K-rations. About that time we were making ice cream. We'd take and melt a chocolate bar in our helmet and when it cooled somewhat, it's still liquid, we'd mix it with snow. That was our chocolate ice cream.

- Mark: Good old Yankee ingenuity. (Meland laughs) Now what about the French? Oh, I suppose you were going very quickly through France.
- Meland: We came through France so fast that we didn't get a chance to fraternize with the women or the men. (laughs)
- Mark: Now, in terms of the German air capabilities, as you mentioned there wasn't much in Normandy. I imagine it became even less activity by this time.
- Meland: By the time we got to Germany there was hardly any German aircraft in the air at all. Although we used to have a German plane come over every night around 9:00 o'clock and we called him "Bedtime Charlie" or "Nighttime Charlie" or something, but he was on reconnaissance. Only flying over and then back, possibly taking pictures.
- Mark: Did you try and get him?
- Meland: Well, we never knew quite where he was at. We used to shoot up a barrage of shells in the area to try to get him but I don't know if we ever got him or not. (laughs)
- Mark: So when the Bulge happened, you were still up on the Siegfried Line somewhere.
- Meland: That's right. They pulled us back into Bulge when the Bulge happened through the Ardennes of eastern Belgium. They pulled us back but they didn't pull us, see the Bulge started on the 16th of December and they didn't pull us back until about the 20th or 21st. At that time we were going into the line where Germans had come through. I remember we had a Christmas dinner in a little town Somme-Leuze and then from there it was with a field artillery outfit and we were actually at that point driving the Germans back, back into Germany. Their thrust into Belgium had failed and by the first of the year, by January, the Bulge was pretty much over. We just, and from there on it was just--
- Mark: Going through Germany.
- Meland: --going through Germany. Yeah. Across the Rhine and Germany just folded right up then.
- Mark: Now, as you're going through Europe – France and then Germany – did you get a sense of how devastated the continent had become. As you're driving through these towns, these wrecked villages, and that sort of thing. As a soldier, do even you notice that sort of thing? Do you become callused towards that? Or do you--

- Meland: Oh, you become very callused. Cities in France, especially eastern France, didn't show too much signs of the war because the war passed it so fast but once we got into Germany we ran into these cities that had been bombed by American bombers and there were certain cities like Marbug and, oh, I can't remember some of the names, but they were almost flat, devastated from bombing. All the way through Germany we tried to set up our command post in a building to get out of the weather because at that time it was January and February and we tried to get in out of the weather and get in a building. Even if the building had been bombed, sometimes the cellar was still good and you could move into the cellar and set up your command post and your radios and such. So we didn't have to dig foxholes at that time. (laughs)
- Mark: Which was good because the ground was frozen.
- Meland: That's right.
- Mark: As far as the Germans were concerned, what is the front-line GI's view of the German? Was it as the Nazi--
- Meland: I never thought the American soldier was as good as the German soldier.
- Mark: So you had some respect.
- Meland: You had a lot of respect for that German soldier because when his officer said do something, the German soldier did it. When an American told an American GI to do something, he'd ask why. And that was the difference between a German and an American. American was a good fighting man once he got mad but there was always that "why?" before he became mad. It didn't make him a good soldier.
- Mark: And so you had some was it fear for the enemy? Respect for him?
- Meland: Oh, we had fear. Sure we did. Never knew quite how to take him. Although as the war got old towards the end we ran to more German soldiers that were kids – 15, 16 year old kids and it was a different war.
- Mark: And you saw this?
- Meland: Yes, sure, sure. Prisoners that we captured were like high school kids.
- Mark: So, when you're on the front line are you thinking Nazi-ism versus Democracy or do those sorts of abstractions come into--?
- Meland: Well, you're fighting for the good ole US of A and you don't want this world to be under Hitler and see you're fighting for freedom.

