Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

RAYMOND RAY

Infantry, Army, World War II

1995

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Ray, Raymond. (b. 1925). Oral History Interview, 1995.
Approximate length: 1 hour 15 minutes
Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Raymond Ray discusses his service with the Army in Belgium during World War II, his basic training in Fort Blanding (Florida), his rehabilitation for trench foot, and his readjustment to civilian life. Ray discusses his first contact with the selective service in 1944, and his decision to finish high school. He then describes his seventeen weeks of basic training at Fort Blanding and his MP work in Boston after basic. Ray was shipped to Glasgow from Boston in December of 1944 and was then sent to Namur (Belgium) as a replacement in the 28th Infantry Regiment. Ray describes the types of missions his unit took part in and discusses the daily life out in the field in the middle of winter in Belgium. He was pulled out January 6, 1945 and hospitalized for trench foot. Ray discusses being sent to a hospital in England until April of 1945, when he was sent back to the U.S. on a hospital ship. He describes his rehabilitation and occupational therapy at a hospital in Colorado. He discusses being discharged on August 14, 1945 and returning to civilian life.

Other topics of note in the interview include: reactions to the death of Roosevelt, reactions to VE-Day, and using the GI Bill.

Biographical Sketch:

Ray (b.1925) served with the Army from June 1944 to August 1945. After being discharged he worked as a commercial artist for a local Madison advertising agency and as a draftsman for Wisconsin Power and Light.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1995.
Transcribed by Georgia X. Hale, WDVA staff, 1998.
Reviewed by Jennifer Kick, 2016.
Abstract written by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Interview Transcript:

Van Ells: Today's date is May 22, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this afternoon with Mr. Raymond Ray, of Madison Wisconsin a veteran of the European Theater in World War II. Good afternoon, how are you doing?

Ray: Good afternoon. Fine, and you Mark?

Van Ells: So far so good, the day is half over so it looks good for the rest of the day. I suppose we should start out by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Ray: Well, I was born October 18, 1925, in Reedsburg, Wisconsin, Sauk County. I grew up in Wonewoc, Wisconsin. In 1939, we moved to Madison to get a better education at the high schools down here.

Van Ells: What did your folks do for a living?

Ray: Dad was a disabled World War I veteran and he had been a mechanic. In World War I, he had been a mechanic in the sense that he put together SPAD airplanes for the French and he got disabled over there.

Van Ells: In combat or something else?

Ray: Well, there were German dirigibles that came over, when they were in Paris, and dropped bombs willy-nilly, but he wasn't really in a shooting war like I had been.

Van Ells: So, was it difficult for you to move to Madison in the middle of the Depression? Financially.

Ray: Well, mother and dad had separated so it was kind of rough. Well, there was a lot of us in the same boat, but we managed. When Germany invaded Poland, I was working in eighth grade in Wonewoc high school, I should say grade school.

Van Ells: The attack on Pearl Harbor, jeez, you were the ripe old age of fifteen or sixteen? I'm not very good with math.

Ray: December seventh was my sisters twenty-first birthday. We had the Crosley radio on and I had never been able to remember when her birthday was, but after that I always remembered. She was twenty-one and I was about fourteen or fifteen.

Van Ells: Do you recall the incident, the attack on Pearl Harbor? Do you remember what you thought and felt, as a sixteen-year-old kid, do you remember thinking that this might have some impact on your life? Did you think that far ahead at that time?

Ray: For one thing, we were all shocked and my mother said that we had been sending a lot of scrap metal over there and now we were going to get it back at us and it was true. Being fourteen, if the war lasted in Europe and the span lasted long enough, sure I'd be in. My dad had been in World War I and he says "You may get in, but finish high school." We found out later that when the Army had us take our physical exam for going into service, we could go in six months before we would graduate from high school or we could stay in high school and graduate. Dad said "Stay in, it might be over" but it wasn't.

Van Ells: So, how did things change after Pearl Harbor, say in your high school, the attitudes among kids your age. Did some run off and enlist?

Ray: Yes, oh lord yes, in fact I'd say 20 percent of our class, who weren't doing too well in school, and some that were, just decided to get into Air Force, the Navy, Marines, you name it, the Army.

Van Ells: So they left school and joined the service.

Ray: Some of them didn't come back; they didn't get their diplomas, of course.

Van Ells: By the way, which high school did you go to?

Ray: Central.

Van Ells: The one right downtown here?

Ray: It's now uptown MATC.

Van Ells: How did things on the home front change during the war? Did you notice when rationing kicked in or any of that sort of thing?

Ray: My younger brother had a Model A Ford and he would mix stove gas and regular gas. But you had to have these tickets or coupons to get regular gas. Butter and meat was in a scarce supply, but we ate margarine a lot. My mother had lived on a farm and she never liked fat, so any time we had meat or anything it was always the fat was cut off. Which was good, it made us healthy—er. [Laughs]

Van Ells: Healthier, yeah. When did you have your first contact with the selective service? I would imagine when you get to be a certain age you had to go down and have a physical and the whole business?

Ray: Yeah that was in Milwaukee.

Van Ells: You were a senior in high school at the time? Or was it even before that?

Ray: I think I was senior in high school and it was in early winter. We went down by bus and a lot of the guys got beer on the way down and drank beer but I didn't touch any of that stuff then. Actually my dad had said if you can see lightening, hear thunder, and eat beans you were in and that was just about the way it was. They did a physical where they checked your pulse and different parts of your body and your, what do you call them? Lymph nodes and so forth. They gave us a deferment because we had said we were going to finish high school so that's the way it worked out. But we were 1-A. And then we came back and finished high school. I think it was June fourteenth of '44 we were down to Fort Sheridan, went through some analysis to decide what particular part of the service you—

Van Ells: You took some tests or something like that?

Ray: Yeah. Rifleman, wareman [??] rifleman. From there I went down to Camp Blanding, Florida and took seventeen weeks basic.

