

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
CLAYTON RETZER
Truck Mechanic, Army, World War II.

2000

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Retzer, Clayton, (1918-2008). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 45 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Clayton Retzer, a Superior, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a motor mechanic and warrant officer with the 4066th Truck Company. Retzer talks about attempting to avoid the draft by learning welding at a shipyard in Superior. He touches on getting drafted, basic training at Fort Custer (Michigan), and instructing in motor maintenance at Quartermaster Officer Candidate School at Fort Warren (Wyoming). Retzer comments on his trip overseas to Scotland and crossing the Rhine with the 5th Armored Division. He comments on capturing a German soldier who had been shooting around corners with a bent rifle and seeing a can of soup with a built-in heater. He touches on the differences between German and American motorcycles and tanks. While in England, Retzer speaks of assembling and hiding 6x6 cargo trucks and characterizes an Englishman who stole an American jeep. He explains the mechanical inferiority of American tanks, and he describes welding additional plating onto them that still failed to protect against artillery. Retzer emphasizes that the Allies' equipment was superior in quantity, not quality, and highlights the benefits of having standardized parts for the 6x6 trucks. He recalls having weekly inspections in the States and feeling bad about using gasoline to make perfectly straight rows of trucks when fuel rationing was affecting his family. He details how they waterproofed the vehicles for the Normandy Invasion. Landing in France shortly after D-Day, Retzer describes performing maintenance with the 5th Armored Division. He touches on helping liberate a concentration camp and struggling to understand how people as smart as the Germans could be so inhumane. Retzer mentions painting the vehicles white in Aachen (Germany) to match the snow and explains the capabilities of 6x6 trucks. He portrays solving a tricky problem with a truck's air filter and driving a chaplain out of danger after improvising a motor repair. Retzer tells of being stuck inside a tank overnight and being stationed at the Elbe River when the war in Europe ended. He touches on V-mail, USO shows, being shipped home to Superior, and his post-war work. Retzer mentions keeping in touch with a friend from the 4066th Truck Company and joining the American Legion.

Biographical Sketch:

Retzer (1918-2008) served in the Army from 1941 to 1945. After his service he sold auto parts for a year in Superior (Wisconsin), moved to Grantsburg (Wisconsin) in 1947, and operated a Coast to Coast Hardware store there for fifty years.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, October 2, 2000

Transcribed by Katy Marty, 2010

Edited by Joan Bruggink, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

James: All right. Off and running. Talking to Clayton Retzer, R-E-T-Z-E-R, and the date is the 2nd of October, the year 2000. Where were you born, Clayton?

Retzer: Superior, Wisconsin.

James: Superior. And when was that?

Retzer: July 10, 1918.

James: And you entered military service when?

Retzer: September 10, '41.

James: And were you enlisted or were you drafted?

Retzer: I was drafted.

James: You assumed it was for a year?

Retzer: I assumed.

James: And things didn't turn out that way.

Retzer: In Superior they had a shipyard and I went to welding school. They also had these schools for welding to help build--so I went to welding school in Superior and passed the course in welding. And I went to the shipyard to get a job and I would be deferred from the service. But I only could get deferred for six months and, of course, and according to the Army had to be a year, so into the Army I went. The welding didn't do me any good except I taught all the guys how to weld overseas, but it didn't get me out of the service like I thought it would. [laughs]

James: Okay. So where did you go when you first got in the service?

Retzer: Where'd I go?

James: Yup.

Retzer: I got it all there. I got all this stuff written down.

James: So you left in September?

Retzer: September 10, '41.

James: Right.

Retzer: Here it is--here. I went to serve September 10, '41 and from there I went to Fort Custer, Michigan, and from there to Fort Warren, Wyoming, to the 4066th Truck Company.

James: You had your basic then in Michigan?

Retzer: Yeah.

James: And then they sent you into the motor pool?

Retzer: I went to Fort Warren, yeah.

James: And what did they teach you there?

Retzer: They didn't teach me anything; I taught them auto mechanics. I don't know how they--I was just sent there and I end up in a school, the 4066th Truck Company, and I instructed auto mechanics. I started as a Private at \$21 a month. I left as a Tech Sergeant, \$114 a month. In 1944 I was made a Warrant Officer. The school I taught was number 807. They gave me a title as Motor Transport Officer. I ended up on the 5th Armored Division after I was overseas.

James: Right. But you're getting ahead of your story now.

Retzer: I guess so.

James: You were in Fort Warren for a year, or roughly that?

Retzer: Didn't I write it down there for you?

James: Yeah, one year it looks like.

Retzer: Didn't I give the dates there?

James: Then in the 5th Armored Division--

Retzer: Yeah.

James: When did they send you overseas?

Retzer: Is it printed there?

James: No.

