

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Walter Smithback,
U. S. Army, World War II

2003

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Smithback, Walter, (1920-), Oral History Interview, 2003

User copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Walter Smithback, a Cambridge, Wis. native, discusses his World War II service as a member of Battery B, 451st Anti-Aircraft Battalion, providing many anecdotes about military service in the European Theater of Operations. He talks about attempting to enlist in the Army Air Corps, enlisting in the Army, basic training at Camp Stewart (Georgia), and spending Thanksgiving with another service member in North Carolina. Smithback gives his impressions of North Carolina including race interactions and drinking. He comments on his trip overseas, stay in Casablanca and attempt to eat at Rick's Café after seeing it in the movie *Casablanca*, and wait for specific orders. Smithback mentions the fighting at Salerno, where he was assigned to drive a truck, including the problems he encountered driving ashore and with the buildup of waterproofing material on his truck's wires and motor. While in Italy, he describes seeing burials at Anzio, celebrations in Rome, interactions with and impressions of the Italian people, and the practice of giving left over food to Italian children. Stationed briefly at St. Tropez (France), he provides a sketch of recreation activities including staying at an abandoned cottage, swimming in the Riviera, and visiting vineyards. Smithback touches upon providing supplies for soldiers in the Battle of the Bulge, hearing buzz bombs overhead, and serving with the occupation force in Germany. He provides a brief discussion of his return home, deafness in one ear due to gun-fire, and a unit reunion. Smithback ends the interview by describing photographs from an album and providing information about what appears in each image.

Biographical Sketch

Smithback served with the 5th gun crew of Battery B, 451st Anti-Aircraft Battalion. He enlisted early in the war, and was honorably discharged from service.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Volunteer, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, 2003.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Volunteer, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, 2003.

Transcript edited by Abigail Miller, 2003.

Interview Transcript

John: This is an oral history interview with Walter Smithback, at Walter's home, at 4985 Hammersely Road, in Madison, Wisconsin. My name is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. [Should give the date: March 8, 2003.] And Walter is a veteran of World War II, United States Army, is that correct?

Smithback: 451st Anti-Aircraft Battalion.

John: Okay. And you said you were born in Cambridge?

Smithback: Cambridge, Wisconsin, in 1920.

John: What did your family do?

Smithback: They were farmers.

John: Farmers. Okay.

Smithback: I was twenty-one when the war started, on December 7. And I was 1-A, and I got a high number. And September 18, in 1942, I enlisted in the Air Corps, up in the Capitol, I mean in the Post Office, in Madison. On Monona Avenue.

John: What were you doing prior to that, Walter?

Smithback: I worked for the Deerfield Farmers Co-op, in Deerfield, which is a little ways from Cambridge. But the Air Corps, in those days, these two guys that were recruiters, up in the second floor of the Post Office, never told me that I couldn't enlist in the Air Corps up there. I had to go to Milwaukee to do it. So, I wanted to find out before I--I wasn't ready to enlist that day, if I had to go to Milwaukee. I was going to find out when and how I did it, and then do it, in a week or so, and then have party first. But, they said, "You just go down to Milwaukee. We'll put you on the train right away." It was on a Friday. And I went down to the depot, the Northwestern Depot, and they put us on the train. And we got to Milwaukee, and they met us there. And they took us over to the Wisconsin Hotel, and they said that we should go over to this nearby warehouse, where you get the physical.

And a friend of mine enlisted with me. And somebody had given him a little brandy. And he had it in his coat, and the first thing they did was dump it right in the sink. We got off to a real good start. So, they told me that I couldn't get in the Air Corps because I couldn't tell colors, especially blues. Distinguish different colors of blues. And I could go back to Madison and wait for the draft, or I could enlist in whatever I was other suited, better suited for, next suited for. They give us a whole lot of interviews, and tests, and I think what they did is, I think they

had two trains out there, and one was going to Fort Riley, Kansas, and the other was going to Camp Stewart, Georgia, and my buddy got in the Fort Riley one, and I got in the Camp Stewart, Georgia one. And we stayed in the hotel, and we ate at the army restaurant cafeteria, you know, there was, we got credit, they just charged it to the army. We had slips, United States slips for each meal. And we stayed over Friday night, Saturday night, and Sunday night in Milwaukee, waiting for the Monday to go to Fort Sheridan.

And on Monday, they put us on the train, and they didn't tell either one of us what we were getting into, when we left. I don't know why they were so secret about it. But I didn't know until I got on the train that he wasn't on it. Found out by mail, afterward. And it took us four days to get to Camp Stewart. We had an old, old steam engine train, with old, old cars, and every time there was a train, they had to pull us on the side track and wait. And through Chicago was terrible, the back ends of all these tenement houses. Terrible poverty. I couldn't believe they were so poor.

We went down to Fort Sheridan and got our clothes. I think it was a whole day doing that, and then we got on the train and this train had an old box car which they had made a doorway and a walkway to go in from the passengers to this box car, and they had that in the middle of the train. And they had people from the ends of the train and the front of the train go in there and eat. Well, not eat. They cooked in there and they served us, and we had to take our mess kits and go in there, and they we had to eat in the train. And go back in there and wash them, afterwards, according to the regulations that said, "You're next!"

John: [To third party] Are you Nina? [Nina Smithback, Walter's daughter.]

Nina: Yes.

Smithback: She wants one. She wants to hear it.

John: Okay. Hey, great. Ah, I'll send you a copy of this transcription, too.

Nina: Oh, okay.

John: This is great.

Smithback: And they were mostly, no sleepers, you know. You'd sit up all night and day, and some played cards. And we visited. And when we got to Camp Sheridan, the train goes right in the camp, and unloads us. And there is a cadre there waiting for us that had been assigned. They train them for four or five months, and send them off, and then they order new ones. And we were the new ones. So, these guys that do this training, they do that all the time there. At first we did drilling and marching, and it was, then we started on hikes. And they we got basic over, and

then we started on shooting the rifles, and then shooting the 40 mm, that airplane target pulled by a C-47. This was about November, and the Sergeant Tenent, in our outfit, in our barracks, I mean, you couldn't get any furloughs, I mean, for Thanksgiving. He asked me if I wanted to go along with him home for Thanksgiving to his parents house. Well, I wouldn't turn that down. He had a car. So we drove over — I can't remember what town it was, Greensboro, or something. And his father was a beef farmer.

John: Beet?

Smithback: Beef. Herefords.

John: Oh, beef.

Smithback: Yea. And for Thanksgiving dinner, we had prime rib. No turkey. And he has black hired help, which Sergeant Tenent told me, were the descendants of the slaves that he had in the Revolutionary War.

John: Oh, that is something.

Smithback: What is the war where they freed the slaves?

John: The Civil War.

Smithback: Civil War, that is what I meant. And I don't know how, but these people were, there was a man and a woman. I don't know if they were man and wife or not. They were like sixty. And they maybe was the slaves sons and daughters, or maybe they were the second generation. I can't remember. He never told me. But he, Sergeant Tenent, said, that lady took, he called her "Mammy," took care of him when he was a little kid. So they had been there a long time. And when we got there, of course, we had to go down and see his buddies. And there was no taverns in this town.

John: Where was this? In Georgia?

Smithback: No, it was in North Carolina. So we had to go to a liquor store to get a bottle, and then we went to the restaurant, and had set-ups. And that was a common thing. The restaurants let you bring your liquor in, and make your drinks. They'd sell you the 7-Up, or whatever you want to mix it with. So all these buddies were there, you know, and we stayed quite late. And when we got home, we went to bed. And in the morning when we got up, that lady that was his nanny comes up and says, "Sergeant Tenent! You got to get up now! Your Mommy and your Poppy are waiting for you!" And she said, "We got the bacon and eggs all ready,

and they want you down there pretty quick.” So we got down there as quick as we could, and then we took off again, to go downtown to the gas station. And all them guys, had a talk with them. And on the way back, he asked me if I wanted to be corporal. And I said, “No. I don’t want to be corporal. I just want to take care of myself. I don’t have any more experience than anybody else, and I don’t want to, I don’t think I am qualified.” “Well,” he says, “nobody is qualified. But I got to pick somebody. So, if you want to pass it up, that is all right. But you had the first chance.” I said, “Well, I’m passing it up.” So he picked another guy, and that was our cadre.

