

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Floyd Schmidt
Truck Driver, Army, World War II.

1996

**OH
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Schmidt, Floyd, [b. 1924]. Oral History Interview, 1996.
Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. [1 folder]

Abstract:

Floyd Schmidt, a Sun Prairie, Wisconsin resident, discusses his service with the 79th Infantry Division in France and Germany during World War II. Schmidt was born in 1924 in Watertown [Wisconsin] to a German-American family. He recalls learning of the Pearl Harbor attack when he was sixteen and his father telling him, "I hope it's over by the time you guys have to go." Schmidt states three-quarters of his high school class were drafted before graduating, and only one student returned to finish high school after the war. Schmidt finished high school but was drafted into the Army in 1943 at age eighteen. He describes his physical exam in Milwaukee, receiving his uniform and oversized shoes at Camp Grant [Illinois], and attending basic training at Camp Buckner [North Carolina]. Schmidt remarks that despite his lack of experience, he was assigned to the motor pool with the 78th Infantry Division, Headquarters Company. He explains his job was to drive jeeps, trucks, and tanks around base, transporting ammunition, supplies, and officers. Schmidt touches upon regional differences in the Army, telling stories about an "exceptional" soldier from Brooklyn and a Tennessee man who faked an injury to leave the Army. Schmidt also discusses military life and recreation in North Carolina; soldiers got weekend passes to Raleigh and Durham, watched movies and drank beer at the PX on base, and gambled. Schmidt also touches upon the relations between officers and enlisted men, telling how he challenged an arrogant colonel to a boxing match. In March 1944, Schmidt went overseas as a replacement. He recalls seeing the Statue of Liberty during his departure from Camp Shanks [New York]. The troop ship docked in Scotland, but the soldiers stayed aboard for a few days until they were transported to a base in England. Eventually, Schmidt was reassigned to the 79th Infantry Division where he became a machine gunner. He explains that the 79th Division landed in Normandy three days after D-Day. Schmidt states combat was still fierce; four men in his company were killed by an artillery shell almost immediately after landing. Schmidt mentions that the "Fighting 79th" spent the most consecutive days in combat of any division at that time. Next, he describes sleeping in foxholes and finding German bodies when U.S. tanks bulldozed through hedgerows in Normandy. He also comments on deserters, telling a story of a soldier who left the front and hid in a French village and another who sought reassignment as a jeep driver after a close call in a foxhole. Last, Schmidt discusses fear and prayer during combat, stating, "Anybody tells you he wasn't scared is a damn liar." Next, Schmidt's Division traveled to Saint-Lô [France] and Belgium with General Patton. Schmidt recalls capturing around 7,000 German prisoners in Saint-Lô. Schmidt spoke German with a few POWs because he had learned German from his family and in school in Watertown. He touches upon tensions between German-Americans and former German soldiers who settled in Wisconsin after World War II. In fall 1944, Schmidt's company was captured near Drusenheim [France] and sent to a German POW camp in the Alps. He describes

hiding in a barn after his ammunition ran out and dismantling his machine gun so the Germans could not use it. Schmidt also discusses being interrogated by an SS officer who took his driver's license and Social Security card. Schmidt later learned his identity cards were used as forgeries during the Battle of the Bulge. When the SS officer asked Schmidt why he fought against the Fatherland, Schmidt replied: "My Fatherland is in America." Schmidt negatively characterizes the SS as "something else" and a "super race," and he contrasts the SS with average German soldiers who generally "treated [POWs] really good." Schmidt describes in detail the hardships of prison life; the POWs wore dirty clothes and ate only ersatz bread, soup, and lard. Schmidt mentions the POWs transported by train around the Rhine River and into Austria. The prisoners worked constantly, repairing railroads in Salzburg [Austria], filling crater holes, and fixing roofs in Munich [Germany]. Schmidt comments that American, Russian, Serbian, and English prisoners were all in the same camp, but separated into different barracks. He states it was hard to communicate with the Serbs, but that the Americans and Russians got along well. Schmidt also addresses the Red Cross; he recalls receiving beer from the Red Cross around Christmas, which made the malnourished soldiers drunk. He also states the Germans painted red crosses on all their boxcars so the Americans would not bomb them. Schmidt marvels that the Americans never accidentally bombed a railcar full of POWs, but he comments that every time the POWs fixed a railroad or roof for the Germans, the Allies would destroy it again. Schmidt explains there were no escape attempts because the prison was in the Austrian Alps and the weather changed too quickly. When he was released in 1945 after eight months in prison, Schmidt weighed ninety-eight pounds. In the last few minutes of the interview, Schmidt alludes to his participation in veterans organizations and describes befriending Wisconsin veteran Kurt Pechmann [OH 345], a German POW who immigrated to America after the war. This interview is disjointed and ends abruptly because the audio recording went missing during the transcription process in 1998.

Biographical Sketch:

Schmidt [b. 1924] was born and raised in Watertown, Wisconsin. He was drafted into the Army in 1943 and served as a truck driver and later a machine gunner in the 79th Infantry Division during World War II. Schmidt participated in the Invasion of Normandy three days after D-Day and fought in Northern France, Belgium, and the Rhineland. Captured in Alsace in fall 1944, Schmidt spent eight months in a German prison camp. After the war, he drove semi trucks for Motor Transport Co. for five years before starting a thirty-year career as a steamfitter. Schmidt earned a Purple Heart, Bronze Star, and three European battle stars. He currently resides in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996

