

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DONALD V. WIBERG
Infantryman Runner, Army, World War II.

1995

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Wiberg, Donald V., (1924-2010). Oral History Interview, 1995.

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

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

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Donald V. Wiberg, a Minneapolis, Minnesota native, discusses his World War II service in A Company of the 394th Infantry Regiment in the European Theater, including his experiences during Battle of the Bulge. After a year at the University of Minnesota, Wiberg touches on being drafted, basic training at Camp Fannin (Texas), going into the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) at Louisiana State University, and assignment to the 99th Infantry Division at Camp Maxey (Texas), where they had ground warfare training. Sent to England aboard a liberty ship, he talks about mobilizing equipment, crossing to Le Havre (France), and camping in an orchard on the front lines in Belgium. Wiberg discusses duty as a platoon runner and comments on how spread out his division was. He details participating in the Battle of the Bulge: hearing movement the night before the Germans attacked, being hit from behind after the enemy had circled around on forest paths, and holding his position for two days. He explains his unit's position in relation to other divisions and their retreat through German lines to an old army camp at Elsenborn Hill, located at the hinge of the Bulge. Wiberg states that in the confusion of the retreat, the 2nd Division took control of the 9th Division for a few days. He tells of having good defenses on the hill and stopping a massive German attack. Wiberg comments on the cold, snowy weather and states that the hardest duty he had was a day of moving and stacking dead soldiers. He describes going out on a patrol, capturing some German prisoners of war, and an American soldier's accidentally shooting one of the prisoners in the back. In the middle of the Bulge operation, Wiberg discusses getting a three-day pass to Paris and feeling guilty for leaving his friends in the trenches. He speaks about having no access to showers, seeing men suffer from trench foot, and having a hot meal on Christmas. He characterizes his junior officers and portrays his impression of General Patton and General Omar Bradley. After clearing some of the Siegfried Line, Wiberg speaks of travelling through pockets of resistance between Aachen and the Rhine River, running across a bridge at Remagen, and having heavy casualties at Honningen while establishing the Remagen Bridgehead. He mentions being a company runner at this point and going into Schloss Arenfels, where battalion headquarters was stationed. After cleaning out the Ruhr Pocket, he states his unit was sent to Bavaria, and he speaks of seeing the devastation at Schweinfurt as they drove by in trucks and encountering resistance at the Danube crossing. Wiberg recalls V-E Day, pleasant guard duty at Marktheidenfeld, and relations between his unit and the German civilians. After V-J Day, he states he was assigned to Camp Homerun (Le Havre, France) and temporarily promoted to master sergeant so he could be assigned to duty paying homeward-bound

officers. Wiberg mentions visiting Paris, London, and Antwerp, and he speaks of his homecoming through Camp McCoy (Wisconsin). He touches on using his GI Bill to finish college and the serious approach veterans took to their college studies. He talks about getting a veterans' bonus from Minnesota and marrying Ella, a WAVE veteran. He comments on having no lasting health problems from service, attending division and company reunions, and joining the American Legion with his wife.

Biographical Sketch:

Wiberg (1924-2010) served in the Army from 1943 to 1946. He graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1948, worked for A.O. Smith Corp. in Milwaukee from 1951 to 1987, and eventually settled in Brookfield (Wisconsin), where he was a longtime member of the Brookfield Parks Department Board.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, September 7, 1995
Transcribed by Joanna D. Glen, WDVA staff, ca. 1995
Reviewed and corrected by Calvin John Pike, 2011
Corrections typed in by Kelsey Burnham, 2012

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2012

Transcribed Interview:

Mark: Today's date is September 7, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning over the telephone with Mr. Donald Wiberg, presently of Brookfield, Wisconsin, a veteran of World War II, 99th Infantry Division. Good morning.

Wiberg: Good morning, Mark.

Mark: Thanks for taking an hour or so out of your time to talk to me today. I suppose we should start at the top and I would like you to tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Wiberg: I was born and raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota and I was in high school at the time that the attack came, and it was a Sunday, and I was sitting doing homework, and I heard it over the radio. It was a big shock at the time and something that I can still remember after all these years.

Mark: Now you were about sixteen or seventeen?

Wiberg: I was born in '24, so I guess I was seventeen.

