

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DONALD C. PECHACEK
Ranger, Army, World War II.

1994

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Pechacek, Donald C., (1921-1998). Oral History Interview, 1994.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 85 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Donald C. Pechacek, a Trimbell, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in the 2nd Ranger Battalion in Europe during World War II. Pechacek speaks of growing up on a farm during the Great Depression and recalls hearing about the attack on Pearl Harbor. He tells of registering and volunteering for the draft, passing through Fort Sheridan (Illinois), basic training at Camp Livingston (Louisiana), and assignment to the 109th Regiment of the 28th Infantry Division. He explains he was a good shot. Pechacek comments on other people from his area who enlisted at the same time and enjoying the adventure of serving in the Army. He recalls the men he trained with being from all over the country but generally from poorer, less-educated families. Sent to Carrabelle (Florida), he talks about some men who drowned in a storm during amphibious training. Pechacek discusses hitting rough weather while crossing the Atlantic aboard a troop ship, landing in Cardiff (Wales), and marching to Island Farm Camp. He speaks about volunteering for the Rangers, the roughness of the training, and the high drop out rate. Pechacek mentions he wanted to join the Rangers because, since the 28th Division was run by the Pennsylvania National Guard, if you weren't a Pennsylvania boy you weren't in the clique. He discusses socializing with the British and meeting his future wife. Pechacek touches on returning to Europe in the 1960s and having forgotten most of the place names he'd been to. He details training on cliffs in Dover, boarding the H.M.S. Ben Machree for the invasion of France, being told the D-Day invasion was cancelled indefinitely, and the morale aboard ship when they were told the next day to prepare for landing. Pechacek states the D-Day landing was the only time he was ever scared. After going ashore in landing craft, he talks about being one of the first people to reach the top of the cliff at Pointe du Hoc, advancing alone to his assigned target, and backtracking to rejoin his unit. He tells of firing over the heads of an American patrol, having a sprained ankle, and making slower progress than planned for. After passing through Grandcamp and Sainte-Mere-Eglise, Pechacek speaks of hauling German prisoners by truck to the beaches. He discusses fighting at Brest for twenty-one days. Pechacek explains having difficulties working with the French Forces of the Interior, tells of working with them to capture Bayonne (France), and gives examples of the strike-and-run tactics his unit used. At Castle Hill 400 in Bergstein (Germany), he talks about being wounded by shrapnel, getting help from a buddy to an aid station, being in a French hospital for five weeks, and missing the Battle of the Bulge. Returned to his unit, Pechacek discusses crossing the Rhine with the 102nd Cavalry, encountering little resistance after three weeks, and witnessing Buchenwald concentration camp. He portrays the destruction he saw of Germany's cities and infrastructure, being in Pilsen (Czechoslovakia) on V-E Day, bringing in German civilians for interrogation, and the general attitude of the German people. Pechacek comments on his unit's refusal to accept surrendering Germans, partly out of retaliation for the Malmedy massacre. On April 27th, near the end of the war, he tells of his unit being led into a German ambush from which they were lucky to escape.

After V-E Day, he talks about staying in apartments in Pilsen until an incident caused his unit to get kicked out, and afterwards spending the summer in pup tents in Dobřany, training for the invasion of Japan. After the war in Japan ended, Pechacek tells of being shipped back to the States, being discharged, and getting a job right away. He tells of asking his wife to marry him by letter, working with immigration employees to have her qualified as a war bride and admitted to the country, and getting married the day after she flew in. He talks about being unable to get a high-enough GI Bill loan for farmland, being encouraged by a veterans service officer to make a health claim, getting a ten percent disability pension, and using the VA hospital in Minneapolis. Pechacek mentions being an inactive member of the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Disabled American Veterans, and he discusses attending Ranger Battalion Association reunions.

Biographical Sketch:

Pechacek (1921-1998) served in the Army from 1942 to 1945. He was born on a farm in the Town of River Falls (Wisconsin) and returned to farming after the war, as well as carrying mail for twenty-four years. In 1947 he married Elizabeth, a Welsh woman whom he'd met while in the Army. Pechacek settled in Ellsworth (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1994
Transcribed by Joanna D. Glen, WDVA staff, 1997
Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2011
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

Mark: Today's date is December 8, 1994. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview with Mr. Donald Pechacek, a veteran of World War II, a U.S. Army Ranger on D-Day.

Good morning, and good morning to Mrs. Pechacek, as well. Perhaps you could just start by telling me a little bit about where you were born and a little bit about your upbringing.

Don: Well, I was born in what would be River Falls Township but we'll call it Trimbell; that's the nearest little place to where I was born. I grew up there and I went through the eighth grade of school, is all I ever went to. I lived on a farm all my life. I have never, to this day, never lived more than five miles from where I was born. I still live in the same area. I've lived on four different farms. I've owned four different farms in that area there. I own one now, a hundred and twenty acres where we live on. Aside from that I just—we got eight children. I married a gal from England, from Wales, that I met when I was in the 28th Division. I was in Wales and I met her when I was there, and then she came over in 1947 and we were married on the 17th of July.

Mark: I'll ask some questions about that. You were born in 1921, so I'm sure you remember the Depression.

Don: Oh, very well. Yeah.

Mark: How did the Depression affect you and your family on the farm?

Don: Well, if we hadn't had a big garden we'd have starved to death, I suppose. There was just no money. I remember when I was going to school and even when I graduated from the eighth grade I worked for fifty cents a day on a truck garden to get a few bucks, that was all.

Mark: On a what?

Don: On a truck garden.

Mark: A truck garden?

Don: Yeah, where they grew fruits and vegetables. I worked there for that guy for fifty cents a day; that's what I got. And then later on when I did go to work in 1935, I think it was, I started working for Havilands, then I got twenty-five dollars a month, and the most I ever made before I went to the Army was twenty-four dollars a week. I worked on the railroad at fifty cents an hour for forty-eight hours; there was no overtime above forty. For forty-eight hours you

got fifty cents an hour, twenty-four dollars a week. The most money I ever made. [laughs]

Mark: So Army life was pretty rich for you, then?

Don: Actually, when I went to the Army why there was no big cut in pay because I got my clothes and everything and I didn't have to buy them, so I suppose it was about the same—about fifty dollars a month.

Mark: When did you come to own your own farm? Was it after the war?

Don: After the war, yeah. When Peg and I were married, about a year, year and a half after we got married we bought a little farm, twenty acres. That was the first one, then I bought a hundred and sixty over on County J, then I bought a two forty up towards Ellsworth, but they're all in the Trimbell Township. A township is thirty-four square miles; it was all in this same township. I've never been over five miles from there. But now I've sold it all. I have a hundred and twenty acres now.

Mark: OK. We'll come back to that. As we were discussing earlier, you don't have any particular recollection about the invasion of Poland in 1939?

Don: No, I don't.

Mark: But do you remember Pearl Harbor?

Don: Oh, yeah, I remember Pearl Harbor very vividly, of course. You can't ever forget that.

Mark: Do you remember what you thought? Do you remember where you were and what you thought?

Don: Well, I remember—as far as I can remember it was a Sunday morning, or probably sometime around noon when we heard that news because I was going with a girlfriend and when I went down to get her, why they'd already heard it on the radio, too. And it was just a strange feeling. My mother, she started to cry, and—it was just—they knew from experience that there would be a war. Well, you had to know then that we were gonna be in a war, that was for sure.

Mark: And as a young, nineteen or twenty-year-old guy, did you think you were going to be involved in the war?

Don: Oh, yeah, I knew I was going. Yeah, I knew I would and then when—see, I didn't have to register for the draft. It was twenty-one to forty-five, I believe, at that time, and then in the summer, why they dropped it down to twenty. I know

in June I registered. I had to register in June, but my older brother, he was registered for the draft because he was a year and a half years older than I was. And I just knew that if he had to go to the Army before I did it would kill him, so I volunteered to go. I didn't enlist, I went up to the draft board in August and I told them I wanted to go. In fact, there was a couple of guys from my hometown or from my area that were going, Gus and Johnny Crockhill[?], and I wanted to get in and go with them, but regulations forbid me—they drafting me. I don't know how they—they had to give me so much notice before I could go legally, you know, so then I didn't go until the next bunch. They went in August and I went in September.

Mark: So you actually went into the service, then, in September of '42?

Don: September of '42, the 12th of September, yeah.

Mark: Perhaps you could describe the induction process. Where did you get the physical and the haircut and where did you train?

Don: We went to Milwaukee, you go to Milwaukee from Ellsworth on a bus and you go down there and you take your physical and then you're sworn into the Army, I believe, right there. I don't really remember that part, when I was actually sworn in, but I believe it was—I know it was the 12th of September and that's when I had the physical, then they send you home for two weeks, then you get on a train and we went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois. Then you go in there and they give you all the B.S., and pretty soon we ended up in Camp Livingston, Louisiana.

Mark: What sort of B.S.? Just all the discipline?