There is fifteen men in the gun crew, and then there is four batteries, A, B, C, and D. And eight guns of the 40 mm and eight of the .50 caliber machine guns that are on water-cooling, and have the swivel, you know. You lay in, and shoot up and down, swivel around. So we had about six hundred men, and the headquarters company. About six hundred man. And when we went out to shoot, this crank goes, well, I was on the crank that goes horizontal, and another guy is on the up-and-down. Well, I thought I had it lined up, and I was way ahead of that thing. And so, I cranked it back, and I got behind it. And in the meantime, that guy, he was shooting up above it, and then he lowered it down and got below it, and we never did hit it. And, you know, that was terrible. If you couldn’t hit that, how were you going to hit a plane diving at us at fast speed? Well, we got better, and the guy put his cord out longer, because he didn’t want his plane shot down. And after Christmas, they said we were ready to go. And it took a while, though, to get us out of there. I think it was about January when we finally got on a train and went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. And they we got barracks, two-stories. Camp Steward was only one-story. I called them tar paper shacks, on post. With an old coal stove in them.

And then we got passes for New York. Because we never got a Christmas furlough. And married men got a little time, but there never was enough to get to the enlisted men that weren’t married. So we got the passes to New York, every other day because we were fifty percent on duty and fifty percent off.

John: Had you ever been to New York, at that time?

Smithback: Never been there. I went to Savannah, one time or two, before we went to New York, and I went to some small places, towns down there that there wasn’t much in them. On the bus. And New York, I called my parents, and of course, I didn’t think of it until night, and then when I called them, I was waiting for the train to take us back, and about one o’clock, and that was about three o’clock in Madison. I guess they didn’t know what in the world was wrong when I was calling them in the middle of the night. I says, “I am just waiting for the train, to go back to camp.” And, you know, we couldn’t write that we were going overseas, but we

could say we were in New York. Same in Europe, we couldn't write only the country we were in. They censored everything else out. March 4, we got on the train, I mean on the boat. The *Evangeline*, is what it was called, an English boat, it was very old. And they converted it to a troop carrier. And they sent around twenty ships with us, and the ships had supplies and guns. Our guns were on. And we had a couple Navy cruisers that could protect us. And we moved by caravan. We'd go straight west, east, I mean, go straight south, go straight east, kept zig-zagging. And I asked them what they were doing that for. And he says, "Because the U-Boats are chasing us, and we are trying to divert them." And once or twice, they had these depth charges on the ship, on a slant, and they pulled the pin and dropped it in. And we never got hit, but they must have been close. But they did sink our guns.

John: Oh, they did?

Smithback: They sunk our guns, yea. So, when we got to Africa, on the 18th of March, it took us from the 4th to the 18th, two weeks, to get there. Casablanca, we landed. The war was all over there, and we landed in dry dock. And the Arabs were running those electric cranes, to take the stuff off. And we went out in the desert and put up pup tents, and waited for our guns. The headquarters set up their kitchen. That took three days. Before that, we ate C-rations in our little tents, all of us. And then we had a pass to Casablanca, so I teamed up with a guy named Walt Hess, from Portage. And we went in on the trucks to Casablanca, and we looked for Rick's Cafe, because we saw that *Casablanca* movie. There was none. And we got a meal in a French restaurant, but we couldn't read French. What we picked out was something we thought we could pay for, and it turns out it was a beef stew, with very little beef. But it had a good flavor. And a loaf of bread, and a bottle of wine. And then they were so slow, we missed the truck going back. So we hired one of those carriages, with two wheels and a horse. And they took us back to the camp. But there was no, as long as you got back, they didn't care, you know. As long as you missed the truck and you still got back, and was on the job next day. We didn't have anything to do, anyway. And then they sent us to Port Lyautey.

John: Oh, yea! I was there.

Smithback: You was? That is in Spanish Morocco, isn't it?

John: No, that is French.

Smithback: That is French? Well, we were only there a little while, and then we moved to Mazagan and there we did have air raids. And we couldn't hit the planes. We did shoot. It was very fast, and it was just one plane, and we never got him on the target.

John: You had been issued your guns then?

Smithback: Yea. We didn't go anywhere until we got the guns. They come two weeks later. And then we moved to Oran. First, there, Bob Hope came at Mazagan. Whole bunch of men all out there in the desert, and if they ever had an airplane and wanted to do damage there, they could have killed a lot of them. But the Germans didn't have any airplanes. That is why. And we didn't get enough air raids to even get practice. We went to Oran, and there was not airplanes there. We set up there as a rear echelon, and then we moved to Algiers. No airplanes there. But the 7th Army wanted us in reserve, in case they needed help, and we just stayed. But we had our guns all the time. And then they scheduled us, and it ended in Africa. The war ended in May, I think it was. And then we were scheduled to go to Sicily, so we practiced loading and getting on the ships, and the twenty-ninth day was the day we were supposed to go. Well, the twentieth day, they told us they don't need us. It is going to be over in two days. So, then, they sent us back to Oran to get on the boat for going to Salerno. Didn't tell us where we were going. But they loaded us in Oran, and we went out in the Mediterranean, way out from the shore, and just waited. And when the infantry come in and landed, and the tanks come in, the Navy shelled it first. And then they said, now, it is time for us to come in, and the Navy sent out little boats to load us from the ship, out trucks from the ships into the little boats.

John: Barges, right?

Smithback: Little barges. And I was one of the later trucks to go out, and when they got there, they had used up all the shoreline that they had staked out for a safe landing, letting him out, and he went on the other side of that wire, or that rope. And then he got a sandbar, and he was still fifty feet from shore. And he opens the door, and he says, "Drive her out, buddy!" And I drove her out, and down I went right to the top of the cab. So, I crawled out of that hole in the top that they have for the machine gun up there, and I had a Tommy gun, because I was a truck driver. And I hung that on the machine gun. And a big Caterpillar tractor, as high as I am, backed out and threw a chain out. And he said, "Hook her on." And I had to go down in that salt water, and find the chain, and hook it on the bumper. All soaked wet with sea water. And then he pulled me on shore. But when I got on shore, it wouldn't start, of course. We had it waterproofed it. That is one thing we did before we left Africa. Gunk all over the wires, and then an exhaust that went up to the top. So the motor pool came over, and a guy named Eddie Foss from Beloit was the guy that did it. He stuck his handkerchief in the gas tank and took the distributor cap off, and wiped it with the gas, and put the cap back on. He had to get the gunk off first. And he said, "Try it!" And it started. I couldn't believe it. And so at the time when we landed, Vesuvius was erupting.

John: Oh, yea?

Smithback: It wasn't really erupting, but there was smoke and fire. But there was no lava enough to come down so you could see. And I guess it does that quite often.

John: Yea. I have been past it, and I have seen it smoking.

Smithback: So, we went over south of that, and east of it, and there was a woods, but where we drove in, it was olives. And part of our outfit went on the other side, and I guess in the morning, they told me that was oranges there. Olives are green and hard, and are just like stones, you know. And I didn't know that. Because I laid down on those sharp stones, and then I had to put some branches underneath me in an attempt to get it so it wasn't so hard on your back. And then we got orders to move up toward the front lines, and set up. And, of course, officers, they show you where to go. And the only air raids we had was crossing the river. I don't know what they called it. It was quite a big river. On a pontoon bridge. While we were over on the pontoon bridge, they came. And the sergeant wanted to shoot. And I said, "I don't think you should shoot, because the pontoon would cave in, and we'd lose the gun and all of the trucks." Oh, that might be true," he says. So we didn't shoot, and I am glad we didn't, because I don't think, the recoil would have been too much. This rubber pontoon, on the airplane skids that they used on the sand, to lay the skids down so the planes could land on them. It was pretty rickety, but we got across. And he didn't hit, you know, you think that they see us, but they dropped flares, even. And we could see him, but he couldn't see us as good, I found out from an airplane pilot later. And they just scared us, is all. But, Salerno, they moved up, the Germans moved up to the mountains, to the abbey. And when we gradually, slowly, pushed them off there. But when they got up there, we couldn't do nothing. They had a big gun in there and they brought it out on tracks, on railroad tracks, and they's shoot. They called it Big Bertha. And they tried going up there with the infantry, even brought over donkeys and everything else, from Africa. And never made it to the top. Shot a lot of men trying to do it. And the donkeys, too. So they got the bright idea in November, December, that we should go around. Anzio.