- Mark: Is that discussed much among the guys in the foxholes or is it pretty much assumed?
- Meland: I think it's assumed. There wasn't much discussion on it. Although I think a lot of the times you're just there to preserve your own health, too. Trying to stay alive, especially when you have a couple of fellows killed one day by British planes, Typhoons, that carried rockets and they came through and thought we were Germans and shot rockets into our outfit and killed a couple of our fellows. You know, if that could happen to any one of us.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Meland: So we didn't have to only worry about the Germans, they worried about the British too.
- Mark: Did you have much contact with the British? I mean, how close were you to them?
- Meland: No, we had no contact with the British. They were in an entirely different sector.
- Mark: I see. I'm trying to go through my map of the Front here.
- Meland: Yeah. The British came through, in through Holland and through northern Germany whereas most of the American troops were located more in the central and southern Germany.
- Mark: So when V-E Day happened, you were in Czechoslovakia?
- Meland: We were right next to Czechoslovakia, south of Leipzig, in a little town called Grimma. We had just pulled into this little town. There was an old German barracks there. It was empty. And we were moving into these barracks when it was announced – it must have been May 8th I guess, must have been – announced that the war was over. So if anybody had a bottle of whiskey or something, they broke it out. (laughs)
- Mark: So it was a fairly good celebration.
- Meland: Everyone was happy the war was over. Yeah, yeah.
- Mark: Did you think that you were going to be going to the Pacific then or did those thoughts even occur at the time? Just glad it was over.
- Meland: Our outfit was sent to Metz, France to a military police school for two weeks.

- Mark: Why was that?
- Meland: Well, in order to move all these troops out of Europe there'd be convoy after convoy headed towards the ports for loading on ships and they needed a lot of cops to direct traffic, military police, and that's what they made us.
- Mark: And so they drafted you into the military police.
- Meland: They drafted us into the military police. We all became military policemen and our job, we stayed right in the Metz-Nancy area and our job was directing troops out of Germany, through France, and to the ports, to ports of LeHavre and Marseilles and so forth.
- Mark: Was that a challenge? Did it go along smoothly? Or did you have--
- Meland: Well, we had a lot of fun, really, as military police at that time. It was a different role. And of course the war was over. Of course at that time you could fraternize too with the French women. (laughs)
- Mark: Not a small matter I suppose. So, as for the demobilization, how long were you doing this job?
- Meland: Well, we were, that was from June until November. About five months.
- Mark: So, it was quite awhile.
- Meland: Yeah.
- Mark: As for the pace of the demobilization, was it pretty steady? Or were there big spurts? How would you characterize it?
- Meland: Well, it was fairly steady because there were convoys coming through every day, different outfits going. And we wonder if they were going to the Pacific or not. A lot of them probably were. At that time they had a point system and you got one point for every month in service, you got one point for every month overseas, you got five points for every battle star, and you got five points for Purple Heart, you got five points for any medal, other medals. I think the magic number was something like 70. If you had completed at least 70 points, then you were eligible for discharge back to the States. If you weren't, it was very likely that you'd probably end up in the Pacific. And I'm sure all these GIs that were going to the Pacific were really happy in August when the atom bomb landed.
- Mark: That was going to be my next question. Do you recall when the atomic bomb was dropped and the Japanese surrendered?

- Meland: Sure I do.
- Mark: You were in Metz.
- Meland: Oh, yes.
- Mark: If you would describe your reactions for me.
- Meland: Well, that again was a big celebration. A lot of fellows got drunk and whooped it up you might say. (laughs) And it lasted not just one day. It lasted two, three, four days. It was an excuse for a lot of people just to celebrate but we all knew that the war really was over now. I'm sure if there was any of these GIs aboard ship, headed towards Japan, I imagine they really celebrated.
- Mark: Now, as for the bomb, do you recall what you thought about it at the time?
- Meland: We didn't really know much about it. What kind of a bomb it was and that sort of thing. It was, there was a lot of scuttlebutt about it. Of course, when the second bomb landed we wondered if there was going to be a third and a fourth. If there'd be any Japan left at all. But we didn't feel sorry for the Japanese because as I felt, the Japanese kind of brought it on themselves by the attack on Pearl Harbor.
- Mark: And so you did this MP duty until about November, you said?
- Meland: About November. And then we were, apparently I qualified for discharge 'cause I had 77 points.
- Mark: You had been in quite awhile.
- Meland: Yeah. So before I knew it was in a camp called "Camp Lucky Strike," near Reims, France. They shipped us there for shipping orders and new clothes and that sort of thing. Before I knew it I was onboard a liberty ship and we were headed for New York.
- Mark: And how long did that voyage take?
- Meland: I think that was just about a week, about seven days.
- Mark: Much shorter.
- Meland: Yes, right. They told us on the liberty ship from New York to England or Wales, that we had ammunition in the box and gasoline in the stern and 3,000 troops in the hole and we would have been just a big bomb if we had been torpedoed by a submarine.