- Retzer: I think I got it on this map right here that I got from General Oliver; I think I wrote it down here. I joined the 5th Armored Division—this is the map I got from General Oliver. 5th Armored Division. I joined the 5th Armored Division September of 1944 in Belgium as a Warrant Officer.
- James: How did you get overseas? By ship or--
- Retzer: Oh yeah--by ship. I landed at Glasgow, Scotland. [pause] Here's another thing. We crossed the river at Westover; we crossed the Rhine.
- James: How long were you in Scotland?
- Retzer: I don't know. About all I can say is [pause] Let's see. Before I joined the 5th Armored, I was with the 4066th Truck Company as a Technical Sergeant, September 1st. Does it say there?
- James: Well, roughly.
- Retzer: I got so much stuff written in. I ended up in the 5th Armored Division. I left the States and arrived in Glasgow, Scotland and I got down here. We crossed the Rhine River on March 31st, 1944. This is hard to believe, but I--we captured a German. He was shootin' at us down the street and we couldn't find him; when we finally found him--this is a fact--he came up to me and he had a gun barrel, hard to believe, that was bent at ninety degrees and he could shoot around the corner. I saw this. I don't know how they could do it, but they did. They'd get behind a building or they'd drive down the street with a tank with the hatch open. They put the gun out and in some way they could see around that corner, those Germans. And they had that gun. Another thing about the Germans: [laughs] they're smart people. We captured this one guy and he was going to open up his food for eating. He had a can of soup, and I'm not dreamin'. He pushed a button and there was a heater in that can of soup. It heated up that can of soup for him. I saw it. Imagine that. Another thing I noticed: the German motorcycles. They had a lot of motorcycles and a side car and the wheel on the side car had power in it; ours was just a wheel.
- James: Sure.
- Retzer: They had power in that wheel. They had power in the motorcycle back wheel and the side car wheel.
- James: Strange.
- Retzer: Another thing I remember is this--we captured a German officer. Another

thing about a German—Before he could be an officer he had to be able to speak fluently three languages: German, French, American. Some of ours couldn't speak English. Of course we only had--they only went to school for three months. The Germans were going to school for years, you know.

James: Sure.

Retzer: Their tanks were so superior to ours it makes you sick.

James: Except they broke down a lot; that's the difference.

Retzer: Well, yeah; they did that but they--

James: Because they were made so well that they're easily disrupted by dust and various--

Retzer: Another thing, we won by quantity, not quality.

James: True.

Retzer: If we lost a tank we'd go back to England and pick up fifty of 'em. Unbelievable how much equipment that we had--unbelievable. But this one German told me that he sat in his M4 tank, mark 4; he knocked off nine of our tanks, our Shermans, and never even moved his tank.

James: Well, they had a better gun, you see.

Retzer: Oh. But we had so much it just--another thing, when we got to England, another one of my jobs was we had the best wheeled vehicles in the world. By far the best wheels in the world, not tracks--wheels.

James: The 6 by.

Retzer: You take 6 x 6, which means six wheels on the ground and six wheels of power. When the war started the Germans went into every garage, every home, and took vehicles, so every one was different. When they broke down where'd they get parts? We had so many trucks in Russia made by Studebaker, the Russians thought Studebaker was the name for truck, our trucks. But these wheeled vehicles that we had were the great-- Anyway, I was going to say they shipped these vehicles, these 6 x 6s mostly, they shipped 'em in two enormous cartons. One had the running gear with the wheels and the motor; the other one had the cab and stuff. We hired English civilians to work on this, too. And then when we got them assembled we had to go out in England and hide them under trees and stuff so they couldn't be seen.

- James: You mean before the invasion?
- Retzer: Oh, this is before the invasion. Yeah, we're still in England. I'm out there one time and we found a whole—hundreds of gliders. They forgot they were there; didn't even know they were there. But anyway, I'll never forget this Englishman--young guy. We caught him; he stole one of our jeeps. He came into my tent. I'll never forget the guy; he said, "Sergeant, I know I took it," he says, "But, you know, you've got so many of them, what difference does one more make to you guys?" [laughs]
- James: How did you get from England to France?
- Retzer: Well, with the invasion we left Plymouth, England.
- James: When was that? That's what I'm getting at. How much time after the invasion?
- Retzer: I can't remember. I know June 4th in '44 was the invasion date.
- James: 6th.
- Retzer: June 6th, and I can't remember if I went on a D plus six or a --
- James: Something like that.
- Retzer: I think it was the 9th we landed in France; I remember that.
- James: You came aboard an LST and--
- Retzer: Oh, yeah.
- James: And drove your trucks off.
- Retzer: Yeah, we drove off.
- James: What was your particular duty at that time? To make sure those trucks got off the LST and onto the shore?
- Retzer: No, that wasn't my duty. My job was the maintenance of the trucks.
- James: I see. Okay.
- Retzer: Although I was in the 5th Armored, I had not much to do with tanks. All I do know is they were--I hate to say it--they were absolutely inferior. For example, when the war started we had to build this thing. Now we fought war on two sides and we weren't prepared. So when they built these

tanks, they had to get the engines. They went all over gettin' the engines, different engines. They had some airplane engines in some of them, and they were air-cooled engines from the airplanes. Well, in an air-cooled engine the vehicle had to run so the air can circulate to cool it. When we landed in France, there were so many backed up trucks—unbelievable! They had to sit there and idle. Well, those air-cooled engines weren't moving. What happened?