Transcribed by Karen Emery, WDVA staff, ca. 1998

Transcript edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

- Mark: Then we'll just start with some questions. Okay. Today's date is April 2, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Floyd Schmidt of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin; a veteran of the European Theater in the Second World War. Good morning and thanks for driving in today. It's a nice day to drive in I suppose.
- Floyd: You bet it is. Not too bad. Well, I didn't go all that far, just to East Towne to get the bus.
- Mark: I suppose we should start at the top, as they say. Why don't 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 on 1941.
- Floyd: I was born and raised in Watertown and December 7, I remember it as a very, very cold day and we were all sitting around a stove that we had in the living room and my dad turned the radio on, and they said that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. I guess I was about seven-- sixteen or seventeen — sixteen. And then he said, "Well, that means war. I hope it's over with by the time you guys have to go." But it didn't happen.
- Mark: Now, as a young man — you were, you know, what? Sixteen, as you said. What was your personal reaction? Did you think that this is something that you might be involved in? Or as a 16-year-old, do you even think that far ahead?
- Floyd: No, I didn't. Not really. I thought by the time I hit eighteen it would be all over with, they'd clean them up and be done with it. At that time we didn't know that we didn't have anything, you know, not as far as Army or Air Force or anything was concerned, we didn't.
- Mark: So you were still in high school?
- Floyd: Yes.
- Mark: As the war dragged on and as your graduation day came up, it came closer and closer to your decision to have to enter the service or be subject to the draft, how did that affect young guys in high school, such as yourself?
- Floyd: Well, I believe that three-quarters of our senior class was drafted at the end of 11th grade. And when we came back, we could go back to school but only one guy did and he didn't stay long. I guess he was only there about three months and then he quit.

- Mark: And you eventually were drafted.
- Floyd: Yes.
- Mark: Was it a surprise to you? I get the impression it wasn't.
- Floyd: No, no, not at all.
- Mark: Was there something else you were going to say?
- Floyd: No.
- Mark: I'd like to talk about your induction process. I went off to basic training about 40 years after you did. I'm sure there were similar experiences and some different ones as well. Why don't you just sort of walk me through the steps of getting the greeting from the Selective Service to your basic training.
- Floyd: Well, we got that post card — Greetings. You are selected to be examined and so forth. So we got on a bus one morning, went to Milwaukee, and there they, the physical they gave us didn't amount to a hill of beans anyway but "You're in." That's what they said. Then we went back home. I guess I was home until March then. And then we got on a train and bus in Watertown, went to Milwaukee again, then we got on a train and went to Camp Grant, Illinois. That one I'll never forget. They gave me clothes and shoes. I wore a 9D and they gave me 11B. All the clothes were too big. So we hung around there for two or three days, then we went to Camp Buckner, North Carolina. The first thing I did was took those shoes down to supply room and I showed them to sergeant and he said, "Good God, what are you doing with such big shoes?" so he gave me the right size and that was okay. But as far as basic training when I got there, I didn't! I suppose I had two days of it. And then one night the lieutenant came in from the motor pool and he said, "Would you mind driving trucks for us?" I said, "No, not a bit." "Well," he said, "you come to the motor pool in the morning." So I went over in the morning. Then I started driving almost anything they had from the light tanks down. A lot of times I had to drive for a colonel or a general or a major or something with a jeep 'cause the guy'd be off on vacation that usually drove for the colonel we had. I walked in by him and, of course, we had to salute him and stuff, he's "Aw, forget that foolishness. Go out there and lay down under the tree. If I want you, I'll holler." So I went out there and laid down under the tree and pretty soon he come, woke me up, and he said, "Let's go." I said, "Where we going?" "Into town. I've got to get a uniform." So we're going, I was headed for the main gate. "No, no, no," he said. "Go the other way." So way down the end of the camp and out over railroad tracks through the field. I said, "Why you doing this?" "Oh," he said, "then you don't have to stop and show

them passes and stuff and we ain't got none anyway." So we went into town, got his uniform. On the way back he said, "Go in the main gate." I said, "Why?" They won't bother us coming in. They never bother an officer coming in. They think they let them out anyway. So that's about all my basic training was, was hauling guys and ammunition. One morning we loaded up a load of dynamite and TNT. Well, the way they were throwing that stuff on the truck, I was ready to run but we got out in the field all right.

Mark: Now, why do you suppose you were selected to be a driver?

Floyd: I wouldn't even guess. I don't know.

Mark: Luck of the draw, I suppose.

Floyd: I suppose, I suppose. I don't know if they asked me some time along the line what I'd like to do or anything. I don't remember ever answering a question like that.

Mark: Now, had you had some experience in doing such a thing? Other than grow up on a farm and drive a ...

Floyd: No.

Mark: Truck or anything?

Floyd: No, the only thing I ever drove was a car.

Mark: Um, oh, I'm sorry.

Floyd: No, that's all right.

Mark: Um, now, you enter the military, of course you're subject to military discipline. Some people don't adjust well to that sort of thing; the "Yes, sir; No, sir," some of the language that is sometimes used. How did you adjust to life in the military?

Floyd: I didn't have any problems with it. As long as they treated us good, why we went along with what they did.

Mark: And they did, apparently.

Floyd: Oh, yeah. They did pretty good. I was in headquarters company with the 78th Infantry Division when I got in. I guess I spent a good year there. And then time to go, then they called me to go overseas, of course, a whole bunch of us. Then this lieutenant and a captain asked me one day, "Would you sooner stay

here? We'd sooner have you stay here and train guys than have you get away now." I said, "No, I think I'll go and get it over with. Otherwise I'll have to go sometime anyway." "Well, okay." So that's how I got overseas. A lot of times when I was over there, I wished I hadn't did it. When the shells start falling and stuff I ...

Mark: Makes you reconsider your decisions.

Floyd: Oh, boy, I'll tell you, you really reconsider then.

Mark: Now, before the military, had you traveled around the country much?

Floyd: No, not at all.

Mark: So, this must have been an interesting experience to meet people from all across the country and to travel to different parts of the country. Why don't you tell me a little about that.

