

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Donald M. Murphy
Radio Operator, Army, World War II

2004

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Murphy, Donald M., (1925-2007), Oral History Interview, 2004.

User copy, 2 sound cassettes (ca. 65 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy, 2 sound cassettes (ca. 65 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Donald Murphy, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in the Army in the European and Pacific theaters during World War II. He recalls hearing about the bombing of Pearl Harbor at a high school basketball game in Milwaukee. In 1943, Murphy registered for the draft on his eighteenth birthday and applied for early induction into the Army. He mentions his father was a World War I veteran and his parents supported his decision to enlist. Murphy briefly describes his induction at Fort Sheridan (Illinois). He was assigned to the Army Air Force and went through basic training in Atlantic City (New Jersey), but he failed the eye exam and did not pass into flight school. Murphy reveals that because of his prior interest in ham radios, he was sent to Radio School at Camp Crowder (Missouri). He relates he spent six months there and became a Morse Code instructor. After Radio School, Murphy explains he was sent to do an AFST (Air Force Specialized Training) program at Kansas State College. He remarks that universities were “going broke” because all the young men were fighting in the war, so the Army used AFST programs to bail out the universities. Murphy enjoyed taking engineering classes and playing football at Kansas State. Murphy explains that the AFST programs were shut down as the war escalated. Rather than become an Air Force officer as he had been promised, Murphy was deployed to Europe as a radio operator with the infantry. Murphy arrived in Aachen (Germany) in 1944, a couple months after D-Day. He details his trek with the 92nd Armored Division, 1st Army across the Rhine and Sieg Rivers in the Ruhr Pocket (Germany). Murphy outlines his duties as radio operator and describes at length how his unit crossed the Rhine. He comments that, after crossing the river, his main mission was to round up German soldiers and care for the wounded. He tells a story of picking up a wounded German officer in his jeep and striking up a conversation with the officer, who had gone to Yale. When Murphy arrived at the field hospital, the German officer gave him his belt and gun as a gift, which Murphy saved throughout the war. Next, Murphy describes a near-death experience: his jeep was hit by German mortars and flipped over into a crater, burying Murphy beneath. He recalls experiencing a “euphoric state” as he realized he was about to die and waking up later in the field hospital after his buddies dug him out. Murphy touches upon daily life: eating “box rations” and sleeping with six other infantrymen in foxholes underneath tanks. Once Murphy’s division crossed the Rhine River, they joined the 82nd Airborne Division and Patton’s Third Army. Murphy mentions he often spotted General George S. Patton driving around in jeeps. He quotes Patton as ordering the troops: “You steal the gas, the tires, anything useful, but you keep going east.” Murphy explains this was exactly how they crossed southern Germany, pushing forward and taking tires off abandoned vehicles. On the way, their mission was to pick up lost airmen, some of whom had been in hiding for six months. Murphy reports they ended up on the Czech border. He vividly describes going

through a ghost town called Flossenburg and discovering a Nazi death camp that the Allies did not know existed. Murphy discusses in detail liberating the camp. He describes seeing gas chambers, a basement full of bones and ashes, and a gallows. He later learned the gallows were used to execute German political prisoners, including a well-known Lutheran pastor, who had attempted to assassinate Hitler. Murphy comments that the prisoners of the Flossenburg concentration camp looked like skeletons dressed in rags and were afraid to approach the Americans or leave the camp because “it was all they knew.” Murphy tells how he and some other troops broke into a department store in town and took clothes to the prisoners. He reflects that “the people in the town purposely never went beyond a certain border...they didn’t want to admit they knew about [the death camp].” Murphy mentions he was the first to radio the discovery of the death camp through the chain of command, and he touches upon the media coverage of the camp’s liberation. Murphy explains that this was the end of the war and that an accord between Washington and the Russians had given control of everything east of Czechoslovakia to the Russians. Murphy describes having to march west, across the Czech border, as the Russians took over. He tells how he and his fellow soldiers would cross the border at night to socialize with Russian soldiers, drinking alcohol and singing. In 1945, after V-E day, Murphy returned to Fort Bragg (California) for amphibious training, in preparation for the invasion of Japan. He reveals that many soldiers, fearing the Japanese, jumped off the troop train heading to Seattle and hid in the woods. Murphy recalls hearing the news of the atomic bombing of Japan on the troop train. His unit did go to mainland Japan, where their mission involved policing and disarming the population. Murphy describes an incident where he took make-shift bamboo weapons away from some schoolboys. Murphy claims he attempted to drive a truck over to the site where the atomic bomb was dropped (he does not specify whether the city was Hiroshima or Nagasaki), but the Americans set up blockades preventing anyone from viewing the destruction. After the war, Murphy studied biochemistry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on the G.I. Bill. He states that receiving an “education at an institution like this” was “my reward” for serving in World War II.

