

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
LYLE D. SOLCHENBERGER  
Machine Gunner, Army, World War II.

2002

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**Solchenberger, Lyle D.**, (1922-2010). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Lyle Solchenberger, an Adams, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a machine gunner in the 399th Infantry Regiment, 100th Infantry Division in the European theater. Solchenberger talks about getting his deferment as a machinist canceled, enlisting in the Army, basic training at Camp Roberts (California), and arriving in France as a replacement for the 100th Division. Assigned to the 399<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, C Company, he states he was told to be a machine gunner despite lack of training because the previous crew had been killed. He details his first combat experiences at Lemberg and Bitche (France). Solchenberger addresses the high casualty rate his unit suffered. He tells of defending a factory during a German counterattack in Heilbronn (Germany), for which he was awarded a bronze star. He talks about rear echelon people stealing medals from infantrymen and recently getting help from a Wisconsin congressman, James Sensenbrenner, to receive the medals he had earned during the war. Solchenberger tells of heating his coffee by burning captured German payroll money, his colonel's refusing to obey a general's order because it would have resulted in high casualties, and having a dentist refuse to treat Solchenberger's cavities because, "You're a machine gunner; you're going to die anyway." He describes his remorse for having killed people and his sergeant's emotional reaction after shooting a young sniper. Solchenberger discusses what he did during the occupation of Germany and getting in trouble for drinking beer while guarding a brewery. At the end of the war, he tells of being billeted next to an Air Force unit, and he comments on being insulted by an Air Force colonel and having to eat C-rations while there was hot food being served to the airmen. Solchenberger talks about his civilian career, hurting his shoulder during service, turning down a veteran's pension, and quitting the VFW. He addresses wearing out his machine gun barrels, using tracers to aim his machine gun, and close calls some men in his unit had during combat. He recalls his fear of being taken prisoner because he looked Jewish and touches on seeing abused dead Jewish American soldiers at a prisoner of war camp. Solchenberger characterizes a medic in his unit who was a conscientious objector and who treated a wounded German soldier in "No Man's Land" under enemy fire.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Solchenberger (1922-2010) served in the Army from 1943 to 1946. He married Carol Bennett in 1942 and, after being widowed, married Edris Gomez in 1998. After the war, he worked for the Lake Wholesale Grocery Company in Beloit (Wisconsin) and the Adams Corporation. He also worked for seventeen years at the Wisconsin Department of Revenue, retiring in 1984 and settling in Lake Mills.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002

Transcribed by Jim Erwin, 2008

Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

**Interview Transcript:**

Jim: I'm talking to Lyle Solchenberger. It's the 6<sup>th</sup> of February, 2002. Where were you born, Lyle?

Woman: Where were you born?

Lyle: Oh, Adams, Wisconsin.

Jim: When was that?

Lyle: That was on twelve two, twenty-two. Yes sir! December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1922.

Jim: You're a year older than I am.

Lyle: I'm a year older than a lot of people.

Jim: [laughs] Okay. And what were you doing on Pearl Harbor day?

Lyle: I was working in a butcher shop. I thought I was gonna be a butcher, but I ran out of favors.

Jim: In Adams?

Lyle: In Friendship, Wisconsin. Um-hm.

Jim: And what were your plans at that moment?

Lyle: I planned on being a butcher, but I ran out of favors. I cut myself every time I turned around.

Jim: That was obviously something you weren't designed to do.

Lyle: Yeah, that's right. I found a safer vocation in a machine shop.

Jim: That's not much better for a guy who's accident prone. [laughs] So anyway, on December 7<sup>th</sup> on a Sunday, what were you doing?

Lyle: Just workin' behind the cold meat counter when word came.

Jim: On Sunday?

Lyle: Yes, sir. We worked six days a week and four hours on Sunday.

Jim: So what did you think?

- Lyle: The first thing I thought was my brother was in service already, and I wondered what would happen to him. It was unknown.
- Jim: But you know when you enlisted for the draft?
- Lyle: He was in the service, yah. I was only—
- Jim: You were old enough to be registered?
- Lyle: Yah, I had registered but I didn't go in until I went to La Crosse as a machinist.
- Jim: Because all of us were registered at that time. So what were you doing in La Crosse?
- Lyle: Well, I worked for an outfit making paper fasteners and then they promoted me to running a turret lathe. I had a deferment, but I wanted to get into service, so I asked them cancel my deferment so I could get in the Army, that's what I did.
- Jim: When was that?
- Lyle: That was in April of '43, and I got out in 1946.
- Jim: So you signed up, joined the Army and they sent you to Camp Grant?
- Lyle: No, they sent me to Camp Roberts, California. I had a choice of going to OCS [Officer Candidate School] or to college, and I chose college, and, well, that program fell through.
- Jim: The ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program]?
- Lyle: The ASTP, yes sir, that kinda fell through.
- Jim: So you didn't get into school?
- Lyle: Nope. And then we were shipped—We were supposed to go to the Pacific; instead D-Day was coming up, which we didn't know it, but they shipped us east to Fort Meade, Maryland, and then we went overseas to England.
- Jim: Where did you have your Basic?
- Lyle: Where? In Camp Roberts. I went to school there, you know, typing, shorthand and that type of thing.