Floyd: Well, we had one real interesting guy from Brooklyn. They have a language all their own anyway, you know. This guy was exceptional. And we had one from Tennessee, I believe he was from. He sat on the end of the bed and he always said his knee hurt him so bad he couldn't stand on it and he kept on going on sick call, going on sick call. Finally one day they decided to discharge him. That day you should have seen him. He was on top of the beds, run right down the row of beds, all the length of the barracks. I said, "What's the matter with your knee?" He said, "Nothing, I'm going home." So he got out of it that way.

Mark: I take it that was unusual though?

Floyd: Very unusual, yeah. But I suppose if a guy kept on long enough they'd sooner or later get sick of him and think something really was wrong.

Mark: Now, all these people from different parts of the country, how'd they all get along?

Floyd: Pretty good, pretty good. We, the guys did get along real good, but we had one corporal that was sort of a cocky guy. I don't know, he didn't like me for some reason and he always was picking on me and one day I said, "Hey, you, let's settle this thing." He said, "What do we do?" I said, "Go down to the bull pen, put the gloves on." "Okay, tomorrow night, right after we eat, we'll be down there." Well, he didn't know I boxed in high school and some of the guys must have told him because when that night came he never showed up. And after that he never bothered me. He was pretty good then.

Mark: Good for you. And, now, when you were in North Carolina for training, did you get off the post much? Did you get to travel around? What were your impressions of North Carolina?

Floyd: Sometimes. I got into Raleigh once, I believe. And to Durham, was in there quite often. Weekend passes we could get there. A lot of times I just didn't go. I'd go watch a movie somewhere on the camp, on the base, you know. There really wasn't much to do in the cities and so I'd go sit and look at a movie and then go home. Stop at the PX, have a couple of beers, three-two beer was all they had anyway. You get to visit more guys there than you did going to town anyway.

Mark: Yeah. So when you weren't on duty, what sort of things did you do for recreation and entertainment? You mentioned movies and have a couple of beers. Is that about it?

Floyd: That's— that and the movies was about it. I don't ever remember them playing baseball or anything.

Mark: I know a lot of guys gambled sometimes.

Floyd: Oh, yeah. I didn't get too close to that, not while I was over here in the States anyway. We had one guy, I don't know how he ever got in the Army, he was an older guy, and he'd wake me up at 2:00 in the morning, "Schmitt, I've got 20 bucks." I says, "Now, what do you want?" "Twenty bucks. I've got a hot game going over in the toilet over across the street." So I'd give him twenty bucks, he'd go over, morning he'd give me the twenty bucks back. He always paid it back. He was really a quite a guy. He made money at the gambling.

Mark: I suppose it's a skill. It's never been my thing either.

Floyd: No. Him and the dice.

Mark: So you trained with the 78th Division but you went over with the 79th, is that it?

Floyd: No, I went over, nothing, just as a replacement.

Mark: Oh, unassigned.

Floyd: Yeah. So we went over there in March of '44, I guess.

Mark: Why don't you describe the voyage over. Where'd you go to? Where'd you leave from? What was the ship like? That sort of thing.

Floyd: Went up into New York, Camp Shanks I believe it was. No, I don't remember the port.

Mark: I think it was Killmer.

Floyd: No, it wasn't Killmer. And then we went from there on the ship and that was the first and last time I seen the Statue of Liberty when we left that day.

Mark: Oh, is that right?

Floyd: Yeah. It was a pretty nice trip going over. Nothing rough or anything.

Mark: I know a lot of guys I've talked to, I hear stories of seasickness and that sort of thing.

Floyd: Oh, yeah. I guess if you want to be seasick, you'll be, but it never bothered me. We anchored then off the coast of Scotland. We were there for probably four or five days. We couldn't get into port. It was all full. Some of them guys used to come out in their little boats and we'd throw pennies in. You should have seen them dive in and get the pennies. What they thought that was worth, but everybody laughed. We'd have a handful of pennies, in the ocean they'd go. Then we fished. But it was beautiful setting out there looking at the shore, the high cliffs they had along there and stuff, it was really nice.

Mark: But you're just sitting in a boat off shore for a couple of days.

Floyd: Yeah.

Mark: Eventually they got you on land and what happened to you after that?

Floyd: Well, then we went into a camp. It was a pretty big one. It was right near a city so we went into there and we stayed there until we left again. But we didn't dare go out. They wouldn't give you any passes to go into town or anything. We cut a hole in the fence; we went into town anyway. One of the guys got drunk and he said something about the Queen and the King that the Englishmen didn't like and they come after us. Well, there was four of us and it was just like rabbits going through that fence and get back and get away from them.

Mark: I suppose that's why they kept you in there.

Floyd: I wouldn't dare tell you what he said.

Mark: And so when it came to getting you assigned eventually to the 79th, how did this all work?

Floyd: Well, about three days after the invasion, then we went over and we got off and went up the beach, and we didn't go very far, and they were throwing artillery at us already so a bunch of guys there and the staff sergeant was standing there and he said, "What did you do?" and the guy told him, and he'd ask the next, then he asked me. There were three of us left yet then. He said, "What did you do?" I said I was a truck driver. "Come along with me." So I walked along with him and he said, "Drive that thing sitting over there." Machine gun. I don't even know which end of it to point at them. He said, "You'll learn in a hurry when they start coming." I said, "Okay." So I went along. There was two guys with me on it to help. I'd helped carry the thing and stuff until eventually they were all gone, then I had to carry it all alone. That's when I hit the 79th. I have a bunch of books at home that I bought from some publishing company, I believe it's in Kentucky.

Mark: Yeah, Turner.

Floyd: Turner.

Mark: Yeah.