Mark: As a young man, did you think, "Geez, this is going to impact on my life," or did you think that far ahead? Did you think at the time that you were going to be off in a war in the fairly near future?

Wiberg: Well, I had a suspicion because I had older cousins that had already been called up in 1940 with the National Guard.

Mark: And so you pretty much got used to the idea that perhaps you might be going.

Wiberg: We all knew that this was a momentous change. We said, "A dastardly act" and everybody in the country was behind the President.

Mark: So you finished high school.

Wiberg: I finished high school and because I was still a little young, why I went right into the University of Minnesota. I was a living home student so I wasn't a great part of the campus activity, but I started and by the time they were ready to call me up, I had the first half year in. So, I said "Well, instead of volunteering, if they'll let me finish the year, why I'll be drafted."

- Mark: That is what happened. So off to basic training you went.
- Wiberg: That is exactly what happened. We went off to basic training.
- Mark: At age nineteen, or whatever it was.
- Wiberg: I was still eighteen, but I was going on nineteen in two months. I went in in June of '43. We went down to basic training, which was down in East Texas, Camp Fannin, and after finishing basic training, they put us into the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] and there was a lot of us at that time that were college students. And I was assigned to LSU, Louisiana State University, down at Baton Rouge.
- Mark: What sort of subjects did you study? This program was supposed to be to train officers and technical fields and that sort of thing.
- Wiberg: It was kind of for officers and to extend your training basically, in the field that you were in. It was engineering oriented, but we had a good start, and some of them were in longer, but I went in after Basic in the Fall of '43. And then things started to deteriorate and, by March of '44, we were all cashiered out of the ASTP program, closed down, and filled the ranks of the Infantry Division.
- Mark: Right. And you went to the 99th?
- Wiberg: Yes. We went to Camp Maxey. The 99th had been moved. They had been in Mississippi and they moved up there to Camp Maxey, apparently shortly before we got there.
- Mark: Yeah. Once you got with the 99th Division, what sort of activities did you do? I would imagine you were training.
- Wiberg: Then we went into a rather intensive training. They had been heavily trained in maneuvers in Louisiana prior to going into Maxey, so we fleshed out the ranks and I guess we were absorbing what they had learned and just drilling and getting ready for combat.
- Mark: Was this like a mobile kind of combat you were training for or was it trenches, ground warfare, or—
- Wiberg: Ground warfare primarily. We were a regular division, Army division. That is, we had several groups of artillery attached to us and reconnaissance troops. It was a regular Army. In other words, grunt troops.

Mark: Right. Ground pounders.

Wiberg: Yup!

Mark: Did you learn that you were going to be going over to Europe or did you might think you might end up—

Wiberg: No. We didn't know anything until it started to happen. We'd get all kinds of rumors always, but I think when they decided that we were going to go overseas—which would be about August of '44—we were sent to the East coast. Well right away we said, "Oops, now at least we know in which direction we're going. By that time a month or so ahead, they had D-Day and invaded Europe. In September of '44 we were put on a number of ships—and a liberty ship in our case—and over to England, and we circled up to the north, and there was some attack by the subs.

Mark: Really.

Wiberg: Oh yah, but the destroyer escort mostly chased them all. I can't remember if one of the ships was hit a little bit or not. Anyway, none of our people were lost and we landed at two ports. I know we came into Liverpool and then got shuttled down to the south coast of England.

Mark: What did you do there? More training, I assume.

Wiberg: Organizing; getting all our supplies together. You see, because first you got the men, now you got to get all the heavy artillery, all the trucks, all of what goes with an infantry division; so that all had to be mobilized. In the meantime, of course, remember England had been a staging area and they said it was darn lucky it didn't sink from all the equipment that was in there before we got there. So we went across the Channel in October. What we did was we went into LeHavre. Now LeHavre had been cleared, that is cleared of mines, but none of the docks were open at all so we disembarked on landing ships and went ashore on landing ships. There was no fighting, of course. We were fortunate, I think, that we had at least a harbor to go into.

Mark: So what took place then once you got into France?

Wiberg: Then we got on trucks and took off across and didn't stop until we got into Belgium. By that time, it was early November and I remember we ended up camping out in an apple orchard with it starting to snow. So we got our introduction; the weather isn't so good and the front had stalled at this point as they tried to bring logistics up to where the troops were. We

relieved the 9th Division. I know it was the 9th Division on line, because my cousin was in that and he had been fighting from North Africa. I didn't see him, but he had been in there a long, long time. We relieved them on line.