James: They overheated.

Retzer: They overheated and froze up solid. We took our bulldozer and shoved 'em over the side. They just froze; they were no good.

James: These were tanks only?

Retzer: Only tank. It was just tanks now.

James: And just those with the airplane engine.

Retzer: That's the one.

James: But a lot of them had Dodge engines.

Retzer: Oh, there were different engines. General Motors had 'em and ah--

James: Several companies made them.

Retzer: Oh, yeah, yeah; sure, sure.

James: Okay.

Retzer: But those tanks.

James: You weren't involved in maintaining tanks?

Retzer: No.

James: Just the trucks.

Retzer: Just trucks as far as maintenance goes.

James: That's the six-bys and jeeps?

Retzer: Jeeps and 6 x 6s. Wheeled vehicles, mostly.

James: Ah, I got it. The half tracks--?

Retzer: I had nothing to do with those, no.

James: How did you check those things out? I mean specifically, they wanted you to make sure that they --

Retzer: Let me tell you one more thing if you could check my mouth. When we were in the States, every week we had an inspection. You'd see the trucks lined up perfectly straight. Well, how did we do it? I'll tell you how we did it. We'd dig a trench, see; the front wheels would drop in. Nobody knew that; of course. The trench was straight. What got me was my folks wrote me from Superior about the gas rationing. The ground was frozen in Michigan, and we used to pour gasoline on the ground and light a match to it to thaw out the ground so we could dig the trench, and here these people at home couldn't drive their cars, you know. But about inspections; I will tell you about them. Every week we've got an inspection and I usually run the inspection, see. I think I had eight or ten mechanics—it shows you if you want to read the bottom of the discharge; that shows you. But one time the officer came to me. "Sarge," he says, "next week you care if I run the inspection?" I said, "I don't care if you do." Well, a truck on the back had dual wheels, so you couldn't tell if the tire inside was flat or not, understand, because the other tire was--so we'd stick our foot and we'd kick it to see if it was inflated or not; we could tell by the sound. So when they got all through I asked this officer, I said—he thought that he was fine—I said, "What are you kicking the front tires for?" "Well, I saw you kick them," he said. [laughs] I said, "We kick the back ones." [laughs] He would kick the front tire and he didn't even know what he was doing with them. "I saw *you* do it," he said. [laughs]

Another thing about the Germans, you know. They knew, for example, what roads, crossroads and stuff we were going to come in when we invaded France. They knew that. As far as artillery goes, for a target they gotta shoot over, they gotta shoot under, until they get to a target. Well, before we landed the Germans had done all this, so they knew exactly where to set that gun to hit—bang—just like that. And those guns they had. They all talk about the Sherman tank; I hate to say it, but they were terrible. They had two inches of armor on each side, the Sherman. Okay, that made four inches. So the first morning off them 88s went through both sides just like there was nothin' there. So we thought, somebody in the States got smart; they're going to solve this problem. I got this picture I got to show you of this. Leave this one here. Anyway--

James: Well--

Retzer: Like I say we had two inches of armor so somebody in the States got an idea; they shipped over boatloads of pieces of steel. They were two foot square and two inches thick. Now, see that tank up there?

James: Yup.

Retzer: Look close and you'll see some that guys are driving--

James: Yeah.

Retzer: See those plates there?

James: Yeah.

Retzer: We stuck those on, just spot-welded them--two inches, so that made--

James: Four.

Retzer: Four inches or eight inches all together.

James: Right.

Retzer: First morning out the 88s went through eight inches like there was nothing there. We'd just spotted those thousands--I put a lot of those on myself; didn't help. It went through eight inches just like--don't forget, man, there's five GIs sitting in that tank, too.

James: Right.

Retzer: Another thing about our tanks. Inside of 'em--I had nothing to do with tanks, but never liked them--they're all painted white and where the turret revolved it was marked off at 360 degrees. Now when you shut the tank off you had to put the gun on zero, because if the gun was turned left or right it would be over a hatch on the left so you couldn't open the hatch.

James: That's right.

Retzer: How many tanks were knocked out with the gun pointed straight ahead? You figure that one out. Some poor GI was down there, wasn't he?

James: Right.

Retzer: Think of that one. And you see the reason that you get back the talk about the battle, not the Battle of the Bulge, but hedgerow country. Our tanks had an inch of armor on the bottom; well, in these hedgerows--

James: They're exposed.

Retzer: They were exposed. "Bang" right through there. Ah, man--that was terrible.

James: Tell me about the six by six, the ones you took care of.

Retzer: Oh, them?

James: They were outstanding, weren't they?