- Jim: You never really started the ASTP program?
- Lyle: Nope, never—I had all the papers.
- Jim: When did you ship over to England?
- Lyle: Well, it was—D-Day was in June of '44; I went over probably in July, after D-Day.
- Jim: What outfit were you with?
- Lyle: I was just—I don't remember the name. We were just a whole group of guys from all over. There was one complete division that had been deactivated and we had first sergeants that had lost their stripes and everything, and I was a lowly little corporal; they didn't listen to much you said. So we just went over kind of as replacements. I shipped across the channel with an outfit and then that was disbanded and I went to the 100<sup>th</sup> Division as a replacement.
- Jim: The 100<sup>th</sup>?
- Lyle: Yeah. The 100<sup>th</sup> Division landed at Marseilles. I landed at Omaha Beach after the—we were the tourists.
- Jim: You weren't with the 100<sup>th</sup> Division then?
- Lyle: Yes. Um-hmm.
- Jim: You confused me when you said they went to Marseilles.
- Lyle: Well, they landed in Marseilles and then went north, on a convoy, until they got to France.
- Jim: That was in August?
- Lyle: Yeah. I didn't get in combat until October, about. I didn't get with the 100<sup>th</sup> Division until October. I was in some fighting before that, but not much.
- Jim: You have me confused now. If you crossed over the channel to get to France then you were a long way from Marseilles.
- Lyle: I know that.
- Jim: What outfit were you with when you crossed over to France?

Lyle: I have no idea. I don't remember that at all.

Jim: What was your job?

Lyle: Oh, I was a supply clerk at the time.

Jim: Okay. And you landed at Normandy and then moved inland?

Lyle: Yep.

Jim: But you don't remember which outfit that was?

Lyle: No, I have no idea.

Jim: How long were you in that group that you didn't know about?

Lyle: Well, from about the latter part of August until October when they sent us to the 100<sup>th</sup> Division.

Jim: Where were they when you went and joined them by that time?

Lyle: Oh, boy. There was a town called St. Lo. They had quite a battle and lost a lot of people, and that's why we were all transferred into the 100<sup>th</sup> Division.

Jim: And did your duties change when you got to the division?

Lyle: Yeah. When I got to the C Company of the 399<sup>th</sup>—

Jim: The 399<sup>th</sup> Regiment?

Lyle: Yes sir. First Battalion. They said if we don't have your shoe pac size, you don't have to go up front. Well, I wore a five and a half shoe. So when I go to the supply room the guy gave me a pair of boots. I said, "These are size nines." He says, "So wear socks." So I got four pair of socks.

Jim: Close enough.

Lyle: Yup. And then the Captain sez, "You're a machine gunner." I told him, "I don't know what a machine gun looks like." He said, "So, we'll teach you." I said, "Why?" "Because the crew was killed yesterday." And that's what I wanted to hear. So that's how I become a machine gunner; never saw one before in my life.

Jim: Before we go beyond that, tell me how they trained you.

- Lyle: They gave me the gun and said, "You tighten the barrel, open it three clicks, and pull the trigger." And that's all they told me.
- Jim: You don't operate those by yourself, so there must have been somebody—
- Lyle: I had an assistant gunner that was supposed to carry the ammunition and load the gun, but he never did.
- Jim: This was a 30 caliber, water cooled?
- Lyle: No, no, air cooled. Just a light 30. The heavy ones were in back of us.
- Jim: Not so smart. Okay, just you and him; did he know anything?
- Lyle: I don't know that he knew machine guns, but he was with the outfit in their training and he landed at Marseilles with them. He had been there since day one, since the organization of—
- Jim: What was his name?
- Lyle: His name was Dominic Gianini [?] from Brooklyn.
- Jim: Do you keep in contact with him or did he not survive?
- Lyle: I tried—Dominic was a very heavy smoker, he lit one off the other, and when I tried to call him a few years after we got out of service, he had passed away, very young.
- Jim: So anyway, what was the first action there with you and Dominic?
- Lyle: Well, I can't remember the name of the town, but it was a small town. And ah, it was in France yet, and then we went from there to a little town called Lemberg which was in Alsace-Lorraine. We started at two thirty in the morning, and ah, they were using 20 millimeter antiaircraft fire against us and at ten thirty everything quit, I don't know why, and then we regrouped and then took the town. We lost a lot of people that day.
- Jim: You traveled on foot or by truck?
- Lyle: On foot, every step of the way.
- Jim: Okay. And you're getting close the Rhine river now?
- Lyle: Um huh.



