

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
FRANCIS C. O'DONNELL
Infantry, Army, World War II and Career.

2001

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O'Donnell, Francis, (1922-2011). Oral History Interview, 2001.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 100 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 100 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 100 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Francis “Jack” C. O’Donnell, a Whitewater, Wisconsin native, discusses his career in the Army, including World War II service with the 18th Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division in Africa and Europe. In 1938, O’Donnell talks about joining the 32nd Division of the Wisconsin National Guard at age fifteen and attending weekly meetings. He comments on the activation of his unit, mobilization at Camp Beauregard (Louisiana) and Camp Livingston, and being separated from the 32nd Division as a replacement when it was reorganized. O’Donnell speaks of his assignment to Company L of the 18th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division at the rank of corporal and being shipped to Great Britain. He touches on the reluctance of the Army officers to put a National Guard member in charge of a squad. He discusses his participation in the invasion of North Africa: landing in Oran (Algeria), the lack of opposition from the French, patrol duty at Majaz al Bab (Tunisia), stopping German Panzers at El Quatar, and being under a dive bomber attack. O’Donnell provides a detailed account of the attack near Mateur when he was wounded, including leading his squad to take Hill 407, tripping over a wire that triggered flares and land mines, being hit by machine gun fire, and being left by the German troops because he appeared dead. After crawling to cover in a field, he mentions warning the company commander not to go up on the hill and the commander’s going up there anyway and getting killed. Helped to an aide station by two surrendering Germans, O’Donnell talks about receiving last rites from a chaplain, getting treatment for his twenty-six wounds at a field hospital, and recovering at the general hospital in Sidi Bel Abbes. O’Donnell comments on landing at Sicily, the effectiveness of American artillery fire against German tanks, the rough terrain, suffering from malaria, and hearing about the “slapping incident” involving General Patton. Shipped to Dorchester (England) for training, he describes the preparations for the D-Day landing at Omaha Beach. O’Donnell provides a detailed account of the invasion, including the gear he carried, surviving when his landing craft hit a mine, his feeling upon seeing an arm floating in the water, wading ashore amidst heavy gun fire, seeing stunned soldiers, working his way up the slopes, and the lessening of resistance beyond the beach defenses. He touches on dealing with his fear during combat and feeling fearless on D-Day, perhaps due to suffering a concussion. After three days of fighting, the 18th Regiment reached its objective and continued on to St. Lô. O’Donnell comments on constant action, getting little sleep, fighting in the hedgerows, and allowing a German soldier to shoot at him. O’Donnell describes earning his Distinguished Service Cross by helping take out a German machine gun after his squad was left behind by his company. After having a recurrence of malaria, he tells of

going AWOL to rejoin his unit in Paris, where he saw the celebrations when the city was liberated, and he highlights being one of the first Americans in Jeumont (France). He portrays the muddy combat outside Aachen (Germany), being wounded by shrapnel, and taking thirty surrendering German soldiers prisoner outside the hospital. O'Donnell recalls convincing soldiers manning a pillbox to surrender and also taking a German field grade officer prisoner. He discusses seeing an Air Force plane crash and being sent to a hospital in Paris after being wounded in the knee. O'Donnell talks of his return trip to the United States, further medical treatment at Percy Jones Hospital (Battle Creek, Michigan), and a short R&R in Florida before his discharge. He comments on re-enlisting in 1947 and serving in Korea from 1947 to 1948 with a Graves Registration detachment. O'Donnell mentions the tense political situation and seeing bodies hanging from telephone poles. Sent to officer candidate school (OCS) at Fort Riley (Kansas), he discusses drinking a spiked drink and being robbed in Sacramento upon his homecoming, getting into an altercation with the police when they didn't help him, and resulting amnesia that caused him to go AWOL from OCS, for which he was court-martialed. O'Donnell comments on settling down with a family, duty as a Battalion Personnel Sergeant with the 124th Signal Battalion, 4th Infantry Division, writing to President Clinton to have the AWOL changed to sick leave, and retiring from the Army in 1962. O'Donnell touches upon his post-service employment, service related sicknesses and ruptured disc injuries, and membership in the Disabled American Veterans.

Biographical Sketch:

O'Donnell (1922-2011) served with Company L, 18th Regiment, 1st Infantry Division in Europe during World War II and took part in the Omaha Beach landing on June 6, 1945. He retired from service in 1962 and settled in Madison (Wisconsin), where he worked at the Madison Public Library for twenty-one years.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2001
Transcribed by Jack Carver and Noreen Warren, 2011
Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2011
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

Jim: I'm talking to Francis O'Donnell, 18 January '01. Where were you born, sir?

Francis: Whitewater, Wisconsin.

Jim: On the 24th of August 1922?

Francis: That's right.

Jim: You're a year older than I; I was September of '23. And what were you doing before the war started?

Francis: I just graduated from high school, when we were—in June, and then in October we were called into active, active service.

Jim: You were drafted?

Francis: No, I was with the 32nd Infantry Division here in Wisconsin.

Jim: Oh, then you'd be in the Guard before the war?

Francis: I joined when I was fifteen.

Jim: Right, that's what I wanted you to tell me about. How could you join at age fifteen?

Francis: I guess you'll have to ask the company commander. [laughs] They put my age down as seventeen, I think; seventeen and a half.

Jim: Yeah, it was legal at seventeen.

Francis: Yes, and I joined when I was a sophomore in high school. About the first of February, I think it was, 1938.

Jim: Well, your classmates must just have been in awe of you.

Francis: There was a couple other classmates that joined also.

Jim: Oh really? How did you get this past your folks?

Francis: My dad was hospitalized at the time and he didn't—

Jim: He wasn't paying attention?

Francis: —he didn't pay much attention to what I was doing. [laughs]

Jim: Oh my, yeah, because a lot of parents would have objected. Was finances the main reason? It was a way of earning some extra money?

Francis: Well, we got a dollar a meeting; that was once a week.

Jim: Once a week. But then there's summer things too, though.

Francis: Yes, we went to summer camp for a couple weeks.

Jim: When you first joined, where were those summer camps?

Francis: Camp McCoy and—

Jim: You didn't go down to Louisiana?

Francis: No. Camp Douglas was another place.

Jim: Sure, that's not far from the other one.

Francis: Yeah, McCoy and Douglas.

Jim: Sure. And this is the 32nd Division, National Guard—

Francis: That's right.

Jim: —that you joined, right? Did they give you any basic training?

Francis: We just had our regular meetings and there wasn't an awful lot of room to do much training other than do a little marching or drilling and study a little bit on military tactics.

Jim: Well, they gave you a rifle to practice with, didn't they?

Francis: That's right; we had to have an inspection every meeting, too.

Jim: You had to learn to take that apart and put it back together—

Francis: Right.

Jim: —and shoot it, too?

Francis: Well, we had to take the weapon, including pistols, apart blindfolded and put 'em back together.

- Jim: I did that in the ROTC a year after at the Wisconsin ROTC. The program there had to take apart a B.A.R. [Browning Automatic Rifle] and put it back together.
- Francis: That's pretty heavy weaponry. [laughs]
- Jim: I know it. But it was fun, you know. And then all of a sudden things got serious when Pearl Harbor happened.
- Francis: We were already in service on the eighth of October, 1940.
- Jim: I see.
- Francis: And we were called to active duty in our hometowns and took a train ride.
- Jim: Was that in October of '40 you were called to active duty?
- Francis: Right, the eighth of October, and we spent about a week in Whitewater just waiting for the train to come by. [both laugh] And then we—about the fifteenth of October we were on our way to Camp Beauregard, Louisiana, where the whole 32nd Division—
- Jim: I visited; one of my friends lived down there then, in that summer of '41.
- Francis: We moved over to Camp Livingston after that winter, I think it was, and then they were building a lot of new camps all over the country then.
- Jim: Was it your assumption at that time that war was going to happen sooner or later, or how would you describe that?
- Francis: I, I had kind of wondered about it even before I graduated from high school, you know. The way Hitler was going.
- Jim: Yeah, if you read the newspaper, it was nothing good news.
- Francis: I was a newspaper boy so I read [laughs] and kept track of what was going on; *The Janesville Gazette*. And we were, we were supposed to be called to active duty for one year only, but that was extended just before Pearl Harbor, about that time, so we were in for the duration after Pearl Harbor.
- Jim: You got extended a month and then Pearl Harbor, and then there was no more talk about back?
- Francis: That's right.

- Jim: So what happened? Did your situation change immediately or not, since Pearl Harbor, I mean?
- Francis: No, I think everybody thought the war would be over with Japan in about three months. [laughs] But then—
- Jim: So what about the 32nd Division? How did you get out of the 32nd?
- Francis: Well, sometime during 1941, they made a triangular division out of all the square divisions.
- Jim: I know that.
- Francis: The square divisions were—had full regiments.
- Jim: I know about that.
- Francis: So—there was maybe three thousand of us that were turned loose as undesirables. [laughs]
- Jim: [Laughs] Shoved out into the cold?
- Francis: Yeah, throw-away type. But I'm glad I got thrown out [laughs] because I didn't, I didn't especially care about how the 32nd ended up in the Pacific. You know, in the jungle warfare and everything else.
- Jim: A long time, longer than any division in World War II.
- Francis: Yeah. They had a tough time.
- Jim: About two and a half, three years?
- Francis: Yeah, at least.
- Jim: Yeah. So where did they send you then? The rejects—
- Francis: I think the triangular division took place before we left Camp Livingston. That was the fall of 1942—or wait a minute, no; it was the winter of '41, right after Pearl Harbor. We left Camp Livingston and then moved up to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, the whole division.
- Jim: Early in '42 then?
- Francis: Yeah. And the main part of the division less us who became replacements actually for other divisions—the main body of the 32nd moved out ahead of us and then we followed. They thought they'd send us along later on as

replacements, either for the 32nd or maybe some other division. So we, the replacement part of the division moved to Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania and we spent a few days there, and then we moved out to Angel Island in California, right next to Alcatraz. And I think I stayed there—well, it was until early September of '42.