Van Ells: I want to back track a little bit and ask about the entrance exam. Did you remember talking to the psychiatrist or psychologist at all? I was just reading about this that's why I'm asking. Your father was in World War I, after the World War I they had a problem with shell-shocked veterans. And so, after—in World War II they wanted to weed these, sort of, people who they thought might be susceptible to that out.

Ray: But World War I would be—in many ways was it was worse than World War II, because I don't think psychologically a lot of the guys were prepared for. And then a lot of them—well, it's like: we were brought up Catholic and we were taught "Thou shall not kill." And then you have to go over there and kill, just the reverse of what you were taught. And I think with a lot of those guys, that's why we had so many conscientious objectors in the Korean War, Vietnam, other wars. Because they would not go past "Thou shall not kill." And I guess, in a lot of cases—I know one fellow in particular who was a conscientious objector—

Van Ells: In World War II?

Ray: In the Korean War. He was put on the front lines, so they figured they'd kill him that way. He was a stretcher-bearer. But he survived and he's talked to me in many ways that he knew several other guys that didn't make it because of that. It sounds crude and terrible but that's real life.

Van Ells: I hadn't heard that actually, although I don't doubt it. Where did you get the haircut and the uniform and the whole thing? Was that at Fort Sheridan or was that Camp Blanding?

Ray: I think they prepared us at Fort Sheridan so when we got to Camp Blanding we could get right into it.

Van Ells: When did you first realize that you were in the army, when did it all start to hit you?

Ray: Dad had told me a lot so I knew the minute that I got into Sheridan that it was the Army. Then this all came off—nice black curly hair. Irish German you know! So that's about when I knew. When we really knew was when we got into Florida and started basic training. We had begun to learn to do about face, about face, and right face, left face. I remember this one kid in particular turned the wrong way and he got a rifle butt right in the face and out came some teeth. We learned to listen.

Van Ells: Pretty hard way to learn, I suppose, but. So, at Camp Blanding what sort of training did you do? How was it all portioned out like how much marching did you do, how much weapons training did you have, military courtesy in the class room type things.

Ray: Well, it was probably eighty-five or ninety degrees when we had some classroom instruction and _____[??] gets awfully hot. You'd try and stay awake, in some of that and it's very dull and of course at nineteen we figured it was. But a lot of us listened because we figured "well, if we were going to go over there, Japan—" actually, we were supposed to head for Japan, that's why we were in Florida taking basic. Getting ahead of myself. But there were—practically everywhere we went we double-timed. Or if we were on a twenty-five miler, or a ten-miler, or a five-miler, we walked otherwise that would have killed us, even at nineteen. And, had a lot of rifle practice on the range, mortars.

Van Ells: Not to interrupt, did you shoot with an M1 or did you have older weapons?

Ray: M1, yeah, and you had to keep that baby clean. You had to be blind folded and be able to undo it, and clean it and put it back together and load it just like you were a computer. From here to here, automatic. You learned to do it so well you couldn't forget it.

Van Ells: You probably could still do it today.

Ray: Yeah. The other thing was, a lot of our sergeants had been in earlier wars like South Africa, Africa and some of those. And they impressed on us very much "This may mean the difference between you getting killed over there or not." So, those of us that took it to heart really took it to heart.

Van Ells: You say "those of us who took it to heart." Were there some who didn't?

Ray: Oh yeah, there was a lot of guys that were—didn't want to go along with—but the sarge noticed it and got onto their backs. He really made them toe the line.

Van Ells: Now, was discipline harsh in training? I remember my training and it was a lot of four-letter words and anatomical descriptions and that sort of thing. Some of the World War II vets that I speak to seem to have had a different experience. What about yours?

Ray: Well I think the guys were pretty sophisticated that we had and they had been through quite a bit of rough fighting.

Van Ells: The trainers?

Ray: Yeah. I guess it was just the way we had been brought up you, you listened to your dad and your mother and anybody else that was a figure of authority. Like your, was it, principal at the high school. [Laughs] So a lot of us listened and those that didn't I don't imagine caught a lot of what they should have known. And maybe that was the difference between them staying over there and coming back.

Van Ells: But there weren't too many discipline problems, apparently?

Ray: Mhm. No, we became quite a unit. When he said, "right face" we all went right face.

Van Ells: Were there many dropouts? Did some drop out of the training for whatever reason?

Ray: There were some with heart problems. In fact one guy dropped dead on the marching field, in front of a general. It was a hot day and I think he was thirty-two or three and it might not have been obvious that he had heart problems and maybe he really wanted to be in. But that was it for him.

Van Ells: That gets to my next area of questioning, and that involves who was in basic training with you? Where did they come from, what sort of age groups did

they come from and how did they get into the military in the first place? Were they draftees like yourself or a lot of volunteers?

Ray: I think a lot of ours were draftees I can't remember any of them that had been volunteered. We knew guys from South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Pennsylvania; my good buddy that never came back was from Princeton, Wisconsin. And there was guys from New York, California.

Van Ells: It sounds like a really good mix.

Ray: It was.

Van Ells: How did all these people get along in training?

Ray: Very good. We had one fellow, he was Italian, I think, that apparently had never been taught how to wash clothes or take a bath. So this one sergeant said "You guys—" He was in our, there was about, let's see, six or eight of us in a barracks and all it was, was just a wood frame with a roof and then the screens all the way around it. And then you'd close these down when it got cool like in October, if you were still there, or put them up when it was hot and that was our air-conditioning. But anyway, this sergeant said "He's beginning to smell a little bit, so why don't you guys take him down to the shower" latrine we called it "and give him a lesson on how to stay clean and clothes too." So we took him down there and he took his clothes off and we showed him how to scrub them and also he learned how to wash himself. I don't know if he was just lazy or if he had parents that just let him grow and didn't teach him anything, I don't know.