- Jim: Did you cross that?
- Lyle: We crossed that, walked. I don't remember the name of the town.
- Jim: It was below or above Remagen?
- Lyle: It was probably below Remagen, because we were south, we were just north of Stuttgart then. We walked for twenty-four hours south. We wound up in the Maginot Line. We went into a town called Bitche. B-i-t-c-h-e. It was a college town and it was the hinge, it was a citadel in the Maginot Line. And the Bronze Star that's on that wall, I got there. And they counterattacked, and we went back two and a half miles, and the next morning when we counted heads we had twenty-four combat troops left. I'm not counting clerks and cooks, 'cause as far as I'm concerned, they were rear echelon, but there were twenty-four combat troops left.
- Jim: Tell me about that experience there.
- Lyle: Well, we were—I had a clear field of fire, but Nick Gianini, they had put him on another gun. They had split us up; he had his own machine gun by then. And he was lined up, the trees were lined up so he couldn't see anything, and I went through at least three belts of ammunition and the captain—the French pulled out on our right flank and the captain asked if we could get out of there, and the colonel said, “No, you stay until we can get—headquarters can get out.” And finally he says, “You're nearly surrounded, and if you can get one man out alive, you'll be lucky.” Then we took off. And like I say, there were about twenty-four of us survived that. Then we stayed in defensive positions for quite awhile.
- Jim: The Bronze Star was for what? The Bronze Star.
- Lyle: The Bronze Star, they just called it Meritorious Service for that one, but this one was later. That was in Heilbronn. Nick and Fred Zimmerman were on the gun and the other gunner was—they were from Brooklyn, and the story I got after it was over was that Zimmerman was lookin' out the right side of the gun and he moved his head a little to the left and a sniper shot at him, and so he tried to see him but couldn't, and he moved his head over again, and the sniper missed him for the second time, so he told Nick to get out of the hole, something's happening. And Nick said, “You stick your head up and I'll see if I can see him.” So Zimmerman stuck his head up for the third time [laughs] and he missed again. Nick says, “Stick your head up again.” Then he says, “Stick my head up? Do you think I'm crazy?” [both laugh] They never did see the sniper.
- Jim: So the sniper was—

- Lyle: [laughter] A poor shot. He could've stuck his helmet up, but he didn't; he kept stickin' his head up. That's the story I heard; I was too busy to know.
- Jim: So tell me about the other Bronze Star.
- Lyle: That one, that was in Heilbronn.
- Jim: Heilbronn in Germany?
- Lyle: Yes sir. We crossed the river assigned to the 397<sup>th</sup> Regiment, and I don't know where our regiment was, it was just our company. So we crossed the Neckar River in assault boats, it's all in the citation here, and we got control of the opposite bank. And then they put us in a factory and the Germans counterattacked and kicked us out, and then we went back in that afternoon. Then we went up on the third floor of this factory, and uh, they counterattacked with a tank and a company of men. Nick was in a window on the right and I was on the left and I hollered at him to start on the right and go to the middle and I'd meet him, and we went back and forth several times until no one—they hid behind a privet hedge, if you can imagine, until nobody moved, and apparently the tank realized it was hopeless and they backed up and left.
- Jim: How much ammo did you have left? Did you start running out of ammo?
- Lyle: Yes, I was almost out. If they hadn't left when they did—what I had in mind was to try to fire down the bore of the tank if he raised that gun, because an obstruction in the bore should have caused it to explode, then we're good. But I don't know that it would. I never had to find out. But that's what I had in mind.
- Jim: Who was in the building with you?
- Lyle: The rest of the company, which was probably less than a hundred people by then, were down on the ground floor or deployed around the building. There was myself and my assistant, who, when the bullets started flying, ran and hid; Nick and his ammunition bearer, whose name I don't know; and a forward observer for the artillery and his radioman, and I didn't know their names. I have no idea who they were. The only other guy I remember, his name was \_\_\_\_\_[?] and he was decorated also. I just got these decorations a few months ago, because as a machine gunner, the guys back in there, including our own cooks and clerks, would steal our decorations, 'cause they figured you weren't gonna live anyway.
- Jim: What about the piece of paper that shows that you won it?