Retzer: They were the best thing in the world. You see, if you had a 6 x 6 in France, we had them over in China; they all took the same parts. See, the Germans, they had so many vehicles. If they needed parts they were all different. Where did they get parts? But you see, the 6 x 6 and our jeeps-- I don't care where the thing was at, the parts were all the same. And we had such a--unbelievable how much equipment this country had. It's just hard to believe they could build so much stuff. The airplanes--I had nothing to do with airplanes, but I remember being in France before the invasion and looking towards Berlin, which is over three hundred miles away.

James: You were in France?

Retzer: I'm in France, before the invasion now.

James: How'd you get over there?

Retzer: I mean in England, excuse me.

James: Oh, in England.

Retzer: Before the invasion, and Berlin was three hundred some miles, I don't know. And they had--of course, the English had planes also. We had mostly B-17's.

James: And 24's.

Retzer: And 24's. I remember sitting in England and seeing them going east toward Berlin. I don't know--thousands, hundreds; you can't describe it. I looked clear to my left and here they're coming back. Just think of that. I can see planes going and coming back and they were three hundred miles away. Now how many planes we had is just unbelievable, unbelievable. We had so much of everything. But--

James: That's part of the way we run the war. They say the war is run with Russian blood, British brains, and American manufacturing; that's what won World War II.

Retzer: That makes a little sense, yes. Yes, it does.

James: Because the Russians ate up the bulk of the German Army.

Retzer: Yeah, they did; that's correct, yeah.

James: That saved our tail.

Retzer: You're not kidding

James: What was your impression of the German soldier?

Retzer: Oh, they were A-one as far as soldiers. They can't--

James: Very military.

Retzer: Oh, yeah.

James: And very efficient.

Retzer: Yeah. What I can't believe is, I know how they treated the Jews because we helped liberate one camp.

James: Oh, tell me about that.

Retzer: I can't remember the name of the camp. All I remember is we took our tank to knock down the gate; there were no Germans in there. A whole bunch of girls came out. Now I don't remember where it was, but I remember that much. And, uh [pause] how they could--we all know they're intelligent people. What I can't get is how they could treat human beings--little kids, and go home at night to their own families, you know. It's hard to believe, but I don't--there's a man in town here—see, I had a hardware store here for fifty years in town.

James: You did?

Retzer: Yeah. My son runs it today; it's still here. And this guy from Germany--he's a painter; he used to buy paint from me; that's how I got to know him--he came over here in the early '30s and he told me how Hitler got in there. He says, "If you'd understand, after World War I, there was no work. Nobody had any cars; they had nothing. He had become the law.

He promised them food, cars, and he said he did exactly what he said. So the people went along with him, see?"

James: Right.

Retzer: But I can understand that too, see.

James: Okay. I know all about that stuff. Tell me about what you're doing, that's what interests me.

Retzer: What I'm doing?

James: What were you doing when you got to France? What was your biggest problem that you didn't have in England?

Retzer: Oh, in France--

James: And Germany as you moved in.

Retzer: Yeah, I guess I --

James: Having enough parts for these six bys and jeeps?

Retzer: We had no trouble getting our parts.

James: No.

Retzer: I often wonder, how did they get the gasoline for all this stuff? Airplanes, you know.

James: You didn't have to worry about gasoline for your trucks?

Retzer: No.

James: Tell me about the Red Ball Express. Do you have--

Retzer: No, I know nothing about that. I know that they were 6 x 6s and they-

James: They ran continually.

Retzer: Yeah, they run night and day. Patton was the guy who was way up ahead and he run out of material.

James: But you didn't know maintenance or how well those trucks stood up? You're not acquainted with that?

Retzer: Well, I can't think of any problems we had with them.

James: Uh-huh.

Retzer: I do remember--

James: They didn't break down a lot, in other words?

Retzer: No, they didn't. We were in Aachen, Germany; I'll never forget that. We had to make some kind of advance and it snowed that night. We got up and painted all the vehicles white. Where did we get all the paint from, just like that? To match with the snow, see?

James: Right, I understand.

Retzer: We painted all those vehicles white. I can't see how we did, but we did, you know.

James: Tell me about the six by and the snowy weather. Did they stand up well?

Retzer: Oh yeah. Another thing with a six by I think people don't know. A 6 x 6, like I said, is six wheels pulling and it had duals on the back. And, if it got really bad we'd put duals on the front. We could put duals on the front end also.

James: The axle would take two wheels?

Retzer: Oh, yeah. Yeah; it was made for that.

James: I didn't know that.

Retzer: You couldn't turn real sharp.

James: No.

Retzer: But if you really had to--

James: The fender--I guess the fender was high?

Retzer: Yeah. See like for mud, for example, snow. For traction we'd put another wheel on the front.

James: But they were four wheel drive.

Retzer: Six wheel drive.