Mark: This is November then of '44.

Wiberg: We started to get casualties in November.

Mark: I was going to ask about your first combat experience, first time someone fired a shot at you in anger and I am interested in your reaction to it. Do you recall the incident?

Wiberg: That was not until the attack. I was a platoon runner at the time, which means that I was in between the platoons and the company headquarters.

Mark: You were in there like a messenger or something?

Wiberg: A messenger, sure. The runner is always the messenger. So I was not on outpost duty. The guys on outpost duty were the ones getting shot at and having to take off on a patrol once in a while. So our division was spread over twenty-two miles of front, which means that we were really stretched out. And the 2nd Division pulled off line too, and the 106th went on line to the right of us, and we were the last company on our front to the south. In between, we only had an I&R platoon; Intelligence Reconnaissance, which was right in there just to fill the gap between us and the 106th. We lost people like I say on a few minor skirmishes, but those skirmishes were [where] the Germans would send a patrol to see where we were. We'd send a patrol to see where they were, so the guys on outpost duty possibly would get hit and a few of them did. Then, of course, was the main action.

Mark: This was the Bulge?

Wiberg: This was the Bulge. The Bulge started the 16th of December.

Mark: If you would describe your experience. When did you first see the Germans coming? When did you first learn that they were coming?

Wiberg: You see, we'd been hearing tanks moving all night long.

Mark: And that was unusual?

Wiberg: That was unusual. When you can hear it, it means there are forces moving around someplace doing something. We were in our foxholes when they started to bombard us and that went on from early dawn and continuous so

we knew something was happening. Then the Germans did hit our front lines. I was in a foxhole all this time, but you see, we'd had time to really put in a good defensive position. Our foxholes were deep, they had log covers. We'd even built a log cabin for each of our platoons as well as the Company and we were in the forest. We were in the forest here, the Ardennes.

Mark: So it was difficult for them to dislodge you from your positions, then.

Wiberg: Originally. And of course they were hell bent on going through and making a break through so they were attacking on at least some roads or some of these rollbahns, they called them, according to the Germans, Rollbahns A, B, C, went through our lines and some of them were really almost forest trails only. But they were trails that they had plotted out. Remember that the Germans had used this same area to go through. How it can be such a surprise when this is the basic invasion route that they had used in previous wars, but it was, nobody expected it. They hit us, and they hit our fronts, and they kind of went around our side. I told you we only had the I&R platoon off to our right. Well, some of the guys that were hit first were not hit from the front, they were hit from the back. The Germans had gone through this gap to come back over the hill the wrong way, as you would expect, and one of my friends, he was hit badly. But they got him out because this was earlier, and they evacuated him, and he still has a plate in his head from that little engagement. But we held our positions all of that day, and all of that following day, and then by that time the Germans had circled around and were hitting our heavy weapons platoon from behind. They were coming in. There was a rest area behind us in a little town, and some of our people who had earned the right to go back for a rest from the outpost were captured first. They were sleeping it off. They had their weapons, but they weren't expecting anything so they were captured right away. Then, by that time, the book tells me more than I could ever remember. They had made some headway in different areas across our division front and because we had two of the regiments on line and the third one kind of in half-reserve, but what complicated the measure was that Montgomery was always critical and we tried several times to capture the Roer, dams which was just into Germany a little ways and they hadn't been able to. And two days before that, the 2nd Division, supported by part of our reserve battalion—regiment really—had to attack the Roer dams. So, they were stretched out in Germany at the same time the Germans were attacking. They thought it was just a skirmish so it took them at least a full day and a half before they could start staying, "Hey you guys, pull back into our lines." It turned out that when you get over in the country you can see it, that our northern corner, which became the corner of the Bulge, was right where there was kind of a steep outcropping of rock and therefore you couldn't get tanks up it. That's why they had to

come around a little bit to the south and hit us in the middle, and they did. Our Company, through the good graces of a good top sergeant and leadership, we were able to get the message and withdraw through the German lines—they'd already bypassed us—and get back to what we called Elsenborn Hill. Elsenborn Hill became the hinge of the Bulge, and the 9th Division was north of us, and we were the corner, and the 2nd Division was alongside of us. Because of the confusion of it, the 2nd Division was, for a couple of days, given control of our Division as well as their own. Obviously, they had the experience from years of fighting, you know, so that was not unusual, but it was only a couple of days and they gave it back to us.