Biographical Sketch:

Murphy (1925-2007) was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He applied for early induction in the Army on his eighteenth birthday and served as a radio operator with the 92nd Division, 1st Army in Europe during World War II. In 1945, he participated in the liberation of the Flossenburg concentration camp. After V-E Day, Murphy returned to the U.S. for amphibious training and was redeployed to Japan, arriving shortly after the atomic bomb was dropped. Following the war, he attended the University of Wisconsin, majoring in biochemistry. Murphy resided in Madison, Wisconsin until his death in 2007.

Interviewed by John: K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcribed by John: K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcript edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

John: All right, this is John Driscoll, and I am with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, and today is August 10, 2004. And this is an oral history interview with Don Murphy, of Madison, who is a World War II veteran, and we are recording this at Don's home in Madison. And, Don, good afternoon, and thanks for agreeing to be interviewed - thanks for agreeing to the interview.

Donald: This is where we start.

John: This is where we start.

Donald: You asked about education.

John: Why don't you start at the very beginning. When and where were you born?

Donald: Milwaukee.

John: Milwaukee. When?

Donald: 1925.

John: On what date?

Donald: January 2.

John: Nineteen-twenty--?

Donald: Six. [means he was born January 6, 1925]

John: Okay. Family? Early life? Brothers and sisters?

Donald: The usual. High school.

John: Okay. When did you graduate from high school? The year?

Donald: Well, it would have been four years after grade school, of course.

John: Okay.

Donald: Then I graduated from the University of Wisconsin.

John: Okay. In Madison?

Donald: Um-hmm.

John: What was your field?

Donald: Biochemistry.

John: Bio? Oh, okay. When was that?

Donald: That has a lot of peripheral things to it.

John: Now, was that after the service?

Donald: Um-hum.

John: Okay. One of the questions I ask, I always want to ask, is, do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

Donald: Oh, sure.

John: What were you doing then?

Donald: We were, I was in high school.

John: Yeah.

Donald: And there was a basketball game, in downtown Milwaukee someplace. Against another school. And at the half-time they announced this had happened.

John: Yeah.

Donald: And everything was shut down, and everybody went home.

John: Wow. Before that, before Pearl Harbor Day, were people talking about the possibility of problems? Or was this a shock?

Donald: It was pretty much a shock.

John: I was six years old when it happened. I remember my dad listening on the radio, but that is all. Okay, that was 1941. It was the end of '41. What were you doing then?

Donald: I was still in school.

John: Okay. And then you said, on your 18th birthday, you enlisted?

Donald: Yes. That was the day I went down and enlisted. Well, it turned out that wasn't the way it worked. I had to go through the induction process. So they sent me back home. And I went down like a couple weeks later. It's on my discharge.

John: Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

Donald: Maybe it was a month later, they finally called me as said, "Come back down."

John: Yeah.

Donald: And I went through the whole process.

John: Where was that?

Donald: In Milwaukee.

John: Okay. Then, did you leave after that.

Donald: I'm trying to remember. Pretty much right after that.

John: And where did you go?

Donald: Whatever the induction center was in Illinois.

John: Fort Sheridan?

Donald: Fort Sheridan.

John: Most of the fellows I've talked to went to Fort Sheridan.

Donald: Okay, that was it.

John: And then...

Donald: I went from there...

John: Well, before we leave that, that was your introduction to the United States Army. What did a kid from Milwaukee, from Wisconsin, think when you came face to face with the Army?

Donald: It was my idea. I totally volunteered. My parents agreed. My father was a veteran of World War I.

John: Oh, okay. Alright.

Donald: There was no objection. We were in an upset age, I think. Things were happening in the world, and we had to straighten them up.

John: Okay, and after Fort Sheridan?

Donald: I had to go through physicals, those things, what have you.

John: Yeah.

Donald: And I was assigned to the Air Force. I was sent out to Atlantic City, New Jersey, to go through, what did you call it, there is a name for it?

John: Flight training? Pre-flight?

Donald: No, no, no. The preliminaries.

John: Basic training?

Donald: Basic training. There we go. And that was all we were exposed to there. And at that point, I went back to the division, or whatever the group was, and told them I was interested in flight school. After I had finished the basic training part of it. So I went through, I was all set to go to Shepherd Field, in Texas. I was really excited about it. We were off and running. And I had to take the physicals, which I passed. There were several of them, to get this far. And we got the report back, and I didn't pass the eye test. So there I sat, in the middle of nowhere. Well, since my years in high school, I was very interested in short wave radio. I had a ham license. And they knew that. It was in my write-up, in my background. So I got sent to radio school. I was still in the Air Force. At Camp Crowder, Missouri.

John: Okay.

Donald: That doesn't sound like a place the Air Force would be interested in, but that is where we wound up. And I was probably there six months. Because of my background, shortly after I got into the school, I wound up as an instructor, because I knew all this stuff.

John: Okay, okay.