Floyd: Yeah, they got POW books. I got three of them. And then I've got I think three or, one is about the 79th, one is about Patton and the 3rd Army, and I believe the other one is about the 7th Army. I was in all them some time or another anyway. I read the one about the, with Patton. He has a lot of good stuff in there, whoever wrote that, and it's all true. Yeah, we had quite a time getting started up there, finally. We were walking along and we were going to start up a hill and it was four guys up there with the maps standing. I'll never forget that. An artillery shell hit right in between the four of them and they just were gone. When we got up over the hill you could hardly find big enough pieces of them to bury. But that was the first time that I ran into anything like that and I said got to watch my own hide, you see that.

Mark: Yeah, I was going to ask how your attitude and outlook changes after having been exposed to combat. I get the impression that you were raring and ready to go. Perhaps that's an over-exaggeration but I mean, how does the "birth by fire" [means "baptism by fire"] as they call it, how does that change your attitude towards the war?

Floyd: Oh, you really take notice at what's happening. You can tell on artillery shells if they're going to come in close or if they're going over you. If they're coming close, you learn how to get down and out of the way. But if they're going over, you just keep on going. And we were known as the Fighting 79th

for, oh, a long time. We had the record of the most days on the front line until all at once they took us off. Well, then, I just read the other day where some other outfit, they had more days than we did finally. But you'd be going along those hedgerows and the Germans would be on one, we'd be on the other one, and they'd be shooting at you, you know. And then they'd bring up the tanks. Well, the tanks couldn't go through where a gate was, you know, so they'd mine it so heavy. So then some sergeant had an idea back on the beaches, all them dragon's teeth that Hitler put in out there, the steel. He cut those up and he made teeth out of them. Well, they're probably four feet long, probably about that wide at the base. And he'd put three of them on a tank and then they'd come along and they'd hit that hedgerow and there's stones and the trees would fly and they'd go through and then a bulldozer right behind them with a tank and they had another road through. So we kept them on a dead run most of the time, but we'd have to dig in at night, dig a foxhole there, and there'd be a dozen dead Germans laying around there and they'd smell so bad. First we'd bury them and then we'd dig a hole for ourselves. I always figured I'd never eat under any conditions like that but it didn't take long, you learned how.

Mark: Yeah. And sleeping would be another issue. I mean, how do you, do you really sleep in a combat zone. I mean, you sometimes see the pictures of a guy laying there but, I mean, you've got to wonder is he really sleeping or what's going on?

Floyd: By the end of the day, after you're poking around and walking as much as we did, and hauling junk around, you get pretty tired but you didn't dare; one guy always was on guard. Well, towards the end, before I got captured, I had the darn machine gun, I used to dig a hole and put logs across and branches and throw all the dirt I could on top. Then I was pretty safe in there from artillery. And I'd get in there and I went to sleep. And the staff sergeant I was talking about in the beginning, he came along, and he woke me up and he said, "Don't you know you're supposed to stand guard?" I said, "Over who? Me?" and he said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, I'm not staying up all night, buddy, and I'm not staying up all day. I'm going to sleep some time, so now is the time I'm sleeping." And "I'll turn you in." So he went back and he told the captain about it and he called me in in the morning and then he said, "Well, what did you do, Schmidt?" I said, "I crawled in the hole and I went to sleep." And he said, "What do you do during the day?" I said, "I pack a whole 30-caliber machine gun plus two 500-round belts of ammunition." "By yourself?" I said, "Yeah." "Just a minute." He hollered, "Froin [sp??], come in here." And he came in and he said, "I want you to stay away from this guy. If he wants to sleep and get shot, that's his business, but stay away from him." I said, "Another thing. If you don't, they'll fire a hole through you that you can stick your head through." He didn't never bother me, but I had to give that captain a lot of credit 'cause he did stick up for the guys, although he never

came too close to the front lines. He wasn't like Patton; he was up there all the time.

Mark: So, it was how long after the actual D-Day invasion that you were in Normandy? It sounds like it was pretty soon after.

Floyd: About three days.

Mark: Yeah.

Floyd: Yeah. They invaded, and then I think about three days later. The 79th didn't go over in the invasion; they went over just a day or two after.

Mark: Yeah, soon afterwards.

Floyd: Yeah, it might have been a little more than three. I don't know, but it seems it was about three. And they already had lost a lot of guys. It was pretty close fighting there yet, where we were. But then we got in there and replacements. There was only three in the platoon that I got into. I suppose there was a lot more somewhere else.

Mark: And as you mentioned, you were on the line almost constantly.

Floyd: Yeah.

Mark: I mean, how long continually, was the 79th in combat? And how did the guys hold up? I mean, in terms of, like, combat fatigue and morale problems and replacements and all these kinds of things?

Floyd: One guy I was with, he said, "To hell with this war." And he picked up and he just left. He said, "If they want to know where I am, tell them I knew a little gal back down the road. I went back by her." So I never seen him again. And then there was another one. He had a Browning automatic he had across his arms, and he was crawling through a field, they had us pinned down pretty tight, and he raised up a little and they shot the stock right off from his BAR. He got up and he turned around and, "I ain't coming back here," he said, and he left. He came back, oh, I seen him about two months later with a jeep, at night, he'd come up with food for us. I says, "Well, at least they gave you a pretty good job." "Yeah," he says "but I'm still getting up too close." So that's ...

Mark: I suppose my question would be, what stops everyone from doing it? I mean, you didn't do that, it seems, at all. I mean, what keeps you going?

Floyd: Well, I don't know really. I suppose it's just in hopes that some day it will end. And, of course, a lot of prayer with it. That helps. That's where I give a lot of ...

Mark: Is it true that there are no atheists in the fox holes? Is that your experience anyway?