Don: Yeah. Well, these old sergeants they get out there and they make you stand at attention or tell you how to stand at attention, you're gonna get your clothes, and you know. I don't suppose I just exactly remember it, but it was kind of fun [laughs], because it was a new experience for me. I had never been twenty-five miles from home in my life before I went into the Army, so it was a great experience. And I don't know how long it took, but it wasn't too many—we weren't in Fort Sheridan very long. I'd say we were only there three or four days, but I don't really remember that. We ended up in Camp Livingston, Louisiana and then I was part of the 28th Division of—for six weeks of basic training. We got six weeks of basic training and then—

Mark: What sort of basic training did you do? Is this handling the weapons, discipline and—

Don: Well, yeah, probably handling the weapons. I don't think we went on a firing range, but I can't remember when we first went on a firing range, but I don't

think we did in basic training. I think it was just marching and your steps and stuff like that. And running ya around and making it miserable, givin' ya shots and stuff like that. I just don't recall, because I enjoyed it, see? It was fun to me. It was a new way of life to me entirely and I didn't mind it. I know you'd catch hell if your toothbrush or your shaving brush wasn't right and have to have your things all decked here out a certain way and stuff like that. And it was just—like I say, it was just, to me, a great thing. I just loved it. [laughs]

Mark: Did you want to go into the Infantry? Is that what you wanted to do?

Don: Well, I don't think I was ever given a choice, really, about going in, in the Infantry. I had no education and therefore, I suppose, that's why I was put in the Infantry. I don't know. I never did know that. It didn't make no difference to me, it was just the Army as far as I was concerned. And I always loved to shoot a gun; I was always a goddamned good shot.

Mark: Before you went in the service?

Don: Yeah. And after I got in the service I could take any weapon there was. Once I learned to be in the military—that's why I got to be in the Rangers, by the way, is because I was such a good shot. But I could take anything, I could just "bing" and I hit it. [laughs]

Mark: You sort of had a knack for it, I guess.

Don: Yeah. Well, I grew up with guns, you know; I mean, what the hell. See, a lot of guys—and they would tell you, I know I had guys even tell me, noncoms and stuff, that they wished, that they think they could teach you better if you've never shot a gun, you know, because they make you get the belt on your arm and your arm's gotta be so, and stuff like that, and somebody that's used to shooting a gun don't like to do that. But I didn't mind it. [laughs] I just knew I could learn to shoot it and I did.

Mark: So you spent about six weeks at Camp Livingston?

Don: Oh, no. I was there a lot longer than that, but I was assigned to the 28th Division then after six weeks of basic. We took six weeks of basic, I think they called it a cadre or something like that, and then I was assigned to the 28th, Company G of the 109th, and some guys went to the 112th, 110th and some guys went to the Engineers, but I went to the Company G of the 109th, that's where I went to.

Mark: I see. And that happened to be based at Camp Livingston?

Don: Yeah. The 28th Division was based at Camp Livingston, Louisiana at that time.

- Mark: Now, you and Goldie remain friends?
- Don: Oh, yeah.
- Mark: Did you go into service together?
- Don: We went to service the same day, yeah.
- Mark: Was that the first time you ever met?
- Don: Oh, no, no. No. I knew Goldie before—Yeah, I knew who he was before I went to service. He's a little older than I am and he was a school teacher, but I knew him and stuff like that.
- Mark: I see. Was that unusual to go into the service with someone you grew up with, someone from your hometown? Were there other people from your area in Wisconsin?
- Don: Oh, yeah. There was thirty some of us went that day. They were all from Pierce County. Don't get me wrong, but a lot of them I would have never known because they come from say, like Elmwood or Prescott or fifteen or twenty miles from where I lived. But there were several of them from the Ellsworth area went, and I can't remember just who. I know one guy that went in with me, his name was Taflin, and he was killed in the 28th Division. He went in the same day I did too. But I don't recall who all went in, but I know there was a whole bunch of us and we got on this bus, we went down there, and you get to know, well "This is Joe Johnson" and stuff like that, but that's all I knew of him. I didn't know where they were from or anything like that.
- Mark: Did you get off the post much when you were in Louisiana? Did you get any break to go into town and see a movie or anything?
- Don: Probably when we were in basic training, maybe we got downtown twice to Alexandria, Louisiana, which was about fifteen miles, and that's why you didn't get there very often because you don't have transportation or anything like that, so how the hell you gonna get there, you know? They brung a truck in there for—had to go in at 8 o'clock and come back at 10:30, so nobody wants to go. But I did get down there twice, I think, into Alexandria, Louisiana while we was in Camp Livingston.
- Mark: What did you think of the town and Louisiana? Was it an adventure?
- Don: Oh, yeah. It was an adventure. Everything was an adventure to me because I had never seen nothing, see. I mean really, like I said—

Mrs. P: I'd say most of them didn't.

Don: Well, yeah. I'd probably been in St. Paul twice in my life, I'd ridden up there with my cousin who drove a truck up there and hauled feed back. I went up there a couple times with him. Otherwise I went to Redwing and maybe Hudson, a town of two thousand or three thousand people. When you get down to Alexandria which is a town of about fifteen thousand at that time and there's people all over hell, kids running around shining shoes and stuff like that, I had never seen nothing like that. It was amazing to me.

Mrs. P: The Negroes. You didn't know them.

Don: Well, yeah, there were Negroes and everything like that. Of course, I'm lucky I live in Ellsworth because there are no colored people there, which is great with me because I'm prejudiced, I'll admit that.

Mrs. P: [unintelligible]

Mark: I'm interested in some of the people you trained with. You mentioned that you had come from a small town and hadn't been out of town. Do you think that this was typical of many of the people that you were training with at the time? Were they guys from Louisiana or South Carolina or New York?

Don: They were from all over the United States. They were from Chicago, they were from all walks of life. Everybody was from a different place of course, and everybody was pretty much the same. Even the kids who come from Chicago—Hell, they'd probably never been off the streets down there where they were, they'd never been anyplace or if they come from Tennessee or Kentucky or—we had one guy in our outfit who was from Virginia, West Virginia I should say, the mountains. He said he never had a pair of shoes before he got in the Army, and I think he was telling the truth. Because we did some training in the mountains of West Virginia and the mountains of Tennessee and we run into families up in there where there was just a little trail going to a shack someplace, you know, and that's what people lived in them days. But they were from all walks of life and everybody was different. I would say there were probably no people from wealthy families there, because the wealthy families—or the kids that come from wealth, they had education and they got better jobs because they were educated, which is fair enough. I mean, that's the way it should be. Because they were wealthy enough to go to college and they had a college degree, why they'd probably get in—well a lot of them went to Fort Benning to OCS and stuff like that, but they had the better jobs, which—hell, let's face it, if you went to college and you had the ability to learn, why you could sure as hell learn their lingo better and quicker than somebody that didn't have, although somebody maybe with no education at all would have made just

as good a man as the guy with the education, see? But that's the way it was. But it was generally speaking all poor people, the poor guys.

Mark: Did everyone get along fairly well?

Don: Oh, yeah, I think they did. I always did anyway. I never had no problems. No problems at all getting along with everybody.

Mark: So, after you left Camp Livingston you mentioned you were training in the east somewhere.

Don: Oh, yeah. Well, when we left Camp Livingston in January then we went to Carrabelle, Florida, Carrabelle, Florida and we were in Carrabelle, Florida until June, around in June sometime, then we went to Newport News or we was near a town, I guess, I'm trying to—Oh, Camp Pickett, Virginia; it was near Crew, Virginia, it wasn't too far from Newport News. We were there and then we were gonna go to Camp Atterbury—well you know the Army lingo, you were always going someplace, but we ended up at Miles Standish, Massachusetts and got on a boat and went overseas.

Mrs. P: What about that storm that you—when you had—

Don: When we crossed the Atlantic?

Mrs. P: When you were training on the boat.

Don: Oh, yeah, we got in a storm. Well, when I was in Camp Carrabelle, Florida, we was—see, the 28th Division, by the way, was the heaviest trained amphibious division in the United States Army, yet they never made the invasion of France, which always puzzled the hell out of me. But anyway, I was in it when we was doing this amphibious training and we hit a storm out there at Carrabelle, had some guys drown. Well, I tell ya what happened. The boat hit a sandbar out there at night and they thought they were on shore and the guys all run out and there was nothin' there but water and they all drowned, a whole bunch of 'em, about forty of 'em in a boat. You know, they just—well, what they did was they dropped the ramp, the guys unloaded, see, and they were out in the middle of the damn water in the dark. But that was an accident; them are bound to happen. It was a storm that night, but that'll always happen. I mean, every once in a while somebody gets killed or hurt in training, anyway, especially after I got in the Ranger Battalion; we had rough training there.

Mark: I was wondering if you could describe your trip overseas? On the boat, what were your accommodations like? How long did it take?

Don: Oh, I'm on a liberty ship, I don't know the name of it, and there's four thousand men on a liberty ship. About the third day out the water was so ungodly rough, we hit a storm in the North Atlantic. We were in a convoy, and all you could see no matter which way you looked was boats, and I think the third day out, why I and about two hundred other guys went down to eat every time we had lunch, but the rest of them never went. Everybody was seasick on that boat; oh, it was just a horrible mess, there was so damn much seasickness. And I never got seasick in my life; it never bothered me a hell of a lot. But, oh, it was rough. I know that you could see the battleships, but even the liberty ships like ours—the battleships set down in the water so the waves would hit them and go over, but these boats that we were on you could see the damn propellers come out of the water, the water was so rough, the waves were so rough that you could see the propellers on the back end of the boat every once in a while, so you know damn well how rough it was.

Mark: Not a very comforting sight, I'm sure.

