

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
WILLIAM NESSMAN
U. S. Army, World War II

2006

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Nessman, William, (1921-2007), Oral History Interview, 2006.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

William Nessman, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service with the 3rd Infantry Division in Europe and North Africa. Nessman touches on being drafted, basic training at Fort Sheridan (Illinois) and Fort McClellan (Alabama), and additional training in French Morocco (North Africa). He talks about fighting in Sicily for thirty-one days, fighting at the Anzio Beachhead for four months, and what the infantrymen thought about Lieutenant General Mark Clark and Major General Lucian Truscott. Nessman mentions rest camp in Rome and compares the fighting in France to the fighting in Italy. After the war ended, he touches on seeing Germans marching in to surrender and spending a little time in Nuremburg. He recalls food in the service and states he used to volunteer for KP duty so he could put fruit in his locker. Nessman speaks of returning to his old job after returning to Wisconsin and talks about other family members who served in the military.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2007.

Transcript edited and abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

John: This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives. This is an oral history interview with William Nessman. Bill is a veteran of World War II, the United States Army, the 3rd Infantry Division. And Bill is in from Little Muskego Lake, and we are here at the Veterans Museum conference room. And, Bill, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview and for coming in to do it. Why don't we start at the very beginning? When and where were you born?

William: I was born in Milwaukee.

John: When?

William: 1921.

John: Okay. Family? Brothers and sisters?

William: Oh, yeah, let's see. I had three brothers and three sisters.

John: Okay. And schooling? I assume you went to school in Milwaukee. Okay. What school?

William: Went to grade school, went to Holly Road School. High school, I went to Doolittle High School.

John: Okay. What do you recall of Pearl Harbor Day?

William: I was at work.

John: Where were you working?

William: I worked Kreske [?] Pope Company. That's in West Allis. We made stuff for the paper trades. Towel boxes. Stuff like that. I put forty-two and a half years at that place. They hired me for part time, and I never left.

John: That's great. What do you remember about Pearl Harbor Day?

William: Well, we were working.

John: Did that surprise you, or did you kind of know something was going to happen?

William: It surprised me. I figured I was going to get drafted. Which I did.

John: When did you get drafted?

William: 1942.

John: And where were you inducted? Where did you go first?

William: I was inducted in Milwaukee.

John: And then where? Fort Sheridan?

William: Yeah.

John: Most of the guys from around here went to Fort Sheridan.

William: And from there we went to Alabama. Fort McClellan, Alabama.

John: And that was basic, I take it?

William: Yeah.

John: When did you find out you were going to be in the 3rd Infantry Division?

William: Well, right after I got out of Fort Sheridan.

John: Were you in with anybody you knew, or were they all strangers?

William: They were strangers.

John: What was it like, here, a young kid from Milwaukee, suddenly in the U. S. Army? You didn't have any desire to be a soldier prior to that.

William: No.

John: Okay. Tell me about Alabama. What went on down there?

William: Well, that is where I had my basic training. We went up and down the hills a lot.

John: Yeah. That's great. And then, from there, where? Did you go right overseas?

William: Yeah. To the port of embarkation. And we loaded up on ships.

John: Okay. Where did you go out from?

William: New York.

John: And over to? England, I assume?

William: No, we went over to North Africa.

John: Oh, that's right. Yeah. North Africa. Morocco, or where?

William: French Morocco.

John: Do you remember where in French Morocco?

William: Casablanca.

John: Did you make the landing, the assault, there?

William: No.

John: Okay. I spent a little bit of time in North Africa. In Port Lyautey.

William: Oh, yeah? I was in there.

John: Okay. What was happening in North Africa when you and your outfit got there?

William: Well, we were training. More of that.

John: Training? Infantry training?

William: Infantry.

John: Yeah, I see you've got the badge. How about living over there? Actually, you didn't have barracks.

William: No. It wasn't too good.

John: I can imagine. Hot. Dry.

William: Yeah.

John: Unless it rained. What all happened while you were in North Africa? Any big events, any action?

William: Not really. No. We were just training.

John: And then where from North Africa?

William: That was a long, long time ago. I think we went to Sicily.

John: Sicily. Okay. Did you make the landing there?

William: Yeah.

John: What happened with that? Can you tell me about that?

William: We went through Sicily in thirty-one days, I think it was. Right through there fast.

John: A lot of action?

William: Oh, yeah.

John: You want to touch on any of that?

William: Well, you know, they had everything built. Like off the main streets, they had pill boxes. Everything was facing one way. And we came in from the back.

John: All right. That was good. You just didn't do what they wanted you to do.

William: Yeah.

John: Thirty-some days in Sicily?

William: Yeah.

John: And then what? Up into Italy?

William: We were on Anzio beachhead for over four months.

John: Pinned down. What was that like?

William: Caught a lot of hell there. The German general promised Hitler on his birthday, he was going to wipe the beachhead out. All hell broke loose.