John: Oh, yea. Okay.

Smithback: So, they pulled us back to Salerno, to Naples, again, and water-proofed again, and then they had these LST things. They had the door dropped down, and you'd drive on. So we practiced landing. We drove on the trucks, and filled it up, and then we went out in the sea. And then we came back in and we landed. Worked fine.

John: Always does, in practice.

Nina: Practicing!

Smithback: When we got to Anzio, the 6th of January, it was. When we were landing, then we had an air raid, and our guns couldn't be shot because they were on the boat. And they dropped a bomb between two LST's and it caved out boat in. Closest to ours, I guess. Then there is an elevator in there to get down from the top, and, of course, I'm at the top. We couldn't get out until all the other ships were unloaded, and then they brought one over and tied it, chained it to our boat, and put a ramp in, and we drove the trucks across to the other boat, and down their elevator.

Then we got out, and went up to the woods, and they told us to dig in. Well, that General Lucas had stopped the men in ten miles to ground. He was an old World War I guy, and he got tired, I guess. And if he had only gone up a little, five miles further, he'd have been on the top of the hill, and we'd have had a straight shot for Rome. And the Casino front. And, instead, they fired him, and they hired, or they sent in General Truscott, and what could he do with the marsh flooded. They did that on purpose, they opened up the gates and flooded us. And when we tried going ahead, we got stuck. And I pulled out two trees with my winch, on the front of the truck. And then we had to cut trees, and make a log road. And we were there six months. We got out of there on the twenty-third of May. And the thing was, that whole ten miles was filled with troops then. And they made the drive. But during, we were shelled all the time there. We lived in the ground. And Sam Olson got hit with shrapnel while he was eating. Most of us went in the holes and ate, you know. Foxholes. But he was a CC, and had to do it different. He also drank a little too much wine. But there was no wine in Africa, and in this part, because there was no civilians there. Sam went looking, and he found a place where dirt looked fresh, and he dug down, and he found a bottle, a five gallon bottle, in a wicker basket. So, he wanted everybody to have a drink, and everybody said, "You try it first, Sam. And if you pull through, we'll have some tomorrow." Well, he pulled through, so it was all right, I guess. But he had to go back to Naples on the boat, because he was injured, and later we found out that he had been shipped back to Africa and put on limited duty. And he was riding the trains. And when his sister [unintelligible] wrote to us about what happened to him, the captain wrote to the outfit and traced him down, and found out that he fell off the train in Africa, when he was guarding it. And got run over. Well, he didn't tell his sister that. He told them that he had got killed in the line of duty in Africa. It was his duty, except that if he wasn't drunk, he wouldn't have fell off. Knowing him, I am sure he was.

In Africa, there was plenty of wine, and so was it in Italy, from the farmers. Well, they didn't move out in southern Italy, they stayed there. The Germans went north, and they stayed there, and we went past them, and they still saved it.

John: Let's stop here, and let me turn the tape. This is great.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

John: I never got seasick. I was fortunate, I know. A lot of fellows, they'd throw off the ropes from the dock and they were seasick. Okay, go ahead, you were talking about--

Smithback: We were at Anzio. Five thousand buried in the cemetery there. And we had to move our gun once, to get more room. And I saw them do it. The burials. They had a Caterpillar bulldozer, and they dug the trench just six feet wide. And when they got it all dug, a long trench, they put one stake every three feet apart, where the bodies would be put, and they kept one dog-tag and put the body where that dog-tag was, the same spot, so they could find them all. And then they covered them up with the bulldozer. When we got to Rome, everybody was out in the streets, dancing and singing, hugging and kissing.

John: They were pretty happy.

Smithback: The Germans left it. They didn't bomb it. They called it an open city. And they went to the next highest ground. And we got passes. We went in first, after the parade ended. Oh, we had to press our pants by sleeping on them, you know. And we had to wash them up, because they were pretty bad. And we got five gallon pails, and had open fires, and sticks, up and down, and rinse them. And then spread them on the fence or trees. And then we slept on them when they dried a little bit. But they didn't look too bad when we got in. We got some pictures of us in Rome, there. Can't see they are baggy, because it is too far away. But our gun crew went in the first tavern when they broke up, and they had one bottle of cognac, about half full. And we finished that off in fifteen minutes, and then there was no more left. We had wine or beer, then. And the beer was no good. And then they said we are going to Civitavecchia, or something like that. It was a long name. Just above Rome, kind of like the first port. On the ocean, the Mediterranean. When we got up there, they told us, we were all done. We were going down to Naples again. The British and the French and all of the other Allied forces from all the countries were taking over and we were going to go to southern France. And in Africa, we were in the Seventh Army, in Italy we were in the Fifth Army, and then we got into the Seventh Army, going to France. Now, being a separate battalion, we get attached to whatever they assign us to. And wherever we are needed, we go. And on the boat, going to France, that was when we were on the LST's again, they interviewed me and they asked me what I thought about it, and I said, "It seems like they should send somebody else, because we have been on three invasions and how long are we going to last?" And he says, "We got to have the best." He's an officer, you know. He says, "We picked you, because you are

the best. You've got the training and we need you." Well, I says, "I don't know how long we will be needed, if we aren't living."

But, in southern France, there was nobody there. It was just 600 Germans and we had them all captured, infantry captured them in one day and put them in a snow fence. Highly unexpected. And in St. Tropez, which was the Riviera, and it was in September, we landed. And that big tractor drove off first to see there was no mines. There wasn't any. The tractor, it was so big they couldn't blow the track off that. They just drove right out on the sand beach and up in the vineyard, and dug our gun right in the vineyard. And the grapes were ripe. Big, nice grapes. And we lived in a cottage that was made of brick and it had a shower in the back corner of the house, but not enclosed. So when you come out of the Mediterranean, you'd shower off before you went in the house, and get the salt off your suit. Of course, we didn't have suits. So about a week later, and then the French started coming down there swimming. There wasn't no war no more. So we had to look in the drawers in the house and find suits, and some of them were too big, and some were too small. But, you could get somebody to alter you one. And the women, instead of putting on their swimming suits, they came down there with a house coat on, and they took their clothes off and put on their suits right on the beach. But they could do it pretty sneaky. You could be there laying on the beach and you could never tell they had their clothes off and their suit on. All under that house coat. But there wasn't no need of them doing that. They could have put on the suit and come down. But they didn't want to be walking down the streets with suits on. But that was nice swimming in there. It was salty, but it was nice and clean and a nice sandy beach. We did swim in Africa, but there was terrible waves. One guy drowned. It was so windy, they were right over your head. If you were standing up, knee high, they would go right over your head. And he evidently got took by one of them when he was swimming, and knocked him out. He was a good swimmer, they said, he was from down southwest, Cuba City here. He died. Bayfield was his name. But see, again, he was an older man, like Sam Olson, and he got drafted because he was single and because he was under thirty-eight. They took them up to thirty-eight. Well, when we got to France, we stayed around there for practically a month, and there was nothing to do, no planes. And then they said we were going to go to an airport further up. And we went up there, and they told us we had to blow up the gas that the Germans had left. One big tank of gas, above ground. And Sergeant Specter, he was from Crawfordsville, he was a farmer too. He says, "If you could find a good rope, like a hay fork rope," he says, "we could put that in the gas and soak it, and we could light it, and it would burn, the gas would burn right up to the tank and blow it up." Sounded like a good idea. I said, "I don't know what else we are going to do it safely." So he went to farms all around until he found rope and just did that. He soaked it all, and he lit it. And the fire followed the rope, and right in the tank, and baroom! Two hundred feet in the air, gas and flame, black smoke. Airplane gas.