Don: Oh, Jesus Christ, no! [both laugh] But see, something like that would never, ever bother me, being on a boat, airplane, no matter; I never was scared of anything like that. In fact, I can honestly tell you that I don't—aside from the day that we made the invasion, the day itself, and for ten minutes, I think that's the only time I was ever scared in my life. Just when we first landed on the beaches, that's the only time I believe I was ever scared. I never had no fear of dying. I had a fear of getting hurt, but not of dying.

Mark: That's interesting, actually. So in England you landed where? At Liverpool or somewhere?

Don: Cardiff.

Mark: Cardiff?

Don: Cardiff in South Wales, yeah. We landed in Cardiff, which—what is it, twenty miles to _____? We got off and they marched us to Island Farm Camp [on the outskirts of Bridgend, South Wales] and [unintelligible], we just walked from the docks. We got off the boat and we kept on walking until we got to this Island Farm Camp which was about twenty miles from Cardiff.

Mark: I see. What did you do once you got to Wales?

Don: What did we do—like for training, you mean?

Mark: Yeah. Or just in general.

- Don: Well, in general, we did the same kind of training that we had been doing. Of course, we went up in the mountains of Wales on a three-week mountain maneuver, but otherwise just basically we'd go out to rifle ranges and fire our rifles and we'd—they keep you busy marching around, they don't let you lay around, which is great, you know, I mean otherwise—but every day you go on a march or do some damn thing and do something. General run of stuff, I guess. Anyway, I just got it in my head to sign up for the Ranger Battalion and I signed up and—
- Mark: I was going to ask about how you got into the Rangers.
- Don: Well, it's a volunteer outfit, and they ask for volunteers, and I just signed up and I went there. And I think probably the reason that I got to be a Ranger was because—well, see what they do is they start questioning you, you know, and of course if you've got any AWOLs or anything on your record, then they wouldn't take you; at that time they wouldn't. I mean, they were pretty damn fussy, and I think probably the reason that I got to be a Ranger is because I was a Bohemian and Capt. Masney[?] was a Bohemian and he was the one that interviewed me and I think he kind of liked me. [laughs] And then when you get in the Ranger Battalion, why then they do everything they can to make you back out; that's part of the training is they—there was sixty of us chosen and I imagine there was about twenty-five of us made it. The other—of course, the Ranger Battalion is easy to get out of. All you need to do is say you don't want to be there and they don't want ya, so that's what a lot of guys would do. The training was really rugged.
- Mark: How was this training different that what you had with the 28th?
- Don: Not a hell of a lot different—just harder. [laughs] Instead of hiking four miles an hour, why they want you to run four miles in a half an hour or something like that. That's the difference. It's just—and then it probably lasts from 4 o'clock in the morning 'til 8 o'clock at night when you first go in, see. They do everything they can to make it—I used to say they try to kill you. [both laugh]
- Mark: Maybe they were, who knows?
- Don: I don't know, but if they do that why then if somebody backs out or can't take it, they don't say anything, they just send you back where you come from or send you someplace else, that's all.
- Mark: What sort of background do these Rangers come from and was it different than being in the 28th Division? Were these—
- Don: The difference? Everybody wanted to be there, that was the biggest difference. Everybody in the Ranger Battalion wanted to be a Ranger. In the 28th Division

they all wanted to get out of the Army. Everybody hated it, it seemed like; they hated it. The 28th Division primarily—it was a keystone division, it come from Pennsylvania, it was run by the Pennsylvania National Guard, and if you weren't from Pennsylvania, you really weren't in the clique. It would be a lot like joining—the prejudice isn't there now what it used to be, but if you would have joined a division that come from the South and you come from the North you'd have been in a hell of a shape, or vice versa. And that's the way the 28th Division was. If you weren't one of the boys from Pennsylvania, you weren't one of the boys. But you get in this Ranger Battalion and everybody wants to be a Ranger, see, and they knew it was going to be exciting and—

Mark: And it turned out to be. I'll come back to that in a sec, but one other topic I want to cover while we're talking about training in England, and that involves getting off the post and socializing with the English. Obviously you had opportunities to that sort of thing.

Don: Oh, yeah.

Mark: I was wondering if you could discuss the social life of the GI in England.

Don: Oh, yes. Yeah. I think it was great. The people accepted us great. We'd go downtown, they had everything going downtown like USOs and stuff like that.

Mark: This is in Cardiff?

Don: No, no this was in Bridgend, but Cardiff would have been the same way. We went to Cardiff, her and I went to Cardiff on the—in fact, her and I had seven dates.

Mrs. P: I didn't even know—

Don: But we never, ever—

Mrs. P: He was never home at my house.

Don: No, we never, ever talked about getting married or anything like that. We just went out and had a few drinks and stuff like that, but we never, ever mentioned getting married to each other or anything like that. In fact, I don't think either one of us thought of it. What the hell, I'm five thousand miles from home and, you know. And my thought, and that's one thing that has always bothered me about my participation in France and England especially, is I don't remember enough of it because I never, ever, dreamt that I would be back there. Like when we made the invasion of France, that's the last place in the world I thought I'd ever want to see again, and now I do, of course. We went over there in 1950

or something when this guy was writing this book—'60, I suppose, and we met him.

Mrs. P: Ron Lane.

Don: Ron Lane wrote the book about us Rangers. We cruised around there with him and I said, "Well, shit, I don't remember the name of them damn towns and stuff like that." And he got me a list from the War Department of where we'd been every night. They had every day where the 2nd Ranger Battalion had been. I couldn't even remember the name of the towns [laughs] because I didn't care. I never dreamt that I'd ever be back there.

Mark: That's actually very common. I've had a lot of vets tell me the same thing. They weren't looking on the highway to see where they were.

Don: No. I didn't give a damn. I just wanted to get the war over with. [laughs]

Mrs. P: It was bad.

Don: But now I wish—now Goldie, he was a little different. He was a company clerk at one time; I don't know what he was when the Battle of the Bulge—but he kept a diary. He had a pretty good recollection of where he'd been and everything like that. But he had a better chance to do it than I would have had, anyway, but I wouldn't have did it anyhow. I didn't give a shit. [laughs]

Mark: I've heard worse. So let's discuss going up to the invasion here. Did you know that the invasion was going to be coming fairly soon? Could you tell, for example, the way you were training that it was going to be in the next couple of weeks?

Don: Yeah. We knew three months before the invasion was made what we were going to do when we made the invasion. We didn't know where, but we knew that we were gonna climb these cliffs and we knew that there was guns there. In fact—

Mrs. P: That's when you went to the Rangers was in—

Don: Well, it was, I suppose, six weeks after, three weeks, four weeks after I joined the Rangers then I knew all this stuff, because we was training strictly on cliffs. That's all we did, train on cliffs.

Mrs. P: In Dover.

Don: Yeah. These P38s had flown along the cliffs, they took pictures of us. We knew what the face of 'em looked like, we had pictures on the top. You could

see the machine gunners, you could see the guns, you could see everything, you know. You can even see men on these pictures, they were that clean that they had taken. But we didn't know exactly where it was, of course. In fact, we didn't know until we got on the boat it was even called Pointe du Hoc. On the maps we got it says H-O-E so everybody called it Pointe du Hoe, but it was Pointe du Hoc, there's a "C" on it. But we didn't even know where Pointe du Hoc was until we landed. What the hell, we didn't know if it was down by Cherbourg over by Calais or where it might be.

Mark: Somewhere in France?

Don: Yeah. Somewhere in France, we knew that. But when we got on the boat, the 30th of May, I believe it was, on the H.M.S. Ben Machree and then we made the—we were lowered into these landing craft from that and when we got the—we heard on the 5th of June, why they announced about 6 o'clock, I suppose, on the 5th of June, the invasion had been canceled indefinitely. Well, it was the 4th of June, because it was supposed to be the morning of the 5th of June, and you know how it is. [laughs] Another son of a bitchin' dry run. You know how you get these dry runs in the service. Everybody says another dry run and stuff like that. But the next day they said the invasion was definitely on; it was a hell of a lot different feeling aboard that ship than there had been. It was pretty glum, you know, I mean. Everybody was playing cards and we ate supper and we was playing cards and stuff and all at once nobody was playing cards, they were just walkin' around talkin'.

Mark: Perhaps you could describe to me the start of it. You mentioned to me this was one of the only times you were ever scared.