- Donald: I knew the code. I knew how to teach it. Where did I go from there?
- John: You were an instructor there?
- Donald: Just in code. Morse code. And not the technical part of it, the radio. I think this was about the time when the AFST program started.
- John: AFST?
- Donald: Specialized Training. It was an officer's training program.
- John: Okay.
- Donald: And I took another exam, and passed it, and got into the program. And actually it was sold to you on the basis that you would be an officer when you came out. But that was not the way it was set up. It was mostly to save the schools all over the United States, the universities were going broke. All the male students were gone.
- John: Oh, yeah.
- Donald: They had a terrible time.
- John: Yeah, I never thought of that.
- Donald: And so I went to, first of all, the University of Nebraska. I was sent up there, and I took some preliminary courses. Only a matter of a couple of months. And then I was assigned to Kansas State College. University, now. And it was the same situation. They had very few male students. And people couldn't afford the education there.
- John: I've heard so many vets tell me that for this or the other program, they were sent to the universities, but I never thought of that. You are right.
- Donald: Kansas State was strictly an engineering school. I had no interest, at that point, except for radio, in engineering. But when I got into it, they had some of the best instructors I ever run into, high school or college. It was just an excellent faculty. And it's now a very good school. But I looked forward every day to getting up and going to class.
- John: That's great.
- Donald: They were that interesting. And, of course, after, I don't know, maybe a year,

maybe it wasn't that long. Things got tight. More bodies were needed. They closed that down, and I found myself in an infantry camp.

John: Okay.

Donald: Along with a bunch of other guys. In Missouri. And went through the whole thing, and wound up overseas, as an infantryman. A radio operator.

John: This was in Europe?

Donald: Mm.

John: Did you go in after D-Day?

Donald: Yeah. We were, oh, maybe, about three months into the war, after the landing. Big city called Aachen. Remember?

John: Sure.

Donald: Well, we hadn't quite gotten that far. So that would have been the next tip-over for the Germans. Then we moved on, up to the Rhine River, and sat on the shore, because the other shore was German from one end to the other. And we just didn't go anywhere. We just sat there, for a long period of time, actually. This is where I ran into Alan, my brother-in-law. He was a tank commander. We talked about this after the war. And this area where we were, along the river, the ground was so hard and so dry, and it was like concrete. And we were under complete bombardment. And especially at night. You'd have to dig a hole someplace, a foxhole. And that ground was so hard, you couldn't dig. So we'd hide behind trees or logs or wherever we could to get some sleep. And then an armored division was moved up and, of course, they hadn't gotten the bridge over the Rhine at that time, so they just sat there, too. And when these guys saw us digging these holes, they were only about that deep. And they all volunteered to scoop out the, they had some kind of a thing on the tanks that they could dig the dirt with.

John: Oh, that's great.

Donald: And six of us would fit under a tank. And it didn't have to be very shallow to get underneath it. And we slept like babies under there.

John: Nice cover, huh?

Donald: Oh, was it ever. Well, after the war, a long time after the war, my brother-in-law and I were talking about something and found that we were in the same area. And

I said, "Do you remember doing exactly the same thing?" You know, these guys had no holes. They just laid on the ground. So they did the same thing. They could fit six guys comfortably under a tank. They would just drive over on top of you. Slept like a baby. But they finally got across the bridge at Remagen, and we started. Well, here. So I give it to you in sequence. Anyway, we crossed the bridge. And the 82nd Airborne had jumped across, on the northern stretch of the Rhine River. This is what they called the Ruhr Pocket. Industrial center of Germany. And they landed in the north, and we crossed this one lone bridge that was still standing, to the south. And walked. And then we moved from there, going north, and the 82nd came from the north, going south. And the German group that was there, there were several divisions. Quit right away. They had no place to go. They were encircled. So, anyway, I was sitting in a Jeep, with the radio, and all these German prisoners were there, giving up by the hundreds. Maybe thousands, but we weren't there that long, maybe a week or two. And I was, it was my duty to pick up any wounded that were coming across, to see that they got to a medical detachment. And I am sitting in the Jeep, and I could see this officer. And one of the rules of war then, was you never disarm an officer.

John: Oh, yeah? I didn't know that.

Donald: At least, in the European Theater.

John: Okay.

Donald: You didn't disarm them. So I am sitting there watching this guy coming, and you could see the blood all over his shins, from his hip right down to his shoes. And he is walking on that leg. And, finally, I just got out, and I knew he couldn't go much further. Because it was his company, or battalion, or whatever it was, it was marching. So I stopped him when he got right next to me, and I said-- and it turned out he was a Yale graduate--

John: Wow.

Donald: --And, anyway, I told him, I said, "I am under orders that, number one, we aren't going to disarm you, because you are an officer, and, number two, you've been wounded, and I'm not allowed to let you pass here until you've been treated." So I just walked him over to the Jeep and got him in there, and he almost fainted, he was in such bad shape. So we get to where we were going. We finally caught up with a medical detachment. And, before that, I'm watching these hundreds of German soldiers crossing the fields. It's hard to explain that. But their faces and their expressions, just unbelievable, they were in the position that they were. But, anyway, back to their leader. He started getting out of the Jeep at the medical detachment, and he turned around and took his belt off. He said, "They are going

to take this away, anyway. Sooner or later. I want you to have it.”