Nina: How far away from it were you?

Smithback: Well, we got pretty far. As far as we thought it was necessary. And then we moved more, when it started. We weren't blown up. And then they sent us back to Toulon. There is nothing in Toulon. So we set up there, and Splinter and I made a house out of crates. There was no houses around there. We were right on the dock. By the boats. And we used juice cans and turned them in with the pliers, and stick one inside the other so we had a - - but I don't know what kind of a stove we had. Somebody must have had a stove. I think it was five gallon pails, probably.

John: Probably.

Smithback: Well, anyway, they said, we've got to go to the Battle of the Bulge. They were just waiting for orders, you know. And then about three days before Christmas, we all piled into the trucks and headed to the Battle of the Bulge. And on Christmas Day, I ate my C-Ration dinner off the truck fender. But the next day, in Dijon, France, the truck broke down and I had to go to the motor pool. And they all loaded on the other truck and left me with it. So I asked them at the motor pool, "Is there anybody from Wisconsin?" And they says, "Yeah, we got the guy from Janesville. His father runs the bus company in Janesville." So, I went to look him up, and he says, "Well, you just stay with me, and when we get done today, we'll go to town tonight in the Jeep." So, I had to have something to do. And we picked the Jeep out of the motor pool and we went into Dijon, and we drove off by a bridge, a cement bridge, and down on the bank, quite a way so they couldn't see it. And then we chained the steering wheel, and padlocked it. And when we come to go home, there is no Jeep. Somebody cut the chain and stole the Jeep. So we hitch-hiked home, and then my truck was ready, and I don't know what happened to him and his Jeep. I don't know if he had permission to take it, even. But I imagine they covered it up someway. So I drove up all by myself, and I didn't know where they were. But I was supposed to go to Liege, Belgium, and follow the Red Ball signs, and I got there. I stopped and asked the Military Police, and they had left word, and they told me just were they were. In fact, I think he took me over there. They had a moat with water around it, and then a draw bridge, and in that moat they had ammunition and gasoline. And we were supposed to guard it, and shoot down those Buzz Bombs.

John: Okay.

Smithback: Well, the Buzz Bombs, when they are coming over, if they aren't stopped running, you hear the motor, you know they aren't going to hit. So we never shot at them, unless they stopped. But we wouldn't have hit them anyway, I don't think. The Quartermasters were in there, and they pulled guard and we pulled guard. And

that first night, when I heard the guy coming, I halted him, and he says, “Don’t shoot! I’m Johnson! I’m sergeant of the guard!” And I says, “It sounds like you aren’t a German.” He was a black guy. And he came over and I talked with him, and I told him, well, he tells me, “These Buzz Bombs come, and I always jump in the moat, in the water, down the edge of it anyway.” And I tell him, “If you can hear them, you won’t need to.” And when one comes, he jumped in. And when he got up, got out of there, I says, “Why did you do it? I told you it wouldn’t hit.” He says, “My heart tells me to stay, but my head tells me to go, and I go.”

John: That’s good. Well, let me ask a question. You were in anti-aircraft. You still had the 40 millimeter gun?

Smithback: Yea.

John: Okay.

Smithback: Yeah. We manned them on the outskirts of it. We had plenty of guns. See, there is sixty-four trucks, and because there is two guns. One truck pulls the trailer for the 40 millimeter and the other pulls the trailer with supplies, and the .50 caliber in the back end. And there is a hundred and twenty men on the guns, and they covered a big area. They used to have them half a mile apart. I don’t know. They probably had them closer there. And we never got hit. Thank goodness, because we would have been blown up. Then we got passes to go to Liege, and there they had a swimming pool, and showers, and a big, no, the showers we had to go to the factory and they had, you put your clothes on a rope and pulled it up in the ceiling, and then you used the showers. But they did have a pool. But we didn’t have a suit fit to go in there, I don’t think. And we didn’t have time, anyway. But after that war got slowed down, they told us that we were moving out of Liege now, there is no danger, and we are going to go to Aachen. And Aachen was near the Remagen bridge. And that is where they sent us, to guard that Remagen bridge. And we were there when that bridge went down. But in the meantime, we were staying in a hotel in Aachen because it wasn’t far. And it didn’t have water. They didn’t have the hot water hooked up. It was froze, or something. But they had the boiler in the basement. And we found garden hose and we lit the boiler with wood and coal, and we got the hose into the first lower rooms, and had baths in the tub. Boy, that was great. A guy named Nash from Wisconsin Rapids was the piano player.

John: Oh, wow. You had everything.

Smithback: And he says, “If we had a piano, now, we could sing.” And so Sergeant Specter says, “We got a truck, and we can find one, I think.” And we went up to the theater and found one, and we hauled it down to the hotel, and we had a song-fest. And that is not too hard a war to be fighting.

John: Hot baths and music.

Smithback: But, when the bridge caved in, three trucks were on it, but not many men got killed. And there was so much pounding from the tanks and the trucks going over. It was a railroad bridge, in the first place.

John: Oh, I didn't know that.

Smithback: Yeah, and the tracks, we covered the tracks with boards so we could drive on it. And then they went, the very next day or so, they had a bridge built with pontoons. And we moved out on that into Germany. And we went to Cologne, and there was nothing there. And this was already in May, you know. Or in April. And we kept going, and there was nothing there. No fighting. We went south, into the Black Forest. Went to Heidelberg, Mannheim, Frankfurt. And down to the Austrian border, there was some dead horses and Germans. And they said the war was over. But they didn't know it down there. They still had trapped, islands, trapped, missed them. On the 8th, they said it was over but the 9th was before they quit shooting. And then we'd go into the first town, we were ordered to be the military government. And they left two men in the town. And all these hundred and twenty men went to different towns. And temporary military government. Well, I got Cochbern [?] with another guy, and we went up to the mayor's office.

John: Now, where was this?

Smithback: In Cochbern, Germany. And they had an interpreter there. And I says, "Well, what do you think we should do for a mayor? Who do you think we should get for a temporary mayor?" And the woman says, "Why don't you go down to the jail and get the priest?" And he was an old guy, but he was locked up because he wouldn't do what Hitler said. And we asked if he wanted to be mayor. He didn't know anything about it, he said. I says, "You just come up there and stay there, and pretend you know something about it." And then we went to another town. But, by that time the military government was getting around with their own men and taking over. So, we went to the Black Forest, in a nice cottage, to wait for orders, further orders. And the orders came that we go to Stuttgart. That time we had eighty-five points and if you had eighty-five or more points, you didn't have to go to Japan.

John: Okay.

Smithback: So, they sent all the men who didn't have eighty-five points to La Havre, and shipped them on the boat for Japan. And it took six months for us to get a boat to go home. And during that time, we rode on trains, taking supplies to the

permanent troops. And I was assigned with Splinter, because he was my buddy, one in the caboose and one in the engine. And we both would get off to guard the train at each end. See, they don't break in. So, that worked okay, for two or three days. First thing when we got back, we got right on another train to go again. And I am wondering, with a hundred and sixty men, why is it that we are going right out again. And we found out that those guys were staying where they were delivering their train, so they wouldn't have to go back and get on another train again. So we pulled the same thing. We went to Augsburg and we stayed there two days, and when we got back, they put us right on again, but we had our little rest already. Rough on them trains. Noisy. Couldn't sleep very good. But in Ulm, I jumped off the train and it was on a bridge. And all they had was the wooden bridge, and the ties and the tracks was all there was, that is all. But I hit the tie, and I grabbed the train door. And I was in the caboose, and I balanced and got in. So, then I got scared and I didn't want to jump out anymore.