Van Ells: He really didn't know? I mean—

Ray: Well, he smelled and his clothes sat, I think, in this barracks bag and we would go by the door you'd go like this. [Laughs] Apparently he just didn't learn good hygiene. So it straightened him out.

Van Ells: I bet it did. Did they scrub him down or was it a cordial kind of thing?

Ray: We had some light brushes and scrubbed him.

Van Ells: Did he fight at all?

Ray: Yeah. [Laughs] There was too many of us though.

Van Ells: What about northerners and southerners, did they get along fairly well?

Ray: Yeah, I was a northerner and there were quite a few guys from South Carolina and Georgia, we got along fine. There were no colored fellows in our unit, which I had never really thought of it until now.

Van Ells: You trained seventeen weeks at Camp Blanding. Jeez, that's a long time.

Ray: It was from June until almost October some time.

Van Ells: You must have had your army basic there and then the more advanced what they call AIT today—the advanced training.

Ray: Mhmm. We got done with our basic training and we got delay en route. We came home, visited with relatives, and then went back to Fort George Meade, Maryland.

Van Ells: To go overseas?

Ray: Yeah. And we did like M.P. work, Boston area or some of the other cities around 'cause there were a lot of prostitutes and problems.

Van Ells: I want to come back to that sort of thing in a second. I'm interested in your training. When it came to your infantry tactics and that sort of thing you did all that at Camp Blanding, too.

Ray: Oh yeah, throwing grenades.

Van Ells: Did you work with, say, artillery people and armor people and the sort of, what they call, combined arms? Did you do any of that sort of thing down there?

Ray: No, not really. We went on—where you got a map and you got a compass and you had to learn to follow to get to a certain place. And then you had these deals where—dye, bags of dye were thrown at—there was a blue troops and the red troops. And you infiltrated the, or tried to, and knock out as many as you could. That sort of thing. And then you crawled under live ammunition, under barbed wire and that sort of stuff. It was really pretty basic basic.

Van Ells: Looking back, did it prepare you for the actual combat experiences that you experienced?

Ray: I don't think anything could've. The Germans, the young Nazi youth that we ran into—I mean they had been brainwashed just like the Japs had. Two whole generations of German and Japanese that never had a chance to use this in other ways. When I came back and I started thinking about it, we were lucky. At least we had a chance to use this.

Van Ells: As you're training of course the D-Day invasion had already happened and we were driving across Europe already. So when you went home, then, after your basic training, how was that? Because you knew you were going overseas already, I can imagine it would be a, kind of a tough time for you and your family.

Ray: Well, my mother I'm sure she got a lot more gray hairs but she really didn't show how she felt in here. We just were young enough that we didn't know fear. So, went through the delay en route and headed over to Fort George Meade and wondered what we were going to do there. They were just apparently killing time until they had a ship for the troops to go over on.

Van Ells: And what did you do while you were waiting there?

Ray: A lot of MP work. And of course more marching and discipline and marching and cleaning your rifle.

Van Ells: What sort of MP work was this? Just going around town, you mentioned the prostitutes and the drinking, and that sort of thing.

Ray: In Boston area, yeah, it was just more or less, I think, for guys that were on a weekend pass, or whatever, and keeping them in line and getting 'em out of problems, or potential problems. Which a lot of 'em would get too much of this and then the prostitutes would move in and they could roll 'em.

Van Ells: Was that a big problem?

Ray: It was big enough then. And of course there were not the female prostitutes there were also guys that were working at things.

Van Ells: As someone who'd been though a whole seventeen weeks of basic training, did you have enough authority, I suppose to—?

Ray: We had the MP arm badges with the uniform and the rifle. Anybody who would look at you twice they would either take off or get in trouble.

Van Ells: So, you finally did ship off, then, from Maryland?

Ray: Yep, Boston harbor. Fort George Meade then we went to Boston harbor. It was a recommissioned, I think, after World War I—luxury ship. And they just gutted the whole thing and had bunks, I'd say five of 'em up to the top them.

Van Ells: As a young enlisted guy you had to stay in one of those I take it.

Ray: Oh yeah. In fact we even had sergeants who were in our areas too. The worst part was we were in one of the worst storms there was as we headed out of Boston harbor. Being land lovers—ships now have these struts that come out this way and the ship doesn't go like this, it kind of is kept level. But the ship when we were on went like this, and this, and then it was going like this.

Van Ells: I imagine there was a lot of seasickness.

Ray: [Laughs] We plugged the plumbing [laughs]. It was horrible. Have you ever been—too much liquor and got sick over it? Well, it's even worse than that! You get rid of what you had in your stomach and then your stomach keeps going. You are sore for three or four days. But we talked to one of the guys that was on the ship, I think he was Merchant marine man, and he said the smart thing to do is eat as much as you can and keep your stomach full. There was this one time, I was talking to this one kid, he said "What's the matter, you got a weak stomach?" and I said "No I'm throwing it just as far as that guy!" [Laughter]

Van Ells: This was pretty common, I take it, on the ship. This trip took you how long?

Ray: We left there, December twenty-first and we got into Glasgow, Scotland. It seems to me it was three or four days.

Van Ells: That was a pretty quick trip over seas.

Ray: Maybe it was more, it's kind of foggy in my memory. But I know when we got toward the front lines it was after Christmas. But we went down through from Scotland to South Hampton in—it was, I think, for liberty, a day when we arrived at Glasgow, in the evening. And by the next evening we were in South Hampton. Went right straight on through.

Van Ells: They must have rushed you right in there, huh?

Ray: Oh yeah. See, we were the replacements for the guys that were killed in the Battle of the Bulge.

Van Ells: No, I understand. I thought you would have been in England or something by that time.

Ray: Well we were, but just [makes *pshoo* sound]

Van Ells: So, when you went over you just went over as an infantry replacement? Unassigned?