John: Oh.

Donald: I carried it with me through the whole war. Never used it. Kept it in the bottom of the bag. But, then we started talking. I went into the tent with him, saw what they were going to do. He had a couple of bad wounds. Interesting guy.

John: Yeah. What an unusual story. Right.

Donald: So, then we wound up on the other side of the river. And that is where the war got a little rougher. And when we went north to meet up with the 82nd Airborne, we, of course, had to turn north along the river. And about, maybe 20 miles north of whatever city we were in, I don't remember anymore, and came across the Sieg River. That needed to be crossed. We had the whole division with us.

John: What division?

Donald: The 92nd.

John: Okay.

Donald: And there was an engineering group who put down a pontoon bridge to get us across. And they'd wait until maybe the first truck got over and then they'd lay it on, with their .88s. I don't know if you've ever been near one when they go off.

John: No, but I've heard so much.

Donald: Yea. They just blow those pontoons up. So, then, they'd take a day or two before they could get new ones up there and get the bridge going. And that went on for maybe four or five days, and then finally they'd clear out enough area that they weren't susceptible to the artillery. And we continued on north. And it was winter, cold, it was raining.

John: It was one of the coldest winters on record, yeah.

Donald: Dark, you couldn't see anything. I am riding in the back of the Jeep. I was darned glad I didn't have to walk. That one radio came in handy in that case. And it was very hilly country, and we were moving along the side of a hill. And the Germans had been shooting at us all day with these .88s. I don't know if it was them again. You have to hear one, or be near one. They had the speed of a rifle bullet but they had the impact of a large shell. And they were shooting at this road, because it was the only road we had. So I am sitting. Actually, I was sleeping while this was

going on. I hadn't been to sleep in two days. And I am laying in the back of the Jeep on top of 200 pounds of ammunition, in a sleeping bag. I was sleeping while this thing was going on. So we were moving along the side of the road. We couldn't see. We had a marker ahead of us, a guy wearing a white bandana on the back of his jacket. And we was walking, oh, maybe ten feet in front of us. That is as far as you could see. So the driver could keep moving. Well, anyway, yea, back to the, we were up on the road under this artillery barrage. And the guy who was in front missed the fact that half the road had been blown out. He couldn't see it. He walked right by it. So when we got up there, we didn't see it, either. I was still asleep. The .88s hit the bank right behind us, completely turned the Jeep over on top of me, in the bottom of a crater.

John: Oh, wow.

Donald: And it's maybe, I don't know, four or five feet deep. And I was only conscious a very short period. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move, the whole thing was on my back. And the guys up on the road couldn't tell where I was, it was so dark. So, anyway, I assumed I was dying. It was a strange, strange experience.

John: Yeah.

Donald: Something I should talk to a psychologist about some time. Because it was almost like a euphoric feeling, because there was nothing I could do. Couldn't breathe, couldn't move, I knew I was dying. Flat out. Anyway, I woke up standing on a stretcher and I was already on a Jeep ambulance heading for the hospital. But that experience. First of all, being paralyzed. I couldn't move. Couldn't do anything to help yourself. And then to have it suddenly occur to me, "Hey, this is it. It's all over. Right now." But then, they finally hauled me out from under it.

John: What an experience.

Donald: The other two guys, the driver and the platoon sergeant, they were up in the front and when it started to go over, they both jumped out. I was asleep till that happened, and I had no chance to move. The whole thing, but fortunately, it was a crater. So I don't know if you've ever seen a shell explode. A lot of the dirt goes right straight up.

John: Yeah.

Donald: And it comes right straight down. So you're embedded like you are in sand. Anyway, it's bad enough you can't breathe, you can't move.

John: Wow, what a story.

- Donald: And I literally suffocated. And fortunately they dug me out before...But I did go through that period of, like euphoria--that is the only way you can explain it. You're on a high.
- John: Yeah. Yeah.
- Donald: You know. Nothing you can do about it. You're dying. You know, in a matter of minutes, you can be gone. And then they pulled me out of it. I don't know, how did we get started on this?
- John: Listen, that is amazing. Wow. What an experience. Yeah.
- Donald: And then we met-- ran into the 82nd.
- John: Ah, how badly were you injured? Were you able to return to duty?
- Donald: Oh, yea. Two days later. I spent two nights in the field hospital.
- John: And they sent you back.
- Donald: And, you know, you're not admitting to anybody that you are hurting. You know. You just don't.
- John: Yeah, sure.
- Donald: So I just went right back to work. Got on the radio again.
- John: Wow. That is an amazing story.
- Donald:: Part I. Turn that off. I'm going to get a drink of water. You got more tape? [Break]
About Kansas State. I loved that school. I wish I had gone back there after the war. But, anyway, it was very obvious that there were very few male students. Kansas State was in the same league as Oklahoma, and campuses like that. I mean, this was big time stuff, and very few students. So, we had, we went to school, we took engineering classes as part of this program. During the day. And then in the evening, we would practice football.
- John: Oh, okay.
- Donald: The coach came along. We were going through our calisthenics on one field, and they were on the next field. And the coach came over and told the instructor, "Hey, Oklahoma is kind of desperate. We don't have any, we need some tall