Jim: You still weren't attached to any division yet?

Francis: No, we were in the, in the replacement—what do they call them? Replacement pool, I guess they call it, so we weren't permanently assigned. But in early September most of us left Angel Island and went all the way back to New York.

Jim: Of course.

Francis: And then from there over to Europe, where I joined the 1st Infantry Division.

Jim: Right.

Francis: And I've always been kind of proud of the fact that I got to serve with—

Jim: "The Big Red One?" [nickname for 1st Infantry Division]

Francis: Yeah. Probably the best fighting outfit in the whole Army.

Jim: History. Well there's a museum down in Chicago, the Cantigny, a gorgeous museum; I trust you've been there?

Francis: No, I haven't, but I know about it.

Jim: Oh my goodness! Oh, you must go there. It's a gorgeous museum. It's devoted to the 1st Division.

Francis: That's what I read.

Jim: Beautiful! Anyway, what was your specialty now at this time? What was your MOS [Military Occupation Code] now?

Francis: My MOS was infantry, and I can't even remember the number.

Jim: Anyway, you were designated as just a rifleman?

Francis: Yeah. From quartermaster, car driver, and truck driver, motorcycle operator, I went to the infantry. [Jim laughs] So I don't know what the qualifications were, but they thought I'd make a good infantryman.

- Jim: Because of the way you drove the cars? [laughs] So you were in a line unit?
- Francis: Right.
- Jim: And where did you end up in England?
- Francis: We, we—the boat ride took us ten days or two weeks, crossed pretty rough waters even for September, North Atlantic. And we were escorted by destroyers who kept going in and out of the—
- Jim: Were you in a big ship, a transport, do you recall?
- Francis: I don't know; it wasn't real big, as big as some of our troop ships. It was a converted Dutch ship. We were crammed in like sardines and we ended up in Glasgow, Scotland, the port of debarkation there. Then I joined my company L, the 18th Infantry, 1st Division.
- Jim: Eighteenth Regiment?
- Francis: Yeah, Eighteenth Regiment.
- Jim: You joined them in Glasgow?
- Francis: No, further south.
- Jim: You trained it down from Glasgow to England then?
- Francis: Right, we took a train down to actually Dorchester in southern—
- Jim: I know where it is.
- Francis: —southern England. And that's where I got acquainted with the 1st Division and they were kind of upset that I was a corporal and, and I was gonna take over a squad, you know. And I was National Guard instead of regular Army.
- Jim: Oh well, then you were treated as a second-class citizen right from the start?
- Francis: [Laughs] Yeah. I didn't fight over it; if they wanted the stripes they could have had 'em. But I kept 'em anyway. [laughs]
- Jim: Good. So they made you a squad leader reluctantly then?

- Francis: Right. I'd had infantry training before we left Whitewater, you know. I was with—
- Jim: —the Guard, you must have—
- Francis: We changed to a quartermaster company just before we were called to active duty in 1940. Prior to that I was with an infantry company— Headquarters of the—
- Jim: So it wasn't totally unfamiliar to you at all?
- Francis: No, I knew what—
- Jim: What you were supposed to be doing?
- Francis: —what was supposed to be done and I paid more attention to first aid lectures than anything else.
- Jim: So what type of training did you receive then? Now you got there in '42— that's pretty early.
- Francis: We got there about the time the World Series was starting and I was wondering how the St. Louis Cardinals were doing. [laughs]
- Jim: [Laughs] In '42 they won it.
- Francis: '42, yeah; I think they won four out of five or something.
- Jim: I think so.
- Francis: Probably one of the greatest teams in the history of baseball.
- Jim: That's right. Enos Slaughter, Stan "The Man" [Stan Musial], Joe Medwick—my favorite ballplayer.
- Francis: I think Medwick had been traded by that time to the Brooklyn Dodgers, but he spent some good years with the Cardinals. I managed to see the Dodgers and the Cardinals play three games before we left New York.
- Jim: Fantastic, oh, that was a thrill.
- Francis: Yeah. That was towards the end of September.
- Jim: I used to be a Cardinal fan, too.

- Francis: Yeah. Oh, I could tell you every batting average and everything else. Between them and the 1946 Boston Red Sox, with Ted Williams—he's probably the best ballplayer of all time, and that includes Ruth and Gehrig. He was called to active service twice.
- Jim: Right. Went to Korea, too.
- Francis: Anyway, we got on a boat and went to North Africa for the invasion of North Africa. We went in at Oran, into Algeria.
- Jim: I've heard a few accounts of that. This was all at night, is that right? People said they couldn't find out where they're going and it was kind of a messed-up situation. What's your experience?
- Francis: I don't know. Things probably got messed up because they had ships coming in from different directions. There wasn't any, any fighting against the invasion, though. The French gave us a little resistance, but they were ready to—
- Jim: So how did you go ashore there? Did they pull up to a dock and you get off or did ya have to take a landing craft in?
- Francis: I got off on a—we were still a replacement-type of division, so the regular units, before I joined them, got off on small boats, I think, and kind of walked in on the surf—through the surf.
- Jim: At Oran?
- Francis: Yeah. And they didn't have any resistance. That's where I joined Company L actually, right there at the invasion.
- Jim: Oh—dockside?
- Francis: Yeah. [laughs] It was bad weather then; there was mud and water all over. The winter season in Africa had just gotten underway.
- Jim: They put you up in tents?
- Francis: Yeah, we used our pup tents. And it was pretty miserable [chuckles]. But, ten days later, I think—the 18th—we were on our way up to Tunisia to the front line. The front line was actually starting to be put in place. We ended up at Medjaz-al-Bab for five weeks, I guess. And the Germans were being pushed out of Libya by Montgomery's forces towards us. And there was pretty much a stagnant front there, a stalemate. We just did patrol duty primarily until the [Battle of the] Kasserine Pass happened.

- Jim: Tell me about how that went.
- Francis: The 18th Infantry wasn't involved, we just got pulled back off Medjaz-al-Bab, we were north of Kasserine Pass. And we were supposed to have a few days rest, but the Kasserine Pass battle happened and the 26th Infantry out of the 1st Division took a beating there.
- Jim: So everything stopped; there's no more forward progress there for a while?
- Francis: That's right.
- Jim: The general got fired then, one of the generals; I don't know if he was in 1st Division or not. He was sent home after that.
- Francis: Yeah, he was the corps commander.
- Jim: Oh that was it.
- Francis: He was replaced by—
- Jim: Patton?
- Francis: Ah, I think—I think he was replaced by Bradley and then Bradley got promoted, something like that, anyway, and then Patton came in and took over. And the movie, *Patton*, describes our—
- Jim: Fight?
- Francis: —our most fierce battle. I never—I didn't like Patton because of all the bad things that were said about him to start with, you know. But after a while, ah, I kind of figured, well, if I was gonna go to war I'd just as soon have him on my side, and I think—
- Jim: Right. He'll never leave you.
- Francis: He, he liked the way the battle at El Guettar went—the German 10th Panzer Division, that was—we always thought was Rommel's best tank division, the Panzers, they were tanks—and they came in and somehow or other we were waiting for 'em. The infantry was—Company L of the 18th was ready to, right on the meat block.
- Jim: That was your first experience in combat then?

- Francis: Ah, well, except for patrol duty, and we had a few skirmishes in our patrol duties prior to that. But, yeah, that was probably the main battle that I can—
- Jim: When somebody was seriously shooting at you?
- Francis: Right, and dive bombing.
- Jim: Oh, dive bombing?
- Francis: Yeah, they had those dive bombers.
- Jim: Junkers that made the noise? 87s?
- Francis: Yeah, they'd come in and then come straight down. [laughs]
- Jim: Was that noise impressive?
- Francis: It was kind of eerie, you know, but you got used to it after a while. But the Germans lost—the 10th Panzer Division took a beating there. We had a few tanks that turned out just as good or better [chuckles]. **[Interruption in tape]**
- Jim: Okay, so you took the Germans to task then and you moved forward from that point?
- Francis: Yes, the front was getting pretty organized then. We knew where the Germans were and they knew where we were. We moved up towards Mateur, the last big battle in Tunisia. And I'll always remember on the 23rd of April, it was Good Friday, and that's where I got wounded pretty badly.
- Jim: Tell me how that happened. You were doing what and then what happened?
- Francis: Well, we left our rendezvous area—my platoon, or the squad that I was leading, anyway—at about 4 o'clock in the morning and we got to our objective, Hill 407, about 4:30.
- Jim: You were supposed to get there and take it or hold it or what?
- Francis: We were gonna take Hill 407.
- Jim: Your squad?