Don: Yeah. Well, when I was scared, all right, the invasion came, we was on these little boats going in and stuff like that. The water was horribly rough and there was guys getting seasick and I wasn't seasick or anything like that and I didn't really think much of it. I and Jim O'Leary were right up on the front of the boat 'cause we were the first two off. He had a mortar and I had ten mortar shells and when we pulled in and when our ramp hit, why we went down and we got off. And he set up the mortar and my hands were shakin' like—that's the only time that I said I was ever scared. And Jim said, "What the hell is the matter, Donnie?" I said, "Nothing," and from that time on, why it just went away. Just like you'd electrified me or something like that, the fear just left me. Then I dropped in these ten mortar shells and I went up the ropes; hell, I could go up just like a shot, you know. And I was supposed to be—many guys have asked me about them damned guns; I never ever seen 'em. But I knew where they were, but I was on the farthest boat up on the 883 on the farthest to the left, and I was supposed to be with five other guys on a roadblock about twelve hundred yards it was up to this road, and we were to set up this roadblock, and when I got there, there was nobody there. But I was the first one up there. Well, I knew

I had went by one of the guys on the ropes. He was havin' trouble. He was off to the left of me and he had hit an overhang and he was havin' a little trouble getting' up the rope, but I went right on up and of course, uh, it's amazing. Nobody—I have never heard anybody say they were the first one up the cliffs; nobody really knows. The first guys up might have gotten killed, I don't know. I was one of the first ones up, I know that, but I don't know who was the first one. It don't make no difference. But when we got up there, this guy from the battleship Texas, this admiral from the battleship Texas, he said there would be holes up there ten deep and fifteen feet across, but when you got up there they were twenty-five feet deep and fifty feet across, and if you fell into one of the damned things it seemed like you'd never quit rolling. When you'd run and jumped into one, hell, you'd go down to the bottom of the damn thing, you'd wonder what the hell was goin' on. Then I worked my—got along the hedgerow, which we knew was there from the pictures, and I went up to that road where that road junction was. Well now, there was a lot of firing. I didn't know who the hell was shootin' at who or anything like that. And I knew other guys were comin' up because of the firing that you could hear. And when I got up there, I don't know how long I stayed there. I said that I might have stayed there two minutes, might have been ten minutes, or it might have been a half an hour. It seemed like hours to me, and I seen some Germans to my left go across that road and they would have come down, they would have been behind me if they'd have got down this way, and that's why I came back down towards the cliff's edge to find the rest of these guys. But when I got back— **[End of Tape 1, Side A]**

Don: —down there then I never did get back up the goddamned road 'til the second day. We was hung up down there and the guys that—where the guns had been moved you see, them guns had been moved, and so help me, I have never to this day seen 'em. [laughs] I have never seen them guns. [laughs]

Mark: They were there at one time.

Don: Yeah, they were there at one time, and evidently what happened is they stuck these poles in the damn gun emplacements so they looked like the guns were in there, see. Like the barrel of the gun was sticking out of this gun emplacement. That's what—of course, they were getting' them in the air pictures and they looked like the guns were there, but they were gone.

Mark: I see.

Don: They had been moved about three-quarters of a mile, I guess. Like I say, I never, to this day, I've never seen one of 'em. [laughs] Never seen one.

Mark: Do you have any idea how much time all this took? To land and get up the cliffs, and could you even guess?

- Don: How long it took me to land and get up to the top of the cliff?
- Mark: Yeah. Was this an all day affair?
- Don: Oh, no, no, no. You mean me, myself? It took me about one minute to get up the cliff. That's how long I—I could take that cliff—I could just practically walk right up it. I could walk right up it.
- Mark: Was this different than your training? I mean, people, they were shooting at you.
- Don: Oh no, same thing. Well, yeah, but they can't shoot at you because they're so straight up. They couldn't look over the top and shoot down. They only had about—probably, was it ten feet, do you suppose? After I got within ten feet of it, why then they could start shootin' at ya. But you gotta remember, they were just as scared as I was or anybody else was, you know, and they weren't standing there waiting for you to shoot at them, or I was—that's when—talk about coming over the top of the cliff, I said I didn't stand up to be counted. I didn't give a shit who was first up there, [laughs] I wasn't worried about it. I ain't going to stand there and wait, you see. But as you come, you're coming straight up and just about the last ten feet that they could get a shot at you. Now I had guys say that they were from the left, I was the farthest to the left, but there was a kind of a little overhang there that jugged out in the—farther than the others so I had a little protection there, but some of the other guys claimed that they were shooting from over there at them; I don't know if they were or not. There were guys got hit on the beach and a couple guys got hit goin' up the ropes, but not too many got hit after they got on the ropes because they couldn't bend over and get at ya, see; otherwise they'd get ya when you come over the top.
- Mark: So, when did you hook up with American troops? After you got to the top and went to this roadblock area?
- Don: After we got to the, there it was about the afternoon of the third day before the other American troops come down to where we were. See we had—I gotta tell ya, this was the greatest plan in the world. It's said to be the most thrilling and exciting invasion that was ever planned by the American Army, but it didn't work according to plan. See, we were supposed to go up the cliffs, then the rest of the 2nd Ranger Battalion and the 5th Ranger Battalion were supposed to come up these ladders that we had with us which never got used, of course. But our original mission called for us to be inland fifteen miles the first day. We never got there for a week.
- Mark: How far did you get on the first day?

- Don: Well, the first day, what'd they say? Fifty yards. [both laugh]
- Mark: That's not anywhere near fifteen miles! [pause]
- Don: Some of the funny things that happened, a guy from Chicago, he said the only reason he's alive is because I'm a poor shot. [slight pause] Here's where we landed, right here. All of us landed in this area here and this is where this road was up here. We pulled back that night to an area; we had about fifty yards here, like this, that we were holding. Well, he went out on patrol, him and about ten other guys went out on patrol, and they went out in this area lookin' for, I don't know, trying to find some Americans or some help or something like that. And when they were coming back along this cliff here, on the top of the cliffs now this was, why you could see them silhouetted, these guys, and they were humped over and they were shootin', and of course, I was over in here, see I was right in here, and I seen 'em but I didn't know who they were and I shot over the top of them. I shot twice over the top of them. And he started hollering, "Thunder" and I said, "Welcome" and he said, "Is that any kind of a welcome, you son of a bitch?" [both laugh] But I mean, you're up here and you don't know what the hell is going on. We landed with two hundred and thirty-eight men and there were sixty-nine of us there that night.
- Mrs. P: Haven't you got a Kleenex? You don't have a Kleenex.
- Mark: No, I don't.
- Don: That's OK. They could've had us anytime, shit, if they'd have known it. But see, everybody had an automatic weapon and any goddammed stirring or anything, why everybody just cut loose with everything they had. We even had German guns that we were using because of the ammunition that they found and stuff up there. It was just so—some of them things are so funny and yet so dramatic that it's hard to believe. And I told many people, I told Goldie when he come down here, I said, "Goddamn it, sometimes I wake up at night and I can't believe that really happened. That there even was a war." It's so ridiculous, people killing people for what? It's just so crazy that it just—
- Mrs. P: And talk about when you really got wounded. You're still talking about that.
- Don: I got hurt—when I first got up to the top of the cliffs, I got hurt a little bit. I got a sprained ankle. I got hit by a rock or something, dirt or something. My foot turned black but—and it swelled up and hurt like hell, but I could walk on it so I didn't care and I stayed there.
- Mrs. P: You didn't put your shoes on 'til when?

- Don: Well, I took it off, then my foot swelled up, so I had a hell of a time getting' it back on. I had to lace it up so it wouldn't swell any more.
- Mrs. P: For a week you didn't—
- Don: Yeah. It was about a week. Actually, it was a sprained ankle is what it was, is what I had.
- Mrs. P: But you never got your shoes on for a week afterward?
- Don: Well, I had the shoe, I had to have a shoe on—you couldn't walk around without a shoe on. [laughs]
- Mrs. P: That's what I mean.
- Mark: Especially in a war zone.
- Don: Yeah.
- Mark: Perhaps you could recount the next couple of days after the first invasion. On the data sheet I had you fill out you went up toward Cherbourg and then towards—
- Don: Well, we went—I tell ya what, we went down and we—of course, when we hit this Grandcamp [Grandcamp-Maisy], that's where we go now when we go over there, this Grandcamp, that was the first village that they came to that they were liberating the French people, I would suppose, or something like that you'd call it. Well then we went through Sainte-Mere-Eglise where the paratroopers had been and we marched through there, we didn't have no resistance there, and we got on the other side of there and then we were so beat up, we had so few men, they pulled us back—well, it wasn't that quick. I suppose two weeks after or three weeks, I can't remember just how long it was that they pulled us back and give us the job of hauling prisoners. One guard for fifty guys on a truck and we'd haul 'em down to beaches and put 'em in boats and send them to England. Because that was when Cherbourg fell. That was the 25th day, or 29th day, whenever it was; 25th, I think it was.
- Mark: Were there lots of prisoners?
- Don: There was so goddamned many prisoners that I didn't see how the German Army could survive! [both laugh] I didn't see 'em all, by no means, don't get me wrong, but I seen them by the thousands. Truck after truck after truck with fifty on, then we'd go back and we'd get some more and take them down. They had them barbed wire entanglements where they had them in, five or ten thousand at a time. Well, there was two hundred fifty thousand prisoners give

up at Cherbourg. I have never seen ten percent of 'em, I don't suppose, but there were just so many men, you just wonder how in the hell the German Army could survive with that many men missing, I just couldn't see it, but they did, and—but it just seemed dramatic to see that many men giving up and glad to do it, most of them.

Mark: I was going to ask, did they resist?

Don: No, shit no; they were happier than hell. They thought they were all going to the United States! [laughs]

Mark: And maybe never coming back?

Don: No. But that's one thing that as the war progressed and everything you heard about all this shit, I wanted to go to Japan because the German soldiers, they would surrender if you got 'em anywhere near even terms, or you didn't even have to get 'em even, why they'd give up. In fact, they'd—I remember times where with men just giving up to you just out of the clear blue—they'd just surrender. And they always was telling how hard the Japanese were to come by, yet we were losing so goddamned many more men in Europe than they were losing in Japan that I couldn't figure out how come it was so tough over there, so I wanted to get over there and see. [laughs]

Mark: Figure it out for myself?

Don: Yeah, figure it out for myself.