- James: Six wheel drive, okay.
- Retzer: The 6 x 6 means the fronts drove all the time. That lever--you could take it in and out of gear.
- James: That's awesome.
- Retzer: Otherwise the back ones always went. But you push the lever ahead and the front wheels had power, and we could bolt another set of wheels--we carried extra wheels--if it got real bad, but of course, you couldn't maneuver, you couldn't turn sharp. But, you could go through mud and snow with that just like it's unbelievable.
- James: Does it carry almost anything you put on it, any amount?
- Retzer: They were rated at two and a half tons.
- James: Did you load them frequently?
- Retzer: Oh yeah. I think the gasoline cans were five gallon cans. We called them Jerry cans; the Germans invented them.
- James: Right.
- Retzer: We could carry three hundred cans; I'm pretty sure it was 300 five gallon cans we could carry on 'em.
- James: That's a lot of weight.
- Retzer: That's a lot of weight. But you know how much mileage a tank got to the gallon?
- James: [Laughs] I'm sure it wasn't good.
- Retzer: Well the Mark-4's got I think one--
- James: One or two miles per gallon?
- Retzer: No. The other way around: gallons to the mile. I think it was about a gallon to the mile, something like that.
- James: Well then they had to have a truck behind the tank because they always run out?
- Retzer: Oh, sure. We always had gas trucks with us with the little five gallon cans. I think it was just about a gallon to the mile.

- James: How about the six bys?
- Retzer: Well that's--I guess I don't remember the mileage we got out of the six bys.
- James: Probably better than that.
- Retzer: Oh yeah. The six bys were wonderful vehicles, you know.
- James: It's nice to know that they didn't break down a lot.
- Retzer: I can't think of any--
- James: How about the jeeps? Do you have any knowledge about them?
- Retzer: I'll tell you one thing you gotta understand about the tank a little bit. When I was in the States with the 6 x 6s, we had a 6 x 6, it run along all of the time. All of a sudden it stopped. It just sounds like it's running out of gas. Well that indicates maybe the fuel filter was no good. But that wasn't--we couldn't find out what was wrong. Everybody drove this thing. Then the first thing you'd think about is the fuel pump's not working; well, that wasn't the problem. Then the filter's plugged; that wasn't the problem. The only other thing is the gas tank has an air vent; so that must have been the problem. We took the gas tap off; made no difference. So one day I said to one of my mechanics—I think I had ten of 'em at that time—, “I'm going to ride up in the front of this cab and you drive this thing. I'm going to get up on the fender and sit there.” We were drivin' along and shhhhh—stopped. I happened to touch the air filter and [bam!] the sucker took off. Well, the air filter is about this big. It sits on top of the carburetor. Inside that air filter is tin. There's a big, big element like a filter over an air conditioner over, you know [unintelligible], and somebody had taken the cover off, took the filter out and put the cover back on.
- James: With no filter in it?
- Retzer: No filter in it, and shut the air space. So what happened was it ran out of air. That's why I got one of those stars on my medal, because I figured that out. [laughs]
- James: Oh, really?
- Retzer: On your Distinguished Service Cross?

- Retzer: Oh, yeah. Let's see. Look at them; I got a whole bunch. There's five bronze ones and two or three silver ones; I don't know what. Because I figured out--
- James: That's a Distinguished Service Cross, right?
- Retzer: Yeah, yeah, because I figured out what was causing--I got one for that.
- James: Did you get involved in any action with the Germans? Were you up close to where any of the action was?
- Retzer: No. Only one time; one time I was riding in a tank--I'll never forget that. And the tank broke down. We were on a narrow road someplace, and it was getting dark out. I looked to the left, I looked to the back and front, and I could see German soldiers running across the road, and we were stuck there all night. I don't know how we got out, but I remember that much.
- James: How could they not see you?
- Retzer: Well, they probably--I don't know; they were just a couple of soldiers. Maybe they didn't want to try to attack the tank. One or two soldiers; that's how I remember them. I don't remember how I got out, but I remember we sat in that tank all night. *Had* to; we couldn't get out, see.
- James: I understand.
- Retzer: But I've seen some of our soldiers that would not get in an M-4 tank; they refused, and they were never prosecuted. Two or three of our men would not ride in the tank.
- James: Were they afraid of those 88's?
- Retzer: Oh, they knocked out like--one man could knock out nine or ten of 'em.
- James: Right. Tell me about going into that prison camp.
- Retzer: Well, all I know is that--I can't remember where we were at, but obviously we were at the end of the war. And we knocked down the gate with our tank and there were no Germans around. And all I remember was these girls come running out. I don't remember where it was.
- James: These girls being young girls or you mean adult women?
- Retzer: Oh, they looked like young girls to me. Yeah. They looked like young girls to me.

James: And they were the only ones that were there?

Retzer: That's the ones I seen.

James: Maybe it was a brothel rather than a prison camp?

Retzer: I don't know really what it was, to tell you the truth.

James: Sounds like it is.

Retzer: [Laughs]. Yeah, could have been.

James: What did they say? Or you didn't talk to them?

Retzer: I don't remember anything about it. I just remember knocking the gate down; I remember the girls. I don't remember anything--

James: Tell me about crossing the Rhine. How'd you get your trucks across the Rhine?