Ray: We didn't know it, but that's about it.

Van Ells: So, in the matter of, like, three days you went from Glasgow to the Ardennes.

Ray: Yeah, across the Le Havre and then Dinant [??], Namur—Givet, Namur. They were all on the Meuse River. There was a replacement depot in Namur, Belgium.

Van Ells: That's where you got assigned to the 28th Infantry regiment division?

Ray: Right. Its symbol is the keystone, which is your stone that holds an arch together. Of course they don't make many of those anymore.

Van Ells: That was the Pennsylvania National Guard Regiment, if I'm not mistaken?

Ray: Yeah. And we called it the bloody bucket because it was red in color. It meant that a lot of the guys had been killed.

Van Ells: Which had been the case in the Battle of the Bulge. It was one of the more mauled units.

Ray: It was spread right out at Hürtgen forest area.

Van Ells: Describe for me, if you can recall, how you get assigned to an infantry regiment as a replacement and have it all take place so quickly. How long did it take you from Namur to get to the front lines? How did this process go? Did you know anyone else? Was there others you knew from the ship or from training that you went to in this unit?

Ray: No, we were completely separated in the group that we had taken basic with. What really happened was that we got on the forty and eights when we were in La Havre. That's forty men or eight horses—boxcars. And that's where our feet, I think, started to freeze. Because it was winter; it was December. And it was cold. And then we got into Givet, and Dinant, and Namur. And you just went into this depot, they just assigned you and then you went on a truck. And what they did—we had packs on our backs, seventy pound packs on our back, and we had wool over coats. And they had trucks that were pretty good size. And they had, let's see, one-two-three—planks that were on metal supports and we all got up in the truck and backed in and we all were stacked at rows of—three rows, as many as you could get in. And then you sat there as you were driven toward the front lines. And then we got off from the trucks and started walking, and you could hear—that was the twenty-seventh, twenty-sixth, twenty-seventh—getting toward the twenty-ninth when we were really up in the front lines. We were walking through snow up to our rear ends or knees, or creeks up to our waists. No way could you stay dry or warm. What we were doing in a sense was—the points of the Germans coming towards

Brussels, we were cutting off those units and mopping up the groups. We came onto several Nazi youths who yelled at us, in German, to surrender. We said, "Nuts to you!" or "Nein!" I guess we said, too, and then let them have it. I mean, it was either them or us. What they had done, they had shot our medics through the head execution style. That infuriated a lot of us.

Van Ells: Did that happen while you were there or before you got there?

Ray: We were going through the forest and they shot the medics. Of course we chased after them and got them.

Van Ells: I'm going to back track a little bit, sort of follow this step by step as best we can. When did you first meet people from the 28th division? When did you first meet your sergeant and your lieutenant? Was it when you got off the truck there?

Ray: When we were towards the front lines, the truck driver knew where the 28th was. He just dropped us off and then we were assimilated into the unit. No hand shaking or anything like that, just this is Ray and this is so and so. But you really didn't get to know the guys like we had done in basic because everything was so fast.

Van Ells: My next question was going to be: how did you get along with the veterans of the unit, those that had been there for awhile? If you look back at the Vietnam experiences one of problems was that because people were constantly being rotated out, it didn't give the unit solidarity. Of course they had a choice name for the new people in the units. I am wondering—it sounds very similar to your situation; I'm wondering how the old guys that had been there for a while accepted you?

Ray: They were sort of like older brothers in that sense. We were actually only with them from the twenty-ninth of December until the sixth of January. We were constantly moving. I remember one time in particular, they would check in when we were caught under fire. The Germans were trying to get us by mortar fire. We were like on a hill but on the top of this hill was this little gully with water in it. The Germans were over here and they were trying to drop the mortars on us, but they kept going over the hill, thank God. We spent, I remember, most of that night with our rear ends in the water, running through. And we were, all of us from fear and cold, were just shivering constantly. We were afraid we were making noise with all our rattling with all the different stuff we had to alert the Germans where we were. I remember falling asleep and then I guess the sergeant of the group toward morning was checking to see if everybody was there. I think I was with a group that was part of the squad but another area of it. He said, "Ray, I don't remember you." and I said, "I'm a replacement." he said "Okay, stay where you are" kind of

checking. But we kept working towards this one little village, I can't even remember if it was Maastricht or whatever it was. We were coming down to kind of simulate the front lines and the ground was frozen quite badly. You had these shovels, the handle will bend back and the shovel you screw down and you can put it in your pack. We had one hell of a time trying to dig foxholes. So, we'd pick any area that had sort of an indentation and then try and break through that. Constantly living out side.

Van Ells: I was going to ask what kind of accommodations, quote/unquote, did you have? Did you sleep in tents or did you just sort of burrow out a hole in the snow somewhere?

Ray: Yeah. See, the houses, the Germans had mortars pretty much and artillery zeroed in on certain areas. And any house that would show any smoke or any light or if anybody lit a cigarette, snipers or artillery or mortar would come whamming in. So we had blankets and we had shelter halves. I remember this one time in particular; we buddied up, where you put down pine boughs. We dug a place about that deep, just enough for two bodies to be under it. Then you put down pine boughs, then you put down shelter half, then you put down a blanket, then you put a blanket on top of you. You didn't take any of your clothes off, and then you put the tarp on. It had snowed that night which was good insulation. And unless we snored you couldn't tell where we were. This was all part of the process, freezing limbs—no warm safe spots, period; it's like you were out in the elements. We had K rations and C rations, nothing hot.

Van Ells: Not even a cup of coffee?

Ray: Maybe the cadre or the sergeants, but we got water where we could, and then put this atabrine, or whatever. Supposedly kill the varmints in it, or whatever.

Van Ells: Now, you are a Wisconsin native and you've been through Wisconsin winters. I was wondering if you could compare how cold and snowy it was there compared to ones you had grown up in.