Mark: What happened after you had withdrawn then to Elsenborn? You had to get back in the combat fairly soon, I figure.

Wiberg: We had to give our General credit, Lauer, that he established some back-up positions, and therefore we could move part of the regiment back there, and hold that, and the delaying action, and then the 2nd Division pulled back, and what they called the twin villages, Rockrath and Krinkelt became a rally point for a couple of days. And while that was going on, that's when we pulled back into Elsenborn. Now, Elsenborn is an old, old Army camp and it's been used by the Germans, the Belgians, everybody for 100 years, I guess. Therefore, there is a ridge there and it is still being used as an Army camp today. We formed our defenses on that ridge and dug in and dug in well. They started to—well, I don't think they had much time to replace anybody, yet, initially. The Germans attacked about the 20th so, you see, this is only about four days. They hit us hard because they had to get through. The Germans' goal was to go through Dieppe Gouvier and then over and get to Antwerp. That was the goal. They never made it, because they could never break through and that's why the whole Bulge then shifted south. That's the only headway they were making. We formed that corner and the Germans attacked us strong on December 20th or 21st, and this was a massive attack, and they got up to our lines, but with a lot of rifle power and artillery, they were stopped cold.

Mark: Now, if I think of the Battle of the Bulge, I think of the blizzard that occurred that helped the Germans to do the invasion. I'm interested in your perspective on fighting in that sort of environment and the snow and cold.

Wiberg: It was cold and it was wet. When it got very cold, of course we didn't have quite so much water in the foxholes, but remember everything goes into the foxholes, and it melts. It was continuous snow there for a while. The most snow they'd ever had in that area and it continued. It started a little while before the Bulge but it continued heavily through that time so

we were slogging through snow and when you went out and, eventually, we assumed the same thing that the Germans did, that is a white cover because you were standing out against the snow. Let me finish that first story about that attack. You wouldn't know about this. After they attacked, and here are all the dead soldiers in front of our foxhole. In the night of course, in twilight you imagine that somebody is crawling up. So, the whole idea was that we had to get them also. For a full day, I worked carrying out dead soldiers. We stacked them up just like cord wood until Graves Registration could come and pick them up. That was, I think, the hardest duty I ever had in the Army. It was really strenuous and disheartening, shall we say.

Mark: Really, I would imagine so.

Wiberg: Then as time went on and they were repulsed a couple of times, their attacks just dwindled down. Therefore we became a static front. Now in a static front, the whole thing you have to do is you have to get information for G2; who's out there, what's their composition, and all the rest of it. So then you send out patrols, knowing you've got to get to somebody and get shot at before you come back. That, I think, is very hard to do. Of course, you were volunteered, which was quite proper. You'd take your turn to get to the patrols and one of them—I remember, it turned out that one of my old buddies was leaving and I didn't know it at the time. You know, you go out with a squad, maybe ten or twelve guys, and you'd go out there and once you— And it was cold, and we did jump up on an outpost of the Germans when we managed to pull out two or three of them before they started to shoot back heavily at us. So, we withdrew and as we were going up the hill, the guy who was behind the last Germans, he's holding a .45 on them as a guard and his finger froze, at least that's what he claimed, and he shot them in the back. Of course there was a wild outcry—the other prisoner, which I don't blame him, "*Nicht mich schiessen, Nicht mich schiessen*"—"Don't shoot me, don't shoot me" and so we, after cussing out the guard, we got him hustled on and returned into our lines. You always have to watch out. You're coming into your own lines and your people say, "Who the hell is this?" You better have the right password or you're dead. We did get back, we didn't lose anybody on that one. Sometimes, the boys would go out and fake the patrol, too. When you do this practically every night, it gets to be kind of old hat.

Mark: As for the Germans, what did you learn about them on these patrols?

Wiberg: As far as we go, we just get hearsay. You turn them over to Headquarters, Headquarters turns them over to G2, and the Intelligence officers do the interrogating, and you hear back sometimes that they did know something, and they were thankful that they got the prisoner to interrogate. One of the

things that was interesting, we would get passes, of course, occasionally, and that is the battalion would get passes, and then they'd draw straws for who would get away. Well during this time, I got the right straw and I got to go to Paris in the middle of this Bulge operation.