Floyd: I had one guy ask me one day, he says, "Schmitt, did you ever pray when you were over there fighting?" I said, "You bet." And he said, "Were you scared?" I said, "Anybody ever tells you he wasn't scared is a damn liar." 'Cause you are scared. That goes on as long as you're up there, it keeps right on.

Mark: I think most Americans are familiar with the war movie and the combat scenes and that sort of things. If you watch a movie, what sort of things, what sort of characteristics of combat don't come across in those films? Some of the vets, oh, for example, tell me that noise is one of the things that you just can't, can't convey that sort of thing. What are some of the characteristics of combat that stick out in your mind?

Floyd: Well, a lot of that, you can pick the fake stuff out very easy.

Mark: You can?

Floyd: Yeah, if you've been. A lot of people believe what they see but not that stuff. Well, for one thing is a lot of the rifle shooting. All the while I was in there I never had them shoot that much at me and I don't know if they did anybody else with a rifle 'cause they never really got all that close. They did shoot a lot of guys when they were snipers or something, or in a city where it was real close. There there was a lot of rifles. But the biggest thing I think that killed people were artillery and mortar shells 'cause those, if anybody was close together, they'd wipe out a lot of guys at one time. But the noise itself, in the movie, a lot of it you can pick out as fake, too. A lot of the artillery shells, well, some will sound pretty good. But a lot of that John Wayne stuff, and some of those other guys — that getting hit that hard and everything else, and their ships, and, well, some of it may have been doped up. I don't know, but I'd like to see some of the actual footage on the Japanese battleship war they had. I know a lot of times [TV Channel] Twenty-one will have on some of that stuff and they'll have actual footage from the war, and that's real. That's real stuff the way they got it.

Mark: So, eventually there was the breakout in Normandy and then you started to move a little quicker, I suppose, through France. I'm curious as to how things changed after the breakout in Normandy and the rush towards Paris and all these sorts of things.

[Tape was turned off for a short duration.]

Floyd: ... and we got up to Saint-Lô, and that city was almost level. All there was was the chimney sticking up on a church steeple. And every time you'd wiggle, why the Krauts would shoot at you. I think there was a Kraut on every brick in that city. And finally we pulled back one night, and they didn't know anything about it, but we went back. I'm like, "What the heck are we doing now?" So we moved back quite a ways. Then the morning, then came the B-29s, and they'd come up and they'd turn, then they'd drop their bombs, and they blew up off the ground. They didn't hit the ground then go like normal, but they hit above the ground they'd go off. Of course, the Krauts started giving up. I think it was we caught six, seven, eight thousand of them at one time. And I could talk German, and the one said to me, "Where'd you get the big grenades from?" I said, "You want to see one? I've got a whole pocket full of them here." "Nix, nix, nix." And we went. But that cut off big trees. They were, I'd say, three feet in diameter. Just mowed them right off. And out of all those planes that went over, I seen them shoot twenty-nine of them down. And there was only three parachutes came out of the whole twenty-nine of them. I don't know what happened to the rest of them. If we just missed them or what happened. But then we went. Then we got on top of the tanks with Patton and we took off. Then we went all the way up to Belgium. We outrun the gas and everything else, food, and then we parked in a great big field, then he said, "Dig in if you want to. If you don't want to, crawl under the tanks. But don't wander away so a German catches you and finds out we're here," he said, "They'll wipe us out." So we must stayed there for three days or so. Then they brought in fuel and stuff and we moved back. Well, then we gave everything back up, almost back where we were. We almost started over again. If Eisenhower went along with Patton, why, we might have kept going and went all the way through everything. But we don't travel we don't have food and gas, you know. You just sit there — ammunition — But then, I don't know how far back we went. I suppose 200 miles, 200 maybe. And we started all over again and start going. Then we get them going again, then run until they were ragged, you might say. They give up like flies again.

Mark: The Germans you mean?

Floyd: Yeah, oh, yeah.

Mark: I was going to ask what your impressions were of the German fighting capabilities and how that may or may not have changed over time.

Floyd: I don't know. They gave up pretty much, well, easier than what we did.

Mark: Uh hum. You mean Normandy?

Floyd: Yeah. And they were pretty stubborn in Normandy, but when we got them out of there then they were quite a bit easier to capture I'd say. But there were so many of them dead. I don't know if that equaled the number of them that we captured or not but every place was full of them. Who picked them up, I don't know. If our guys did or, I suppose so towards the end. But the average German soldier was just like we were. He had a job to do and he was doing it. But the SS guys, they were something else.

Mark: And so for a PFC in the field, I mean, that was a distinction that you made apparently — between the average German soldier and the SS?

Floyd: Yeah.

Mark: There was no particular, jeez, do I say "animosity" between the American soldier and the German soldier? I mean, was there a lot of, did you hate the German soldier?

Floyd: Well, we probably did at the time, but as time went on and we got to know a little more about them and captured some of them, you know, then I think things did change. Although we had one guy that—he got hit in the head and then he had a silver plate in the head and they wanted him to go home, they didn't want him over there anymore. And we captured twenty-five, thirty at a time and he'd march them down the bomb hole and shoot them down with a machine gun and come out the other side like nothing happened. He hated them just because they, artillery shell hit him. I said, well, he probably was in the wrong place at the wrong time, just like any of us would be but why shoot them because that works both ways. If the Germans would take that over again and find them guys, which they probably did, I don't know. Not [that] I feel sorry for them for shooting our guys, and they did enough of that.

Mark: Now the SS, what made them different, from your perspective anyway?