Ray: Pretty much the same. Belgium, in fact, it almost reminded me of Wisconsin. It had rolling hills and macadam roads. But one time that we were really shocked, we were walking through this one town and it had snowed and we sat down on what we thought was rocks or what ever. Got out our K rations or C rations and started eating and I figured I'd brush off this area and here it was a human body, frozen solid. Of course I threw up and didn't eat any more! There had been no time between the Bulge and a lot of the snow storms and all the killing and shooting, and people getting here and getting out, so forth. No way could these bodies be moved or even know where they were.

Van Ells: Until spring.

Ray: Yeah, or warmer weather. And that was a bitch of a winter. Pardon my French.

Van Ells: That's okay, I speak French. [Laughs] You were pulled out on January sixth? And it was because of—I'm sorry, go ahead.

Ray: They were relieving our unit, but thank God they did. We were so cold we were warm and that's the last stages of hypothermia. Our legs felt just like fence posts, from 'bout the knees on down and we knew they were froze. I mean, living in Wisconsin. It'd been different if we'd been in Florida, you don't get snow there. When we got back to this one hotel in Belgium, they put us in a room about the size of maybe this area in here and we all slept with our heads to the walls and our feet towards the center of the room. When we woke up in the morning we were exhausted and we slept really sound. They had to cut our boots off. The walls were running with condensation because of all of our breathing. And the hotel, to us it was a luxury because it was a roof over your head, there was no danger from anybody shooting at you and it was warm. But our feet in the mean time had swollen so bad they had to cut our boots off and then the skin split from the warmth. Well then we headed back to Paris, all the hospitals were full so I was billeted—several of us were billeted in a museum.

Van Ells: In Paris?

Ray: Yeah. Went past the Champs-Élysées, it was just at Arc de Triomphe. The next thing we were heading for Sherborne [sp??] and over to England. To Hartford, England.

Van Ells: Now of the guys in your company, how many suffered from the frostbite? What was the medical diagnosis?

Ray: I barely remember. Three or four of us that had been in the front line areas, that were watching the enemy or hopefully not seeing any. What was that question again?

Van Ells: What was your medical diagnosis was it deep frostbite?

Ray: They called it trench foot, which was actually frozen feet. We didn't lose any toes or feet, but we lost skin like that and toe nails and we couldn't walk. Let's see, January, February, March, April—by May we could kind of walk on our heels, but we couldn't put any pressure or body weight.

Van Ells: There was some surgical removal of tissue? When you say you lost—

Ray: It atrophied yeah, it just atrophied off.

Van Ells: Of the guys in your company, how many guys suffered as severely as you did?

Ray: Just in our squad, I would say eight or nine.

Van Ells: Out of? I don't know how big a squad is.

Ray: I can't remember. Twenty-four. But we had no overshoes. We checked in the replacement depot: "No overshoes in your size." The pack on our back had actually been a double supply of underwear, socks and so forth. We were a walking supply house, so that when we got to the replacement depot we left all of that there. So we had no new dry socks or boots to put on to keep our feet warm and dry. So the elements took over, even at nineteen. I got back to England and got pneumonia, 106 temperature. Some older nurse specialed me and got me through it.

Van Ells: So, you spent how long in the hospital?

Ray: From January until April and then we were headed back to the United States, a hospital ship.

Van Ells: So, by the time you got back to the US you couldn't walk yet.

Ray: No. We were in Halton [??] General I think it was April sometime.

Van Ells: You have here April twenty-first, which is my wife's birthday, by the way.

Ray: [Laughs] I'm glad you got that down 'cause the memory. And from there they assessed our condition. I tried to walk, even got shoes, but no way! Just too tender, too painful, so I told him, to this doctor, I says "You better put me back on a stretcher. I've tried but I can't do it." So we were on the hospital train headed out to Camp Carson, Colorado. On the train we got word that Roosevelt had died in Georgia, I think it was. That kind of affected a lot of us because he had been through a hell of a lot for a man in his condition. He just really burned himself out. A lot of the people along the route, we would stop and there were people that were aware of it. The flags were at half-mast.

Van Ells: A very somber time.

Ray: Yeah. Losing our leader, and he was a good one.

Van Ells: So in terms of the army's medical capabilities and their treatment of you?

Ray: All you could do was let—the wards where we were they actually kept some of the windows open so that the heat wouldn't affect the flesh as much. It just slowly, slowly, slowly, was defrosting and then of course the healing process had to take over for the flesh to come back.

Van Ells: Did you realize that you would be able to walk again or did you fear that perhaps you might not walk?

Ray: They didn't know and we didn't know. Apparently they learned through the process. I know when we were kids, when we would walk to school and there was some pretty bitter winters in the Wonewoc area. We didn't have earmuffs or what ever and these teachers would when we got into school, put their hands over our ears and they were literally brittle. They'd say, "Let us cup our hands over your ears until they get warm and thaw out." That's one of the main appendages that freely get cold.

Van Ells: So, when the war ended in Europe, as you mentioned before we started the taping, you were in the hospital? Would you describe what you described to me earlier about the actions and peoples feelings?

Ray: We were in the mess hall and several of us that had gotten aquatinted. In fact one fellow had been on a flying fortress that had been shot down over Germany. They shot the tail element off from the bomber and the bomber crashed of course. He feels that most of the guys died. But in Maple Leaf Down, you might see in this fashion and hit into some deep snow in the German mountains. It knocked him out and he wasn't sure how long he had been out, and he came to. I think he stayed there as long as he could but some of the German natives in the area realized that the tail element had come down so they checked him out. He lost his big toe and several of the small toes. When you lose your big toe you lose the balance element, so after that he had to use a cane. He had the same process we did with the slowly thawing out. But he said the Germans treated him well, lots of potato soup and onions.

Van Ells: I don't suppose there was too much left to eat by the time the war got too far into Germany?