Nina: Was it dark?

Smithback: Dark. It was night. I had a flashlight but I didn't remember to use it. I didn't think about it. So when we got to the next place, I just looked out the door and I couldn't see or hear nothing, so I thought everything was okay, and when we got to Strasburg, no, that was down in the French Zone, and the guy said to me, "Where is your bill of lading for the seven cars?" I says, "I never saw them unhook them." "Well," he says, "did they go to the French Zone?" "Well," I says, "I suppose so, if that is where they were supposed to go, because they are gone." And he says, "It will take you ten years to pay for this if they aren't there." I was a private, you know. PFC. But they were there, though. They checked and they got there. They were supposed to go there and they got there. And I think we did that for six months, approximately. And then we got the call to go to the camp by La Havre, and wait for the boat. And then we got passes to Paris. Everyday we would go down and see if our boat was posted, and if it wasn't, we could get a pass. And of course, everybody comes back and says that our boat is there, but it wasn't, you know. And then this one day, they come back and says, our boat is there. It was called "Uneeda Victory." The name of the boat was "Oneida Victory." And it was there. But everybody had to go down and really look, but it was there. And then we shipped off, and it took only ten days to get home. It was a Liberty ship. And we got to New York, and went to Fort Dix, I think. And they had two-story barracks, nice, again. And they had good food there. And then they put us on, we went through de-tox, whatever you call it. And we got on a train to go home. It was different wherever you were going. And I got on the train to, it was in Illinois, Camp Grant, or something? It was an airplane camp. And I got there, and I called my brother up to come and get me. That wasn't far from Cambridge, about sixty-seventy miles.

Nina: Was he surprised?

Smithback: Yea.

Nina: At the phone call?

Smithback: And it was the day before Armistice Day, and no, it was two days, it was a weekend. They don't discharge on weekends, and then Armistice Day was on a Monday, I guess. And I didn't have any pass. I just told him to come down. He told the guards he had just come to get his brother. They let him in and he took me out, and I didn't even have a pass, and went home. And another thing funny. His wife came along. And when we stopped in Janesville to get a drink at the Monterrey Hotel, they wouldn't serve her, because they don't serve women at the bar.

John: Oh, man.

Smithback: Here the war is over and they don't serve a woman a drink at the bar. But that ended shortly after World War II. But, so we had to get a table in the dining room to get a drink. And then I stayed till Monday, or Sunday night, I went back. He took me back. And nobody asked no questions, where I was. And I got my discharge on the day after Veterans Day, Armistice Day.

John: Wow, that is something. That is amazing.

Smithback: That's the whole trip.

John: Do you remember the unit you were with?

Smithback: 451st Anti-Aircraft Separate Battalion. And like I say, A, B, and C Batteries. And I was in B Battery. In the fifth gun crew. Eight guns in each battery. And when I talked to the Optimist Club last week, they said it was a wonder we won the war with guys like you.

John: Yes. Walter and I were in the Optimist Club together for a while there. When I came in, we were looking at each other.

Smithback: I knew I had seen him somewhere. So, we got home safe. Never got injured. Thirty-nine months. Thirty-three overseas, and six months in the states.

John: When you got out, you had the GI Bill. Did you ever use it?

Smithback: I went to vocational school and while I was going to vocational school, I got a call

from the Deerfield Co-op. They wanted a manager, and they wanted me to come down to interview. So I went down there, well, first I studied up on how many pounds to the acre of fertilizer and how many pounds of seed per acre. And I got down there and they asked me when could I start and how much I wanted. And I told them I want the same pay the guy is getting. 'Well, he's been here for years.' I said, "That's okay." He had never been getting enough, and I wasn't going to stay very long for that, either. And then they said they would go along with that, but I couldn't get a raise till the following July. That was the end of the year. So I signed up in May, and I had to stay until May, and then the following July before I could get a raise. Well, I asked for \$50 and got \$25 and the next year I asked for \$75 and got \$25, and I told them I was quitting. But, really, the place didn't boom. It was poor management, they didn't have good equipment. They had debts, and the guy didn't want the money back, because he couldn't get that interest at the bank. They never paid them off.

Nina: Before the war, were you farming? Or were you in school?

Smithback: No, I worked at Deerfield Co-op before I went.

John: Oh, okay.

Smithback: That was not a manager. That was just a laboring position. A truck driver. And, of course, I figured a manager's got to know more than that.

John: Any reunions? Have you stayed in touch with any of the guys?

Smithback: Yea. We had a reunion right away. And it was a drunken, messy one. We met in Portage, and we went to all the taverns there, and then we went to Montello, and then we went to the Dells, and then we went to a restaurant by a lake in Ridgeville.

Nina: How many days long was this reunion? Was that one day?

Smithback: It was a weekend. And then we couldn't get together much any more, because everybody got jobs and were busy. We did have a reunion in Wausau, at the park, because one of the guys lived there and his wife worked in the National Store, and she catered it for us.

Nina: What year? How long after was that?

Smithback: That was probably fifteen years afterwards.

John: Were many of the guys you were with from Wisconsin?

Smithback: Yea. They were. I'd say three-quarters of them were. Wisconsin and Illinois. And then there was a few from the south, either the train picked them up on the way down, or they had left-overs.

John: This wasn't a National Guard unit?

Smithback: No. All of us volunteered, or were drafted.

[End of Side B of Tape 1.]

Smithback: To help haul ammunition and prisoners. So I had a lot of experience with that, because I was a truck driver. And I can tell you why that happened. In Camp Stewart, Georgia, Klemm, had never drove a car or a truck in his life, was taking training. And Spinner, the driver of the other truck, he was a truck driver in Dickeyville. He says, "Smithback, unless you get assigned to the same truck I am, you aren't going to be safe unless you take the training and get to be a truck driver." I said, "I didn't come in the army to be a truck driver." He said, "It's a good deal. You always have a place to sleep, better than on the ground."

John: That's true.

Smithback: "You're going to be dry." And I said, "That sounds good to me." So I took the training, and of course, I got the driver's job. But there wasn't no rating for it. But Spinner got the first truck. See, he got to be a corporal, a T-5. Had one corporal in that, and then you had one corporal that was the machine gun guy. And the officer and sergeant in charge of the fifteen men. And then headquarters had two or three lieutenants, and a captain, in each battery. And then there was a colonel over the whole thing, and he was a World War II guy, an old guy. And he rode around in a weapons carrier, one of those four door deals. High ones, with a driver. And then he would come out and we'd have to salute. And then he'd look at our set-up. We had to be dug in, or sand-bagged. And the telephone was put out by the headquarters company. And every gun crew had a phone, and every battery had a telephone operator, and every headquarters battery had a telephone operator. And a medic. And the first time we hauled prisoners, they were older guys, and they give up. And we just took them to the prison camp. But in the Battle of the Bulge, we got SS, really crack troops. And the SS guys, they were smart at us, and the infantry guy that was with me to take the prisoners, I just drove the truck. They put them, they took the watches and the rings from them SS and they hollered and complained, but nothing. But, then, when they got them in the truck, they put the two SS guys on the fender. And I knew there was going to be trouble. And he says, "These guys are going to go in the ditch when you get to the curve." He shot them, first.

John: Oh, wow.

Smithback: He said, "They killed all our prisoners, and didn't take any prisoners. And we aren't going to let them get away with it."

John: Did you get to the Bulge?

Smithback: Never got in the fighting.

John: Okay.

Smithback: We were in that camp with the supplies, ammunition and gas. That is all we did. But, they called us, in case that they break through, you know. We could help them. But we never had to. A lot of times when we were in the rear, these outfits wanted you, because it was extra men, if they needed us. In Anzio, we had to go in the infantry two men at a time. To help them. And one other place, in southern Italy, they got a bridge in. I think it was that river where we got bombed at. And they asked us to come up every night and guard it, so that the Germans didn't sneak in and blow it up. And they told us not to shoot until we saw the whites of their eyes. And when it was my turn, I heard noises in the leaves, and they kept getting closer and closer, and I couldn't see anything. But I didn't shoot. And I kept waiting. And pretty soon a squirrel came.