Francis: Well, our platoon. My squad, we were leading [laughs] the way in the dark.

Jim: Fantastic!

Francis: And I couldn't see a thing in the dark hardly. I had darkness blindness or whatever you call it. Night blindness. But I tripped over a wire that set off a flare and a few, few antipersonnel mines, you know. They, they were waiting for us. And then all of a sudden everything started landing in on us.

Jim: Mortars?

Francis: Well, mortars, artillery, machine gun fire, and hand grenades [chuckles].

Jim: They were waiting for you?

Francis: Yeah.

Jim: So?

Francis: I, I must have been knocked out by concussion from the explosions. When I came to I had bullet wounds from machine gun fire in my right leg.

Jim: Through and through, or did the bullet holes—

Francis: Well, they went through on the right side of my leg and departed on the inside, or the top part.

Jim: The same bullet, you mean?

Francis: Yeah. Well I figured later on I must have got hit by about six or seven—

Jim: Bullets?

Francis: —machine gun bullets in that area, yeah. The machine gun was on another hill to our right that our second platoon was supposed to take. [laughs] And they kind of goofed up.

Jim: You couldn't you see this coming? You were hit before you really knew what was going on?

Francis: Yeah. As soon as that flare went off and the, and the mines, a couple mines, ah—

Jim: You really opened a can of worms!

- Francis: Yeah. Well I don't know what happened to the rest of the squad. I think some of them were taken prisoner and some of them were killed.
- Jim: Well, you stopped then? I mean, did they rush you or—
- Francis: I could hear two German soldiers talking, just barely—I was probably semiconscious, and I don't know whether one of 'em—they maybe thought I was dead, you know. I had, I was, had—I was bleeding from an artery wound up here, too, from shrapnel hitting it here. I knew it was a—later on I knew it was an artery because of the way the blood bubbled out like candy boiling. And—
- Jim: That means it hit [unintelligible].
- Francis: And I think the German soldiers thought I was dead then, because I wasn't—probably wasn't moving. I don't know whether they hit me with somethin' else or not, but—
- Jim: But you say this is early in the morning, when it was still dark?
- Francis: Yeah, it was beginning to get pretty light. So—and I've got no idea what time it was. It may have been about six o'clock.
- Jim: So how long did you lay there before they found you?
- Francis: Ah, well, I didn't lay there. I, I, I was—I came to enough to, ah—and the German soldiers were preoccupied with what was happening around them so I managed to stuff, stuff some bandage, some gauze into this wound and wrapped, wrapped my right leg with bandage and—
- Jim: You could walk?
- Francis: Yeah. They were all flesh wounds in my right leg; I was fortunate.
- Jim: Yes.
- Francis: But I found out later on that my—I had grazing bullet wounds in my right side here and my cartridge belt was shot off [laughs] and my M1 that I, that I was gonna take up, ah, an argument with the German soldiers if I had a weapon there and it was cut in two by shrapnel, the barrel was cut right in two.
- Jim: The gun was gone then?

- Francis: So I didn't have anything left to fight with. Ah, I had to make a decision. I knew as many holes as I had in me, that the shock was gonna kill me if I didn't get out of there, so I, I, I pondered for a few moments whether I should just take the butt of what was left of my rifle and fight with that. [laughs] But I decided I'd—
- Jim: That wouldn't be prudent.
- Francis: No, because I figured it'd be better to live and fight another day.
- Jim: Right. Were there a lot of your mates around you that were dead?
- Francis: There wasn't anybody in sight at that time.
- Jim: Incredible.
- Francis: It was just me. If I'd a had a weapon, I would have had the hill. That's what always bothered me. [laughs]
- Jim: Right. You took the hill and had to give it up.
- Francis: Yeah. But I, I—there was winter wheat and poppies growing, kind of early, and maybe it was early or maybe it was the season. This was the 23rd of April, so it was springtime.
- Jim: In '43.
- Francis: And so I zigzagged through that wheat field, it was up about—winter wheat I guess—it was up about a foot and a half or two feet high already. Ah, and when I was doin' that, why a sniper, one of the Germans was shooting at me with his rifle, and he hit me a couple times in the [laughs] right arm.
- Jim: Jesus Christ! Through and through wounds, I trust?
- Francis: Yeah, it was again, something that went in back in here. And I got hit by a piece of shrapnel earlier than that; there's a line, line down my right arm here.
- Jim: [Laughing hard] You're the most wounded guy I've ever talked to.
- Francis: I had twenty—I was bleeding from twenty-six places. And along with that I had sand dripped, beaten into my face.
- Jim: That's right, you're in the desert, or desert country, anyway.

- Francis: An explosion right near you will, will, will beat sand into ya and your face will feel like sandpaper.
- Jim: So how'd you get back to your lines?
- Francis: I met the company commander and the executive officer comin' up to see what was wrong. The company commander had said that he was gonna have the second platoon leader court-martialed for not moving up the way he should have on that other hill.
- Jim: Oh, to give you some backup there?
- Francis: Yeah. And I told him there wasn't any use for him to inspect the Hill 407 because he just had a carbine and that wasn't any weapon to fire against the rifle, you know. So it ended up he and Lieutenant Fogg, was his name—or Captain Fogg from New England, and Lieutenant Cross were both killed by that sniper fire.
- Jim: Just after you talked to them?
- Francis: Just after I talked to them. I went—I moved on because I knew I had to get to the aid station and they didn't take my advice. I told them don't go up there unless you got somebody with better weapons with you.
- Jim: Right. They went up there in spite your warnings and got killed? That's a hell of a way to learn a lesson.
- Francis: Right. Actually it might have been the two Germans that I saw on the hill came towards me when I was down in the valley. I was making my way back to the aid station. And they had their hands up. I never, I never could—I didn't ask 'em, anyway—**[End of Tape 1, Side A]**—whether they were the ones that were shooting at me. But they helped me back to the aid station.
- Jim: The two Germans did?
- Francis: Yeah.
- Jim: I supposed they all looked alike; you couldn't tell whether—
- Francis: Yeah. And the war was getting close to the end and they didn't wanna have any more of it, I guess.
- Jim: The war in Africa?

Francis: In Africa, yeah. Yeah. It ended two weeks after the 23rd of April; the 7th of May it was over.

Jim: Tell me about your experience back at the aid station. Did that take you long to get back there?

Francis: Ah, no, we got a jeep ride, the two prisoners and I. My prisoners. [laughs]

Jim: Your buddies, right?

Francis: And the aid station wasn't too far away, but that speeded my journey a little. But actually there was a lot more casualties that day and I had to wait until, maybe, seven or eight at night before they got to me and I was almost dead from shock. When shock sets in you feel like you've been kicked all over; you just ache.

Jim: You were low on their priority list?

Francis: Yeah, until they found out what they had.

Jim: And the holes in you—twenty-seven holes you said?

Francis: Twenty-six I counted.

Jim: Twenty-six holes?

Francis: Yeah. Some were real small and others were large enough to kill ya. This one here was the main one that took three operations.

Jim: Well that's the main—that was lungs, see that was air. The reason it bubbled was because they got you in the lung. The bubbling chest wounds, I've seen those.

Francis: Oh. Anyway, it took three operations to repair that. But during, during my wait at the aid station—they had a field hospital set up where they could take care of a lot of wounded, you know. Father Macaguire??, a regimental Catholic chaplain, gave me last rites, though, [laughs] while I was waiting.

Jim: At least you know what they thought about you.

Francis: So that's that for Africa. That happened to be Good Friday.

Jim: Now those operations you said they did to close the hole in your chest, they weren't done during that—while you're in that aid station? They just patched that up and then sent you back to the hospital?

- Francis: From the aid station, I don't know how far away the field hospital was; maybe they were right together. The field hospital patched me up and stuffed this thing back full of gauze again, then took care of the other wounds. And I went back to a general hospital near—right in Sidi Bel Abbes in Algeria. That was the home of the French Foreign Legion, by the way. [laughs] And I talked with some Foreign Legionnaire later on that had been there for twenty-five years with the Legion. He was from Chicago. [laughs] Anyway, I got fixed up from the general hospital in Sidi Bel Abbes and I went back and joined Company L of the 18th Infantry again.
- Jim: Didn't nobody suggest sending you home? It seems like you had enough wounds to go home.
- Francis: Yeah, you had to be pretty near dead, I guess [laughs]—or dead, either way. But they must have thought there was something left in me. [both laugh] We jumped off on probably the 9th of June and on the 10th of—or July, the 9th of July, and then on the 10th of July we, we invaded Sicily. And that was—
- Jim: Did you get another stripe by this time?
- Francis: No, I was still a corporal.
- Jim: Still a corporal, OK.
- Francis: They hadn't taken it away, either. [laughs] The campaign in Sicily didn't last too long. It was over after about six or seven weeks, I guess.
- Jim: How were you involved with that?
- Francis: I was still a squad leader.
- Jim: I know, but how'd you get ashore and that sort of thing?
- Francis: Oh, we were on—probably a landing craft infantry, our whole company. We got off where the ship ran aground and we waded in at—near Gela. And that afternoon the Germans sent some tanks towards us and we thought we were done. [laughs] You know, tanks coming at you, it was kind of scary. But our, our own artillery had gotten a few guns on the beach and the Navy out on the water took care of every one of the tanks. There was probably around twenty tanks or more.
- Jim: The Navy knocked each one of them out?