- Lyle: They'd substitute that, they'd re-type that and then destroy the one with our name on it, because after the War was over, I became the Awards and Decorations Clerk and I found how many—I had at least three other decorations that I never got, and I can't document them, 'cause I can't—these I can document, so that's why I got 'em. Congressman Sensenbrenner helped me get them. But anyway, I confronted the guys and told them that they hadn't even seen a machine gun, let alone fired one. But you got five points for each decoration to go home, and so they went home and I sat there. And then about two years ago, I decided why not try, and I went back to the records that I had here and could document those things hangin' on the wall, and I got them.
- Jim: Who did you write to?
- Lyle: Pardon me, sir?
- Jim: Whom did you write to? You wrote to a congressman; his office took care of it?
- Lyle: Yes. A lady named Sally Cole worked long hours with Congressman Sensenbrenner to get 'em. In fact, I gave up at one point in time and she says, "Oh, no, hang in there." And so we did, and things went pretty quick.
- Jim: Good. Tell me the name of the regiment again?
- Lyle: It was, I was in C Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 399<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 100<sup>th</sup> Division
- Jim: The 399<sup>th</sup>?
- Lyle: Yes sir. Three nine nine. We were only in combat a little over six months; I wasn't there that long. In that length of time there were very close to five hundred people went through our company, and the company originally consisted of about a hundred and eighty people, counting the clerks and cooks, so the attrition rate was rather high, but, surprisingly, it was either wounded or captured, very few killed. Very few killed.
- Jim: Captured? A lot of your regiment was captured?
- Lyle: Oh, yes. Yeah.
- Jim: At the time of counterattacks, was that when most of them were taken?

- Lyle: Um-hmm, yes. Lieutenant Hackell [?] and his whole platoon was lost that way.
- Jim: Maybe they were all taken prisoner.
- Lyle: Um-hmm.
- Jim: Did you ever see any of them afterwards?
- Lyle: No. I don't know what happened to them.
- Jim: Does the 100<sup>th</sup> Division have reunions?
- Lyle: They have reunions every year, but I've never gone to one. They're on the East coast and I have just never gone.
- Jim: Then you'll wait until they come to Lake Mills? [laughs]
- Lyle: No, no, it doesn't—Well, you see, for years and years I couldn't stand the fact that I had killed so many people with that gun, and it wasn't until I found, just a few years ago, that the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," is a translation. The original commandment was, "Thou shalt do no murder," that to kill in self defense or time of war is not considered a mortal sin. Now I didn't know that until about five or six years ago. So [pause] I've always been ashamed of what I did. [said with catch in voice]
- Jim: You shouldn't be.
- Lyle: I was.
- Jim: When did you leave Germany?
- Lyle: In April of '46. I was there during the occupation time, 'cause I didn't have points enough to come home.
- Jim: April of '46. What did you do during the occupation?
- Lyle: Practically nothing. The Infantry is a strange group. Your only job is to kill and destroy, and when the war ends you have no job. The medics still work, the doctors still work, the truck drivers work, the clerks work, but you have nothing to do. So they would put us to guarding the most insane things. Like once I was put guarding a brewery, for what reason, I have no idea, but they had to have something for you to do. [laughs] There were three of us, and you don't take it too seriously after combat. It was a hot summer day, so kids were playing ball in the back parking lot, so we

took our helmets and guns off and started playin' ball. A man came out of the brewery with three bottles of frosty beer, so we're leaning against the dock drinkin' a beer and the captain drove up. Needless to say, we caught a little bit of the dickens.

Jim: Should have given him some of your beer.

Lyle: No. He wasn't interested in beer; he was interested in screaming at us.

Jim: At that point you didn't care.

Lyle: No, we really didn't.

Jim: What could he do? Send you home? [laughs]

Lyle: Well, what he did was, my next post was way out in the boondocks, about ten miles from anybody, so that was my punishment. But I was lucky 'cause we could have been in big trouble, you know, drinking beer on guard duty, you know.

Jim: You never were hit by anything?

Lyle: I got a little scratch on my right eyebrow outside of Lemberg, and I went back to Battalion Aid and they just patched me up and I went back up front, and that's what the Purple Heart is for, up on the wall. Um, one other time I got a scratch, this was outside of Bitche when a shell burst in the trees and Sergeant Kelly screamed and grabbed his face. When the Medics put him on the ground and pulled his hand away, he had no eyes. He lost his eyes, and all I got was a little scratch, so I didn't even report that. You feel pretty guilty, you know.

Jim: [unintelligible].

Lyle: Yes, yes. I was offered a battlefield commission at one point in time, and I turned it down because I didn't feel I'd be a good combat officer. I felt that if I had to die, that was one thing, but to send somebody else to, I couldn't do that.

Jim: More responsibility than you wanted?

Lyle: Right. I couldn't do that; I just couldn't.