John: Heart in your throat, huh?

Smithback: Yea. Was I glad to see that, though.

John: I'll bet.

Nina: To feed the squirrel.

John: You have a remarkable memory, Walter. You just have that straight, that is great. What did you feel like, well, wait, you enlisted. That's right. You didn't get drafted.

Smithback: What did you say?

John: Overall, what do you feel about having been in the war?

Smithback: Well, I think it was a wonderful experience, but I wouldn't want to go through it again. But I can't say that I didn't learn a lot from it. But, I saw a lot of country. In Italy, we had four on and four off, and we would go down to the farmhouse, you

know, and get a quart of wine for eight cents. And they were nice people. And we didn't pester them a lot. When it was my turn to go, I would do it. One farm house, they were cooking a chicken in the fireplace. Metal kettle. And I looked at the chickens, and they were pretty thin. They only cook them if they don't lay eggs. They are so poor. But they invited me to stay, and they had two girls that were like high school age. And they had to have a toast, with the wine, before we ate. And these Italians guys said, or girls, said they learned a toast from the infantry. And so they held up their glasses, and said, "Down the hatch!" Yea, they learned that from the infantry. And I laughed, and they said, "Isn't that what you say?" And I said, "Yea, that is what you say." But I didn't want to tell them not to say it, because I couldn't explain it in Italian.

John: That's great.

Smithback: And those infantry guys laugh every time they think of that. Guys come there now and they give them that toast. That is the fun things that they do.

John: Ah, you have a whole bunch of pictures here. Could you kind of run through these, Walter?

Smithback: I can't see good enough.

Nina: Go get your magnifying stuff and I can tell you what it is.

John: That is great. That is quite a story.

Smithback: After the war, the prison camp was gone when we got there. They had carloads of ashes on the trains. That is what we stopped to pick up. And, oh it was terrible conditions in there. They slept that far apart on board beds, racks. And they gave them potato soup and kept adding water all the time, and never getting more potatoes. And they were really thin, I guess. And another thing happened by that prison camp. The people that, when we were running these trains, people wanted to get on and go home. And we were supposed to ask them if they had the papers, a pass, you know. They didn't, of course, a lot of them. And we'd let them on anyway, if we had room. And then, they switched it in Stuttgart, you know, the hump, and one guy took his bicycle on top of the car, and we didn't see him up there until they got up on the hump, and the bicycle hit the wires and electrocuted him. And he fell off on the ground, and he was all burned. His skin was burned. Peeling off. And he was still living. And they took him. And I asked next day, the next time I got by there, and they said he died in two days. They didn't have those things they do, the operations like they do now, and transfer skin from under the clothes.

John: What are some of the pictures there? Just describe some of them, you know, for the tape.

Nina: This is Germany. This is the superhighway.

Smithback: Yea. That is Heidelberg and that is on the Autobahn.

John: Okay.

Nina: A camouflage factory.

Smithback: They had a kind of nets over their factories so you couldn't see them.

Nina: German civilians going home on the train.

Smithback: Yes. But that is a pretty good picture there of Heidelberg.

Nina: That was the camera company, headquarters for your battalion.

Smithback: Yea, once we stayed in a, right by a camera factory, where they made the Leica cameras.

John: Oh, that was a good camera.

Smithback: And one of the guys bought a camera there. But I didn't have enough money.

Nina: You are standing with your mascot, and the dogs.

Smithback: What is that?

Nina: Some more German civilians going home after the war.

Smithback: This Danny, Ferrera, he came as a replacement. And the first night they brought the replacements, he jumped off the truck. And a shell came in, and he got so scared he broke his arm, and they had to take him back. And the next day, they brought Danny. And we were going north in Italy, and there was a little slant in the land, so we would always dig on the backside of the slant. Danny said that it was too hard digging here, so he was going over on this side, where there was no cover of the hill, you know. And in the middle of the night, it started raining, and they started shelling, and Danny comes running. And he says to me, "They are shooting at me!" And I said, "We told you to dig on this side!" "Yea, but it is hard there." Well, I says, "You don't worry about that. If you are going to protect your life, you go wherever it is where you will be safest." So he had his raincoat on, no,

his overcoat, and it was all wet, and he says, "Can I come in your foxhole?" And I says, "If you take your coat off." So, he had to stay with me the rest of the night. He was an Italian, from New Jersey.

Nina: And the little Italian girl who came over every day with her pail.

Smithback: Every day she came and got food that we didn't eat. She had a gallon pail with a wire in it that she had punched, you know, and made a handle. And everything that we didn't eat, she took in that pail. She had two pails if she needed them. And that is what her family lived on.

Nina: Jerry at the .50 caliber?

Smithback: Yea, he was on the .50 caliber, so I didn't see too much of him.

Nina: A German .40 ml. AAA gun, destroyed in Italy.

Smithback: Yea. You know, the German guns were better than ours. Their 88's were more powerful and could shoot farther, and they worked. And their tanks had 88's and better guns than we had at first, but finally we got bigger ones. And then we got the 90 millimeter outfits in the Coast Artillery, but we didn't never get assigned any. They always stayed in the same one.

Nina: American flags on your arms and ready to hit the shore on D-Day, August 10, 1944, southern France.

Smithback: See, that was the first time we ever had an American flag was when we got on the boat to go to the south of France. That is the first time they ever put a flag on our arm. It was a good idea.

Nina: Three French girls, G. R., and Splinter?

Smithback: Yea.

Nina: Who is G. R.? This is you.

Smithback: G. R.? I don't know who that is.

Nina: German prisoners of war, marching to prison camp in France.

Smithback: See, when you are out in the woods, they come to see you, you know. If there isn't any shooting. And so we got them to get their picture. But the French never come for food.

Nina: Destroyer shelling the coast of France.

Smithback: Oh, yea.

Nina: LST. Now, there is in parentheses, G. R. I don't know what the G. R. stands for. But that is you standing there in an LST.

Smithback: I don't the least what that G. R. is. I don't know what that is. I can't remember.

Nina: It's my writing. Here you are on lookout. This is a good picture of the gun. Bang-bang.

Smithback: What's that?

Nina: That's you. On the landing transport.

Smithback: Another thing on that landing transport, I went up under the, on the deck with Spinner to sleep, because it was so hot down below. And when they had the airplane come over, they shot that gun off, and it just about broke my ear drums. A metal ship, and a metal turret.

John: The gun is bolted to the ship--

Smithback: Yea. All iron above it where they had it standing and shooting it.

Nina: His left ear is basically deaf, because he was sitting on the right side of the gun.

Smithback: I sat on the right side, doing the horizontal, and that is were the shells came out. And, you know, we had to shoot our gun even though we didn't hit anything, because if you didn't shoot, they said, you were not doing your duty. So, sometimes we had a gun facing north, and the plane would come over high and never see it, and they would come back from the south and by the time we turned the gun around, the plane would be gone. But we shot three shots, four shots in the air anyway, turning it around so we could have some shells to show him we shot.

John: You mentioned your ear. Any other medical hangover from your time in the service?

Smithback: No.

John: That's good.

Nina: This is your gun in somebody's nice back yard. Looks like a vineyard.
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Smithback: That is the vineyard in southern France, in St. Tropaz.

John: Oh. Okay. Just go ahead. This is fine.

Nina: That's your heavy artillery gun grounded on--

Smithback: Oh, that is the same place.

Nina: Oh, grandpa on top. That's you. At least, we got that.

Smithback: When I was at the Optimists, they asked me for some pictures, where I was on, and I couldn't see good enough to tell them.

Nina: There is that girl that came every day, again, with her pail. Bombing.

Smithback: This is stuff that got bombed before we got there, by airplanes, before they landed.

John: Okay.

Smithback: This Willis Higgins was from Alabama. And he was the nicest guy. But he lived in Fyfe, Alabama, and is really hill-billy.