Mark: I'm sure. So you landed in New York and you had to go somewhere to get discharged I would imagine.

Meland: We went into New York to a camp and then put on a train to Fort Sheridan, Camp Kilmer, New Jersey where we landed from New York Harbor. And then they put us on a train and before we knew it, anybody that was going to discharge in the Midwest, went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois. I was only there for about two days. I called my folks and said that I was being discharged. I remember getting off the bus on the west side of Madison, my folks lived on Stevens Street, and it was 10:00 or 10:30, 11:00 o'clock at night. It was a dark night. Hardly anyone around. I got off the bus with my duffel bag and walked, by myself, lonely, down the street to my folks house. Not a soul to greet me. And I thought, at the time I thought, "Jeez, this isn't what I figure a homecoming should be. (laughs)" But that was my walk home to my parents' house. And opened the door and walked in and there were my parents that looked – I'd been gone a couple of years and they looked 20 years older. I suppose I did too.

Mark: I suspect you probably did. Yeah. So, this is where a lot of these war oral histories, narratives end but I want to get into some of the post war experiences. When it came to getting your life on track, what were your **[End of Side A of Tape 1]** priorities? What did you want to do? And how did you go about doing it?

Meland: Well, I had, before I had gone into service I had thought about university but never really got to that point because of the war. As soon as I got back, my dad was in the restaurant business most of his life and he wanted me to go into the restaurant business. So we bought a little café on University Avenue and we started a business called Wisconsin Inn. That was in the summer of 1945, no, '46.

Mark: It would have to be '46.

Meland: '46. And so I was in the restaurant business for about six months. At that time the GI Bill was coming about and there was talk about whether you're eligible for the GI Bill or not. I think it was January of that next spring that I started in second semester. The restaurant didn't pan out. My dad and I didn't seem to get along too well and he sold the restaurant. He had all the money in the restaurant. He sold the restaurant and I went to school. Went to the university under the GI Bill.

Mark: And what did you study?

Meland: Well, I studied in art 'cause I always had a knack for art. After the semester was about half way through Mr. Zingalas (sp??), who was an art teacher there, came over to me and said, "Dick," he said, "I think you

should change your major. I don't think you'll ever go very far in art." He said, "You have some talent, but," he said, "there's a lot of mediocre artists around." He said, "Why don't you go over and talk to Professor Longnecker (sp??)." And he said, "That's landscape architecture." He said, "Are you interested in the forest and the trees and landscape?" and I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, if you combine art with landscape, you get landscape architecture." He said, "Why don't you go over and see Professor Longnecker (sp??)?" So I went over to see him and then when September came around, I changed my major and started under Professor Longnecker (sp??). That was in '47.

Mark: And did you get your degree?

Meland: I got my degree in June of '50 in landscape architecture.

Mark: As for the GI Bill, did that meet your expenses? To go to college?

Meland: I think it was \$90 a month I got. I was married at the time. Got married. We had a small apartment. The apartment was \$25 a month. It was right near campus so I could walk, didn't need a car. \$90 a month was good. And then it seemed like every semester I'd gather another T-square, I'd get another set of books, I'd get another set of this, another set of that. Duplication. So you'd go down to the book store and trade all your duplications in for whatever else you wanted. But I thought the GI Bill was very fair at the time.

Mark: Do you think you would have gone to school without it?

Meland: Probably not, probably not because financially, I wasn't really able to. In that respect, the GI Bill provided the financial aid that it took to go to school.

Mark: And after you graduated, it becomes time to go out and find a job. Did you have any problems with that?