defenders, so that these guys running out for passes know what they are going to face. Because these guys from Oklahoma are full sized football players.” So there were only two of us who volunteered, or three of us. And we had a ball. We’d practice with these guys every night. And they weren’t even taking it very seriously. They knew they really didn’t have a chance. But we had a lot of fun doing it. So, anyway, Saturday comes along, and Oklahoma is in town for the big football game. And we go to the stadium, because they let us in for nothing. And they had a pretty good crowd, actually. And got through the game. I think it was 35 to zip. Something like that. And we watched the kids that we had taught, if you want to call it that. They made some pretty good plays. So the next day was Sunday. A half a dozen of us went to town. We were going to get some food other than the cafeteria material. And somebody bought a paper. We were all gazing through it to see what they said about the game. And it turns out the Oklahoma team never even made the trip; they sent the freshman team. ‘Cause there was nobody left there.

John: Wow.

Donald: So I’m a football player, for Kansas State.

John: Great.

Donald: So, back to...

John: You crossed the Rhine, and you were hooked up with the 82nd.

Donald: Yeah. And then we joined the 1st Army. Well, we were part of the 1st Army.

John: Okay.

Donald: That is when we joined the 3rd Army.

John: Okay. Patton’s group.

Donald: That’s a different cat altogether.

John: Yeah.

Donald: We got notices from just about every direction that you don’t do anything except you go east. If you have to walk, if you have to crawl. You don’t go in any other direction from here except east. And George would drive through every once in a while in his Jeep. We did see him. He was in the area. And by that time the war was just going down hill very fast. We ran into very little, I don’t know what you

call it. They didn't have any real organized units in the area. Didn't see any. So it was easy to move. And we were, as George said, you run until your gas is gone, you run until the tires are gone, and then you get out and walk. Take everything with you. And that is the way we went across southern Germany.

John: Is it?

Donald: Yeah. And we did find some abandoned vehicles that we could steal the tires from, put them on the Jeeps. But, he was quite a guy.

John: Now, were you part of the relief of the Bulge? That Patton did?

Donald: No, we came back after that. But, at Aachen, and that was after the Bulge.

John: I am going to flip this over.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Donald: Buy, anyway, the feeling returned to my feet and then they thought I was fine.

John: You know, you were very fortunate, from that accident. That could have been...wow.

Donald: Yea. If they hadn't pulled that Jeep out of there, you know. The rest of the guys got down there in a hurry. Got a hold of it and tipped it off, down the hill. I wasn't under there very long. I was out. And here it is, George saying, "You steal the gas, the tires, anything useful. But you keep going east." He was a character. Okay, remember, the early part of summer, and out of everything. So I'd swap, we'd stop. Most of the divisions that were in that area had to stop. For the rest of us, the rifle guys, we just kept walking. And we'd stop for a meal or whatever. So, eventually, they resupplied all the units. We end up on the Czech border. Did routine patrols, and then there was, we weren't moving very fast. So they would send out patrols looking for airmen who had parachuted out, or crashed, or had been captured and escaped. There were a lot of them all over the place. Oh, yeah. We picked them up by the hundreds, over time. We did that for some time, anyway. And Allied survivors, also. Most of them from the Air Force. Some had been in hiding, literally, for the whole time, maybe the last six months of the war or maybe even longer. These patrols that we went on, we used ton and a half trucks. I don't know whether you are familiar with them or not.

John: Oh, yeah.

Donald: Personnel carriers. I had, I operated the radio and I had a driver and one rifleman,

and we were going through not real friendly country. Nothing ever happened, but, you know, but you never know. You are a strange guy. You were sitting up, the three of us were sitting up in that truck. But, nothing, nobody ever. There was never a problem. And we literally picked up, not just us, but every truck that went out in that whole area. You were assigned a specific area, and they'd give you a crude map so you didn't get completely lost. And off we'd go. I have a little note here that we did this for quite a long period of time, because there were a lot of these people out, you know, in the countryside.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Donald: And we lived off the old box rations.

John: I still remember them.

Donald: Here is where it gets interesting. On this particular day, again we were down on the Czech border. We were assigned a new area. It was just over the German border. We had to pass through a pretty fair sized city, and we hadn't done that before. We were just in the countryside, picking guys up. We weren't very sure how we'd be greeted by the citizens. As if they didn't have rifles. We were a little bit uneasy through the whole thing because we didn't see a single person, and this was our first big city.

John: Wow.