Mark: So as American forces are going through northern France, what are the Rangers doing? What's the mission—

Don: What's the mission of the Rangers? We were down by St. Lo. We're a small outfit and we're attached to some corps and some Army all the time. We were, at different times were in the 1st, we were in the 3rd, we were in the 9th Army. And whenever they wanted us to do something, they would call us, and we got some awful missions, we got some easy ones. Ah—but we were at St. Lo when the breakthrough, when Patton's Army broke out of St. Lo, they bombed all that stuff and they broke out of St. Lo, that's where we were, so then they sent us up to Brittany Peninsula because Brest was a besieged city and we got the Le Conquet Peninsula because the Le Conquet Peninsula had the big guns, the 320s were out there on the Le Conquet Peninsula. Well, we had got the name of takin' the guns out at Pointe du Hoc so then they sent us up to Le Conquet, but it took us twenty-one days to get them sons of guns out of there. They fought like hell for Brest, twenty-one days they fought. But then Brest finally fell. When Brest fell, then we got on a train; we must have rode on a damn train for a week.

You know, we'd go a little ways then stop, go a little ways then stop. We got up into Belgium and then we was sent up into the Hürtgen Forest.

Mark: That's where you were injured?

Don: Yeah, that was in Bergstein, Germany. I was injured on Castle Hill, Hill 400 in Bergstein, Germany. I was kind of really lucky because I was wounded on the 9th of December and I was in the hospital when the Bulge came. I didn't get back 'til the Bulge was pert near over, when I got back to my outfit. So I was kind of fortunate, and that was the wintertime, too. [laughs]

Mark: I'll come back to the Bulge and the surrender in a minute. I'm interested to know if you had much contact with the French people who were being liberated, as you say. I'm wondering what the scene was like.

Don: The theme of the French people was—to me, they were a pain in the neck, ya know.

Mrs. P: God.

Don: Well, they were. I mean, as far as goin' out and drinking and finding girls or something, they were a dime a dozen, as far as that goes, but I'm talking about the French people, ya know, and the FFI was the French Forces of the Interior. Whenever we had them we had more goddamned trouble than we had with them. You couldn't tell 'em nothing, they wouldn't listen to ya and they'd lie like hell to ya. I know one time—I'll just give you an example. We were going into Bayonne, France. We were gonna go in there at night and raise hell because the Germans were holding the town and there was about fifty of us went in there. And we got these Frenchmen and they were telling us all about it and they said the Germans, there was a park there, like we'll say this is the town and there was a park like here and there was a swamp here. But they said the Germans didn't guard this park very heavy because they never figured anybody would come through there because of the swamp. But that Frenchman was tellin' me, he said, "That deep, that deep, that deep," he was telling ya the damn mud wouldn't be over ankle deep, ya know, stuff like that. Well, when we went in there that night, now I had a five gallon can of gas, which was thirty pounds. Gas only weighs five pounds a gallon or six pounds a gallon, and the can, but I had it on my shoulders and my gun and stuff like that, and I'm goin' in there and I get about halfway across the swamp like the rest of the guys and I'm in goddamned water up over my combat boots. Well, if I'd have seen that son of a gun I'd have shot him, that's the way I felt. [laughs] But we got in there, we went in there. But anytime you're dealing with 'em, why they're just in the way, they run around, they—I don't know, they just got in the way, is all. We was glad when we didn't have to monkey with them at all.

Mark: After you got out of France I suppose?

Don: Oh, yeah. Well, it was just, the Free French of the Interior—they were looking for a name. I'll tell you what happened in this Bayonne. We went in there that night. We raised hell. You dumped the gas on the street, it was downhill, set it on fire, and the people hollering and squealing and stuff like that and we shot the hell out of everything. We left little notes, "Rangers will strike at dawn." And the next morning the Germans all come out and surrendered. And they surrendered to the Free French of the Interior, that's what teed us off. [laughs] Big deal, they made a big deal out of capturing this town. But not that it made any difference really, it just was one of those things. But the FFI—like I said, as far as we were concerned, they might have did some good in some other places, I don't know, but as far as we were concerned they were just a pain in the neck and they were in the way if we had them around. We didn't want them. We'd rather do it our way.

Mark: Yeah. And so this kind of mission was typical as you were going across Germany? You would go into a town that wasn't liberated and—

Don: Oh yeah. Just raise hell and stuff like that. After we got away from Brest, France, where we was on the Le Conquet Peninsula, 'cause that was pretty much line fighting, just day and night; you know, you're on line, stuff like—we usually didn't do that, we'd just strike and go. We might move fifty miles in a night, they might move us by truck someplace else or something like that, you know, and then we'd hit something and then we'd go. Same way in this Bergstein, Germany, this Castle Hill 400; that was only supposed to be a two or three hour mission. We was there two days and a half, we was just stuck there. But normally, we didn't. Oh, we'd maybe go out at night to blow a pillbox in the Siegfried Line or something like that and we'd take a dozen guys or something like that. It's just—we did anything they wanted us to do. [laughs]

Mark: I see. You seemed pretty good at it too.

Don: Well, whatever they said, why we usually did. We didn't—There was only one mission that I ever know that Colonel Rudder backed us out of, and they wanted us to try to cross the water up at Brest. There was about a seven-mile stretch of water from one bay to the other and they wanted us to cross that and they were gonna give us rubber boats and stuff like that. Well, shit. You'd have all drowned if you'd have tried it. He knew it, too. We didn't do it, but they wanted us to do that. If they'd have had some decent power boats to haul us across, we'd have probably went. But them little rubber boats—I crossed the Ruhr, the Saar and the Rhine River and the English Channel and I never made a dry landing.

- Mark: So was it at Castle Hill 400 that you were injured? Where did they get you?
The arms, legs?
- Don: Well, I was wounded in both legs and my left hand, but I just had one bad one in the back of my right ankle.
- Mark: Was it shrapnel or bullets?
- Don: Shrapnel. It went in between the cord and the ankle, see. Well, I can show you where it went; it was right there. But see, no, it wasn't that dangerous a thing, but it's hard to heal a round hole there, especially because you move your foot all the time. That's why I was in the hospital for about five weeks, because we couldn't get the damn thing to close up. Actually, when I did go back, why this Doctor Smootz[?] had put some bandages on, give me some medicine so that I could keep it wrapped up because he was afraid infection might get in there, but he gave me sulfa pills, too. It didn't hurt me but it wouldn't heal up.
- Mark: I'm kind of interested in the medical process involved with processing the combat injuries.
- Don: When you get hurt what happens, you mean?
- Mark: Yes. So I assume you were conscious for this?
- Don: Oh, yeah, I was conscious.
- Mark: So what happens? The medic comes up and—
- Don: No, I was—we was coming off this Hill 400, we had already got our mission accomplished there, and I heard this shell coming as plain as anything, but I thought it was going way over. I didn't pay no attention to it, and it caught the side of a goddamned building. And when it went off, why all I could see was red because I was so close to it. And I guess it's a good thing I was because the shrapnel must have come down and hit the pavement or the cobblestone streets which they had, and had been scooting along the ground and hit me in the leg. Of course, shit, I was layin' there, I didn't know where my rifle was, my helmet was gone, I didn't know where nothing was, I mean, I was just so close to it, the concussion, and I don't know if I actually passed out or not, but I don't think I did because if it was, it would have been the only time I ever passed out in my life—I never have. And I thought my foot was gone, because it was completely numb, so I crawled over alongside of a building there and I didn't know what the hell to do. All at once I heard this Walter Browski say something, a buddy of mine, I heard him talking to somebody and I said, "Hey, Walt, will you give me a hand?" And he come over there and said, "You bet I will" and he took me and got me back to an aid station. There they put me on a stretcher, wrapped the

goddamned thing up with splints and everything, which wasn't necessary 'cause it wasn't broke, but they thought it might be, and then they put me on a Jeep and they hauled me about five miles and then I got in an ambulance and then they took me to a hospital, or a clearing station, whatever they called it, a tent hospital, and then I ended up in Paris, France in a hospital and I was there until they operated and took the shrapnel out and a couple of days after that then they sent me to what they call a convalescent hospital in Cherbourg. It was a—I was walking wounded is what I was. If you'd have been home you'd have been sent home, but you ain't got no home to go to so they gotta put you someplace. It wasn't bad enough—if it was a broken bone or something, then they sent them guys to either the UK or the States.

Mark: So in these convalescent hospitals, there were a lot of guys with injuries similar to yours?

Don: Yeah, they were all flesh wounds. They were all flesh wounds. There was no broken bones or anything there because, like I say, if you had a broken bone you went to the UK or else the United States, one of the two.

Mark: I see.

Don: They got clear of them right away. But if you had a flesh wound you didn't have to go back if you didn't want to. They'd give you an option to go any place else, but I wanted to go back because I knew everybody. I wasn't gonna go someplace else, what the hell. I might have ended up back in the 28th Division. [laughs]

Mark: And that wasn't for you, I take it?

Don: No.

Mark: So it was during this period that you missed the Bulge. Was your unit involved in the—

Don: Our unit was involved in the Bulge. They were on the—actually, the guys tell me, and I don't really know, but they always claim they were on the corner of the Bulge. The Bulge came through here and they were here and they were up here and there was guys down here but the Germans went through here. They always claim they held on the North side; I don't know if they did or not, there wasn't very damn many of them there anyway.

Mark: Yeah. And so you got back on the line or back with your unit about what time? January '45?