Jim: Were you a corporal or were you made sergeant by that time?

Lyle: No, I was corporal; I never got above corporal. In fact, I felt somewhat justified a few years ago when Larry King interviewed General Powell,

whom I consider to be an extremely great man. He said, when Larry asked him why he retired early, he said, "I gave thirty-five years to my country. I love my country and I love the military, but I hate war. I hate war!"

Jim: All right. How did you get out?

Lyle: I went to Camp McCoy and was discharged. I was discharged from there.

Jim: Were you married then?

Lyle: Yes. I was married before I went overseas. We got married—I was married to my first wife, Carol. We got married at nineteen, because I knew I'd be going in the service and you don't know if you're coming back or not. And so we wanted to be husband and wife for awhile anyway.

Jim: Any children from that marriage?

Lyle: There were two after I got out of service, yes. Two daughters, Karen and Connie. They live in Ft. Atkinson.

Jim: Do you keep in touch with them?

Lyle: Oh, yes. In fact, my daughter's gonna take us into Madison tomorrow to the doctor.

Jim: Any grandchildren?

Lyle: I have four grandchildren and I'll soon have two great grandchildren in March and June. After we took Heilbronn we advanced to a town called Eislingen [?] and we captured a garrison that had just received their payroll, 'cause there were stacks of hundred mark notes, and I filled my backpack with hundred mark notes. They told us, afterwards, that they were worthless. They were going to issue script and those notes would be worthless, so we'd stack three of them together in a pyramid and light them on fire and heat our coffee with them. We found out after the War that each hundred mark note was actually worth four hundred marks, so I had some of the most expensive coffee in Germany. [Jim laughs] There were three of us, we'd stack them up and—but anyway, while we were stealing that money, the colonel's radio happened to be in my area. In front of the garrison there was a long, long, black-topped road, then a long field that went up a steep hill to an orchard. And the general, a three star general, ordered the colonel to take that hill, and Colonel Zayres [Zehner?] says, "I'll take it tomorrow morning at 2:00 o'clock." And the General says, "You'll take it now!" And the Colonel said, "Sir, it would

be slaughter; they're waiting for us on the hill. It's a bright March day and none of us would survive." And the General ordered him to take the hill. "Either take the hill, or I'll court martial you." Colonel Zayres [?] says, "Two reasons why you won't court martial me. I'm not dumb enough to come back there, and you haven't got guts enough to get me." So the next morning at 2:00 o'clock we took the hill and they had guns lined up—Aw, none of us would have made it. As it was, they were not on guard and we took 'em easily.

Jim: Did you surprise them?

Lyle: We surprised them completely. They didn't expect us at 2:00 o'clock; you usually attacked at daybreak, that's when you usually attacked. But when the colonel ordered us to attack at 2:00 o'clock in the morning, that completely surprised them.

Jim: Did you catch them in the foxholes?

Lyle: We caught them in the foxholes; in fact, there was only one casualty, and that was a German. This kid stepped in the hole, and when the German hollered, he shot him. He said, "You make too much noise." And the rest of them surrendered without a shot.

Jim: By that time were they young kids?

Lyle: Pretty much. Yeah, and even some officer candidates.

Jim: Were you impressed with that, how young they were to be in the war?

Lyle: Yes, you were surprised, but they had trained those kids. They were fanatic, because they had heard nothing else, they had learned nothing else; they never knew what real life was. I'm going to tell you a really bad story, but this was about two weeks of the War was left and we were in a little tiny town which name I do not remember, but we were pinned down by a sniper. Every time we'd try to move, they'd fire. We finally realized he was using a bolt action rifle, and so a Sergeant—Whitey is all I ever knew him by—stepped out and said, "My goodness, it's a kid." So we called on him to surrender, and every time we would, he'd shoot. So the next time he fired, Whitey waited until he took a little while to reload and he stepped out and shot him and he dropped his rifle and he said, "My God! I just killed a kid." And he went back to the rear with tears streaming down his cheeks and we never saw him again. I don't know what happened to him.

Jim: Was he a ten year old or something like that?

Lyle: Ten or twelve. He was just a ten or twelve year old kid was all he was. But that was the end of it for Whitey. He broke. So that's not a nice thing, but—I gotta tell you two other stories. They called us back off of the line and they said, "We're gonna have a dental examination," and so I went to the dentist, and he said, "You have two cavities." So I said, "When are you gonna fix them?" He says, "Are you crazy? You're a machine gunner; you're gonna die anyway," and he ordered me out of the office. And then, towards the end of the War, we moved a lot, and we moved to this garrison and there were big brick buildings. The Air Force got there ahead of us, and, of course, they took the good buildings, which was natural. My squad was put up on the third floor with no walls, no outer wall. It had been blown out, and there was snow on the floor, but they said, "You're gonna get used to that." As we unloaded from the trucks this time, the Air Force guys hollered, "Hey, grab your mess kits and eat with us." It was the evening meal, so some of us did. A bird colonel pulled up with his driver, of course. They stood up in the jeep, and I'll never forget this if I live to be a million. "You Infantry people get out of that line, you are no better than dogs, you're not fit to associate with decent human beings."