- Francis: The Navy or else our own artillery.
- Jim: But they didn't get close enough to shoot at you again, did they?
- Francis: Well, they could have, could have been firing, ah, but once a gun zeroes in on a tank, the tank is a dead animal. [laughs] So we watched the battle from the hilltop, um, and it was our first victory off of the [unintelligible]. One of the Airborne divisions landed—either that night or the next night—landed troops; they landed right over our position. [Jim laughs] It's never a good thing that happens when paratroops land at night. [laughs]
- Jim: For them either.
- Francis: They were fired at by our own Navy, the paratroopers.
- Jim: They lost some of those airplanes bringing 'em over; they were shot at by the Navy. It was a communication problem.
- Francis: It just wasn't a good operation. I've still got a piece of silk cloth, red and white, at home from one of the parachutes. I think it was wrapped around ammunition to denote red for ammo. But it was a rough campaign from a terrain standpoint, probably as rough a terrain as we were in all through the war.
- Jim: Did you have to hoof it all the way or were you allowed get on some type of vehicle?
- Francis: I can't remember riding in a vehicle in Sicily.
- Jim: But you remember walking up and down those hills?
- Francis: Yeah. I had to go to the hospital, I had, ah, malaria; when the campaign was over in Sicily, I had a major attack of malaria.
- Jim: That was your first attack?
- Francis: Yeah. I went to the aid station—I think it was because I was suffering from concussion from just before the campaign ended in Sicily. And then I got back out and went, went back to my outfit. On the day I was going back to my outfit, why Patton was there and that's where the slapping [laughs] slapping incident took place.
- Jim: In Sicily?
- Francis: Yeah. He had to apologize to our whole division later on. Anyway, the campaign ended real abruptly with the march across the northern part of—

- Jim: Did you parade down the street like Patton wanted everybody to parade to show the British that they got there first in Messina?
- Francis: No.
- Jim: You didn't have a chance to do that?
- Francis: The 1st Division, Terry Allen was a—Terry Allen and Patton didn't like each other, so we didn't do much for Patton at that time. But I think General Huebner—[pause for microphone adjustment] I think General Huebner took over in Sicily though, for Allen, and Allen went back to the States to bring back the 104th Division. But I liked both generals; really, really soldiers—generals. Am I taking too much?
- Jim: No, you're doing fine. Everything's right on schedule.
- Francis: [Laughs] It takes a while to get things back together sometimes, when you're retracing—
- Jim: Did you have aftereffects of being wounded in Africa, when you were in that Sicily campaign? Did it slow you personally down?
- Francis: No, I—
- Jim: Were you short of breath because of your chest wound? That's actually what I'm asking you. You don't recall that?
- Francis: Not that I know of.
- Jim: Well, you were young and invincible.
- Francis: I didn't feel as strong, you know—it takes a while after you get up out of bed, you know, and to gain your balance again.
- Jim: How long were you in bed in Africa? A week?
- Francis: Probably around ten days, because they had to do two operations on this besides what they did at the field hospital.
- Jim: Was there shrapnel in your chest, or a bullet? Or did it go through and through?
- Francis: It was shrapnel.
- Jim: They had to get that out.

Francis: Yeah. I never saw the piece of shrapnel.

Jim: That never gave you any trouble in the rest of your life, that chest wound?

Francis: I don't think it has.

Jim: So far, anyway.

Francis: There's a little bone sticking out here that probably got bent a little.

Jim: One of your ribs.

Francis: Umm—pardon?

Jim: One of your ribs. So anyway, you were finishing up in Sicily. Did you get a little R&R then, or a little chance to rest or anything like that?

Francis: Well, we went back to what was probably an R&R area. And during that time I think we were about to ready to leave and go back to England, and that's about the same time that the invasion of Italy took place at Anzio.

Jim: That's a good thing to miss.

Francis: Yeah. We hung around, I guess, long enough to see if they needed our help and things turned out that—

Jim: So the whole division went back to England then?

Francis: Right. And our mission from then on was to prepare for the D-Day landing at Omaha beach.

Jim: So did they send you back to the same camp in England or a new camp?

Francis: We went back to Dorchester. I said Dorchester when I first got to England but it was Tidworth Barracks, and I'm not sure where Tidworth Barracks was; it was right near Dorchester.

Jim: It's on the west side of England, that's all.

Francis: That was our first stay. And then our second stay was at Dorchester, which was real close to Weymouth and not too far away from London. I never got to London but I went down to Weymouth quite a bit. And after our about six months' training—practicing landing and making different types of bombs, you know, from—assembling bombs from TNT and stuff like that. And you'd use—

- Jim: You were still in L Company?
- Francis: Right.
- Jim: I forgot to ask you, were they surprised to see you come back? After, you know, you left them there, and then all of a sudden you appeared again in Sicily. They'd probably given you up.
- Francis: When I joined the outfit again, just before we went to Sicily, they thought I'd been killed in action, you know. They were surprised.
- Jim: They'd taken all your stuff. [laughs]
- Francis: Yeah, so I must have been on the morning report as killed in action. I never pursued that.
- Jim: [laughs] Well, you're living proof that it's slightly inaccurate.
- Francis: So, yeah, they were surprised. I was surprised to see some of 'em that have come back that I thought were dead too, you know, from Hill 407.
- Jim: But your platoon? How many of survived out of your group of thirty?
- Francis: Ah, probably half, you know. When you get hit in a good battle you're gonna lose maybe half of your men, wounded or killed, or taken prisoner. Some of them were taken prisoner, but the Germans had to turn 'em right back to us, you know, because—
- Jim: They *themselves* became prisoners then.
- Francis: The campaign ended right after that.
- Jim: So tell me how you got—what was your training then? Did they have a different task for you personally? Were you still in the rifle company and do the same things you did before, or was there something new added for the invasion?
- Francis: It was the same thing. We had some real tough training. We had to march five miles every day there for a few days every couple of weeks with a full pack, rifle, and everything, just like as if we were going to go into battle.
- Jim: This was in the spring now of '44? Early spring?
- Francis: Right. And that was getting us prepared pretty much for what happened in France. Uh, we got on a boat—when D-day was scheduled initially for the

5th of June, we were already on a boat, a Landing Craft Infantry; they carried a whole company, plus a few replacements. So we, we sat in the water for an extra twenty-four hours.

Jim: You didn't go back then, you just waited there?

Francis: Right. We just stayed on there, LCI.

Jim: I bet that was unpleasant, sitting there waiting.

Francis: We were pretty much a bunch of sardines in that can. [laughs]

Jim: Did they feed you at all during that twenty-four hours?

Francis: We had K-rations; they were a little easier to handle.

Jim: You had your own K-rations? So they said everybody eat their own K-rations? They didn't have any provisions for any of you?

Francis: No, there wasn't room for anything else.

Jim: Right. Were you expected to carry anything ashore—a piece of a mortar, or a machine gun, or any of that stuff? **[Interruption of tape, conversation interrupted.]**

Francis: Prior to our D-Day landing, I'd been promoted to sergeant.

Jim: Great!

Francis: It took an Act of Congress to do that. Every squad leader was—

Jim: It was automatic.

Francis: —automatically made a sergeant. So then on the 6th of June, uh, I carried my normal cartridge belt full of ammunition for an M1 rifle and two bandoleers of fifty rounds each and maybe a half a dozen grenades in a grenade bag. All told, with a field roll and ammunition and rifle and everything, we must have been carrying a hundred and ten pounds at least. And our uniform was this—these rolls impregnated to protect you against gas attack, you know, and they were pretty heavy, especially when they got wet.

Jim: Yeah, they said they smelled bad and they—

Francis: Yeah, they had a kind of a chemical smell to 'em that might have harmed you. But—

- Jim: So your whole regiment landed, you know, pretty close in, at Omaha?
- Francis: I, I don't like to take credit for a lot of things that I don't know what was going on in other areas, you know.
- Jim: Right.
- Francis: But L Company led the way, really, off of Omaha Beach.
- Jim: Hey, terrific.
- Francis: And, ah—we didn't know—we didn't really know of all the—all the problems that faced the 16th Infantry, another regiment out of the 1st Division.
- Jim: They had more problems than you.
- Francis: Yeah, they got pretty well cut up.
- Jim: Sure. But tell me your personal experience, that's what we need here.
- Francis: Okay. The—
- Jim: The way it went down and so forth
- Francis: We—somewhere in the British book it's written that two destroyers came in to aid the landing of the LCIs, Landing Craft Infantry, and one of our—our Landing Craft Infantry was one of those. We beached on top of what were antitank mines, maybe two or three on top of each other, and it tore our, tore our LCI pretty much in two, and—
- Jim: So everybody's in the water now?
- Francis: Yeah, well, there was several casualties, and we'd beached, we were out in the water. I was standing in four feet of water up to my chest before I realized what, what was going on. Everybody was at least stunned, if they were still alive. What turned out that a good majority of L Company survived that, [laughs] but some of the pictures show L Company members on the beach having been bandaged up and everything.
- Jim: So in four feet of water, you just started trudging in?
- Francis: I was—when I, when I came to my senses I was helping, uh, the rest of the platoon out of our compartment up through the hatch, you know, so they could walk down the ramp. And—