Meland: Well, I went to work for a nursery, locally. During that first year traveled around the country somewhat whenever I could looking for, with my resume, looking for a job. I remember going to Omaha, Nebraska one weekend. Another weekend I went to Lexington, Kentucky where there was a large nursery. They were hiring, supposedly were hiring, for a position for a landscape architect. Finally I came back and one day there was a nursery for sale on Verona Road here in Madison and I went out there and talked to a fellow who was 77 years old and who wanted to sell because he wanted to move to Florida. I bought a piece of property there and started a nursery.

- Mark: And the rest is history.
- Meland: Up until a couple of years ago. (laughs)
- Mark: Now, when you were looking for work, was it a tight job market? Is that--
- Meland: It was very tight.
- Mark: It is just that way in that field? Or was it, did it have to do with some post war economic conditions?
- Meland: I think there's more opportunity today for a landscape architect, graduating. That's more opportunities for various jobs. There are more nurseries than ever. In 1950 when I graduated there weren't that many nurseries that were hiring landscape architects. The starting pay was very low. I'm sure it's different today.
- Mark: Now, there were also various GI housing loans, grants, and those sorts of things. When that time came in your life, did you take advantage of any of the veteran's programs?
- Meland: No. I know a lot of GIs did but we had a nice apartment and it was, I believe \$25 a month is what we paid in rent.
- Mark: Now, was that hard to find?
- Meland: That was hard to find. I had to take care of the building also. I had to clean the halls, and put the storms on, and act as kind of a janitor and then that was included in my rent. We were there for three, four years even after I graduated. The only reason we moved away was that we had our second baby and the apartment became too small. (laughs)
- Mark: Another veteran readjustment problem sometimes encountered are medical problems. Now you, I don't get the, you were in Europe so you didn't come back with any sort of diseases like malaria or anything.
- Meland: No. I think European GIs were lucky that way where in the Pacific they came back with a lot of different illnesses.
- Mark: Did you come back with any sort of medical conditions that might be war related? Frozen feet is what I hear from Bulge veterans quite often. Did you come back with any such--?
- Meland: No, I never had any of those problems. Never froze my feet. Actually, I felt pretty lucky that I came back as I did.

- Mark: Any sort of emotional or psychological things like Vietnam veterans have brought these issues out into the open. Some World War II veterans will say the same things. Did you experience any such things?
- Meland: I think probably the first six months or nine months, a year, after I came back, I used to get some bad dreams. And they were war related. When you're in battle you become hardened to death, really. You don't think of things like you do after the war and you start thinking about what transpired. I know my wife told me several times, "What were you yelling about last night in your dream?" That sort of thing. That sort of thing subsided, but I think probably in the first year it was conditioning to get back into civilian life, get away from that war.
- Mark: Did loud noises, for example?
- Meland: No, that never seemed to bother me.
- Mark: I've just got one last area that I want to cover and that involves veterans organizations and reunions. As we discussed before, you went to a reunion in the 1980's but before then did you ever join any of the big veterans organizations like the American Legion? And if so, when?
- Meland: Well, I've been a member of the VFW 1318 here in Madison. But I only joined probably, 10, 12 years ago.
- Mark: Why did you decide to join? Why then?
- Meland: I had always talked about joining. My brother was a veteran and was a member. And he kept saying to me, "Dick, why don't you join the VFW?" And I think it must have been about 1980, '81, I finally did join and I've been a member since. Last year the wife and I went to Europe and celebrated the 50th anniversary of D-Day.
- Mark: Oh, did you go?
- Meland: Yeah.
- Mark: How was that?
- Meland: Well, it was quite a celebration. We stayed with a French family for four days and that was something that we still talk about. Very, very interesting. We came back with a lot of good memories.
- Mark: Did you learn of the whole celebration through the veterans organization? I mean, I assume you went with a tour or something like that. Or did you just go on your own?