John: You were there four months?

- William: Yeah. Yeah, we had holes there that were ten feet deep, all covered up. We'd get up in the morning, the Germans would come over at night, drop flares, and they would drop these real small bombs, which had a quick fuse on them. They hit something and they would go off. You'd get up in the morning and see where they had hit. Yeah.
- John: Was that summer? Was it hot or cold?
- William: It was warm.
- John: Okay. Anzio, yeah, that was bad business. You finally got out of there. How did you finally get out of there?
- William: Oh, we broke out. What happened is, they had another division, and they had us. And they wanted to go to Rome in a hurry. But they got stopped. And we got stopped, too.
- John: Who was in command there? Was that [Lieutenant General] Clark?
- William: Yeah. Clark.
- John: What did the guys in the infantry think of him?
- William: They kind of liked him. He wasn't bad. And then we had General Truscott. He was a heck of a man, there.
- John: Then, when you broke out of Anzio, you went up through Italy? Then it started to get cold and wet.
- William: Yeah.
- John: I spent time, ten years after you were there, in northern Italy in the winter, and God, that was miserable.
- William: We went as far as Rome. Then we had a rest camp there.
- John: Okay. You were in action, then, all through Sicily, through Anzio, and all the way up to Rome. That is a hell of a long time to be in action, to be in the line.
- William: Oh, yeah. You know, we had, I think I read in this book, we had over five thousand casualties.
- John: Wow. That's a lot. How many guys were in the division?

William: How many guys?

John: Yeah.

William: Twenty thousand, I think.

John: That is a lot of loss.

William: Yeah.

John: Okay, you were in rest camp in Italy. Then what? If you want to look through that book, that's fine.

William: This is a picture of my brother.

John: That's great. That is quite the certificate. For the record, let me read this. It's Army Services Transportation Corps. New York point of embarkation. Corporal William Nessman, returned to the United States on the ship *Queen Elizabeth*. October 4, 1845. That is great. Well, you traveled first class.

William: This is Seventy Army. They were doing all the fighting.

John: Okay. That's great. Then, let's see. After Italy, what happened? You have a map there. You went into the south of France.

William: Yeah. We went into Sicily, Naples.

John: Where did you land in France? Marseilles?

William: Yeah, I think it was.

John: The book shows you coming all the way across North Africa. Were you in action all the way across?

William: Ah, we saw a little bit.

John: Was it different when you went into the south of France? Than Italy?

William: Yeah.

John: Was the German opposition as strong in France, than it had been in Italy?

William: Yeah. Mostly.

John: Okay. That's quite a map. Have anything to do with the French people when you were fighting your way in the south of France?

William: No, they were, they would come out with a small barrel of wine. You couldn't buy it. They were glad to see us.

John: May I take a look at this book? Oh, yeah, this is *The History of the 3rd Infantry Division in World War II*. Oh, you were at Cassino? Okay. Salerno. And then Anzio. You went up the Rhone River Valley? And then over into Germany. You crossed at Strasbourg. And here is Nancy. You had a pass written to go to Nancy. But that is not a woman, that is a town. What was happening when you got into Germany? Had things started to come apart, or were they still raising hell?

William: Well, it started coming apart. I don't know what he's got marked on here.

John: Well, that's a general. Well, this is really something. This is quite a book.

William: Oh, yeah.

John: Man.

William: These are all the guys that got the Congressional Medal of Honor.

John: Oh, man.

William: 3rd Division had more than the whole army together. This is Audie Murphy, the movie star. We had quite a few.

John: Oh, yeah. How many are there?

William: At least thirty something.

John: That is something. That is a tremendous number of men earning the Medal of Honor. Man, that is great. That is a precious book. What, can you tell me what was going on when you heard the Germans had surrendered?

William: Well, we were glad to hear that. Yeah, they used to come in by the thousands.

John: They were giving up?

William: Yeah. They would come marching in.

John: They didn't want to go the other way.

William: Yeah. They were afraid of the Russians.

John: I can imagine. Ah, when the war was over, did you do time in Germany?

William: Yeah, we spent a little time there. I went to Nuremberg.

John: Were you scheduled to go to the Pacific?

William: No. No, I guess they took some other younger guys. The older guys, they had done their fighting.

John: That was good. That was only fair. I know several of the vets I've talked to, they were madder than hell. Here, they fought all the way through, they beat the Germans and now they were going to send them over to invade Japan. And they figured, if they had to invade the islands, they would have been awful. They thought they would take a million casualties. Then, how long were you in Germany before you came back?

William: Maybe a month or two. Pretty quick.

John: Yeah. October. You came back in October. So you had quite a few points?

William: Oh, yeah. I had enough to come back.

John: Did you have any decorations?

William: The Good Conduct Medal. No, I didn't want any.

John: Yeah. I have the Good Conduct Medal, too. I used to say, I didn't deserve it, but I got it. Okay, and then you came back to the States. Where did you get mustered out?