Retzer: They built a bridge. How they put that bridge up real quick, I don't know. You know. They built--

James: A tract bridge. Pontoons.

Retzer: Pontoon bridge. They hauled it on the back of the 6 x 6 trucks and they laid that bridge down, yeah. That's how we got across, yeah. And that's where I saw that guy with—I told you, the gun barrel bent ninety degrees; I couldn't believe it.

James: Right.

Retzer: He had barrels hooked onto his belt: straight barrel and this one at ninety degrees. And he'd drive down the street, open the hatch up, put that gun out and start shooting, and nobody could figure where it was coming from.
[End of Tape 1, side A]

James: Tell me about getting that map.

Retzer: I don't remember this map. I remember this general gave me this map.

James: Open up it up now, see if I can get it on camera here.

Retzer: Oh, this map?

- James: Yeah. Hold it up just a little higher. [pause] North Sea and English Channel [unintelligible]. So tell me about that map; what was involved in-
- Retzer: It tells you all about—I'll leave this--if you want this thing I'll give it to you.
- James: Oh yeah, I'd love to have it.
- Retzer: It tells here where we landed in England. The whole course, see here? I got it written down here someplace. Here--here's where I joined right here at _____. I got it written down right. [pause] Okay, now, 5th Armored Division landed in England the 24th of February, 1944. That's right there on the map. That's where the 5th Armored landed, see.
- James: Right.
- Retzer: And I joined them over here in-- [pause]
- James: Where were you then?
- Retzer: Huh. [pause] I don't know, it's all written and I can't read it [unintelligible].
- James: Okay.
- Retzer: If you want that I'll give you that; you can have it.
- James: Sure, okay, thank you. Okay. So how long were you in Germany after the war? Tell me about the end of the war. How'd you find that out?
- Retzer: End of the war. See, when the war ended we had a point system.
- James: Oh, I know about that. Where were you when you found out that the war in Germany was over?
- Retzer: I was at the Elbe River.
- James: All right. See, this is what I want to know.
- Retzer: Because I remember the Russians weren't allowed to come across and we weren't allowed to go across, but we had to fire--use our tanks for artillery. I'll never forget the M-4s. I hate to bring those things up. We couldn't elevate our guns. What did we do? We took a shovel and we had to dig a hole. The Germans--see the German Mark, their tank; they could use that tank for anti-aircraft.

James: I know.

Retzer: Either one. We couldn't do that; see, we couldn't elevate the gun.

James: Where were you when the war ended in Germany?

Retzer: As far as I know I was at the Elbe River.

James: I see.

Retzer: And then we had what they call a point system.

James: I know about the point system; I don't want to know about that.

Retzer: Okay. But then, you asked me about where I was. Well, because of my points, I had enough points I came home; I didn't have to go to the Pacific. If your points were lower you had to go to the Pacific, something like that, but I came right back.

James: Depending on what you did. If they needed you bad enough--

Retzer: Probably; that could be--yes.

James: So you went right home from Germany?

Retzer: I was discharged and--

James: With your unit or individually?

Retzer: [Pause] I guess I can't tell ya.

James: Did you fly home or take a ship?

Retzer: Oh, I come in a boat. I remember when we came by the statue of liberty; I remember that. Yeah. No, I came home by boat and went over by boat.

James: Sure.

Retzer: I'll never forget the boat I went over on; there was a big sign says, "The Orion of London." That was the name of the ship--an English ship. It was full of mirrors and all this stuff.

James: So when you got off the ship in the United States you went right home?

Retzer: I went right--

James: Discharged you at Fort Sheridan?

Retzer: That's right; I got discharged and came right home.

James: Okay. So what did you do right after the war? Did you use your GI Bill?

Retzer: [Pause] I went to work then in Superior. I didn't use the GI Bill, no.

James: What did you do in Superior?

Retzer: Well, I worked for an auto parts company, selling auto parts. I was always kind of interested in motors.

James: Sure.

Retzer: That's what I did.

James: Okay.

Retzer: And after that I got a hardware store: Coast to Coast Hardware.

James: Were you married at that time?

Retzer: Yup. I got married over in France. [unintelligible]

James: France?

Retzer: You see that picture right there with all the medals on?

James: Yes.

Retzer: Look at that picture behind it of my wife and I. Look on the back of that.

James: I see that.

Retzer: It tells the date there.

James: Is she French?

Retzer: Take that picture there and it'll tell you. Okay, look on the back of that picture. Doesn't it tell where--what's it say on the back? Is it written down there?

James: 1943, January.

Retzer: That's when I got married, yeah.

James: In Michigan.

Retzer: Michigan, okay. That's where I got married. That was our picture.

James: This is before you went overseas then?

Retzer: I guess so, yeah. Yeah it was. I forgot about that; but that's our picture when we got married.

James: Yeah.

Retzer: I'll never forget my friend, Sergeant Foster, who stood up for me, you know. The preacher said, "Have you got the ring?" and he reached into his pocket; he brought out a pair of dice. [laughs] He had it mixed up.