Floyd: They were the super race [means superior race?], Hitler called them, you know. When I got captured I had one of them, he was sitting up on a platform behind a desk and one of these one-eyed glasses, you know like you see in pictures. And he was dressed just like a guy in a picture. And then he said, "Schmidt." I said, "Yup." Then he said, "What's your name?" I told him my first name, my last name, rank, and serial number. And he said, "Well, what else? Where you from? What did you do? What outfit you with over here? And besides, why are you fighting against the fatherland?" I said, "I'll answer one question. I said this isn't my fatherland. My fatherland's in America." "Don't get smart with me," he said. Then he opened up a folder like this and then he read everything off to me. Where I was born., mother and dad's name, brother's name, everything. How long I was in service. I said, "Why'd you

ask if you knew all that?” “I wanted to see if you’d tell me.” I said, “I wouldn’t tell you nothing.” “Well,” he said “we caught all your records when we caught your whole battalion.” If it was up to full strength, it had been about 315 guys but we were way below because a lot of them got killed, a lot of them wounded, a lot of—some— probably captured. Then he talked a little more to me and finally I must have gave him a wrong answer, he picked up his pistol and said, “Get out of here before I shoot you.” So I walked out the door, boy, glad to get out of that place. Other than that you could just, they’re just a bunch of guys that think they’re better than anybody, really. I was so surprised when I got out and there was so many of them over here. There was two of them in Watertown. One worked in a digital outfit in Watertown. He was a super-foreman, they always called him. And the other one worked on a farm. I run into that guy just shortly after I got out of the war and he’s walking around there real straight and telling me all about Germany. I picked up a piece of wood and I went after him. I said, “You get out of here or I’ll club ya.” The farmer he was working for told me, “Run, Fredrick, run,” he said, “that guy means business.” He ran all the way up to the farm.

Mark: We’re kind of jumping ahead, but I’m just interested in something you mentioned about fighting against the fatherland. You had mentioned that you spoke German as well. I’m interested in how close to your German ethnic background you really were. I mean, did you grow up in a German-speaking environment? Or did you have relatives who did?

Floyd: Well, my dad did off and on. Not all the time. My aunt did. My uncle did. And then I went to a Lutheran school in Watertown and the 7th and 8th grades worked together and the teacher was teaching German. I didn’t take it but he was teaching it to the kids and I picked an awful lot up out of there. Well, after while when I got over there it just all came back and it fit in but I can’t [do] beans with it now.

Mark: Do you think this SS officer was trying to appeal to your German heritage, I guess? I mean, ...

Floyd: I don’t know what he was trying to do, but he didn’t get much.

Mark: Yeah.

Floyd: I didn’t like him and he didn’t like me. I didn’t like none of the SS. I don’t think anybody else did either. Especially after we were prisoners. Everybody hated them. Oh, boy.

Mark: So where was it, and when was it, that you were captured finally?

Floyd: Well, we got going again pretty good and we got up to, I think the name of the city was Drusenheim. I know it was on some big river anyway.

Mark: It's in Germany.

Floyd: No. It's still in northern France. For some reason, we were way in the southern part, then we came back up again, and we got stuck there. For some reason, we could see the Krauts coming for about three days, coming across the field, and we were in a bunch of trenches around a house. And we went into the house and I set the machine gun up in the attic, out of a shingle — we took off a couple of shingles — and setting up in there, and the rest of the guys were down below. And pretty soon I said, "Them tanks are moving again." They kept coming. Well, the third day they came right into town. We had no ammunition. We had tanks and all sorts of guns, artillery and everything else, but we couldn't fire at them, and I said, "I'm not shooting at them with 50 or 60 rounds of 30-caliber ammunition." And so I took the gun down and I took the bolt out and buried it in a sauerkraut barrel. When they captured me, he asked me what became of the parts for that machine gun. I said, "I don't know. I didn't shoot any machine guns." "It says right here you did." "Oh, well, I didn't have them." I said, "I wasn't shooting it that day. Another guy was." "Who was he?" I said, "I don't know." Well, finally he gave up on those questions. The gun was no good sitting there that way without the main bolt in it. A lot of other stuff we buried in there — guns and things, too, that we didn't want them to get. And he took away my GI driver's license and Social Security card, cigarette lighter, and cigarettes that I had. But I left most of them out on the windowsill before I went in and he took all the rest of them and I said, "What are you going to do with that stuff?" "None of your business." So I found out after while they used them in the Battle of the Bulge. This guy could talk better English than I do. Sitting there talking to you. But that's where they used them. When they decided to have that final fling, why they had to have stuff for identification. You know, three years after I got out of service, I got an envelope from the government and there was my Social Security card. By then I'd already had a new one. I was the only guy got two.

Mark: Um, so after you were initially captured, how were you treated?

Floyd: Well, we were in a hay barn, three of us. We dug down, way down in it. Of course, every time you moved, there was a cow down there and he'd moo all the time, so when the guys go down there and they'd feed him, the Germans always fed them. And then one day one of them looked out the door and the Kraut said, "Come rouse." And he said, "How many are in there?" "Why," he said, "three, three of us." So he got the other two of us out and they lined us up against a stone wall across the street and I was, "Oh, this is the end of the line, boys." But the one started to laugh. He says, "We ain't going to

shoot you. We're going to take you back by the rest of your buddies. We've got a whole bunch of you." So that's what they did. They treated us really good. It was just German soldiers.

Mark: Some of them spoke English, obviously.

Floyd: Yeah, yeah. Always, you'd always run into one or two in a bunch that could talk English. Always. They were pretty decent guys. But they marched us way back to, oh, a great big barn and there was pretty near all the guys they captured. They gave me a loaf of bread, that old sour crap. I used to find that laying all over the place and I said, "What do I do with that?" He said, "You eat that." You wished you had more eventually. I gave it all to the other ...

Mark: Is that true?

Floyd: Oh, yeah. I gave it to the other guys in the barn. Some of them, they looked pretty hungry. About three days I wished I'd had it back. It was mostly sawdust and it was real sour.