Nina: This is you guys eating, but where are you?

Smithback: That is right out on the ground where we ate all the time. We cooked with gasoline in a C-Ration can, and we had open fires and one guy was assigned to do the cooking, and he didn't have to do the guard, but he had to wash the dishes.

John: Okay.

Smithback: And his name was George Brewer. No, he wasn't George Brewer. But George Brewer was from the south, was from West Virginia, and another guy from that area, he said "George, when you go home, if there is high water, will you be able to get through, or will you have to swing over on a grape-vine?" He says, "I'll swing over on the grape vine." Now, they were just kidding, you know. But that is the kind of talk that goes on. And I thought, well, really, don't you have a bridge? "Oh, no. Only the water comes when it rains. And other times you either drive through it, or if it is too deep, you have to wait till it quits raining."

John: Well, I was in with a kid who bought his mother a steam iron, because they didn't

have electricity at home.

Smithback: Oh, God! Well, I can tell you worse. Sefus Polk [?] was from Mississippi, and our captain was southern, named Captain Watson, and Sefus Polk went home without a furlough. And then he called up Captain Watson and asked him if he could get an extension. And Captain Watson said, "Extension? Sefus, you haven't even got a furlough. You get right back here." And then Sefus came back, and instead of putting him in the guard house, he made him his permanent KP. And he never did anything with a gun, or anything. And he came overseas, and he was still his permanent valet man, KP man. And then Sefus comes to me on day and says, I think it was in Anzio, and he says, "You know, I don't have a gun." And he says, "You got an extra gun?" And I said, "Yea, but you have to ask the captain if you can get it." We had an extra Springfield in the trailer. And he came back, and the captain had said, "No, Sefus, you aren't having any gun." He wasn't going to give him no gun. He just thought he wasn't capable. You know, one day, he asked me, "Where do you go to school?" And I asked him, "What kind of school are you going to go to? Radio school, or truck driving school?" "No," he says, "I want to learn to read and write."

John: I can believe it.

Smithback: So that is why the captain didn't give him no gun. He just kept him there, and he did odd jobs for him.

Nina: Streets of France.

Smithback: Oh, yea. That is, we did get passes to Paris, and I got a picture where I am sitting with Peterson, from New York, on the Rue de la Paix, at the outside tables, and the girls are marching by, with short skirts.

Nina: And this is your whole unit, it says, at camp. And you are right there. This is on a ship to Italy. And those, that is your house.

Smithback: That is the house we built in Toulon.

Nina: These you don't have marked. Looks like a desert to me.

Smithback: No, that is a pup tent, in the desert. You know, we got the first C-Rations there. And I opened a can of beans, and Spinner opened up a can of stew. And I says, "You know, beans aren't so bad. How is that stew?" And he says, "I'll tell you what I'll do with you. You give me that half a can of beans, and I will give you this half a can of stew." And that was worse than the beans. Cold, you know.

Nina: Splinter is much better dressed than you are.

Smithback: Oh, yea. See, I had fatigues on, and he had his, he must have come home from pass.

Nina: Look at how pressed those are. You're a dirty mess.

Smithback: He was sharp.

Nina: He must have been in Paris. And here's, I don't know, it looks like you are holding a wire there.

Smithback: Oh, that might be that wine we found.

Nina: No, it looks just like a wire, or a headset? I don't know.

Smithback: No, I don't think we had any headsets.

Nina: Here is the wine you unburied. With your basket. There is your juice can chimney.

Smithback: That is Paris.

Nina: Paris. There is a bombed-out building. I don't know where that is. And the boys. Gun in the great vineyard in Italy. Just before the ship was bombed.

Smithback: Yea.

Nina: In your best uniforms.

Smithback: Now, there, I am in the dress uniform.

Nina: I don't know if that is Splinter, though.

Smithback: We did dress up when we went to town. In fact, Splinter, he shaved his moustache just to be like Clark Gable, so then I tried it. But it was too much work, though, You have to shave below and above. But we didn't have to wear ties, you know, in the summer time. So we got a parachute, a camouflaged parachute, and cut silk scarves we put around for going to town. And the first officer came by, and we saluted him, and he said, "Soldier, you are out of uniform. I'll tell you what you got to do. You got to take that off and stick it in your pocket. Then you will be all right. You don't have to have a necktie, but you can't have that camouflage around your neck."

- Nina: That is the mess hall. That is the truck full of stuff. You got your jacket on, there. Loading ships. Prisoners of war. Italy.
- Smithback: Oh, yea. That must be that fountain down in Rome. Where you put the pennies in.
- John: Oh, yea.
- Smithback: We parked right in St. Peter's Cathedral brick parking lot when we were passing Rome. All of the Catholics went in to see him. Then in Anzio, and other places in southern Italy, I went to church, services, with Splinter and Cesleski in the back of the truck. And the first day I jumped off with them, instead of going to the Protestant church, and the whole war, they asked me about that. Because, you know, you are the only guy that goes to both churches. You should be saved.
- John: Cover all your bets.
- Smithback: And these tents we got in Africa, when they moved us out in that desert, we took the moonlight requisition, we got a truck up and we picked up two tents that were left there. And then the quartermaster come, they didn't know how many tents were there, anyway. So we had two tents, but then we had to get rid of them when we moved because, you know, you couldn't carry them.
- Nina: A pet dog in Italy. They made the shelter and the chimney out of cans. That's right. The dog you had to leave behind.
- Smithback: There is a picture of that tent thing, again. Splinter was proud of that.
- Nina: The woman who you hired to wash your clothes and dishes.
- Smithback: Yea.
- Nina: Where is that?
- Smithback: That is Italy. She's got black hair. Women, the parents, always wore black dresses if their, if somebody in their family had died in the past five years, they kept wearing black for five years. And I don't think, I think it was more than five years, because they didn't have many dresses, so they used it anyway. When they dressed up, they put on black.
- Nina: Those are bombing, pictures of bombing. Pictures in front of your truck.
- Smithback: There is Hess, and Higgins.

Nina: Abandoned motorcycle.

Smithback: Only in our gun crew, now, there is two guys left, out of fifteen. One is Joe Warshoe, who lives in Muscoda, down by Milwaukee, or Racine-Kenosha. And the other is me. And Stanley Sesleski just died a little while ago. Nina checked it out.

Nina: We wanted to go see him this summer and then--

Smithback: The last time I seen him, he was in bad shape. His wife had died, and his daughter had married and moved to Appleton, and he sold his farm and he moved in with a woman who had a house in Amherst Junction, and when I called the number at the farm, the woman said "He doesn't live here any more." Well, I said, "Can you tell me where he is?" "No," she says, "I can't." And I says, "I was in the army with him thirty-nine months and I want to see him." "That is different," she says. "He's living with his girl friend and they aren't married, and I didn't want to give you any information that would be harmful to him."

John: Yea. Sure.

Smithback: "But," she says, "you go to Amherst Junction, you ask, they will know where she is. Or where they live. So I stopped at the first gas station, and they said, "You go down the road, across the tracks, turn left, third house. And they were painting the garage. He says, "Anzio was tough." That was all he would say. He didn't want to talk much about the war. But I remember that real vividly. Because we were in the hole for six months there. Underground.

Nina: Abandoned motorcycle? Where was that?

Smithback: We found it in France, and just rode it to wear it out. We also found a '37 Dodge in St. Tropez, and we painted it green, and this colonel come and wanted it.

Nina: That is you in your Patton pose, in front of your shack. Is that Italy, or is that Africa?

Smithback: I got that camera from a German that was a prisoner that they took it away from.

John: It is amazing that we were in the same place in Africa, Port Lyautey.

Smithback: We were there a very short time, and we slept in these bunkers that the Germans slept in, and some guys got lice.

John: Oh, yea?

Smithback: They said from the straw.

Nina: That is the wine basket, when you dug that up.

Smithback: That is Klemm.

Nina: That is injury, at home. Injured comrade. He got injured?