Jim: Those were the words he used?

Lyle: Yes. "You may have the scraps off the table." So we went back to our room and we were given C-rations. For three days we ate C-Rations while there was hot food a hundred feet from us, but we weren't allowed to have it.

Jim: Did you complain to somebody higher up?

Lyle: No one to complain to. He was pretty much right because that's how you become. You kill without—in fact, one time we matched coins and the winner got to kill the next German.

Jim: What did you-- [unintelligible]

Lyle: Whoever stuck his head up, you shot him. We just—you sink so low that the colonel was right. The more I think about it, he was right. [pause]

When we'd go back for a break, you'd get your first clean clothing in a month or two months. And the guys in the rear, it seemed like it always rained or snowed, and there were no black-topped roads in those little villages, and we'd be walking on and they'd make the sign like there was incoming artillery, and of course you'd dive in the mud. You could rinse the clothes out but you couldn't get clean clothing again, and they thought that was funny. We didn't see much humor in it.

**[End of Tape 1, Side A]**



Jim: After you got out, what did you do?

Lyle: I went to work in a warehouse unloading box cars, one hundred pound bags of flour, and uh—

Jim: Where?

Lyle: In Beloit, Wisconsin. It was called the Lake Wholesale Grocery Company. And after some of that I went on the road as a salesman for them, and then from there I went to what's called Adams Corporation making corn curls.

Jim: Did you use your G.I. Bill?

Lyle: No, I never thought about that. I know it was available, but my only thought was to get out of the service and have a family. The G.I. Bill never occurred to me. I know I should have, but, no. In fact, I separated my shoulder at Fort Meade, Maryland and they were going to put me in a hospital; instead I packed my bags up and went overseas, and the Veteran's Service Officer was going to give me a pension for that shoulder. At the time I was selling insurance for Metropolitan, and I says, "I'll bet you money I'm makin' more money per week than you are." I didn't want to lean on anybody. I guess I'm kinda dumb but independent.

Jim: That cost you some dough.

Lyle: Sir?

Jim: That cost you money.

Lyle: It did. Yeah, I could have had a pension all these—

Jim: A check coming and still coming, right today.

Lyle: Yeah, I know. But I made it on my own, I've made a pretty good living and a pretty good pension, and I didn't have—

Jim: You got a pension from the insurance company?

Lyle: No. I went to work for the State of Wisconsin, for the Department of Revenue. I was a Revenue Agent. And Edie worked in the same office, and that's where we met.

Jim: When was this?

- Lyle: Well, let's see. I've been retired seventeen years and I worked for the State seventeen years, so that's thirty-four years ago. I mean, I appeared for seventeen years.
- Jim: You tend to depreciate what you do; you shouldn't do that. [both laugh] Did you join any veteran's organizations?
- Lyle: I'm a member of the 100<sup>th</sup> Division, the Combat Infantry Association, and uh, it's called the Society of the Sons of Bitche, only that's not how they pronounce it. And because that had never been taken by frontal assault before in the history of war, and we did. And so they—from what I understand on the fiftieth anniversary of the capture, the guys went back and the city had a great big to-do for them. I didn't go, but—
- Jim: Well, that's too bad.
- Lyle: I have a friend in New York and he goes to everything, so he lets me know what goes on.
- Jim: But you haven't been to any of these reunions?
- Lyle: No. No. I'm not a joiner. I'm a member of my church and that's it.
- Jim: You attend church every day?
- Lyle: Oh, yes, every Sunday.
- Jim: Oh, every Sunday.
- Lyle: Yeah. I don't want to get into the Legion because I don't have much of an opinion of them, so we won't even talk about that.
- Jim: No, I don't think any of them joined that. I never did. It's an organization that no longer has any meaning. Even the VFW is losing members.
- Lyle: Yeah, I was a member of that until they invited Clinton to speak. They let a traitor like that speak at their meeting, I thought, my goodness, so I wrote a letter, I cut my card up and sent it to the national organization. They said we received thousands of letters in the same vein. Well, when you're ready to rejoin, we'll consider accepting you. Well I thought, why you conceited person, you.
- Jim: [laughs] So you've been living your life in protest?
- Lyle: I have.