- Jim: Everyone was stunned by the explosion of this mine, right?
- Francis: Yeah.
- Jim: That's what made everybody in a daze?
- Francis: Right. So there was a—somebody's arm was floating to my right side, I'll never forget. And, uh, I thought right away "Welcome to Omaha" so—really, really a rude awakening. And when we were all off of the ramp and out in the water up to our chest with all this equipment and everything on and I recall helping one of the fellows who was being washed back into the surf, saving him, I thought. He was—his head didn't stick up above the water too much. And from there on it was just getting on the beach where there was—we were on the sand, you know, or the shale on the—we'd gotten through the—when we landed we'd gotten through the—lot of the, ah, tetrahedral and mines and everything. And L Company got organized, there was disorganized groups just sitting there by the cliff.
- Jim: You just got under that cliff for protection?
- Francis: Yeah. And there—all I remember was a lieutenant colonel sittin' there on the beach from 116th, that was the 29th Division Regiment, and he wasn't, he wasn't aware of what was going on. I don't know what happened to him, but he—I tried to talk to him into getting his troops, what was left of 'em, together and doing something besides sitting there. But I knew if General Patton had come in, why he'd have those men shot, you know, for sitting there with this—
- Jim: He was just paralyzed with fear?
- Francis: Yeah. That's what I thought. And it can really do things—[laughs]—do things to you.
- Jim: Sure. The noise, tell me about the noise.
- Francis: Well, I remember a lot of the noise was going off towards our ships, you know, the big artillery shells and the—from the German pillboxes they were firing at them and the trenches along, along the slopes of Omaha were filled with Germans firing at us. And I could hear the bullets hissing, you know, as they went by and I could never figure out how they missed us, you know, so many of us. And there were explosions of mortar fire and there were also the sound of our own artillery going that way towards the enemy. So—
- Jim: From the ships?

- Francis: Yeah.
- Jim: Destroyers that came ashore—
- Francis: Yeah, the destroyers just kept right on firing and they were, they were firing just ahead of us as we went up to the slopes.
- Jim: How did you get up the slopes? Through a defile in the spaces along that cliff?
- Francis: We had to go through a water-filled hole—I don't know whether it was a shell hole—I think it was probably put there by the Germans or dug out. And there were mines in that water and our company commander stepped on one and I don't know whether he survived or not; I never found out. From there on we had a few other casualties. We had to cut barbed wire and just feel our way through a mine field.
- Jim: With bangalores?
- Francis: No, we practiced with bangalores over in Europe, but they were too bulky to fool with when you're—
- Jim: Yeah, you're busy doing something else.
- Francis: —when you're being fired at and firing back at somebody else. They wouldn't have been any good, anyway, because the barbed wire and the mines stretched quite vertically, you know, up the—we finally, finally got the aid we needed from the destroyers coming right up as close as they could, knocking out a couple of pillboxes, or bunkers. And I was suffering from concussion so I had a few blank spots in there that I'll never be able to recall. Normally if you have a bad concussion you should be in the hospital. [laughs]
- Jim: Right.
- Francis: But I remember going by one of the bunkers or pillboxes that you see in all the pictures of Omaha. And there were two dead Germans, soldiers, laying in front, and two of 'em wanting to give up, and I just walked right past them. The mission was over for them. And I didn't believe in shooting prisoners anyway or fighting against the prisoners. So I think we gave the signal to the rest of the—rest of the people—
- Jim: Yeah I guess.
- Francis: —yes, waiting on the beach and out on the ships.

- Jim: So L Company led the charge? Up the hill?
- Francis: As far as I'm concerned they did.
- Jim: Like the Rough Riders in Cuba, right?
- Francis: Yeah.
- Jim: Charge up the—
- Francis: I suppose. I don't take credit for anything, I just try to put the pieces together. And I always felt real bad about what we were doing to each other—the killing each other, you know. I always figured man was at work at what he does best, right?
- Jim: When you were leading this, did you have a lieutenant that was with you in leading the company, or he's no longer around?
- Francis: I kinda took over the platoon, you know, going up, I was one of the squad leaders. We had a platoon sergeant who was real good at ducking under cover whenever the going got tough.
- Jim: Oh, I see.
- Francis: And I threatened him one time later on for doing that and I almost—I looked at him as an enemy, you know, more than a—
- Jim: He was a threat to everybody.
- Francis: Yeah, by just leaving a platoon cold and nobody directing what the hell was goin' on.
- We'd had a young lieutenant assigned to our unit and I was with him; we met each other again at the top of the hill. And he was assigned to our unit out of the Air Force, I don't know why. They didn't like him, I guess.
- Jim: Punishment.
- Francis: [Laughs] And I knew the Germans, if they had any planes left, they were gonna come back, come over the beach and start hitting the beach and was out in the air and the water.
- Jim: Once you got to the top of the hill there, were you in a relatively safe position then, because most of the guns are then behind you? Is that right or is that not correct?

- Francis: That's pretty close to right. **[End of Tape One, Side B]** The Germans, when they saw what was happening, they were taking pretty rough casualties from our destroyer fire. And, uh, they had to make a decision; either withdraw—they were running short on ammunition, too—
- Jim: It was a fight to the last.
- Francis: —'cause they fired a lot of bullets early on. And we didn't have any resistance from the top of the hill, farther in for a ways. I told—they probably had resistance right close to our flanks, though. You don't know what's goin' on, on your flanks, you know. I told this lieutenant when the German plane did come over, a bomber, I said, "Don't worry about it, they're gonna drop their load on the beach, below us, or out in the water." And the plane got driven off the beach and we had a lot of aircraft fire going up at it and it came back right across us and dropped its load right in front of us. [laughs] And the lieutenant—it frightened him and I haven't seen him since.
- Jim: He disappeared?
- Francis: Yeah.
- Jim: Where did he go, Francis? I mean—
- Francis: He probably went back to the beach.
- Jim: Where it was safe. [laughs]
- Francis: That's what happens in wars and people who are—if you aren't tuned into what's gonna happen to you, you find out real quick-like, you know. I'd already been wounded, you know, and I didn't really fear the bullets any more.
- Jim: You're saying sooner one's going to get you anyway, so why worry about it?
- Francis: Yeah. I mean that's kind of hard to believe but—it isn't that I wasn't afraid at times; I was. But because when you get so many days on the line you get weary, ya know, and figuring the next one's gonna have your name on it. But I wasn't afraid on D-day. I can't explain it, but nothing bothered me. Maybe it was the concussion that I was suffering from. [laughs]
- Jim: You won a Distinguished Service Cross for that?

- Francis: No, that happened four days later when we were being—the Germans were wanting to overrun us.
- Jim: I would think you would have won the Silver Star for just landing in Normandy and dragging your company up there.
- Francis: They—that's a strange quirk of the events that nobody—nobody got any medals for anything and there were so many heroes there.
- Jim: I was thinking that the people who designate that were probably not around, they sort of bugged out for you—your immediate commanders.
- Francis: We didn't have a lot of medals given to us before that either, and I couldn't figure it out.
- Jim: Oh, really?
- Francis: We ended up with sixteen Medal of Honors in the whole division.
- Jim: In the whole division, yeah.
- Francis: And that's not a lot of Medal of Honors when you spent two and a half years, pert near, in combat, in and out of combat.
- Jim: How long did you sit up there and get regrouped above the beaches?
- Francis: We didn't wait around. We knew where our rendezvous area was. I had half of a platoon and the regular platoon leader—we met at the rendezvous area.
- Jim: He was the lieutenant?
- Francis: Right.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Francis: The reason, the reason that I'm foggy is because I don't remember what happened to the lieutenant. He must have—
- Jim: You mean your lieutenant?
- Francis: Yeah. The other one was attached for a learning experience, I guess.
- Jim: But you had to stop then for the night, or did you keep on moving?

- Francis: We stopped for the night; we were about three miles inland, where we were supposed to rendezvous. And how we found each other, I don't know. [laughs]
- Jim: You're talking about your regiment now?
- Francis: No, I mean the platoon.
- Jim: Oh, the platoon.
- Francis: I had half of a platoon. I had the half that one of the lieutenants was supposed to have.
- Jim: Yeah, OK.
- Francis: But we were on the road and we stayed in a—what was a maybe a small farm—farm area with buildings. And we probably were right next to the Germans, ya know, sleeping on the other side of the buildings. [laughs] But we'd had enough for the day. And then we took off the next day and I think it was three days before we reached our D-Day objective, ten miles inland. We got three miles inland on D-Day. We could have got to the ten miles, I think, but you gotta have flank support if you're gonna go anywhere.
- Jim: Right.
- Francis: And they had to hold us up to protect the beach area, more than anything. So the beach was secured when we—the 18th didn't do it all, I don't want anybody to get that. It was the best regiment in the division, though. I'll always, always go with that. We were never, never humiliated by the Germans and they always respected us, too. As a matter of fact, the 1st Division, the Germans always knew where we were and they didn't want any part of the 1st Division, really. [laughs] We had good leaders, good plans and everything.
- Jim: Sure. So then did you get a little time off there? Or did you keep on moving?
- Francis: We kept on moving. We stayed in action—seems like forever. Some things I don't remember is ever sleeping. When you laid down you used your grenade pack for a pillow, things like that.
- Jim: Did you pick up some vehicles along the way so you could move a little easier or did you have to hoof it again?