William: I think I got mustered out at Fort Sheridan.

John: Okay. What did you do after the war? Back to work for the same company?

William: Yeah.

John: You were fortunate to get the same job back. A lot of fellows I talked to had a rough time.

William: If they were in service, they had to give them back their job.

John: Did you have any trouble adjusting when you got back? Settling down?

William: I was just happy to get back.

John: I'll bet. You had the GI Bill when you got back. Did you ever use it?

William: No, I didn't.

John: What about the vets organizations? VFW? American Legion?

William: No, I didn't join anything. Like the Veterans, you join that, they are all sellers.

John: Ever get any reunions? Get together with any of the guys?

William: We had them, but I didn't go.

John: I went to one fifty years after I got out. I just heard they were having one. Heck, I met two guys I was in the service with. In fact, we still send Christmas cards. That's great. Well, let me ask you a question. I ask this of everybody. This isn't a loaded question. Here you are, you are a young guy. You are just coming out of a tough time, coming out of the Depression. Your whole life is ahead of you and then, bang, you are in the Army. What did you feel about that? Were you mad? Were you upset? What did you feel about it?

William: Well, I felt I had to go. That was about it. I had to go.

John: Yeah. You know, everybody I talk to, they said they didn't like it, but they went. They had to go. I've never heard anybody crabbing or complaining, "Poor me."

William: Yeah.

John: They crabbed and complained about the food and the officers.

William: I used to volunteer for KP. Yeah. Get a bunch of apples, oranges, put them in my locker.

John: Okay. Hit on that for a minute. How was the food?

William: It wasn't too bad.

- John: A lot of K-rations and C-rations over there.
- William: Oh, yeah, overseas. Then they come out with ten-in-one rations.
- John: Oh, yeah?
- William: Supposed to be enough to feed ten guys. Pretty good rations.
- John: Were they?
- William: C-rations, K-rations. Open it up in the winter and there would be lemonade.
- John: Yeah. I ate a lot of C-rations.
- William: Lot of stew.
- John: Yes. Put everything into a pot or helmet. What about supplies and that. Clothes? Socks? Were you well supplied, or were you short on stuff?
- William: Well, it was kind of hard to get. One guy, we used to get a lot of fleas. And you used to soak it in gasoline to kill them. This one guy hung his up and lit a cigarette, and bang, he went without pants for a couple weeks.
- John: How about the rest of the stuff. Communications equipment, ammo. Transportation. Were you well supplied with that?
- William: Oh, yeah. They took care of us pretty good.
- John: That is a remarkable story. One of the people who works here said her uncle was coming into town, and could she arrange for him to be interviewed. And I said, sure, I'd be glad to. He was in the German army. He was a German soldier. He didn't speak a lot of English.
- William: My dad came from Germany. He had relatives there was captured and he was in the States here. In Michigan. They went up to see him, I guess, and he wanted to stay here. He didn't want to go back. Wouldn't let him. They made him go back. They just let so many in every year from Canada.
- John: I recall as a kid, I was nine or ten, we lived in Marion, Ohio, and they had a prison camp near there. And they would take convoys of prisoners around town on Sunday for a ride. And every so often there would be a Jeep with a machine gun. They didn't need the gun. Those Germans didn't want to go anywhere.

William: They had it good.

John: They had it made. Yeah.

William: They liked it here.

John: Okay. Anything you want to get on tape, Bill? Any thoughts you had about it? Your thoughts from having been in it.

William: One happy duck when the war was over.

John: I can imagine. To understand it's over and you made it. So many guys didn't.

William: My brother is buried in Hawaii. Big national cemetery there. I had another brother in service, and my younger brother, he joined the Marines. He was over in Korea.

John: During the Korean War.

William: During the Korean War.

John: Well, all you boys did time then.

William: Yeah.

John: Do you have any children?

William: Me? Yeah. I got three boys and three girls.

John: Okay. Any of your boys go in?

William: The oldest boy was in the service. And, you know, funny thing about it, all their first names started with D - Don, Darlene, Diane and there was David, Duane, and Danny. And if we had one more, we were going to call it Duck.

John: We still have a little time here. As you think back, what are some of the memories you have?

William: Being overseas. Memories of there. I was 3rd Division of the Regular Army.

John: Yeah. In fact, they are in Iraq right now. You can see that patch. Okay, well, we can wrap this up then. This is a remarkable story. You know. I have a good friend, he just passed away. Steven Ambrose. He is a writer. He wrote a lot of books on World War II, and he was giving a talk here a couple of years ago. To a bunch of

vets. And he was kind of praising them. And a lot of them were saying, I just did my job, I didn't do anything special. And he said, "You know, you guys were giants. You went out and saved the world." And you did. Things were looking pretty bad. And you did it. Well, that is remarkable. I am going to shut this off, but if you think of anything more you want to tell me, I'll turn it back on. Okay?

[End of Interview]