Donald: We drove from one end all the way to the other and not a person came out of a building. So we went on through and I think we got back on the same road, kept on through the countryside. And we came up to some old beat-up old buildings, mostly wooden like barracks. And the fence was, I guess, ten or twelve feet high. So you knew immediately, this was not a friendly place. And we didn't know quite what to do about it. We radioed it in right away, but this was obviously a camp of some sort. And then we just stayed right there. And finally a couple of guys came out of one of the buildings. And we walked back and forth a mile in each direction trying to find a gate that we might open. There just was nothing there. And the two of them, the two guys that came out, were just literally dressed in rags. Just strips of clothing. Just nothing on them. And they looked like skeletons. They hadn't been fed, or, but we knew immediately when we were looking at them. And it turned out that this was the only death camp, German death camp, that the Allies were not aware of.

John: Oh!

Donald: Nobody knew it was there. So that got interesting.

John: Yeah.

Donald: We got a lot of attention.

John: Sure. Oh, wow.

Donald: The next day or two, I don't know how long it was, but they finally cleared the main gates so some of the people who were involved at division could get in there and look around. And then they opened the gate up, and everybody went in, and it was just, it was an experience for us.

John: I believe that.

Donald: The gas chambers.

John: Do you remember the name of the place?

Donald: Oh, Flossenburg. Flossenburg was the name of the city. That was also the name of the camp.

John: Okay. Okay.

Donald: I've got a write-up for you, for that whole area.

John: And they didn't know, the Americans, the Allies, didn't know it was there?

Donald: No.

John: Amazing. Wow.

Donald: When I radioed it in, you know, that we had found it, we didn't know, we knew obviously what it was, that was their thing, they went on and notified the chain of command. But nobody knew it even existed.

John: That's amazing.

Donald: And even the people in the town purposely never went beyond a certain border or boundary. They didn't want to look at it. They didn't want to admit that they knew about it.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Donald: One of the things we went by, this is kind of ironic, although it came in handy later, was a store. Now, we just went through the middle of the town, or went through in the truck. And big windows like you see downtown here, with dresses and suits, just all kinds of paraphernalia, that you would expect to see in a big store. And here are these starving, they estimated there were about 10,000 people died in that camp. Over a long period of time. I've got the whole story for you in here. So we went back out to the camp. And on the way out, we went by that store again. And that just didn't make any sense that those people out there didn't have - well, before that, a lot of the people started coming out of the barracks. Men, women, some of them could hardly walk. It was hard to describe. Just turns you inside out on that camp. So, we decided, hey, these people don't have any clothes and we know where the clothes are. So we went back into town and took a rifle butt and opened up the whole big store.

John: Okay.

Donald: And we just threw stuff out the windows. And the ones that could walk, and not many of them made it that far, really. They just dressed right out in the street. And then turned around and went back, because the only place they knew was the camp.

John: Wow. That is something.

Donald: Yeah. It's hard to imagine people doing things like that. When we went back out there, we had a winch on the front of this ton and a half, which was unusual. And we pulled down about a hundred feet of fence around the camp, around this one part of the camp. But we couldn't get those people to come.

John: Oh, yea? They wouldn't?

Donald: They wouldn't come near it, they wouldn't go through the fence. Wouldn't walk over it. They were just too terrified of it.

John: I can certainly imagine. Wow.

Donald: Yeah. I just looked into the one building. And that turned out to be a hole in the ground. But they had built a roof over it, so it looked like a building. And when I pushed open the hooked door, there was just nothing but bones, skeletons, that had been cremated, or what. Just piles. Oh, and then I made another note here. Having gone through the city, we went back in and raised Cain with their department store, we never saw a person. Not one citizen did we meet. Going through and back, we had to get back out to where we started.

John: Wow. That is amazing.

Donald: Well, anyway, it turned out this was one of the largest Nazi death camps. And, of course, the people who knew about it, everybody in that whole part of the world knew about it, but nobody else did. Until that day, this camp was unknown to the Allies.

John: Wow.

Donald: Yea, that was, we got some pictures of it. But they are just pictures of the old buildings. You have to see the skeletons, the raggedy clothes, and the fence. And they wouldn't come close enough to us to talk. If we moved to the fence, they moved back.

John: They were petrified.

Donald: Well, they knew. They knew the Allies were American troops. But they were just so afraid to make a move. Maybe there was another guard in there watching out a window, or something.

John: What was going through your, the GI's thinking, when you saw this?

Donald: It's hard to imagine. It's hard to imagine. But, what a gut-wrenching experience that was.

John: Wow. Yeah.

Donald: Well, we went back, we were sent out on patrol again. The next day was our turn. And we really hadn't seen anything except this area where we tore the fence down. Well, it turns out that was the back of the camp. We had never seen the rest of it. And we heard, the word was passed along as soon I radioed in that this thing was a death camp. So the next day, they threw the gates open. Every big-wig within a hundred miles was there, with their cameras, taking pictures.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Donald: But that was unreal. Be a hard thing to try to describe. Totally.

John: Now, let's see. V-E Day was in May?

Donald: Ah, another interesting thing. Just to go back.

John: Go ahead.