Don: Yeah, January, sometime in January. You come from the hospital, they give you a—it's a big story but I got up to _____, France. I was there, we could go into Paris every night. You could go at 9 o'clock in the morning. If they didn't send transportation for you or give you word by 9 o'clock in the morning then the day was open, so you could go to Paris; we could go to Paris every day. And this morning when they come and told us they were sending us—I knew damn well somethin' was up, ya know, because Vella, Chuck Vella and I were together in the hospital and they sent word that they had transportation for us. Then we crossed the Ruhr River the next morning. [laughs] Yeah.

Mark: As you went into Germany, did the combat change at all? Did your missions change? After all, you're now in enemy territory as opposed to being in France.

Don: Yeah. I don't suppose really what we were doing changed a hell of a lot.

Mrs. P: You saw the liberation of Dachau.

Don: No, not Dachau. Buchenwald.

Mark: Buchenwald? Yeah?

Don: Yeah. No. See, when we crossed the Ruhr River they mechanized us. They put us with the 102nd Cavalry because we couldn't keep up walking any more, ya know, and so they put us with the 102nd Cavalry so we were mechanized. We were mechanized when we crossed the Rhine River, but, I mean, we were part of the 102nd Cavalry then. And then, of course, as you went across Germany, I'd say that three weeks after the crossing of the Rhine, I shouldn't say because I don't know, I don't remember, but I'd say three weeks after we crossed the Rhine, there was absolutely very little resistance anywhere you went. We got ambushed once from that time on. Now it might have been four or five weeks after we crossed the Rhine, but it was a short time after we crossed the Rhine River. When we went across Germany, there'd be a white flag sticking out of every god-darned house there was. Everybody was ready to surrender. I will say we got ambushed the 27th of April but that was later. But there was no resistance to speak of. Now when we came to Buchenwald, I was one of the first guys into Buchenwald, and how I got there was because we were with the 102nd Cavalry and we had heard about this Buchenwald, where it was and stuff like that, and there was no resistance, no fighting or anything, so we went over there, a bunch of us on a half-track. It was about ten of us on a half track and we drove over to Buchenwald and we went in there. It was the damndest thing that you've ever seen. People don't even believe it was there, but it was there. And it was just amazing. It's unbelievable. How they could be that way is more than I'll ever know, but that's the way it was. But as far as the crossing of Germany, that was just nothing. We come to Nuremberg, there wasn't even a

place for the military government. We were going into fields in Czechoslovakia the day the war ended.

Mark: Was Germany very war scarred? Like if you go into a major city—

Don: Today now?

Mark: No, at the time. If you went into a major city, could you tell that they had been—

Don: It was all smashed all to hell. Everything was smashed all to hell. And even the—well, see, like the bridges on the Rhine or the bridges—see they had an autobahn there, bridges on it just like we got now. They blew every damn one of them, but they did it themselves. We didn't destroy them, they did the bridges themselves. The cities, the bombing, like of Castle Germany and places like that, that was done by American bombs and stuff like that; they just leveled them damn cities. But as far as the roads or the bridges, shit, they blew most of them themselves to try to slow down traffic, which I'll never understand. I don't understand why Germany didn't surrender a long time before they did.

Mark: Yeah. So when the Germans finally surrendered, you were in Czechoslovakia or Bohemia?

Don: Bohemia, yeah. And where I come from, and I couldn't speak a damned word of it. [laughs] My dad had to go to school to learn to talk English and I got there and I couldn't—but he never ever tried to teach us Bohemian as kids, though. He never tried to teach us kids any Bohemian. In fact, any time that—my mother was an English, but any time that he would try to do that she would give him hell because it would always be some foolishness like “fordel”[?] or something like that, and so we never got to know what the hell Bohemian really was. And he could—by speaking Bohemian, you could understand most of them people over there, not all of them, but you can make out what the Poles and the Germans are talking about if you could speak Bohemian. But I couldn't, because I didn't know a damn word of it, and of course, I was not interested in learning a foreign language. Or learning any of it. [laughs]

Mark: I wonder if you could comment on the capabilities of the German Army. Were they a formidable fighting force? Were they not as tough as people make them out to be? And did this change over time? For example, as you went into Germany.

Don: Well, I wouldn't be no authority on that. I couldn't really tell you. It was just—I don't know whether they were better or worse or anything like that. I would have to say that they were probably—we run into more older people as we went along. We always—I have no souvenirs whatsoever from Germany. I had about

two; I had a swastika armband and a little jackknife that I brought back and I always wanted to get an armband from one of the People's Volkssturm Army but I never caught anybody with one on. They were telling about the People's Volkssturm Army was gonna come out once we got into Germany, but as far as I know they never ever did. I don't know if they did or not. We used to go into these towns when we'd set up and then they'd send us out and you're supposed to pick up everybody between the ages of sixteen and sixty and bring them in. Well, hell, we'd haul 'em in and they'd be walking down the damn street as fast as we brought them in. They wouldn't—I don't know what the hell they did with them, just ask them something and let them go? They were supposed to interrogate them, of course.

Mrs. P: What did you think about that boy you thought that died, that you—

Don: You hate to see it happen, but it does. But I know, I was telling Goldie yesterday, I remember this massacre at Malmedy [84 American POWs were killed by their German captors] and I still bet you, in my own mind, I think it cost fifteen thousand Germans their lives, because I know our guys shot every damn one that ever tried to give up in a long time. They wouldn't let 'em give up. Because you're afraid it's gonna happen to you. You wouldn't give up. I wouldn't surrender. Shit, I'd have been scared to surrender.

Mark: As you went into Germany, did you have much contact with the German people?

Don: Not a lot. A little, but not a lot. They weren't that hard-hearted, the German people. The young people would tell you that they are gonna make a comeback. They still thought they would. I remember talking to girls and young men both; they figured the German Army would come back, that they're gonna come back. Maybe they will some day, I don't know, but that was their opinion at that time. That they were gonna make a comeback.

Mark: I see. So, do you recall finding out that the Germans had surrendered? Can you remember your reaction and the reaction of those around you? Was there a party?

Don: Well, not really. We were betting for a week that the next day was gonna be VE Day. You knew the war was over. There was no—like I will say, we got ambushed the 27th of April and it cost us five men, we had five men get killed, and it was so foolish, so ridiculous what happened. We know better than this where somebody, a man that could speak Russian, we had a guy that could speak Russian in our outfit, name of Jahorlig[?]. He come up to him and he told us that there was nine SS troops in a barn. See, the SS troops are Army and we started down there, we were with the 102nd Cavalry and we had two medium tanks, so I suppose twenty-five of us piled on each tank and we were going

down there to the barn to get these guys, see. And I'm on the lead tank, the tank I'm on, we went right through them. The other guy was coming about a hundred yards behind us; what the hell, we was goin' right along. And geez, all at once, all hell broke loose and a bazooka hit that tank, it hit the turret. It didn't hit the track, it hit the turret, so the tank was still going, but the five guys that got killed were riding on that tank when that damned bazooka exploded. And all hell broke loose. Jesus Christ, the firing come from every direction, there was German soldiers all around there. We were damned lucky to get out of there. [laughed] He walked us right into it. And we know better than that. You go down a road with no flanks or no nothing, nobody checks it out or a damned thing, you're just like a bunch of damned fools. See, the war was so near over and these must have been a bunch of die-hards that just—but I mean, hell. For days we hadn't— **[End of Tape 1, Side B]**—even seen nobody who wanted to fight; they all wanted to give up.

Mark: So after the German surrender, perhaps you can describe what happened. When did you finally come back to the US and what sort of process did you have to go through?

Don: We were in Pilsen the day the war ended and we sat up in billets there. The Germans had Czechoslovakia. See Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, there wasn't a scratch in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, it was just like a modern city, but the Germans had built all kinds of roads, I suppose you can call them roads, apartment houses. There were apartments for the women, the wives of German soldiers, to move into that had kids and stuff and they'd live in these apartments. Of course, they were all gone, and so we just moved into these apartments and we took over everything and we was there in that area, in Pilsen. That lasted for about, oh, I suppose ten days or two weeks we were in them, and then one of the guys got in trouble one night. They got drunk and they started raising hell and this one guy, his name was Granville Harrison, I'll never forget him, he come chasing a woman down the street and he didn't have no clothes on and neither did she. They'd got into some kind of a problem and that kicked us out of town; that kicked us out of Pilsen. Then we got down in Dobřany, which was about ten miles from there, and we was in pup tents all summer. Not all summer, but from probably the first of June until August, when we started our trip back towards Paris, France or toward Le Harve. We was in them pup tents and then when—I suppose it was sometime in August and they loaded us up and got us on trains and we headed for Camp Lucky Strike, or I don't know. I can't even remember if it was Lucky Strike or—they had towns and cigarettes that they had camps and we got to one camp. We was there about a week or ten days and we got on the USS America and we came home.

Mark: And went back. Did you think that you were going to have to go fight the Japanese?

Don: No, see the war had ended in Japan by that time. It was after August 14th or 7th or whenever the VJ Day was that we started back. No, we were training to go to Japan when we were down there in Dobřany.

Mark: Yeah, I was going to ask about that period between the German and Japanese surrender.