Ray: No. The other thing was as we were going out to Colorado, I ran into this fellow who was from Chicago. His name was Donald Sousing [sp??] and he had been in Stalag II, and was nothing but skin and bones. He had had the same problem with his feet. So we became pretty good buddies. He was telling me about some of the things that happened where they were. And they were shifted from here to there as the Americans came closer.

Van Ells: They eventually liberated them?

Ray: Yeah. They just let them go and the Germans ran toward Germany.

Van Ells: So VE-Day, when you first heard the news?

Ray: Oh yeah. We were in the mess hall and we were talking away. This one fellow that was on the flying fort and myself and Sousing, we started hearing this "V-E! V-E! V-E!" and then the guys singing God Bless America. Then we knew, and even the German prisoners that were working in the mess hall were yelling and jumping up and down, crying and so forth.

Van Ells: Now, there was still the war against Japan of course. But the people you were with apparently weren't going to get back in it, period?

Ray: No. You could take different classes and we took piano. But we realized as we started taking them that you have to start when you were about five, six or seven to learn the bass and the treble and then try and put them together. And I just couldn't do it [laughs] at twenty.

Van Ells: But it did keep you busy, I suppose, which was probably the point of that anyway.

Ray: That was the psychology of it, yeah. Not just sit there and do nothing.

Van Ells: In the hospital among a lot of wounded veterans, what's the atmosphere, what's the mood? What are you thinking about, are you glad to be going home, are you apprehensive about going home?

Ray: Well, going back a ways, when we were in England, some of the medical doctors, they could have been Colonel or whatever asked why we had frozen our feet. We said "Have you been in real battle?" "No." We said "Well then you can't really understand it because you're out in the elements for six, seven, eight days at a time, and you can't get warm, you can't build a fire, you can't do much of anything living out in the snow. What would you do? Wouldn't you freeze your feet?" and I guess they accepted it. It was just a completely different world for them.

Van Ells: What you are saying is: they were thinking it was negligence on your part or you did this on purpose?

Ray: I had no guilt feeling, because I knew where I had been. I told them, "If you haven't been there and you haven't gone through what we have, you can't understand it." Because here you are in England, in a nice warm place, you can have a beer whenever you want or whiskey, you have a nice soft bed and we had none of that! We were a little bit angry at their attitude.

Van Ells: The people in the rear?

Ray: Mmm. I mean, they were trying to find out if you had done it on purpose. Some of the guys would shoot themselves in the foot just to get out of the war.

Van Ells: Did that happen in your experience?

Ray: Not that I know of. We were eighteen, nineteen, gung-ho, get those Germans. That's what we were thinking.

Van Ells: So, in the hospital how did you occupy your time? You mentioned piano lessons there must have been other things.

Ray: In England they had Plexiglas from the bombers that had crashed; we made photograph—deals that would hold a photograph. Like a square or a rectangle or a heart, things that you could carve out of plastic. It was Plexiglas so it carved fairly easily. You could take toothpaste and that would act as an abrasive and you could really smooth it. And we made jewelry elements for our mothers or sisters whatever. Also they had these boards, where you had nails and you could make scarves, all you had to do was do this and then so forth. It was just to occupy your time.

Van Ells: Occupational therapy right?

Ray: Yep. They still do it in a lot of the hospitals.

Van Ells: Pretty much the same in Colorado as well? Same basic kind of activity?

Ray: There we started to get up and about. That's where we were doing the piano lessons, going to different talks. I think it was in New York we put in a claim for disability for our feet, that's where the disability payments came in. But this guy, I don't know if he was a lawyer or what, but he said, "You know you have been damaged and you should make a claim to the Veteran's Administration."

Van Ells: No was he a military lawyer or a civilian lawyer?

Ray: I cannot—I don't really remember. I think he was a military lawyer. One that was looking out for the common—and felt obligated that we should know, rightly so.

Van Ells: So, you were discharged then? For good? Free and clear? In August?

Ray: On August fourteenth. I got a picture of my buddy Sousing and myself holding our discharge papers.

Van Ells: Proud day?

Ray: Well, it was the same day that Japan surrendered!

Van Ells: It was, wasn't it, August fourteenth, yeah.

Ray: We kept our discharge papers handy because anybody that was not—everybody was pulled back to the bases, because they were fearing that the guys would get drunk and snake dance through the theaters, enough of that anyway on the base that day. But we were heading home.

Van Ells: So, when did you finally get back to Madison?

Ray: It must have been about the sixteenth of August.

Van Ells: So, here you are a veteran back home for the first time. What are your priorities, what did you want to do to get the rest of your life in order?

Ray: Sleep.

Van Ells: Did you have a plan?

Ray: Sleep. Because you literally had to get up when the old bugle went off.

Van Ells: Even in the hospital?

Ray: Well, you had to get up and about, but it not like it was in basic. I think that, plus getting out of the GI clothing and getting some new fancy clothes. Seeing some of the girlfriends, going out dancing to the '40s music. I still think that is the best; the lyrics mean something and the music was something. Maybe I am prejudiced.

Van Ells: Everyone's stuck in their own time. What about serious stuff, what about school and all that sort of thing? When did you—?

Ray: Well, we went to Veterans Affairs office, I think, the representative and made application for Public Law 16, what was the GI bill.

Van Ells: How did you know to go about doing this? Were you told in the military before you left that you should do this, or did someone contact you once you got home?

Ray: When we were discharged we were told to get into contact with our veteran's organization in Madison, and they would fill us in. This Colt School of Art it

was at the time, he's long gone now but—they had to check him out and he had gone to Paris, France, back in I suppose his youth, and learned all the fine arts and other elements. Of course I went there three years, and also at the same time I was going to night classes at the MATC which, they called it vocational technical school. Vocy-tech we called it. Which was in the old Central High school area and the school I graduated from in '44.