Donald: There had been another attempt made on Hitler's life.

John: Okay.

Donald: And I think there was seven of them. They were captured, or whatever, by the Germans, as a group, and sent down there. To be killed, I don't know what you call it. And when we got inside the fence, the first thing I noticed, anyway, as we again walked by that same basement that I mentioned. When we looked at some of the other buildings [unintelligible]. Lost track of it here.

John: So, about the conspirators to [assassinate Hitler]?

Donald: Oh, yeah. The whole camp was kind of on a slope. Well, if you walked down it, there was just one ghost building after another. But we came across a gallows, and a rope up there with a loop on the end. And a one-way ladder. What in the world is this? With the ovens and the gas chambers and everything, why in the world would they need a gallows?

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Donald: Well, it turned out Hitler had sent these seven guys there to be executed.

John: Oh, okay.

Donald: In May. Sometime in May.

John: Okay.

Donald: And one of them, I think the last one-- they came in from different places and were executed at different times-- was a very famous Lutheran pastor, I guess. He was well-known all over Germany. And he was the last one that they hung. And we didn't know that. We didn't find that out until later. But it just seemed ironic to get inside of this place where they kill them off by the hundreds, and find this.

John: Wow. That is something. Go ahead. This was pretty close to the end?

Donald: Oh, yeah. Yeah. The war had wound down a while before that. We were picking up prisoners who were wandering around the countryside. We had got well into Czechoslovakia.

John: Did you ever come up against the Russians?

Donald: Um-huh. But only by radio.

John: Oh, okay.

Donald: It turns out an agreement had been made in Washington, or wherever, that the Czech border was it. The Russians were going to have everything up to that border.

John: Okay.

Donald: So we got up one morning and found out that the Russians had decreed that we'd be out of that country, across the border, by that night. So we had to do some scrambling. Throw some things together. Walk out of there. Actually, we didn't have trucks. We had to walk across the border.

John: I have never heard that. That's something.

Donald: Came right out of Washington. Get back across the border and stay there. But we snuck out. We knew where most of the Russians were. They stayed on their side of the line and we stayed on the other side. And we'd sneak out at night and go down the highway for a mile or two and they'd come the other way. And one night we met them. You know, somebody had a bottle of beer, or whatever they had. Bottles of wine. Of course, that is endemic in that part of the world. I am trying to remember where it was. It doesn't make any difference where it was. But, anyway, we'd typically meet at an intersection and the guys who could speak Polish, we had a couple of Polish guys.

John: Oh, okay.

Donald: And they could communicate with them. And it go to a point when, after a couple of drinks, you couldn't talk to them and they couldn't talk to us. So they'd start singing songs. They'd sing a song, and these guys would sing a song. They were all half in the bag.

John: Okay.

Donald: It was funny. But that is probably the biggest contribution we made.

John: And then, when the war did wind down, what did you do?

Donald: Well, we were originally trained as an amphibious division. On the West Coast. Camp Pendleton, the Marine base.

John: Oh, yeah. I've been there.

Donald: That where you went to school?

John: Yeah.

Donald: We made many practice landings there and out on the Santa Barbara, or was it Santa Anna Islands? Right off there. Doesn't make any difference.

John: Santa Catalina? Or Santa Something?

Donald: Very small islands. But we were trained right from the beginning when we started in Missouri as an amphibious unit. And when things started going bad, I don't remember where, we were put on a train, well it had to be in Europe. There was a problem someplace and they needed more bodies over there. And first thing you know, we were on a boat and over there. When things got a little out of hand in the South Pacific, they put us on another boat.

John: Well, when you finished up in Europe, were you headed for Japan?

Donald: Yeah.

John: Everything was going for the invasion of the Home Islands?

Donald: Yea, we were briefed by experts, while we were at Fort Bragg, they ran us through Fort Bragg. And these people were well rehearsed in the geography and what have you. We had heard about, no, we had not heard about the bomb. But at Fort Bragg, they told us what we were facing.

John: Yeah.

Donald: We were trained to land on the beach and to walk out of, or out of a ship that had its nose up on the beach. Anyway, they estimated that the casualties would run between 150 and 200 percent, if we invaded. So we were a division that wasn't too happy about it. You know, thinking about going over there.

John: No, you would have been fighting grandmas and little girls. I mean, they were a fanatic people. Yeah.

Donald: So, we were on a train heading for Seattle, and pretty somber bunch. People were jumping off the train and running off, into the woods.

John: I can imagine.

Donald: I don't remember when we found out. There was a newspaper, anyway, it spread through the train like wild fire that something had happened and that the Japanese were going to surrender. We had no idea about the bomb. But, when you have been sitting there and thinking about climbing up those cliffs in Japan with a rifle-

John: Right.

Donald: --then you find out it's over with.

John: That must have been a relief. Wow. I bet. Yeah, they dropped the bomb on my tenth birthday.

Donald: Really? Well, we tried to, a bunch of us, swipe a truck. It wasn't very far away from where we were camped. We had finally landed there. You know, the military government to take over.