Don: Yeah. We were setting down there in Dobřany training to go to Japan, of course. And then when the war with Japan ended, why then everything got ready to go home, and I was simply amazed at how quick it was done. We was sent back to this camp in France and we weren't there very long and we loaded on the USS America and we come across the ocean in about four or five days. We come into Newport News, Virginia, and that night that we got there, I suppose we unloaded—I don't know how long it takes to unload eight thousand men off a ship and stuff like that, but we got down in this camp and everybody from the east was loaded on trains and went home right away, and then the next was the west and then we were from the central, so we got on trains and I went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and I was there two or three days and I was discharged. I was discharged the 1st of November, and I can't remember to the day what day it was that we landed in Newport News, but it was in the middle of October sometime.

Mark: Yeah, it was pretty quick.

Don: Oh, hell. They did an amazing job of getting the guys out, I thought. I was really surprised, because you know how the Army does things. It takes so damn long all the time that by God, they really run us through and got us out.

Mark: So how'd you get back to Pierce County?

Don: I got on a train in La Crosse, Wisconsin and I got a ride to St. Paul and then I got a bus ride down to Ellsworth from there. My dad would have come and got me but I didn't have no way of contacting him or getting a hold of him. He wanted to come to La Crosse because he knew I was—because I had called him from Chicago and told him I would be at Fort Sheridan. He worked at a grocery store in Ellsworth and I knew the number there and I called there. But I didn't know how long it was gonna take to get discharged or anything like that. I didn't know it was only gonna be a couple of days or I'd have had him come down, but shit, you know how the Army works; it might have been a week or two. [laughs]

Mark: So, now you're discharged. You're out. What are your first priorities now that you're out of the service?

Don: My first priority is to get a job. That's all I thought of. A lot of the guys took the 52/20. I didn't take the 52/20; I went to work for Havilands. I worked for thirty dollars a week. The reason I didn't take the 52/20 mainly is because I had kind of thought in my own mind that if they are going to give you a thousand dollars, they should give it to me. So if figured if I went to work, somehow I'd get some of that anyway, which never happened, but I had kind of thought that maybe you get a couple hundred dollars, something like that. See, the guys who went to 52/20, they got a thousand dollars for doing nothing and I didn't get anything. And actually, I worked for thirty dollars a week and they took four dollars and some cents out for income tax and Social Security, so I only was making five dollars a week, is what I was making by working. But I worked anyway, because—well, I never knew how to do anything but work anyway, so it didn't make no difference to me, really.

Mark: Did you have trouble finding work?

Don: No, I had no trouble finding a job at all. Jobs were very easy to find after the war was over.

Mark: Really?

Don: Oh, yeah. See then the next summer, why I went to work, that fall and the next fall then I went to work for the Jake Seed Company and I worked there that winter and then the next summer I worked on construction out to Minnesota Mining. I got a job at Minnesota Mining. You could get a job anyplace. So it didn't make that much difference, the job part. I never worried about finding a job. I was always under the impression if you're willing to work, you could find a job anyway. You still can today, if you're willing to take a few bucks less an hour. If you want a top paying job you can't get it now.

Mark: So you lived at home for a while? Tell me about your farm.

Don: Yeah, I lived at home. In 1947 I got her over here.

Mark: Now I was going to ask. I don't want to get too personal, but I do want to ask how you kept in contact.

Don: By writing letters. See, I wrote to her all the time while I was in France, I wrote to her, back and forth, and I always thought that I was going to get back to England. I'm pretty clever, I can do a lot of things, but you can't get across the Channel and back without somebody catching you. If I'd have disappeared for three or four days I know I wouldn't have got caught. Shit, I had enough connections I could do that, but how am I gonna get across that damned Channel and back without getting caught? See, that I couldn't do. If I'd have thought there was a way, I would have, 'cause I was going to go to England and ask her

if she wanted to get married. And then when I found out that I couldn't get back, why then I wrote her a letter and asked her if she wanted to get engaged, and she wrote a letter back and said she did. So I bought a ring and sent it to her. No idea when we could come; everything was so screwed up then.

Mark: Is this after the war?

Don: After the war, yeah. And she would—they'd tell her—transportation would be '49. See, they brought over the brides. The married women with children came first. Then the married women came. And then I don't know what the hell, but you see, we weren't engaged during the war or anything, so we didn't have nothing really going for us. They'd tell us that transportation would be in '49, and whenever I'd talk it would be maybe a year or two, and I was working at Minnesota Mining and it rained one day. I was working with the plumbers—plumbers get half a day's pay if it rains; I got nothing, I was a common laborer. But anyway, I went up to the Federal Building in St. Paul and I went in there and I went into the Immigration Office and I start talking this guy and I said, "Well, it's either this way. I want to know how I can get her over here, or else what I have to do to go over there." And he talked to me and he said, "Well." I said, "I'm engaged to the girl and we want to get married and I want to get her over here." He said, "I'll tell you what. We can't give information out from this office. We are not supposed to." But he was alone; he said, "I'll tell you what to do. You go down to the International Institute and you ask for Miss So and So." I figured I was gonna go down there and find a young girl and it was an old lady, and I talked to her and she started typing up and I told her what I wanted, I told her what her name was—I didn't know her name. I didn't know her name. [laughs]

Mrs. P: Yes, you did know it.

Don: No, I didn't know; I knew it was Peg, that's what I told them. That I knew it was Peg, but I didn't know what her—see Peg is a nickname for Margaret or Margarite, and I was going to put that on there and I said, "By God, I don't know." I didn't know.

Mrs. P: Because I was Elizabeth.

Don: Her name is Elizabeth, and I never knew it. [laughs] Anyway she typed all this stuff up and we agreed, I said, "Well we might as well put down Peggy, because shit, I don't know what the hell her name would be." Then he told me when you get those papers from her, you go over to the First National Bank and you ask for a Miss Davis. So I did. I went over and I asked for Miss Davis and she said, "When do you want her to come over?" I said, "Just as soon as you possibly can." Now this is about the first of June.

Mark: Of '47?

Don: Yeah, of '47. She said, "Well, the nearest date I can get is the 26th of June." I said, "Jesus, don't make it the 26th of June, I haven't even told her." [laughs] So we agreed on the 12th of July. We settled on the 12th of July, see that was the next date we could try to get her over here. And that was just a flight to New York so we got the ticket. That woman said to me—I said, "Well, I haven't got my checkbook with me or anything." She said, "Don't worry about it. You send me a check when you get home. I'll take care of everything. I'll see that she gets the ticket." And that's the last I knew. I never had no contact with her. It takes about seven, eight, nine days for a letter at that time. I wrote and told her but I hadn't heard no answer from her. So I drove to New York, and when I got down to New York, I went to the American Airlines office at Times Square New York and they said, "Well, she's on the plane."

Mark: And the rest is history.

Don: We went to Albany and bought our marriage license that same day. No, we got our blood tested that day. But the time counts from the time you got the blood test there. And so then the next day I got a license and then we drove to Niagara Falls and got married. Then we went to Ellsworth and raised eight kids and now we're here.

Mrs. P: You know we were Catholic then; now.

Mark: So just to get some of the details straight, did you own your farm before you got married? Before she came over?

Don: No. We bought it, we bought it together. We borrowed the money.

Mark: Did you borrow the money from the bank or did you use a veterans loan?

Don: I borrowed it from a—

Mrs. P: A friend.

Don: I'll tell you how. I was buying this little place for \$2500. It was twenty acres and an old house and a barn; it was \$2500 dollars at that time. And this old fellow had a mortgage of \$1200 on it, so I asked him if he would keep it and I had \$1300 dollars and he kept that at four percent, that \$1200 mortgage, and then I paid him off in a year. He thought that was so damn great, so then whenever I needed money after that, I always asked him and shit, I could ask him and he'd say, "How much do you need?" He was a good-hearted old fellow and he had all kinds of money, but I always paid him interest. I paid him

interest right to the day, that's what he liked. I'd figure it out for him. He was an old guy and he had money but he liked to have you—

Mrs. P: He's good in math. He would have been.

Don: I've always been good in math, but I mean, you can figure out five percent, ain't hard to figure.

Mrs. P: But I mean if he would have gone to school he would have been.

Don: But I mean, I'm just telling you how this old Al was. If he liked you—he either liked you or he didn't, and he liked me, see, and so hell, if I bought a new tractor, when I bought the farms—in fact, when I bought the farm we're on now, he talked the guy into selling to me. “Hell,” he said, “He'll know how to pay for it. He'll pay for it.” I mean, he was backing me, so it was an individual. No, I never made a federal loan of any kind. In fact, I tried one time to get a federal loan when I bought the first one hundred-sixty, but the restrictions were so great and then I never knew until I went to the service office that you couldn't make a GI loan at that time if the purchase price was over fifteen thousand; that was in '56. They didn't raise it to more than fifteen thousand until I think about 1960. Of course, when I first come home you could build a new house for five or six thousand dollars, ya know, if you wanted to build a new house at that time.

Mark: But things have changed. They've changed so much—

Mrs. P: So much.

Don: Oh, yeah. And they have to keep changing with it.

Mark: I just have a couple more things I want to ask about. The first thing is about readjusting back to civilian life after having been in the military. In the '60s and '70s we watched the Vietnam vets and certain problems that they had. I wonder if you had any sort of readjustment problem?

Don: No, no problem whatsoever. It didn't bother me a damn bit. Never has. In fact, I don't know if you're a Vietnam veteran or not, but—

Mark: No.