Smithback: He got injured. It wasn't in, it was accidental. When you lifted the gun up, the pole on the truck became the levers for raising and lowering the gun, down off the wheels. And it had a pin in there that you pulled out, and put in, when the handle was in the locked position. In order to raise the handle up, that would mean that the wheels would go up in the air, and you jacked the jacks. And he didn't get the pin in. And it went down on him. You know, the handle, and cut his finger off.

Nina: And it got a little infected?

Smithback: No, no, they sent him to the hospital and they sewed it on, and he went to Battle Creek, Michigan, for rehabilitation, and he went to visit my folks, and he never came back. See, he had to go to the infantry.

[End of Side A of Tape 2.]

Smithback: This one guy, his name was Klemm, and he got in the K's, and I was in the S's, and I only had to go one time less than he did. This is Klemm. And he lived in Milwaukee. And Spinner lived in Dickeyville. And Klemm called me to get ahold of Spinner, and tell me when we could make a visit to him, and call him, and he'd come up. So I went to Dickeyville to the dog races, and stopped in Dickeyville, and found out that he had died. And the guy told me what happened. He had a farm at the edge of town, and he sold it for lots. And he quit farming. And he made an antique store out of his farm. That is what the guy in the antique store told me. He says, he built a new house, and then he started building apartments. So he must have had a talent for carpentry because he could build that house real easy. But he had his own land, and so he did his own contracting, and he was putting the dry wall in the bathtub, and fell down, had a heart attack right in the bathtub. And then I couldn't get ahold of Klemm when I called him. And then when my brother died, his picture was in the paper, and she saw my name, and she lives in Endeavor, Wisconsin. She wrote to me that Klemm had died and then I went to see her, but she wasn't home. I was going up north to our cabin, and I never got back since. We were going to stop this time, but we didn't have time. And tell her that story why I never got back to Klemm, you know. I didn't know he died, because he never answered the phone. So they are both gone. [Now

looking at Walter's photo album.] This is in Rome, I think. By St. Peter's, I believe.

Nina: Italy. Guys are at attention. Those are prisoners of war, marching. Africa. What is this big tower? Oh, that is a train track. That is you and Splinter.

Smithback: Yea. That is the guy that rode the trains with me.

Nina: Some water.

Smithback: Electric trains were nice. They had, see, Germany had most electric, and they were always clean. And one guy had to be in the engine, you know. We switched every other time. Because in the coal trains, it was smoky and gassy and dirty.

Nina: These mountains in the background have snow on them. This guy has glasses? Did somebody in your unit wear glasses? And another guy with curly hair. Where is your magnifier? You need your glasses.

Smithback: Never put them on. Wasn't that Ferrero?

Nina: I never heard a guy named Ferrero.

Smithback: Ferrero. That is the guy that come in with the wet overcoat. That is Sesleski.

Nina: Stanley?

Smithback: Stanley Sesleski.

Nina: With the glasses?

Smithback: One of those guys that got in when he was thirty years old. He was eight years older than me. And he would pull guard with me. And he would talk about potato farming. And then he'd talk about his sisters. He had a lot of sisters. And they all went to Milwaukee to work, in the Polish community. And they all got jobs down there from their friends and relatives, and then to get married, they'd come back to the farm to get married, and then they'd have a three day wedding. And you would pay a dollar to dance with the bride. And that goes in their fund. And I couldn't believe all the stories like that. And I never knew they did that.

Nina: Who is Stan with?

Smithback: That is Tony Ferrero. He is the Italian guy. See his curly hair, black hair? Now, the other thing about, when we were on the gun crew, Spinner was a priest, altar

boy in the Dickeyville church. And I had been to Dickeyville, because my brother went to school there, and I'd take him down when he'd come home weekends. And we went to visit that church, and saw that glass, whatever they call it. And I said, "What did you mean by altar boy?" He said, "I helped the priest with the mass." And he said, "I learned it in Italian and English both." So, in the gun pit, I said, "Let's have the English mass today." And then, just for fun after it, I'd say, "Now have the Italian one. See if you can understand any part of it." And you could understand a few words, because we learned Italian when we were over there. For like a whole year. And the first Italian guy to come down from the hills, to go to his farm, they lived in a little village and they always went out to do their farm work on the grape vines, I said, "Buon giorno" to him, and he didn't answer. Then I talked to Ferrero, and he said, "You got to say [growling] buon giorno." So the next day he comes down there to go to work, and I say, "Buon giorno!" And he says, "Paisan! Buon giorno!" he says. "I go to Boston. I make-a da shoes. I save the money. And then I come back." And then he says, "I get the grape vine and now I am the boss." So, he had the guys work for him, and he bought the land and owned the grape vines and made the wine, and he was the boss. He was about sixty, and he asked me where I was from. I told him Madison, and he had never heard of it. And I said, "Chicago." And he said, "Oh, Capone! Capone!" He knew Chicago.

John: Walter, what, when you got out, what did you do after the war?

Smithback: Well, I went to the co-op. And then the dust was too much for me. And I had bad lungs, and the doctor told me I had to quit. So, after three years there, I started in selling Vita-Plus Feed. But one year, I didn't like that so I quit and then I started a gas station down here where the Kentucky Fried Chicken is. Puroil. And then I ran for treasurer after they were going to put the Beltline through and the gas business would be all done. You know, you can't get off the road. And a guy from the post office wanted it. And I told him, you wouldn't want to leave the post office to be in a gas station. You want to work eight hours a day, you aren't going to make a living here. Oh, he just wanted to sell it to somebody else, he said. I sold it to him. And I won in 1954. I ran for treasurer and I got the Democrat nomination. And I beat the Republican. And then I stayed there for ten years. And then I got, I ran again, no opposition. I only had opposition once or twice. And I ran five times. And then I got a call from the University, if I was interested in being the Assistant Registrar. And I said, sure. And I went down there and interviewed, and they said they would let me know in a week. Called me in a week, second interview, and they asked me the same thing as the co-op, when could I start and how much did I want.

Nina: I thought you said you were at the vocational school. This says University of Wisconsin Union membership card, '38 and '39. Did you go to UW?

Smithback: Yea. I dropped out because I got appendicitis. Then, with the war coming, I didn't go back. You would have to go and I thought I would enjoy life while I was still living.

Nina: Somebody's autograph.

Smithback: Swing and sway with Sammie Kaye.

Nina: Where did you buy this wallet?

Smithback: Morocco. Casablanca. This card was in my billfold. I got my Social Security card. I carried these two all through the war. Made in 1939.

Nina: And he won't take it out. You're not supposed to carry that. "Well, I carried it all through the war and I'm not going to lose it now. That must be some nice Italian girls.

Smithback: No, that is a French girl that, right by that place where we swam. And where we had that shower. She was in one of the other houses that they hadn't moved out of.

Nina: We got some that are kind of moldy from being in the basement.

John: This is a fantastic story. It is great.

Smithback: I talked to the Optimist Club and I got as far as Italy. Now they are going to have me back on the 31st to have me do the other half.

John: Okay. Let's see, who got me into that. Jim, the realtor.

Smithback: Olmsted.

John: Yes.

Smithback: He got a lot of members.

Nina: United States Army Motor Vehicle Operator's Permit. War Department.

John: I took the driving test for the Jeep, and a truck, and they had this great big tractor trailer that they haul tanks on. And the guy checking me out said, "Do you want to get licensed for that?" And I said, "Sure." So, he says, "All right." And that was it. I never even got in the thing.

Smithback: You could drive anything.

John: Let me leave this with you. This is about the - - have you been to the museum?
The Vet's Museum?

Smithback: Oh, yea. They got a 40 millimeter in there, when I was there.

John: Yea, that is right. And let me leave some more of this with you. I need a release.

Smithback: Yea, I can give you that.

John: And I'll send you a copy of this, and I'll sent you a copy of the transcript of this.
Let me sign that too.

Smithback: Now, I must have a good memory, because some people say they can't remember
much about their war.

John: You know, that is true.

[End of Interview.]