Meland: Well, I wanted to go back for the 50th anniversary a couple of years before 1944. In talking to my wife I said, "You know, we should try to find some tour that's going that's the official tour. We don't want to go just with my tour." Some of these tours weren't going to land until the 8th of June, or the 9th of June, and then they were going to go back and visit the beaches, the landing beaches and such, be we wanted to be there when the ceremonies were taking place on D-Day. I checked with a lot of tour companies and found a tour company out of Boston and they were signed to be the official tour company for the celebrations. They sent four bus loads of veterans over and we were in that tour. We spent four days in England at different museums. And then we crossed the channel by boat, by ferry boat, to Cherbourg and then we spent four days during the ceremony on June 6, 7, and 8 with a French family – lived with them, ate meals with them. During the day we visited the landing beaches and the ceremonies. We were there when President Clinton gave his speech and such, and the French Premier. Then we went on to Paris for four days before the tour was sent back home.

Mark: Now, was this your first trip back to Europe since the war?

Meland: No, actually this has been my sixth trip.

Mark: I see.

Meland: We've been back many, many times. I always wanted to go back to that one hillside near Aachen where we were dug in in September, October, November and where we had the deluxe...

[Tape goes blank for less than minute]

Mark: So were you able to find this place?

Meland: My wife said to me, "You're never going to find that hillside. You're never going to find it." I said, "It's right on the outskirts of a little town called Venvagen (??) and it's about 10 kilometers east of Aachen." I said "I know I can find it." I was there for two months and I got to know every foot of ground on that hillside. I found it, parked the car, we walked up that hillside, and there was still some depressions I swear where there had been foxholes. Of course they had been filled in with erosion and such. But it was the hillside.

Mark: This may seem like a dumb question, but I want to get your reaction to it. How had it changed from the time you were there?

Meland: Trees were bigger, the few trees that were there. Alongside this one hillside there was a big apartment complex which wasn't there during the war of course. The apartment complex looked rather new. It looked like

maybe only four or five years old. The bricks, they were constructed of bricks and the bricks looked real new. So the atmosphere had changed. The German farmhouse down the road wasn't even there anymore.

Mark: As for the Normandy celebration in 1994, what did it mean to you to be there? I mean you obviously spent quite a bit of money to go over there and be there at this particular time. What motivated you to do that? What did you get out of it?

Meland: We sat around in a room one night, all of us veterans from our tour bus, and we asked every member to stand up and give a three or four sentence, summary, of how he felt about the beaches, and whatever you want to talk about. And we, of the group, that was a group of three dozen men, three or four of them couldn't get up and talk. And one started to get up and talk and started crying. It was very emotional. When you looked around the room many of the veterans had tears in their eyes talking about experiences. Of course, everyone has their own experiences but it was very emotional. I thought the ceremonies themselves, the one at Omaha Beach and the one in Utah Beach, were some of the, well, I'll never go to another ceremony. It was so emotional. Grown men crying, especially in the cemetery there at Omaha.

Mark: As you mentioned, you've been active in reunions of your particular unit. If you'd describe how you got involved with that and what sort of activities do you do?

Meland: A buddy of mine lives in Cincinnati, Ohio and we've been exchanging Christmas cards for 50 years and we were very close during the war – we came back in the same ship to New York – and along about 1987 I got a e-letter from him and he said that they were going to have the first reunion since the war of the 438th at Cleveland, Ohio at such-and-such a place and wanted to know if I could make it. And that's how I learned about it and I've been going to them ever since. We were at Cleveland in '88, in '90 we were at Baltimore, in '92 we were in Niagra Falls, '94 we were in Pittsburgh. I don't know where it's going to be next year but there will be one next year. But every year the number becomes few that attend either because of ill health or death. At the last reunion in Pittsburg I think we only had something like 40 members out of the battery that was originally 200 men. And we were sorry to hear about some of the fellows that had passed away especially some of the officers that we thought a lot of.

Mark: But were a bit older--

Meland: Right.

Mark: --than you young guys.

Meland: Oh, that's right. Some of these fellows today are in their 80s that are still alive.

Mark: I think you've exhausted my line of questioning. Is there anything you'd like to add? Anything you think we skipped over? Glossed over a little?

Meland: Nothing I can think of.

Mark: Okay. Well, thanks for coming in.

Meland: Sure.

Mark: Very, very interesting.

[End of Interview]