James: Okay. Did your unit have any trouble getting food properly and enough of it? Was food ever a problem?

Retzer: Never, not to my knowledge.

James: Did you have any trouble getting mail when you were overseas?

Retzer: No. We sure looked forward to it. We had those, what do you call them, V-mail letters or something--

James: What about any USO visits?

Retzer: Oh yeah, we used to go--Yeah, we had those.

James: They came right up in camp in Germany?

Retzer: Oh, in the camp. Yeah, we had them. I forget the name of the movie people that came, but I remember them. I forgot the names now, but I remember they came, yes. We used to go to them. That's correct, yeah.

James: So when you got back home you went to work in the hardware store?

Retzer: Uh-uh. No, I went to work in an auto parts store.

James: Auto parts, and then?

Retzer: Then when I got through with that I bought a hardware store in Grantsburg, Wisconsin. I moved there in 1947. I was discharged in '46. And then I ran that store for fifty years; my boy runs it today.

James: Oh, how nice.

Retzer: The store is still there.

James: Did you keep track with any of your friends--

Retzer: Yeah.

James: In your motor vehicle division?

Retzer: Yeah. A friend of mine lives in Sault Ste Marie, Michigan. He was the postmaster; his name is Ed Mitchell. He and I were good friends. So, yeah. [pause] Well, I guess he can't be interviewed any more now.

James: [Someone enters] Hold it. What are you going to do?

Retzer: We're not getting him in the pictures; he's trouble. We have a long time here yet.

James: We're just about done.

Retzer: This guy is a World War II guy. He's interviewing me.

Unknown: Good.

Retzer: Got any bad things?

Unknown: Are you doing World War II stuff?

James: And Korea, and Vietnam; whatever.

Unknown: You came to the right guy for the WW II.

James: Right. We're just getting through it here.

Unknown: Keep going. Can I listen? I won't distract him.

James: All right. Here we go.

Retzer: Are you going to stay or what?

Unknown: Just keep going.

James: We're almost done.

- Retzer: Maybe you should read this thing before I'm gonna approve it, but still tape this thing.
- James: I guess I'll have to. It's your discharge.
- Retzer: Read that.
- James: I can't read--oh the bottom. Responsible for the activities of twelve men in the maintenance and repair of about one hundred fifty vehicles. You know what it says. Why don't you say this on the camera? This is what you got your citation for, wasn't it?
- Retzer: One of them.
- James: All right, then you read it. On camera, so that I can have you reading it. Are you ready? Here we go; do it!
- Retzer: Okay. This discharge says, among other things, I was a Motor Transport Officer responsible for the activities of twelve men in the maintenance and repair of one hundred fifty vehicles. Performed many welding operations with gas welding. Served thirty-two months as an enlisted man Tech Sergeant. Instructed motor maintenance for eighteen months in the Quartermaster Officer Candidate School. Served twenty-eight months overseas. [Unintelligible] for fifteen--served as Motor Sergeant in charge of twelve mechanics in the maintenance and repair of about one hundred trucks. And what else does it say? It says here 12th of May 1944 enlisted. No, that's wrong; this is when I was a Warrant Officer--this, see this. I was an enlisted man from 1941; they don't have that here. The 12th of May; that's when I became a Warrant Officer. And discharged December 2nd of '45.
- James: Okay; you can stop there now. Tell me now how you got the other medals. What for?
- Retzer: [Laughs] It was all from things I'd done mechanically, you know.
- James: Other than that.
- Retzer: One medal I got when we landed in France. I was driving a jeep and I had the Chaplain with me, and the motor broke down. You'd have to understand mechanics to understand this. In those days they had points and condensers for ignition; nowadays they have all the new stuff. But a spring broke from the points to the ignition. I took my knife out and reached down on the front tire and I cut off a piece of rubber off the front tire, and I jammed it in there, and it worked as a spring and we drove off the beach.

James: [laughs]

Retzer: And the officer, when they gave me the citation, said, “You probably saved the Chaplain’s life.” I got one for that, see.

James: [Laughs] Oh, that’s great.

Retzer: Plus, I got one for that--I told you about the gas cap thing. That’s one I got for that, see.

Another time [laughs] I was on the beach and one broke down. If you ever noticed a picture of a jeep, you see a rope tied around the front bumper—yeah, twenty feet of rope. And the big trucks, big 6 x 6, all had a big hook on the back.

James: I remember that.

Retzer: Okay. So anyway, this one wouldn’t run; I don’t know where we were. And a big truck went by. I took the rope off and threw it around the back of this hook. The guy driving the 6 x 6 didn’t even know I was back there and he pulled us off the beach. I got one for that.
[both laugh]

James: Oh, that’s great; that’s wonderful.

Retzer: It’s interesting, anyway.

James: Yeah. You’ve been in Grantsburg then since that time when you got the hardware store, right?