- Jim: I believe that. [unintelligible]
- Lyle: Well, I've done quite well I guess, I think.
- Jim: Okay. Any more that you didn't tell me yet?
- Lyle: Yes, one more. Outside of Lemberg, I told you how bad that was. Three tanks were knocked out and 20 millimeter anti-aircraft. Well Nick and Zimmerman and I were in the same trench and a 20 millimeter shell stuck in the opposite bank. And we were arguing over who was gonna throw it out, 'cause it could have exploded. I don't remember who did now, but it went tumbling down the hill and it never did explode. After it was over, Zimmerman took his helmet off and sat down in the trench and he says, "These two guys from Brooklyn, you know, they talk different." He says, "You should have been there, Nick," and he explained the whole day to 'em, he described everything that had gone on. When he got all done, Nick says, "Zimmy, I bought my ticket the same time you did." I never heard that before. [both laugh]
- Jim: Well, have you said everything that you needed to say? Did you feel that the Army didn't train you as well as they should have?
- Lyle: Oh, they trained me as well as—I was in the artillery to begin with, and like I said, I went to school, and one day I got transferred to another battalion, and the captain says, "Have you ever pulled a lanyard on a howitzer?" And I told him, "No." "You'll be out in the field at 4:00 o'clock tomorrow morning." And I was, and they loaded it, and I pulled the lanyard, but of course I ducked. He said, "This time, pull that thing and stand still." I did the second time, but oh boy, that thing makes an awful racket. And that was my one experience with a howitzer. Other than that, I was in the office all the time; I didn't see all that stuff. No, as far as the machine gun, there isn't a whole lot to learn other than pull the trigger; any fool can do that. And they told us to fire in bursts. I says, "You're kidding. Every time you stop, they'll shoot back at you."
- Jim: That would save the barrel.
- Lyle: That's what they said.
- Jim: The barrel will melt if you keep at it.
- Lyle: I said, "I don't give a hoot about the barrel." In fact, I don't know how—
- Jim: If it stops working you would, because then they'd be shooting back all the time.

- Lyle: Well, I don't know how many barrels I went through, but a lot of 'em, 'cause it would take the rifling out and then the bullets would tumble. See, every fifth bullet is a tracer, and you could see 'em tumbling end over end. And, of course, they weren't too happy with me requisitioning new barrels all the time.
- Jim: Yeah, I know, but if you lose that rifling, then you lose control of the gun.
- Lyle: That's true, but you can aim pretty good, 'cause you never aim a gun, you just watch where the tracers are going, 'cause the others are slightly heavier and they'll go just a little below. And so I just—
- Jim: The tracers are always above where the rest of the shells go?
- Lyle: Correct. So even end over end, they'll kill a lot of people.
- Jim: I was on a hospital ship during Korea.
- Lyle: Oh boy.
- Jim: And I saw a lot of casualties. This one kid came in and he had a little hole in his forehead, and sticking out of the forehead was the nose of a 30 caliber bullet. The day he got on the line, the Sergeant said, "Keep your head down." Of course, then he stood up and he was hit, but the bullet was tumbled so it went in backwards. So he came aboard ship, all I could see was just a nose of that bullet sticking out. So he was on the line, I guess, twenty minutes. So I pulled it out and it creased his skull, but otherwise he was [unintelligible]. But he was lucky if it hadn't tumbled, that thing would have gone straight through.
- Lyle: Sure it would have. I've had bullets come so close to my head, many, many times, that you could hear them snap as they go by. But as long as they're that far away, they don't hurt ya a whole bunch. But I have a friend, well, he's dead now, but his earlobe was missing, and one time I talked to him and says, "Harold, you know, what—were you born that way?" He was at Anzio, he was on guard, it was in the evening, and he was standing near the front of his hut, someone said "Harold" and he turned his head, and a sniper took his earlobe off.
- Jim: Right.
- Lyle: Oh boy! [laughs] That's as close as you'll ever come. And then, I wasn't on this patrol—I went on many patrols—but this guy, they shot at him and it went in the helmet and out the back and just creased his hair; it didn't even break the skin on his head. So when we got ready to go

home, the lieutenant told him to turn that helmet in. He says, “No sir, that’s goin’ home on my mantle.” Then the officer says, “Turn it in and that’s an order.” The kid said, “If you want to come around the corner and fight me for it, you can have it.” Then the Lieutenant just laughed and let him take it. So I guess that went home with him. That’s pretty close too. You know, I have often said that combat was not as bad as what you think it could be, because you knew from second to second what was goin’ on. The folks back home were the ones that didn’t know. They worried. They—you were protecting yourself. Well, anyway—

Jim: What about the noise? Did it bother you?

Lyle: What? No I can’t recall that it did.