- Francis: We stayed on the ground most of the time all the way up until I left the division in Germany. Once or twice we rode tanks. If the tanks needed infantry support they'd give us a ride, until we started to get a little far from the enemy. The tank infantry operation coinciding was a real good experience. They draw fire, you know, tanks do. [laughs] After Normandy—do you want me to go in—
- Jim: Sure. Whatever happened next?
- Francis: Well, the battle at Saint-Lô was next, and that huge bombing of the Saint-Lô area by our Air Force, where they killed a lot of our own people.
- Jim: Including the general.
- Francis: Including General McNair. That was a terrible, terrible experience.
- Jim: Were hedgerows a real problem for you?
- Francis: Yeah, after a while you got—it didn't take me long to know how to move around in 'em or anybody else, but it was just a problem when you ran into hedgerows that had the earth up this high, you know. Some of the hedgerows just had bushes. But I remember one time I could see on the other side of the hedgerow a German soldier pointing his gun at me. And I let him. I'd heard that they were poor marksmen, you know, and I waited until he fired and then I fired.
- Jim: You waited?
- Francis: Yeah. [laughs]
- Jim: That concussion really had you—
- Francis: Sometimes you get kind of reckless when you don't seem to care any more what's going on.
- Jim: Oh my.
- Francis: But those are things that happened in combat. We'd had it mentioned several times that the Germans were poor marksmen and I just wanted to find out, I guess. But I don't think he survived, the guy that was firing at me.
- Jim: You hit him, I assume?
- Francis: I think I did, yeah. Those are things I've always hesitated to talk about.

- Jim: Well, you had to do what you had to do.
- Francis: The day that action took place was the 10th of June, where I was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.
- Jim: Tell me about that now.
- Francis: That was four days inland and our company ran into a little trouble, but somewhere or other, the squad that I had didn't, didn't get the word and we were left alone, just a squad fightin' a lot of Germans. [laughs]
- Jim: More than a squad?
- Francis: Yeah. I figure that a machine gun squad and a mortar squad met harm by the action that I took.
- Jim: Which is what?
- Francis: Well, one of the machine guns was pointed through a hedgerow, just bushes at that point, about a yard from my head. [laughs] And I had—I used Kentucky windage just to aim at where I thought he was, you know, hanging onto the gun. And—I killed him.
- Jim: An M1?
- Francis: Pardon?
- Jim: With your M1?
- Francis: Right. It's the worst experience a person can go through, to see somebody you've been fighting against killed. And there were, there were other casualties on the German side. And citations sometimes ignore other people who were involved in the action. I hesitate to take all the claim for the DSC; I kind of figured it belonged to the squad.
- Jim: But this allowed your platoon to move forward, though, getting rid of that gun?
- Francis: Umm, actually we set the Germans back and we could've taken their position plus a vehicle or two and captured maybe thirty German soldiers. But being left there alone, a runner from the company came up to us and told us to pull back to the company. We didn't know where the hell the company was or why they'd left my squad and I by ourselves. Later on it was put in the citation that I got that we, we held the flank while the rest of the company withdrew. Well, I suppose we did, but I didn't know we were doing that. [laughs]

- Jim: You didn't know it at the time, huh?
- Francis: We were just trying to survive, really. But we lost some casualties there, too. Not just out of our platoon, but some of the other platoons.
- Jim: Did you go into Saint-Lô then or not, or just went around it?
- Francis: We walked through Saint-Lô, but there wasn't a building intact. I don't know how much responsibility we had for doing that; probably our artillery and the Air Force just made a mess of the place. The Saint-Lô - Mortain part of the battle came maybe six weeks after we were into where we started to break out away from the beach area. Far enough where we could get into France a ways. And from there on, I guess, during that time Patton had taken charge of another Army, the Third Army, and he moved across France and the First Army under Bradley—later on he was a group commander—we moved north towards Paris.
- Jim: The going went a little easier by this time? The Germans were falling back?
- Francis: Yeah, we ran into some real tough battles, though. Breakin' out of the Normandy thing was a battle. And I'd had an attack of malaria come on somewhere during France and my temperature was up to a hundred and six again.
- Jim: That's just like in Sicily.
- Francis: I think it was from all the stress and strain and everything. So I spent a week or ten days in the field hospital, and then I went back and joined my unit. They were northeast of Paris, where I rejoined them.
- Jim: You went back to your L Company?
- Francis: Yeah.
- Jim: Oh my goodness.
- Francis: And actually I hitchhiked right into Paris and got there on my birthday, the 24th of August.
- Jim: That was right before they took the city officially?
- Francis: I'm not sure that there—General LeClerc, I'd met him over in Africa. We met a lot of the—

- Jim: Oh my goodness.
- Francis: —a lot of the French soldiers and General Giraud and Gerard?? and General De Gaulle. They were all enemies. DeGaulle especially was enemies of—
- Jim: Everybody's an enemy of his.
- Francis: Yeah. I thought later on he probably had Gerard and Giraud assassinated, which they were. [laughs] Anyway, that's been—I spent a night or—
- Jim: You were in Paris by yourself on the 24th?
- Francis: Yeah.
- Jim: That's before, the day before the French walked in.
- Francis: Right. Actually I went AWOL from the hospital to go back to my unit.
- Jim: I was going to say, there were a lot of Germans still there.
- Francis: If they were, they didn't show any resistance.
- Jim: So you told all the girls that you were liberating Paris by yourself, right?
- Francis: No, I didn't know I was doing anything except that I wanted to see Paris. [laughs]
- Jim: Oh, I see.
- Francis: But somehow or other I got to a replacement depot where you could go back to your unit—get transportation. We'd had word from the regimental commander if you get in trouble when you're back in the rear, you know, on leave or in the hospital or something, that he'd always see that that wasn't gonna stay on your record, so if I was AWOL a day or two, why it never appeared on my record.
- Jim: So did you find a place to drink some wine or get something to eat in Paris?
- Francis: There was a nightclub; they were celebrating. I'm not sure whether it was the 24th or the 25th that LeClerc went in; I've always thought it was the 24th.
- Jim: The 25th is the official day.

- Francis: So I got there a day after my birthday. And it was one of the biggest celebrations that I ever—
- Jim: That would be the 25th; everybody went nuts.
- Francis: Yeah. [laughs] Later on I learned that Lily Pons was from France, and she—I don't know how long after the liberation of Paris that she sang the French national anthem.
- Jim: *La Marseillaise*.
- Francis: *La Marseillaise*. So I thought I had something in common with Lily Pons; I really liked her.
- Jim: Did you have a chance to talk to her?
- Francis: No. No, I never did. I wanted to—after she gave up on the opera tour she made her home in Dallas, Texas. You always put off writing a letter to somebody that you really should have, you know, and she died real sudden. I think she was sixty-seven or something like that. But she dominated the opera for thirty years, and a lot of people don't pay any attention to that.
- Jim: Yes. I remember hearing her sing.
- Francis: I kinda figured it was strange that I should be an infantryman and take an interest in somebody that belonged to the opera. [laughs]
- But anyway I got back to my unit through the replacement depot and I didn't hear anything about me leaving the hospital a couple days early, anyway. So they probably didn't even know I was gone.
- I got back to the replacement depot and it took a couple of days to go—before transportation would be available, so another fellow and I went into a small town nearby and we were the liberators of that town; they said we were the first two Americans they'd seen. The Germans had just left town.
- Jim: What town was that, or don't you remember?
- Francis: Yeah, it was Jeumont, Jeumont on the Marpent, I think—north. I think it was right on the Belgian border actually; it might have been in Belgium rather than in France. [Jeumont is in France]
- So, we—they fed us, gave us wine, we stayed overnight and then went back to the replacement depot. And I got back to my outfit at Aachen in time for the battle of Aachen. We'd—well, it was before that actually, we

hadn't gone through the Siegfried Line yet. I joined them before we went through the Siegfried Line. And I was on a patrol—we were right into Stolburg; that was right on the Siegfried Line. The Germans had pillboxes all over the town, camouflaged as drug stores, you know, or whatever.

Jim: Drug stores?

Francis: Corner drug stores. We didn't go any farther. During the night they decided they'd try to puncture the line somewhere else, which happened. Aachen was a tough nut to handle.

Jim: Continued fighting around there?

Francis: Yeah. I had been wounded on the 10th of June, that was the day I got the DSC. That wasn't a life-threatening wound or anything, my hand or somewhere, from shrapnel. And then on the 16th and 21st of October I was wounded at, around Aachen.

Jim: That's the third time now?

Francis: Third and fourth.

Jim: The fourth time. You seem to attract a lot of attention.

Francis: Yeah. [laughs] I got into Germany anyway, and—

Jim: These were shrapnel wounds that were not significant?

Francis: The last wounds were shrapnel wounds in my left knee and I couldn't walk without causing bleeding, you know. So they had to stabilize that.

Jim: They had to take you off the line?

Francis: Yeah, I guess. From there, I got in an ambulance—around Aachen, a lot of stuff were kinda foggy to me because of concussion, you know. We were doing hand-to-hand combat almost.

Jim: Really?