Retzer: Yeah. See, now I went back to Superior first, okay? I came to Grantsburg in 1947. I was discharged in ’46, so I worked in Superior in an auto parts store for a year or so.

James: Right, you said that.

Retzer: Then I came to Grantsburg in 1947 for fifty years in the hardware store; my son runs it today. That’s what happened to me.

James: Well, that’s a lot. Did you stay in the Reserves?

Retzer: No.

James: Did you join any veteran’s organizations?

Retzer: Oh, I belong to the veterans here in town.

James: Which one: American Legion or VFW?

Retzer: American Legion. I'm a fifty-five year member right here in town. American Legion.

James: Of the Legion; right.

Retzer: Yeah, I'm a member—a fifty-five year member.

James: Okay. What else. You did keep track of this one guy?

Retzer: His name was Ed Mitchell. [pause] Yeah. He died from lung cancer. I'll never forget that.

James: He was a smoker?

Retzer: He was a smoker. I remember we were in our twenties when we went in the service.

James: Everybody smoked in those days, remember?

Retzer: Yeah. I'll never forget, in the morning he would wake up and he'd be coughin' his head off--I'll never forget that. And he got home--he was the Postmaster at Sault Ste Marie, Michigan, and he died because of lung cancer because of the smoking, sure.

James: Yeah. That's what happens to most of them.

Retzer: Yeah.

James: Okay, I think that does it, unless you forgot to tell me something.

Retzer: I've got a bunch of notes, if we've got time to read 'em. I wrote a lot of stuff down.

James: Well, look over the notes quickly here. I'll stop the camera for a second.

Retzer: All right, let's see. What else have I got? I end up in the 5th Armored Division, I told you that.

James: Yeah.

Retzer: We crossed the Rhine in [unintelligible]. One of my jobs in England was to waterproof vehicles to go across—they'd land in France. I've got a

picture of this. We had to waterproof these vehicles, 6 x 6s, okay? They could drive underwater so just the guys head was sticking out of the cab. So what did we do? We took the carburetor air filter out; we put a big hose on it.

James: Stuck it to the outside?

Retzer: Okay. Then we'd take the fan belt off so the fan wouldn't throw water all over everything. Okay, so the spark plugs are there, aren't they?

James: Right.

Retzer: We had some special kind of compound; I don't know what. We take it out over the plug and just cover it up so the water didn't get to it. They'd run underwater. The 6 x 6, you could drive 'em with just your head sticking out.

James: [laughs]

Retzer: No kidding; yeah, they did. Yeah. And I told you about the white paint in Aachen, Germany, yeah.

James: Yeah.

Retzer: I told you about that. But those 6 x 6s--I can't get over how wonderful they were. One other thing: we had another tank called a light tank, or an M-5. They had a 37 mm—the Shermans had a 75; that's the size of that caliber, right--that was 75? [pause] What did you do in the service?

James: I was in the Navy.

Retzer: Okay. [pause] That 37 mm--

James: A Stewart tank.

Retzer: Pardon?

James: A Stewart tank. They used them in the Pacific.

Retzer: Anyway, the armor plating on a tank, the most vulnerable spot is the rear end; the front's got the big armor plate. This one buddy of mine was drivin' one of these little M-5s, and he came over a mound like this and here was a big German tank, an M-5; oh. I don't know which one. They had a barrel about thirty feet long on 'em, you know. It was between two trees. Well, the Germans couldn't turn [unintelligible] and he couldn't hit them [unintelligible] This guy had told me he sat there with that 37 and he

bounced all—he said like ping pong balls, he could see ‘em bouncin’ off. He said when he saw the smoke of that diesel start up he got the hell out of there.

James: They were going to back it up, right.

Retzer: If you can’t penetrate a tank from the back, what are you doin’ trying to shoot from the front? The Germans had eight inches of armor on the front.

James: They should have been shooting at the wheels.

Retzer: Yeah.

James: That’s the only way you can stop them.

Retzer: The only way. But see, the Germans had figured out the angle just right so the shells would bounce off the front.

James: Right.

Retzer: You couldn’t get a shell to penetrate it. [bang] It would bounce off like that. You probably know that stuff.

James: Yeah, I know that stuff.

Retzer: You probably know that stuff. [pause] I can tell you some more bad things about our tanks. That wouldn’t help, no.

James: I don’t like bad things.

Retzer: About the tread and the narrow tread and all that stuff. No. You know why they call the Shermans the Ronsons, don’t you?

James: Because it lights up like a--

Retzer: Like a Ronson lighter; it burns. Yeah. And they had 37 mm guns. [pause] When the end of the war came along we had a beautiful tank called a T-26. It was copied from the Germans. Low silhouette, but we never got one. The war ended. I’ve got a picture of it.

James: Did it have a 90 millimeter gun on it?

Retzer: Yup. We never got one; we never got one--the war was over.

James: That’s the door.

Retzer: Okay; turn that thing off. Like I told you, I took hundreds, maybe thousands of pictures. I remember when we landed someplace in Germany see and this--

[End of Interview]