Jim: Wasn’t it noisy to have a machine gun?

Lyle: I never worried about dying either. I worried about losing an arm or a leg, or like Sergeant Kelly, losing his eyes, that I worried about. But I’ll tell something I worried about worse than that was being caught a prisoner. See, I used to have black wavy hair and I’m short and fairly—ah, you know, well built, and I look Jewish. I’ve been invited to Yom Kippur on more than one occasion, and what the Nazis did to Jewish American soldiers was they tied their wrists and ankles together and then took two meat hooks and hung ‘em, hooked their jaws and then let them hang until they died. And when I saw that—Lieutenant Shields —

Jim: You saw that? You saw that where?

Lyle: Oh my God! I don’t know, it was a prisoner of war camp. But I can’t tell you where ‘cause we didn’t pay much attention to towns. But from then on, Lieutenant Shields says, “I should decorate you; you fight like a crazy man.” I said, “I’m not interested in saving your life, I’m savin’ mine. I don’t care if you die in the next ten seconds.” Needless to say, I didn’t get much of a decoration. [laughs]

Jim: I was going to say, that’s not a very good [unintelligible].

Lyle: No. But I feared being captured so much that I did. I went crazy from then on.

Jim: Do you have nightmares?

Lyle: I used to for years. I wake up once in a while now, but it’s not as bad as it used to be. Oh, yeah. Yeah. Mostly guilt from killing people. You know, you just—I have a friend from church, and when she found out what I

did in the war, she looked at me and said, “How could you take another life?” and walked away from me. She won’t talk to me anymore, never.

Jim: I wouldn’t want any person who was so ignorant to say such a thing; they’re not worth talking to, I can guarantee it.

Lyle: Well, let me tell you one more story then. We had two conscientious objectors. They were Medics; they were two of the bravest men I’ve ever met in my life. And we had had a little bit of a skirmish and there was a wounded German out in what the press likes to call “No Man’s Land,” and this kid had a Polish name, we called him “Jonesy.” He says words to this effect, I don’t know if it will be exact, but I’ll tell you the gist of the thing. He said, “I have to go out there and help that man; he was screaming in pain.” And one of the guys said, “If you do that, they’ll kill you.” “Well,” he said, “that’s their problem, not mine.” So up over the trench he went and he crawled out there, and we tried to cover him, but they were firing machine guns and rifles and you could see dust kicking up all around his body. Now he’s got four Red Crosses, you know: four on the helmet, one on his sleeve and one on his medical bag. He got out there and put the man’s jacket under his head as a pillow, gave him a shot of morphine, and bandaged him up, stopped the bleeding and everything, crawled back, and all the while they tried to kill him. He got back in the trench and one of the guys said, “They tried to kill you.” Jonesy said, “I know that.” They said, “Well will you kill them now?” He said, “No.” “What if they had killed you?” He said, “They would have to answer to their God. I’ve already answered to mine.”

Jim: All right. Any more?

Lyle: No. That should do it, sir. So when I hear—I worked for a factory here in town for awhile and there was a really good, good man, and the boss said, “I should promote him, but he’s a conscientious objector.” I said, “What’s that got to do with anything?” And he said, “Well you were in the War and so was I.” And I says, “Yeah.” And I told him this about Jonesy, and I don’t know whether that had anything to do with it or not, but the man got his promotion. I don’t believe that you should knock what another man does. There was an old Indian saying: “You don’t judge a man until you walk a mile in his moccasins.” Well, that man was a lot braver than I was.

Jim: You wouldn’t have done that?

Lyle: I don’t think so. Oh no. It was almost suicide to crawl out there and bandage that man. Nothing could have saved him but—

Jim: Maybe he had a death wish.

Lyle: He just loved people and he bandaged him and wouldn't hurt him. When we retreated that time I asked him if he normally carried a gun, and he said, "I threw it away." I said, "They can use it against us." He said, "So?" [Jim laughs] He would not touch a gun, but he was brave beyond belief. He'd bandage you and take care of you and—

Jim: Where is he now?

Lyle: I have no idea. Well, I do too have an idea, which I didn't have to tell you this, but he's dead. Yeah, the War was over and he had a really good friend, and they were sitting in this room and they were writing letters home, and this kid had a muzzle-loading pistol, the old flintlock, and he was aiming it out the window, click, click, click, he done it about a dozen times, and he turned it like this at Jonesy and Jonesy said, "Don't do that, they'll fire." This kid said, "No it won't." He pulled the trigger, it went in Jonesy's mouth, took the whole back of his head off. That's how he died. The kid that did it went nuts. He went crazy, right on the spot. [pause] His best friend.

Jim: Okay.

**[End of Interview]**