Van Ells: Did you use Public Law 16 for that as well?

Ray: Yeah, you could. The veteran's administration checked out these different schools to make sure they were accredited.

Van Ells: Did you have to wait until—for example in the Colt School of Arts were there other veterans?

Ray: I would say there were a dozen of us.

Van Ells: Out of the student body how many were there?

Ray: Well, he had what you might say three or four rooms. We were pretty much divided amongst those rooms. You did charcoal sketches and you did lay outs, advertisements, you did nude drawings, nude classes to learn the anatomy and all that stuff.

Van Ells: At MATC what did you take there?

Ray: Lettering. Hand lettering, they were just starting to use the adhesive type that you can use now practically on everything. What was some of the other stuff—posters on different subjects. We had, I can't remember his name, he was a great teacher. Gwen was his first name. It's too far back, I can't remember. He taught us a lot about commercial art. The linoleum block, where you would—it was a block about so, it could be in any size. You scoured out what you didn't want to have ink get on and then you made a print of that. A lot of people used to make Christmas cards, notes, different advertising. Some books are even blocked printed.

Van Ells: Did Public Law 16, cover all your medical expenses, I mean your educational expenses?

Ray: Yep. We would pick up extra stuff that we were particular in wanting. Like sketch books and so forth, different sizes that we wanted. But they paid for, oh lord, water colors, oil paints—you name it.

Van Ells: Did you have to work outside of your schooling or were you able do both?

Ray: The last year that I was in schooling—this gal that, actually my mother and her mother had worked at Bradley Memorial Hospital on University Avenue, the old University Hospital. And her daughter knew of a gal that was getting married. She had worked at this Coulsic [sp??] advertising agency, which was a small agency across from what used to be Steve and Diana, East Washington—it's now Klinke's. She was getting married and going to go to Texas to live. She wondered if I was interested in trying to become a commercial artist there. Well I said "Why not? That's what I'm trying to train myself for." So I jumped in with both feet and boy, did you learn in a hurry. I did bus cards, two and three-color silk screen. Where you have membrane that you cut away from a particular area and then this paint goes through those particular areas. You made three different cuts that became one bus card. We did Schoepp's Ice Cream, and Block Cleaners, Steve and Di, that way.

Van Ells: So after the war, finding a job wasn't too much of a problem for you either.

Ray: No. No, in fact they were screaming for—well, what happened when I got out of the job there, the Korean War had started. A lot of the people that were working in Wisconsin Power and Light as draftsmen were in the Reserves and the Air Force in Truax. When they got pulled in the drafting department shrunk at Power and Light. They had a big ad in the paper, in the want ads, "Draftsmen needed." Well, I'd had four years of high school drafting work and art work. Then I had the three and a half to four years with Colt School of Art, plus I had been taking my classes in drafting too. So I had more than enough of what they figured they needed. One thing I didn't know much about was land measurements. Where a mile is 5,280 feet and then you have land sections and all that stuff, but we soon learned. Then we mapped quite a bit of the Wisconsin Power and Light electrical systems. Which is a coal land sections, with the gas, water, you name it. And we did freelance our work too. So, it was really a well-rounded education. The Block Cleaners logo that you now see on the trucks, I designed that one.

Van Ells: Which one?

Ray: The Block Cleaners, baby blocks, like kids take blocks.

Van Ells: Yeah. Off hand I can't recall seeing that although when I do see it I will undoubtedly notice it.

Ray: It's cleaners down here, I designed that just before I left to go to Power and Light.

Van Ells: I will look for that, I'm curious now are they East Side or West Side?

Ray: All over town. But it was so perfect I mean Block Cleaners, wooden blocks, why not? It's like Shoepp's ice cream, we just went along with—the guy's name that started Shoepp's ice cream was Shoeppsshlepshlepshlepsan. They just shortened it to Shoepp's thank God. They figured, who would remember a German name like that.

Van Ells: So, at the Colt School of Art you said, there were about twelve other veterans that were there at the time?

Ray: Yeah, and some that were just regular. This one gal was a little re—

[Break in recording] [End of Tape 1, Side A]

Van Ells: What I am trying to get at is, is the impact of the GI Bill, Public Law 16, on educational establishments. I don't suppose you have a way of knowing this, but did the student bodies get larger after the war? Did you hear people talking perhaps "Our student bodies doubled because of the GI Bill" or any of that sort of thing?

Ray: Well, at the Vocy-Tech, yeah. This fellow, Mr. Colt, kept getting in new people for the GI Bill that were interested in becoming commercial artist. One fellow I knew in particular, were close friends and he became a photographer, and he did a lot of work that way. But there, he wanted to learn the art appreciation element. Like composition and a lot of us gave him ideas too. In a lot of your photography you've got to have a center of interest and something else that tells the story too.

Van Ells: As for other benefits, we talked about employment; you didn't seem to have any trouble with that. How about housing loans and that sort of thing? As you got more established in life, did you use the veteran's home loan or were you able to finance that on your own?

Ray: No, I didn't use any Veterans Home loan. My younger brother and myself supported my mother who was ill at the time. We all three lived in, I think it was an apartment on South Hancock, one flat. After she recovered, why, she got licensed as a Practical Nurse, license, LPN. And went on her own, and my younger brother married, then I married. We rented a few apartments here and there. Oh that was, '47, '48, '49, in '54 I got married, at twenty-seven years old. The children started coming along and we had a couple of apartments. Because of the diapers and all the noise they wanted a little more money, and we finally decided to hell with that "Let's get a home of our own." So we looked around for quite a while, finally bought a house over here on Gorham. The fellow who owned it was a artist and had worked for a couple of the art agencies here in town. I helped him do a lot of the house, what do you call

them, the books they put out that there were drawings of houses, the builders put these books out you know the Home Show books.

Van Ells: Oh yeah. I know Home Show books.