Don: —the Vietnam era veterans have always irked me. And now the Korean veterans. And this Gulf War stuff. I don't know what happened; see, I don't know nothing about what happened and it's terrible—

Mrs. P: Cold war.

- Don: Yeah, but I think there're so damn many guys that are trying to pull something that it bothers me because—sure, I know—well I got an older brother that thinks the Army owes him a living and he never went out of the United States, but that's the way it is, you know? And his boy was in Vietnam, and every damn time you see him, "Oh, that Nam, that Nam," and it just gets me. Because now like Jerry, my oldest brother, hell, he drove truck. He was in the Quartermaster Corps, he never left the United States. Christ, he's been trying to get a pension and everything else out of the government for the last twenty-five years, but he can't get it because there's nothing wrong with him, really. But it's guys like that who bug me. It bothers me. I don't know why, I figure they should have took her. [laughs]
- Mark: Did you have any contact with the VA Medical System because of your injuries?
- Don: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I get a pension of ten percent. That's—well, I'll get to that later, but that's—the funny thing about this ten percent, I was awarded that in 1948 or '49, whatever it was, and then they dated it back to the day I was discharged, so I've gotten ten percent ever since I was discharged, as far as that goes. And I go to the VA Hospital all the time now.
- Mark: In Minneapolis?
- Don: Yeah, in Minneapolis. I go up there for different things. I like it up there because you meet guys your own age and stuff like that and get a chance to shoot the breeze with some of them that don't make any difference. I was very fortunate. I got a job carrying mail before I—I carried mail, twenty-four years of government service.
- Mrs. P: He was the highest, one of the highest—got the, you know—because of his disability. Right?
- Don: Well, yeah. I got ten points preference because I had a disability. I was Purple Heart, whatever you want to call it, why you get ten point preference. But anyway, it don't make no difference. I got insurance. I kept my insurance with the government and so they even get paid for it when I go up to the VA Hospital, they get some pay. They don't get as much as a hospital would get, but they turn in a bill and they get something. But my medical bills will always be paid anyway by the insurance. I'll keep it long as—they raised the premium on it so it costs me \$135 a month, but I figure I might as well keep it; you never know when you might need it. She had a stroke and she was in the hospital for almost six, seven weeks, and never cost me a cent, so I can't complain.
- Mark: Have you had much contact with the service officer up there?

- Don: No, I don't really have a lot of contact with him.
- Mark: What about right after the war right away? When you had to apply for the pension? How did that work?
- Don: When I got out of the service I didn't apply. When I came out, when I was discharged I never said nothing. I mean, I didn't give a shit, you know. And then this Don Johnson was the service officer at that time and then I had a cousin that he got a pension and there really wasn't nothing wrong with him. He never was overseas or a damn thing, but he was gettin' a pension, and he said well why don't I go up and apply. So I did. And I went up to this Don Johnson and he had been wounded up near Brest and I knew him. "Oh, hell," he said, "You got a good claim." And then they sent it in and then I went for a physical and they awarded me this ten percent. It said on the thing that they had rated me twenty to thirty and they would give me ten and date it back, and I never made another claim, I was just satisfied because the main reason I wanted to go was so I'd have rights to go to the Veterans Hospital, which I would have had anyway, as far as that goes. But this way I'm service connected and stuff like that when I go through there, so I just go up and I go right in and that's very nice. That VA Hospital in the cities is a hell of a nice hospital. It's well maintained and everything.
- Mark: So this Don Johnson, he sought you out?
- Don: Well, no. He was the service officer and I went up to see him and we got to talkin' about it and he said, "Oh, hell, I should make the claim." He was a service officer at that time.
- Mark: I just have one last area I want to cover, and that involves veterans organizations and reunions and those kinds of things. Did you ever join a group like the Legion, the VFW or the DAV or anything like that?
- Don: I belong to the Legion and the DAV and the VFW.
- Mark: When did you join those groups? Right after the war or much later?
- Don: I joined the Legion right away, somebody was after me to join the Legion, and I'm a life member of the DAV and the VFW. It was years later, though, that I joined them, and when I did join them I became a life member because—well, what the hell, it was a hundred bucks or whatever it was and I became a life member. But I never became a life member of the Legion and I don't know why. [laughs] I paid my dues all the time anyway.
- Mark: Are you an active member? Do you attend meetings and the reunions?

Don: I'm a poor member, let's put it that way. I belong, but I don't want to get involved in a lot of jobs. I don't want to run the cookie stand or something like that. I go up and sell beer at the polka fest or something like that, you know.

Mrs. P: [aside] Is he trying to get our attention? No.

Don: I'll work in the stand or something like that, but I don't—see, I'm the kind—I don't like to go in there and say, "Well, I'd like to see you have a milk machine because I'm a farmer." All right, I'll appoint you as a one-man committee to do it. So I don't say nothing. [laughs] I don't want to get that job. But I belong to the Ranger Battalion Association and we have a reunion every odd year and then every five years we go to Europe. But of course, it's easier for me because we got relatives over there. She's got brothers and sisters.

Mark: Why don't you get involved with the Ranger veterans? Was this much later after the war?

Don: Yeah. It was quite a while after the war, because I didn't know. You see, the Association, I don't know how the military works. Anyway, you can write to the War Department, but they won't give you a list of the Rangers for thirty years or something like that, so they had no way of getting a list, so it went by word of mouth. Guys that knew each other and just putting in a little ad in the paper, and one day my mother came up to me and she'd seen something in the paper where the Ranger Battalions had a reunion in Detroit and I didn't even know about it, of course. And I read it and then I wrote to somebody—I can't remember who the hell it was I wrote to and I asked them—and then they sent me, and the next reunion was in Des Moines, Iowa. So then we went to this reunion in Des Moines, Iowa, and then, of course, I've belonged ever since.

Mrs. P: Is that from you?

Mark: No, this was in our old museum and I just hung it up.

Mrs. P: Oh, I didn't think you were in the—

Mark: In the Philippines? No.

Don: But the Ranger Battalions have a reunion every odd year and like I say, I didn't know about 'em.

Mark: Next year is the next one then?

Don: Next year is the next one, yeah; that's in Boston, it's gonna be in Boston in August, I guess, either August or October, I can't remember. I got the list of

where it's gonna be, too, but we'll go to that one. We'll go. We went to every damn one since then, every odd year.

Mark: Then what happens, just meet old friends?

Don: Meet old friends, and the thing that bugs me is you never meet the ones that you want to meet. There's guys that I've been—I've been trying to find a guy by the name of O'Leary from Ann Arbor, Michigan for years now and I can't locate him. I wrote to the Legion Post there and I'm gonna write to the Chief of Police in Ann Arbor and see if they'll give me—I got his name and his serial number. If I had his Social Security number it would be a lot better; they could punch that in a computer and find him. He might be dead for all I know. I don't know where the hell he is or have no idea what he did after the war or anything like that. But the reason I wanted to—I thought, I had it my mind so positive that he was gonna be there the 6th of June this year. I just thought, God damn it if—I called another buddy, I called up and asked him to go and he didn't go. He said, "Next time." I said, "Jesus Christ, there ain't going to be too many next times." For somebody that's seventy years old, why you ain't gonna have too many more chances.

Mark: Well, you never know.

Don: No, you never know, but I just thought, Jesus. Now like this O'Leary, he'd be the same age as I am, seventy-three, and I don't know what he's doing or what he ever did. I think possibly he was maybe well educated, I don't know. I know he was gonna go to the University at Ann Arbor when he got out of the service, he had that all figured out, and I think that he was an only child, but I don't know. You don't get to know the guys that well sometimes. Actually, they advised us not to do it, but of course, you can't help but get well acquainted with somebody. And I just thought that he'd surely be there at this reunion, but he wasn't there. He's never been to one. But this Walter, I've seen him. I went out to his place in New Hampshire to see him and he's been at my place, too, as far as that goes. His wife died now and I thought sure as hell he'd go, but he wouldn't do it.

Mark: Well, maybe Boston. Who knows.

Don: I know he'll be in Boston. Hell, he'll be in Boston if he's alive, I'm sure of that. He's full of B.S. too. He's windy as hell. Well there's a lot of guys. I know that as far as this stuff is concerned, like Elrod Petty, he wrote books about it and he never could sell them because I think—

Mrs. P: But he was a good guy.

Don: He was a hell of a nice guy, but his—he thinks he won the war by himself. You ever see anybody like that? [laughs]

Mark: Sometimes.

Don: Yeah, you know. I mean, God almighty! And if he gets to talking about anything, it's always him and somebody told me, I never seen the book, I shouldn't say too much because I don't know, but they said he called it Petty's Point. His name was Petty, see, and he called it Petty's Point. Well he figured him and the first squad of the first platoon won the damn war up there and he wasn't the only one there neither. But he thought—and I will say he was probably the guttiest man that you ever seen in your life. Hell, he feared nothing. But he didn't do it all! [laughs]

Mark: Those are all the questions I had. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Don: Well, I don't know. I can sit I suppose and talk about the war for days on end, as far as that goes. You think of different things at different times and stuff like that, and some of them are funny and some of them—

Mrs. P: I bet you're glad of this one over now too; I'll bet you're glad it's over.

Mark: I enjoy this. This is the best part of my job, to do the interviews. It sure beats printing library cards. The most interesting part by far. Well, I want to thank you both for stopping in. I really, really appreciate it.

[End of Interview]