Francis: One side of the hill, we'd crest from one side to the other. And the Germans—we had a three hour truce with the Germans and they brought out one of our captured halftracks into our area to pick up their dead and wounded. We weren't right in the city of Aachen, we were on the outskirts, near Crucifix Hill. Aachen used to be the seat of the Catholic Church when it belonged to France. The French call it Aix-La-Chapelle.

And that was a bloody, bloody week or two there in that area, mud up to our knees almost. It was almost World War I-like.

Jim: Being in trenches?

Francis: No, the mud and the trees, all stripped of their limbs, you know, shredded, and I wrote a poem about that. It was in on Memorial—Memorial Day in the Capitol Times.

Jim: Oh, that's interesting.

Francis: Five or six stanzas of poem.

Jim: Oh.

Francis: I thought it was pretty good. Let's see—oh, while we were situated there the Germans had—German forces occupied a hospital that had red crosses on it and we could look down at it from our hillside. They were directing what was going on, I'm sure of that, for, to the Germans on the other side of the hill.

Jim: When you were wounded there, you couldn't stay on the line, they sent you back?

Francis: Right.

Jim: Did you ever rejoin your outfit after that?

Francis: No, I got back to the hospital in Paris and the word was that that's where Rommel had spent a few days when he almost got killed, when our bombing took place.

Jim: Now your left knee, what did they do about that?

Francis: They extracted the shrapnel and just bandaged it up.

Jim: It didn't require any more attention than that?

Francis: No. Prior to leaving Aachen though, at this Red Cross—what we thought was a hospital, it probably was—I counted thirty-three German soldiers with their hands up wanting to come in and give up. So I had the tank destroyer that was right near us just cover me as I went out with a white handkerchief. I left my rifle behind. And I brought thirty of 'em back in. Three changed their mind and took off around the buildings. They may have been safer coming in with me than staying where they were. [laughs] So I took thirty prisoners.

Jim: That's nice.

Francis: The next night—or, it was the same night, I think it was—anyway, the night before or that night, we were having a problem securing a pillbox right near our area. And I went out and led a squad and we tried to holler in through the vent, you know, down to the Germans on top of the pillbox to come out with their hands up. I knew how to say “*Hände hoch*” and “*Macht schnell*.” But they come out but one of them fired at me; I was down off the top of the pillbox and right at the corner. He almost hit me with a round of rifle fire. So I figured we could have burned them out with gasoline, but I didn't want to do that. So I figured well, maybe tomorrow morning they'll change their mind, and sure enough they—nine of 'em came out of the pillbox and gave up.

And that was only a night or two later where a field grade officer came in; hell he might have been the commander of Aachen, German troops in Aachen, for all I know. I'd only had four hours' sleep in four days so I was asleep on my feet almost. And he surrendered—I don't know how many troops he had with him—but he surrendered to me.

Jim: To you?

Francis: Yeah.

Jim: How did he pick you? Where you the first guy they ran into?

Francis: They knew it was a good place to come to if you wanted to surrender, I guess.

Jim: Well, this is just before you got wounded the last time?

Francis: Yeah.

Jim: Okay. So how many prisoners was your bag up to now?

Francis: I figure that—

Jim: A hundred?

Francis: —there wasn't any—anyway, I just accepted his surrender and had some of the men in my charge escort him back to the Company CP.

Jim: What grade was he—I forgot—a colonel?

- Francis: I figure he had to be a lieutenant colonel, a field grade officer. I don't—I didn't count how many Germans he had with him. There was a lot of people there, though. And among them were one or two of our own wounded. So I could have—if I would have hung around maybe another day or two, I would have found out how many—how many prisoners I took. But—
- Jim: What were you doing when you got your last wound in the knee?
- Francis: I was standing near the, near the—on the crest of the hill—not far from overlooking the German position. There was a no-man's land between us, of course. And a shell got lobbed in and we both got—
- Jim: Mortar?
- Francis: Yeah, I think it was a mortar or something. So that was the end of my—**[End of Tape Two, Side A]**—tour of duty. I'd went out on patrol, by myself, in that area, got near Düren and even down towards the Hürtgen Forest. One of our flyers—and later on I found out that it was probably Colonel Gabreski, the well-decorated pilot, from Pennsylvania.
- Jim: Oh, yeah.
- Francis: Because it was on—about that day I was out in the area just, you know, reconnoitering in no-man's land. And he'd landed right closer to me than to the Germans, but he went the other way. I waved for him to come in. His plane hit a tree and came to a stop.
- Jim: He laid down, but what happened?
- Francis: Yeah, he probably—he was disoriented, I suppose, and couldn't tell whether I was—
- Jim: You could have saved him.
- Francis: —friend or foe. He spent a little time in prison camp—
- Jim: Prison Camp.
- Francis: —not too long, though, I guess.
- Jim: So it was getting near the end now?
- Francis: Yeah. Well, six months, maybe. That's—those are pieces that I've put together over the years and you forget a lot of stuff.

- Jim: You remember a lot, you did very well. So they carted you back; did you stay in Paris now?
- Francis: Not too long, maybe a couple of weeks. And then they put together a group of patients and took a train ride to the coast.
- Jim: Lucky Strike?
- Francis: Probably Le Havre or—
- Jim: Well, that's where that Lucky Strike Camp was where you staged before they put you on a ship.
- Francis: Yeah. And there I was in a hospital near Exeter in South England, I think.
- Jim: Oh, you went to England?
- Francis: Yeah. And I told them, "Either send me back to my unit or send me home." I was getting tired of laying around. So Christmas Eve of '44 I got on a boat and came back home.
- Jim: You were discharged rather promptly then? You got—you didn't have to spend any time in a hospital then?
- Francis: Yeah, I spent some time at Percy Jones Hospital in Battle Creek, Michigan.
- Jim: For what?
- Francis: I guess just to—I don't know whether they had to—
- Jim: Fatten you up before your folks saw you?
- Francis: [laughs] I suppose. I don't know whether they were following up on any concussion injuries. I mean, anybody that went through two and a half years, pert near, of in and out of combat suffered from concussion once or twice, or maybe ten times. [laughs] And Normandy was really bad. That's why there are blank spots in my memory.
- Jim: You remember a lot; I think that's very good. After you were in the hospital in the United States, then you were sent to Sheridan and then home?
- Francis: Well, they gave us a few days down in Miami Beach from—I guess it was a custom to give as many returning servicemen as possible a trip to Miami Beach. But they could just as well have sent me right home.

- Jim: I'm sure by that time you want to go home.
- Francis: Yeah. So from Miami Beach I went to Fort Sheridan on the 22nd of June of '45. I was—
- Jim: Did your folks know that you were injured as things went on? Did they keep track of the things, or were they in the dark part of the time?
- Francis: Yeah, I wrote to my mother. My father died in April of '44 so he didn't know that I'd been in D-Day or anything else. He—**[Interruption in the tape]**—especially if you were a farmer inhaling, oh, fumes from wheat harvesting, you know, and the dirt and everything.
- Jim: So then after you got out of the service, did you use your GI Bill?
- Francis: Not until 1975 or '76.
- Jim: Oh, really. What did you do right after you got out of service?
- Francis: I stayed out until January of—
- Jim: '46?
- Francis: —'47.
- Jim: '47?
- Francis: Yeah.
- Jim: Oh, what kind of duty did they give you?
- Francis: When I came back in they were—they were real generous. They made me a corporal again. [Jim laughs] I was out—I was out too long to get my old rank back. [laugh] Of —
- Jim: I can't believe it.
- Francis: —staff sergeant. I never could figure out, here with all of the—I don't brag about it, but here was a guy with a lot of medals and time in combat and everything and they were generous enough to give me a corporal's rating.
- Jim: That's not fair.

- Francis: But that's the way the Army operates. I had some bad times in the Army after that with—
- Jim: Bad times? The couple of years that you had left, do you mean, in service?
- Francis: I retired on 1 August—1 August 1962. After a little over—'62, yeah—
- Jim: Oh!
- Francis: —after a little more than twenty years. When I went back in on the twentieth of January of 1947, I figured I was gonna make it a career, which I did. But—
- Jim: What did they have you doing then?
- Francis: Well, they sent me to Korea right away. They couldn't think of any better place. I'd spent eight and a half months in Korea when they sent me back to the States to go to OCS, and that turned out to be a failure.
- Jim: What did you do in Korea? When did you go there exactly?
- Francis: It was May of 1948. I left there in March—
- Jim: '48?
- Francis: May of '47, and I left there in March of '48.
- Jim: Oh, this all was before the war?
- Francis: Well, this was after the war.
- Jim: Then it wouldn't be '48. The war in Korea began in '50.
- Francis: Yeah I know. But I was there in '47 and—
- Jim: That's what I say, it was before the war.
- Francis: Oh, I see what you're saying.
- Jim: So what was your duty there, in Korea?
- Francis: I was a clerk for a graves registration detachment for awhile.
- Jim: But the Army didn't have many people over there at that time.
- Francis: No, they were actually getting ready to clear out of there; in '49 they did.