Ray: We did a lot of those drawings in conjunction with each other. The people that lived across the street on the lakeside owned the home. They some how passed on or moved some where else. He bought that house, so his house sat empty. Well we decided there was school there, grade school, and it was right on a bus line, that's it we're gonna buy it. So I took out loans on my GI insurance and some of Northwestern policies that I had gotten and put down payment.

Van Ells: The rest is history. Now I would imagine in terms of medical readjustments into society you had some problems I would imagine. Did you have much contact with the VA Medical system after the war? First of all I suppose I should start by asking did you have any sort of manifestations of your frost injuries that you had in the war, after the war?

Ray: There was a period where they went through some problems, I guess, with the veterans, some of the personnel. I had started to get a growth on the large toe on the right foot. I went out there and saw an older doctor and he said "Yeah my brother had that problem." He said "There's no problem at all we'll just arrange for it and have the spur cut off." He said it was probably caused because of the freezing. That was, I think, in let's see—'50, '60, '70 almost '71, '70, '69—So I came back later, it must have been a month or whatever. I couldn't see this doctor, I saw a new doctor, young doctor. I think he was affiliated with the University; and he pooh-poohed that I needed the surgery. I know x-rays were taken of it and then I said, "Can I see any of the x-rays?" The x-rays that I saw weren't what I saw previous, so I was pretty pissed. But I had the insurance with Power and Light so I went through the surgery away from the Veterans.

Van Ells: So, the VA wasn't terribly helpful in that instance?

Ray: I think they had some problems personnel-wise.

Van Ells: What about right after the war, when you got home were you relatively healthy?

Ray: I was twenty years old.

Van Ells: On a particularly cold day you were not bothered by it?

Ray: Yeah, oh yeah, always, even now. I wear western boots, which come up about half way and wear double socks in the winter. But they still are cold; I mean it did something either to the nerve or the flesh or both. Where they're always chilly.

Van Ells: But it didn't stop you from working or anything?

Ray: No.

Van Ells: You never had that serious of a relapse or regrets or what ever you call it?

Ray: Well, the feet would swell right after '45, '46, '47, '48, gradually that kind of went away.

Van Ells: Those episodes.

Ray: But the feet always sweat profusely ever since then.

Van Ells: What about psychological readjustment?

Ray: I was a civilian and always [laughs] PFC—Poor Fooling [??] Civilian, and I came back as a Poor Fooling Civilian. Army life didn't appeal to me at all, but we did what we did.

Van Ells: Some veterans I've spoken to talk about nightmares and that sort of thing. Did you come back and have those sorts of things?

Ray: No, I had those over in England.

Van Ells: It sounds like you made a decent readjustment back. I just got one last area that I have to cover in these interviews and that involves—

Ray: I think what I was doing was reliving what had happened to us on the front lines and the sooner we could get past it the better.

Van Ells: Sure, absolutely. The last area I am going to cover is Veterans Organizations?

Ray: I'm a life member of the DAV.

Van Ells: When did you join that?

Ray: Back in it must have been in the '50s, '52, '53.

Van Ells: So fairly soon after you got back. Is that the only group you belong to?

Ray: I did belong to the Legion, American Legion.

Van Ells: That wasn't your cup of tea, so they say?

Ray: No. I guess I'm just a pure foolish civilian.

Van Ells: As far as the Legion went when did you join that? When was this brief episode in your life?

Ray: It must have been about ten years ago.

Van Ells: So, fairly late in life?

Ray: Yeah.

Van Ells: As for the DAV you joined them in about in your thirties I suppose by that time maybe. Why the DAV?

Ray: I am a disabled veteran and I have gotten disability payments since '45. Most of the guys that are in there either had this problem or that problem. You feel more agreeable with that kind of a group.

Van Ells: Are you an active member? Do you go to meetings and that sort of thing? How involved are you?

Ray: I used to but I don't now.

Van Ells: Did you hold office in the organization or anything like that?

Ray: No, I had a lot of church duties, I was the treasurer of the church we went to. There were some veterans there. I wanted to kind of stay out of that with three kids growing up.

Van Ells: No, time for that sort of thing. What about reunions; have you been in contact with some of the men you served with?

Ray: No.

Van Ells: I know you were only there a short time so that might be the deal.

Ray: That's the reason.

Van Ells: You've exhausted my line of questioning. Is there anything on your sheet here that I missed?

Ray: Oh, I mentioned those two fellows, did I? Of the German fellows that had gone to Boston University? We were taking them as prisoners on the front lines just before we got relieved. They had gone to a University in Boston.

Van Ells: Were they officers or were they enlisted men?

Ray: They were German officers and they went back to visit their families in Germany and they were conscripted, if they didn't agree to join they would have been shot. In other words Hitler says if you are not with me then you are against me and that's the reason that I think two generations of the German youths who had no choice they had to and the same with the Japanese. They didn't know anything else; they couldn't use their own brain to decide what they wanted to do with their own life.

Van Ells: Were these guys sincere or do you think it was just a line? Or do you think they had really been volunteered I think was the term?

Ray: I think it was the truth. "You, you and you."

Van Ells: No, you didn't tell me about that.

Ray: The other thing was in November before we went over we went to New York on a greyhound bus. The buddy and I, he never came back. I'm glad we did because we saw New York and the Statue of Liberty when we came back on the hospital ship. I don't think there was a dry eye, because when you went over you figured you'd never come back. But luckily a lot of us did. For a while there when we got back, there was a guilt feeling, "Why didn't I get it over there?" The guy up there probably knows.

Van Ells: When does this guilt feeling kind of go away? Or does it?

Ray: Oh, I'd say three or four years. But it's something you don't ever get over. You figure they were a living, breathing human being and then wham! That's it.

Van Ells: Well, thanks for coming, I appreciate it.

Ray: You bet yeah, it was a pleasure. I hope it was helpful.

[**End of Interview]**