Mark: So you, and a lot of other Americans, were sort of rounded up in this area. And then what happened after that? I assume you had to go through some sort of induction process or something.

Floyd: Well, they took us across the Rhine River eventually, on a barge. And then they marched us all into a great big barracks. A lot of times I sit and I think about that. It could have been a gas chamber because that's what they did with the Jewish people. They put them in a barracks, told them they were going to get a shower, and they'd gas them. Well, we went in there but they did give us a shower. And they'd delouse our clothes. Of course, they were dirtier than ever anyway. They said we had lice but we didn't then at that time. So then they took us out of there and we started out for another place, for another camp somewhere. And we'd walk, and walk, and walk, and then finally here'd come a train, we'd get on a couple of boxcars and go, then get out and walk. The Americans were too _____, you know. Then we'd walk again.

Mark: Yeah, I was going to ask. You seem to be going through Germany. Of course, Germany was subject to a lot air raids and those sorts of things. What were your impressions of wartime Germany, being transported around a bit? I mean, could you see the evidence of the bombing, and the morale, and that sort of thing?

Floyd: The English and the Americans didn't trust them because everything they had they put a red cross on top of the boxcars, you know. They figured that way you wouldn't shoot at them. Well, we'd be in them. But for some reason they

didn't shoot at the ones we were in. They'd shoot the engines out then we'd get out and walk. They, well, they'd put 40 of us I suppose in one of those little cars, then a little hole like that you could look out of. If you were lucky, you could sit down but that very seldom happened. But the starved us out pretty good. I guess I weighed 98 pounds when I came home. I went from 160 down. No good, the food they gave you. Oh, such junk.

Mark: Like you mentioned the sawdust bread. Is that about it? Or was there sort of a potato soup or something?

Floyd: No. Towards the end you were lucky if you got sawdust bread. But it was soup but all it looked like to me was like they went out in some field and dug up a bunch of weeds and boiled them. Then they'd throw a little block of fat like that, lard into it for, that they called stock. Then they'd boil 50 gallons at a time, then they'd haul it up there in big tubs. All we had to eat out of was an old Army helmet and you could smell the paint burning, the soup was so hot. It tasted miserable but it was better than just sitting there and dying. That's where the VA blames that all on to whatever's wrong with me, you know. With my legs and stuff don't have feeling. Arms don't have feeling. And the VA says that's where it come from, lack of nutrition.

Mark: As time went on, did the food get worse?

Floyd: Yup, slow but sure it did. Once in awhile if we were real lucky, they'd come with a block of cheese about that square. Probably about two inches square. And you had to cut that for 15 guys so you can imagine how thick that was. And all them 15 guys were looking at the guy that's cutting and if he cut one a little bit thicker, there was a lot of racket. And then the Red Cross used to send parcels over. But the biggest share of those parcels went to the Russians. We got one all the while I was in one.

Mark: Which camp were you in specifically?

Floyd: The last one was, I believe it was 7A. It was over near Salzburg, Austria 'cause we went into Salzburg and repaired the railroads. The day we'd get them done, the Russians would put the tracks down, they'd run one engine, and here come the Americans and blow it all out again, and we'd start all over.

Mark: So in these camps you were in, what sort of nationalities were in there? Was it all Americans? Or do you have Americans and British?

Floyd: Oh, we had, they were different compounds they called them. There was so wide and then fences down, there was buildings in there were you slept in. Then the next one we had Serbians in. And then there was Russians in the next one. And whatever was fighting against them. We had English in with

us quite a bit. And then the officers were in a separate one. And we were in a separate one 'cause they were always afraid if the officers got mixed up with us, they'd stir up something, you know, cause a disturbance. So they'd keep them separate. Well, we could have caused enough disturbance by ourselves. We didn't need them anyway.

Mark: Did you have much contact with the prisoners of other nationalities? Or were you kept pretty separate?

Floyd: No, we could talk through the fence to them but the Serbians couldn't understand us and we couldn't understand them. Most of them just sat there on the ground with their legs crossed and a big turban on their head, and there they'd sit smoking a cigarette. They didn't go out and work or anything. I don't know why they didn't bother them.

Mark: I'm interested in the Russians because, you know, the Germans and the Russians had this very distinctive animosity and there were a lot of atrocities against the Russian soldiers, not unlike the Holocaust-type of thing. From what you could tell, I mean, they were just regular prisoners like you were. They weren't treated any worse. Did they have any worse labor details?

Floyd: They had to go out and work just like we did. But they trusted them more for putting the tracks down and the ties down and not us because we'd sure end up like that picture you once seen where one set of tracks is here and one is here, with the engineering. That's what we'd have did to them. But the Russians that we did talk to, they always said "We don't never want to fight the Americans 'cause they're too good, and we just want peace with them." Well, we felt the same way about them but their leaders evidently didn't. They weren't bad guys. I mean, they talked good to us, just as we talked to them.

Mark: So, you were in captivity then, it was about the Fall of '44 up until ...

Floyd: It was seven, eight months I suppose. But you were back and forth. We'd be down where it would be real warm and the next day we'd back up where it's cold. You never knew where you were going to be. If they needed Patton somewhere else, well, we'd climb on tanks and ride back up again. Clean up what they had a mess and then go back where we were. So we never really knew exactly where I was 'cause it was all over the place.

Mark: And in terms of your captivity, it sounds like you were shuffled around quite a bit. I was going to ask what a typical day was like in prison camp. I don't, perhaps that's not a good, perhaps you can't answer that question. I don't know.