John: In Japan? So you did go across?

Donald: We decided, what the heck, let's get in the truck and go over and see what happened over there. Was there a bomb, or we figured it was heavily bombed. Destroyed the city. And we got about half-way there and we ran into a road block, and, boy, they ran us out of there in a hurry. They didn't want anybody in there then.

John: Yeah.

Donald: This is the Americans, now.

John: Yep.

Donald: To see what had actually happened in that city. And we never got over to see it. But, when I came back to school here, I can't think of his name, one of the professors, a pathologist, what was his name? I worked with him for quite a while. Well, anyway, he was one of the people selected by the Federal government to send over there as a committee to just look at the damage, what it had done to the people, how are you going to treat the burns and, gee, I can't remember his name. Sharp guy. So I'd get reports from him. When he came back. I was, by that time I was out of the service and back in school. And then of course they published pictures of the area, you know, and the destruction was unreal.

John: One of the newspapermen from Madison, John: Patrick Hunter, who just passed away this past year, was a correspondent with a SeaBee unit. And he was on the

first plane into Tokyo with the initial team to set up the surrender, and he stole a truck and drove and got into the town.

Donald: Did he?

John: Yea. And MacArthur had said, get him and send him back to the States. Then, how long did you spend in Japan?

Donald: Not very long. I probably got there like, September. We had to do a lot of policing. They were afraid of food riots.

John: Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's right.

Donald: They were, we were well fed, but I forget what they called the people who were mayors and so on, running the cities, were afraid of their own lives.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Donald: So we would take a few battalions-- not battalions, but troops--down and march them through the city looking for people who were doing what they shouldn't be doing. Policing, really. And when we finished that, well, we headed home again. We got tired of riding in boats.

John: I'll bet. What were the Japanese people like?

Donald: Very docile.

John: Very docile? I guess the emperor said, "Do it."

Donald: No problem. One of the jobs they gave us was to go through the prefecture, which was like a county, I guess. Big area. Again, I had a truck with a radio on it, and a couple of guys. And we'd been given a map of where these schools were. And the maps weren't very good and we missed half of them because you didn't know where you were on these backward roads. But what we were doing was picking up all the sham weapons that the students, these grade-school kids. You'd see them, when we went to the first one, we couldn't believe it. They were playing on the parade ground with these little wooden rifles and pointed on the end bamboo sticks. Swords, and bamboo sticks. Little guys.

John: That is frightening. Yeah.

Donald: Picked them all up and burned them.

John: When you came back to the States, you got out and came back here? And then went to school?

Donald: Yeah.

John: Okay. What were you taking? What was your field?

Donald: I don't remember originally but I wound up in bio-chemistry.

John: Okay. Okay.

Donald: I don't know what my major was. It was in the sciences. Chemistry, or something closely aligned.

John: Okay.

Donald: And one day I was walking by, I was bored to death with whatever it was. I wasn't interested, really. I walked by this lecture hall, and the doors were open, and that is the guy who invented a drug. Stan Knight. (?) Best lecturer I ever heard.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

John: Okay. All right, this is the beginning of Tape 2. And, Don, the question I said I was going to ask, you had when you came out of the service the GI Bill. Did you ever use it?

Donald: Yes.

John: Okay. For education?

Donald: Um-hum.

John: Did you use it for anything else, like housing?

Donald: No.

John: Okay. It was, a lot of people say it was one of the greatest things ever to come out of the war because not only did it give guys a chance to go to school, but also it helped a lot of guys get started on their first home, and that got the housing industry going. And it was, and then the other question I wanted to ask was about vets organizations. The VFW, the American Legion. Did you ever get into them?

Donald: No.

- John: You didn't join. Okay. And then the last question, you were a young man and this came along and took years out of your life, and just what is your general reaction to that? What do you think about that now, looking back?
- Donald: I don't.
- John: You don't?
- Donald: I never did.
- John: Okay. Okay.
- Donald: I was very fortunate to get an education at an institution like this.
- John: Okay.
- Donald: That was my reward.
- John: Okay. I write, and a very good friend of mine, a writer, who just passed away, Stephen Ambrose...
- Donald: Oh, yeah.
- John: He was talking to a bunch of vets one evening, and most of the guys were saying, "Yeah, but I didn't really do anything." And he said, "You guys were giants!" And they all said, "Aww." He said, "You went out and saved the world!" And you did. It was in pretty bad shape there, and they went out and saved the world. Yeah.
- Donald: You don't think of it that way.
- John: No, you don't. Okay. Well, anything else you want to add into this, Don? This is a remarkable story. See, this is the stories that aren't going to get into the books. Swiping the truck and using a rifle butt to open up the store, and things like that. That's the real stuff, and the Eisenhower landing at D-Day (??) isn't really it. Anything else you want to put in here?
- Donald: I can't think of anything. I was just gonna head home [unintelligible].
- John: Wonderful. Okay, I'm going to turn it off.

[End of Interview]