- Jim: Yeah.
- Francis: And then they had to come back in the hard way.
- Jim: Right.
- Francis: But they were—we saw people hanging from telephone poles, you know. The North and the South backed by the Russians were fighting each other then.
- Jim: In other words, you walked into a political war?
- Francis: I guess so.
- Jim: Well, I don't know, what else would you call it? Why were they hanging people?
- Francis: Anything that the Russians had to do was political and whatever else you want to call it. [laughs] They were our enemy more than the Germans, I always thought. Anyway, I didn't get to be an officer and I—
- Jim: But they sent you back after a year there to go to OCS?
- Francis: Yeah, after eight and a half months in Korea I came back to the US to go to OCS.
- Jim: Where was that?
- Francis: Fort Riley, Kansas.
- Jim: Okay, and that didn't work out?
- Francis: Pardon, no. I've written about that and I'm waiting for the Army to—I've just gotten around to putting it all together.
- Jim: Oh, I see. But what was the problem with OCS?
- Francis: The problem was me, I guess. I just—I'd lost my stamina and dedication, whatever else you want to—I ran into a *Mickey Finn* in Sacramento and it damn near killed me.
- Jim: Oh, really.
- Francis: And that just tore me apart physically and psychologically. When you come back from a place like Korea, you know, and you figure you have a

cab driver, tell him to take to take you to downtown Sacramento, you know, from the air base outside, you figure—you figure he's gonna let you off in the best part of town. Instead I got off in the sleazy neighborhood and I damn near died from whatever was in my drink.

Jim: Did they want to rob you? Is that the reason they gave you that?

Francis: Yeah. They robbed me of around ninety dollars—ninety-five, maybe. I just cashed a hundred dollar money order. But what, what destroyed my faith in things was the fact that the police were involved in it. And the cab driver and the woman coming and sitting in your booth when you didn't invite her, you know—

Jim: It was a set-up from the start.

Francis: Yeah. Yeah, they knew I was pretty good sucker bait. Then to end up in a, in a—what appeared to be a warehouse area, and the police—a squad car nearby with two police officers. I tried to get them to arrest the cab driver and the woman, but they arrested me for disturbing the peace. [laughs]

Jim: Oh my goodness.

Francis: The woman had my wallet when I came to. I had passed out and came to a little bit in the cab and she was giving the cab driver a five dollar bill and she said there wasn't anything else left in the wallet. So the police let them go and I was probably telling the police what I thought of them. And they took me to the police station.

And the next day, I suppose, I was given tickets to go on my way, though I was sicker than the devil. I couldn't even stand up by myself. They put me on a train to—two MPs I think was helping them—put me on a train to Fort Riley.

And when I got there I didn't feel well; took a long time to recover anyway. I asked to drop out and go back to the next class, but I was turned down.

After being in Junction City, Kansas, right outside of Fort Riley, I had a couple of beers and decided I'd go back to camp, and amnesia set in. Whatever was in that drink, even a little amount of alcohol would set off strange things with your brain, I guess. So I didn't know what happened until I got to—was coming into St. Louis, Missouri on a train. Then, from there on, I could recall—I didn't know what my reason was for being on this train, or journey or anything, but I could recall things that happened after that, you know, like hitchhiking to Alexandria, Louisiana where I was with the 32nd Division previously, then over to San Antonio where I

had re-enlisted in 1947 at Fort Sam Houston. And I was staying at a dollar a night rooming house in San Antonio, and it finally hit me that I belonged to the Army and was absent from OCS; that all came back to me. So I ended up getting back to Fort Riley, but it was a terrible, terrible thing to go through, you know. I was court-martialed.

Jim: I'm sure.

Francis: I wasn't, I wasn't in any shape to defend myself—

Jim: I bet.

Francis: —from the court-martial. It took a lot of time, years, to get over that and it still—

Jim: What was your punishment?

Francis: I was reduced to the lowest rank, which was Private E2 at that time— Private E1 was a recruit—and fined fifty dollars.

When I got to Fort Riley, anybody that wasn't a staff sergeant, they promoted you to staff sergeant, so I was promoted from corporal to staff sergeant there and they took that away. And then I was assigned to Fort Benning, Georgia later on and I finished out my tour of enlistment there. While there I had written down that I entertained thoughts of going back to Sacramento to take care of some unfinished business. I really wanted to get those people that made a mess of my life. And if I hadn't met my future wife, I probably would have, probably would have ended up in—

Jim: In jail; it would have killed you.

Francis: Yeah, I probably would have ended up on Alcatraz, at least, for awhile, until they moved the people out of there, up to Washington.

Jim: So you met this girl and she settled you down?

Francis: Yeah, I guess it was probably the best thing that ever happened to me.

Jim: So you were discharged from the service shortly thereafter and came home?

Francis: Yeah, but I re-enlisted again; see, that was—that was '49 when I got discharged.

Jim: Oh, I see.

Francis: So I re-enlisted a couple more times until 1 August of '62, when I retired.

Jim: What was your duty during that last interval, then? The last twelve years.

Francis: I was—I had changed from infantry, but I couldn't get away from an infantry outfit for some reason or other. I kinda liked it.

Jim: Were you still in the 1st Division?

Francis: No, I was in several different outfits and even on reserve?? component duty at ROTC unit.

Jim: Oh, I see.

Francis: But I ended up with the 4th Infantry Division at Fort Lewis, Washington and I was with the 124th Signal Battalion. I was the Battalion Personnel Sergeant, the most stressful job in the Army. [laugh] You had to be a chaplain, a mother, and a father, and—

Jim: Dealing with folks like you, am I right? [laughs]

Francis: Yeah. [laugh] So it's sort of strange. I started out with the 124th Signal—or the 124th Quartermaster Battalion, ended up with the 124th Signal Battalion, different outfits.

Jim: Sure. But you were married and settled down by this time and behaving yourself?

Francis: Yeah, we have six children. The oldest one's my stepdaughter. And they're all gainfully employed.

Jim: And what about you? How did you—when you back to civilian life, what did you do to live with?

Francis: On \$175 dollars a month that the Army paid me in retirement. I ended up getting a job with Holmes Tire and Supply out here in Syene Road.

Jim: Oh, really.

Francis: Yeah, it was for an outfit out of Columbus—or out of Dayton, Ohio that rented Holmes facilities. Making—capping, or putting recaps on tires.

Jim: Recaps, that's it.

Francis: I was with them for maybe four or five months and I got a job with the city, Madison Public Library.

Jim: At the library?

Francis: Yeah. So I stayed with the library twenty-one years.

Jim: Oh, my goodness.

Francis: Retired in February of '86.

Jim: Oh, that was a nice job.

Francis: Yeah. I liked it, all that material there. It was actually a cheap education.

Jim: You got a lot of reading done.

Francis: Yeah, a lot of pictures, too, art.

Jim: Did you join any veterans' groups?

Francis: Yeah, I belong to the Disabled American Veterans. I'm a permanent member.

Jim: Right. Now that's another thing, I'll get into that. But the DAV was the only group you joined?

Francis: The only one that I—I thought about the American Legion, but they didn't go to bat for me when I was needing their assistance in filing a claim.

Jim: And the VFW didn't have any interest for you?

Francis: Not really. I didn't really care about belonging to anything.

Jim: How about the 1st Division, they must have had some stuff? I'm sure they meet on a regular basis.

Francis: Yeah, but I've never gone to a reunion—

Jim: Oh my.

Francis: —and when I—

Jim: They don't send you their magazine? I'm sure they have a publication.

Francis: They probably do. Fort Riley has probably got a whole library of them.

Jim: That's where the headquarters is. Yeah.

- Francis: I never got back. I always felt kinda—kinda ashamed about my being AWOL from OCS of all places.
- Jim: I know, but you were a young kid.
- Francis: Actually I—the letter I’ve written—I’ll show it to you someday if you want to read it. I wrote it to President Clinton. I didn’t want to ask the Army for anything. I want Clinton, if he will, to order the Army to—
- Jim: Do what?
- Francis: —change those ten days AWOL to ten days sick leave. And there’s no reason why they shouldn’t do that and it should have been done years ago.
- Jim: Right.
- Francis: Because I was sick. You can’t get any sicker than I was.
- Jim: Right. Now, how about your malaria? When was the last time that flared up?
- Francis: It came back a couple of times, but not very severe. I could tell the onset, you know.
- Jim: Chills and fever.
- Francis: And I had a few—not atabrine, but quinine.
- Jim: Chloroquine, chloroquine—white tablet.
- Francis: Yeah. So actually I haven’t been troubled with it. I hesitated to be a blood donor, though, because of the malaria.
- Jim: Oh yeah, you mustn’t do that. Tell me about your disability now. How did you get along with the Veteran’s Administration with your disabilities?
- Francis: I’m seventy percent.
- Jim: Based on what primarily, Francis?
- Francis: Three disc operations and—
- Jim: Disc operations?
- Francis: Yeah, I’ve had three ruptured disc operations.

Jim: How does that associate with being in the service?

Francis: Two of them happened when I was in the service. When I was lifting a footlocker, something snapped.

Jim: Just after you came back from Europe?

Francis: Yeah, 1948 was the first time. And I got over what was bothering me—a slipped disc, I guess, went back in place. And then in 1953, as best as I can remember, I had surgery at Walter Reed for a ruptured disc that wouldn't go back in place; and then in 1959 again at Walter Reed, then 1984 right here at St. Mary's for another, all in the same area.

Jim: Well, at seventy percent, that's pretty good.

Francis: Yeah, I think it should be a hundred percent. I'm legally blind. I've gotta feel my way around when I'm up close. When—I can see you plain enough, but if you're standing right near me I wouldn't be able to—
[Conversation abruptly ends]

[End of Interview]