Floyd: I don't think we ever spent a whole day in it. We were always out doing something, you know. Working somewhere. But they didn't treat us bad while we were out working. They'd just walk around and watch us. Fifteen hundred of us on one bomb hole, shovel the gravel back in until it was full and then they'd run the tracks over it. It would take days. "Why don't the Americans work better than you fellows do?" I said, "Well, the food you give us, how do you expect us to work?" And everybody had the diarrhea. The bathroom, what they called the bathroom, that was full of people. Sometimes there wasn't even room to get in. And you never got enough water or anything to wash up decent in so we always had lice and fleas, and who knows what else. And hair was dirty. Oh, we were a filthy bunch of guys. But that's the way they left us. They took my uniform away right after they caught me and they give me one of theirs. Old overcoat and a pair of shoes that had holes in the bottom. I said it's no wonder I froze my feet again when I got into prison camp.

Mark: During the times you weren't on labor detail or something, what sorts of things did you do to occupy your time?

Floyd: Well, I don't ever remember not being on one.

Mark: Really.

Floyd: Yeah, Sunday and every day. Some Sundays they'd get us out in the woods and chop up pine trees into chips. And those things, they had a big, great big like a tank on the back with a chimney on, on a bus that they'd fire in there. And then the gas from that would go up into the engine and run the engine. They had some way of getting gas out of that. Then one day I remember, we went out in the woods and we were working in there and I think it was the German Red Cross came out with beer, give the guys all a bottle of beer. Boy, you talk about a bunch of drunks on one bottle of beer.

Mark: I suppose.

Floyd: You're run down, there's nothing left, and then you throw in a bottle of beer besides that, and nothing to eat, oh my. Then they'd laugh. They said, "How come you guys can't take beer? Don't you drink in America?" We sure do but not with, the way you feed us. Funny it didn't kill a bunch of guys.

Mark: So I was going to ask about, like escapes and that sort of thing. It doesn't sound like you've got much of an opportunity to do any sort of planning, or tunneling, or these things.

Floyd: Well, they told us go ahead if you want to. You go up there in the Alps and you'll freeze to death anyhow. That was the Austrian Alps we were in. And

the way I understood it, it was only about three miles from the Swiss Alps. But which way do you go? It's all mountains all the way around you. You get up in the morning and there'd be three feet of snow on the ground. By noon it was steaming. I didn't care if I ever seen a mountain again. Every day it would be the same old story — snow and then melt, snow and then melt.

Mark: I want to go get another tape.

Floyd: Okay.

Mark: I don't want to start ...

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

Mark: So, I'm interested in the labor details and exactly what sorts of things they have you doing. It sounds like bomb damage repair and that sort of thing.

Floyd: That's all we did was just work on railroads. Some of the guys had to work for farmers and stuff but we weren't that lucky. Those guys got to eat good and stuff but not so with us. One night we were going to head back from the rail yards and we got on the train. We were sitting there waiting, and waiting, and waiting. Nothing happened. The engine left with the cars and not ours. So we set there some more and pretty soon, oh, probably about three hours later, we were still setting there. All at once a bunch of SS guys got on there and they asked how many of us were missing. Well, nobody, we were waiting for the engine to take us back. Boy, I'll tell you, they were happy to see us. That's the first time we ever seen an SS guy smile. But the thing that nobody ran away, you know. I said, boy, we were lucky, too, that they didn't decide to shoot us. But they used to go by in troop trains. Well, the guys— the trains were right— the railroad was right in front of the prison camp. So the guys would all run up there and watch the trains go by and they'd take a machine gun, stick it out the window, and see how many they could kill. But you got quite a few of them that way and it didn't take too long and then sooner or later they learned don't go up there. I would even walk across the prison yard just to look at a train going by. They were something else. And I have met a— you probably know him too. Guy that runs a monument works out here on [Highway] 51. Kurt Pechman. Yeah. Very nice guy.

Mark: I met him just the other day.

Floyd: He's a very, very nice guy. That's the first German prisoner that I met that was over here. I went out one day to sell him an ad in our magazine that we have at the convention. He bought a whole page. "Absolutely," he said, "I buy one." Then I went back one day by him, then he said to me "Could I come to your convention?" I said, "I'll sure find out." So I called the

commander and he said, “Why absolutely, let him come.” He said, “If the guys don’t like it, they don’t have to talk to him.” So I went back and I told Kurt and he came. He said that was the most interesting thing he ever attended. A lot of the guys talked to him and they thought he was very nice. But there was a few wouldn’t even give him the time of day. I said, “Well,” — and those were guys that weren’t in the prison camps very long. A lot of the 106th guys were caught in the Battle of the Bulge and they weren’t in there very long. I know my brother got caught and he said he was only in four months and that wasn’t enough time to make it pay to belong [to a veterans organization]. I said, “If you’re in one day, you can.”

Mark: So, in terms of— I’m interested in the American and British aid campaign against Germany and how that affected you having to fix the railroads. Obviously, they were bombing a lot of railroads. About how often would these air raids come? Were they constant? A couple a week? How often?

Floyd: Every day.

Mark: Every day.

Floyd: Every day and every night. They never missed. They were there all the time.

Mark: And, I mean, you’re an American but you’re also on the ground where the bombs are falling. I’m interested in your perspective on that.

Floyd: Well, we never really worried about them. We just figured that they knew where we were. The closest, I think, they dropped the bombs was about three miles from us. The windows rattled and shook out of the barracks all right. A lot of stuff got shook up but they never hit us with them. We were in Munich at one time, right after we got captured, and we were putting slate roofs back on the buildings. Well, that was a losing battle anyway because you’d get half a dozen on and they’d come blow everything up again. That had one of the most beautiful railroad stations in the world and that was a shambles. They had everything broke in there. It looked like they go through the town with a snowplow and just heap the bricks up back there. They’d probably be two stories high all along the street.

[Transcript ends as the transcriber reported the audio recording missing from her desk. It has never been found, hence this partial transcript is all that remains of the interview. Richard W. Harrison, WVM Archivist]