Mark: That's kind of strange. How did you feel about that?

Wiberg: That's why I bring it up because it was strange. I had very strong emotions about this, that I was abandoning the guys that had to stay there and get shot at and maybe by the time I got back, there would be more of them dead and gone.

Mark: Is this how the guards felt?

Wiberg: That was my particular emotion. The fellows up there, heck no. They loaded me down with the currency of the moment; that is cartons of cigarettes to go and enjoy Paris for all of them. No complaints on their part. I'm sure most of them wished to go along but you don't dream about those things until it happens.

Mark: How was Paris and how long did you stay there?

Wiberg: Three day pass. They checked us into a hotel— Hotel Metropole— or whatever it was. I enjoyed it. I think I saw the Folies, but I can't be sure because after the fighting was over, I got back to Paris and I can't remember which was which. I think I saw the Folies, and one time I saw an opera, and it was fantastic to me.

Mark: So you went to Paris for a couple of days and then back to the front.

Wiberg: Right. In the meantime, of course, we're living in foxholes and, until the Bulge is almost over, as a group we never got back for showers or anything. We were there and you see the cartoons of GI Joe—remember Maulden?

Mark: Yah, right.

Wiberg: This was typical because if you had anything, any light at all, you lit a wick and gasoline and all you got was smoke. And we were all black-faced and just plain filthy.

Mark: Dirty and grubby.

Wiberg: Right. That's the way it is. You don't even think about it. The fellows that suffered most were from what we called trench foot, which was really

a case of frostbite. If your feet got wet, you didn't have a change of socks or take your shoes off and dry them off, you were in trouble. I always took my boots off. I figured I'd get them on fast if I needed to, so I never had that problem, but I'll tell you an awful lot of the guys went back, their feet were swollen and black and everything.

Mark: Did these guys eventually get back to the line?

Wiberg: Sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't. Some of them came back. It depended on age, I think. One thing that I found out is that—why we have all our young cannon fodder, they're the only ones, you know, whose bodies will stand up to this stuff. All of the sergeants that were thirty years old and older, it wasn't long and they were all gone. They just—it was physically too hard, you know.

Mark: There was of course, a Christmas that happened during the Bulge.

Wiberg: That was good in that, for the first time, we had a hot meal. The cooks really did a great job, and broke their fannies, and got us up some hot food, and we enjoyed Christmas. I'm sure there was a little shelling going on, but that was not a problem. We all were able to come off line by groups and get some hot food and it was really, really, welcome! After all our K-rations or whatever we could eat, C-rations.

Mark: As you look back at the Battle of the Bulge and your training, did you think that your training prepared you for the combat experience that you later had?

Wiberg: I think it was a combination of training plus the fact that remember we were fleshed out with a lot of young college kids that were pretty damn smart and independent minded and were able and willing to take over when they had to. I think that all contributed to the good performance of our Division.

Mark: So the Bulge was eventually beaten back then.

Wiberg: It was beaten back and of course, one thing that comes out in the history book was the big Siege of Bastogne and what happened there, of course, was that because, like I say, all of the German success had been shunted down that way and they were driving for the Meuse River and Bastogne was a crossroads, but was not important to their success. So they had bypassed it and before they had closed anything off, why the Generals told the 101st "Get out of Paris," and they trucked them into Bastogne to support the armored Division that was holding it then. And when they finally brought them in and secured it, and they got all the publicity in the

United States, Hitler went crazy and said they had to take Bastogne. Well he never did, of course. The story is well told that way. I think we often felt that one of the stories of the Bulge was the fact that we could hold the north corner and this good old Division stood there on line and kept knocking the Germans back. I pity the poor troops that had to slug it out and push them back. Instead of letting us pinch them off, they just pushed them back. Whose decision that was I have no idea. I'm sure it wasn't Patton; he'd love to cut them off. He was a damn good tactician, not a very nice guy.

Mark: That brings up the subject of leadership, in general. What did you think about the junior officers above you and then the General? There are apparently some strong opinions about Patton and so if you'd just comment a little bit about your leadership.

Wiberg: I'd say that our junior officers, if they weren't on line enough to get a lot of good experience they had to be out there, they just didn't last, which doesn't surprise you and we had some standout company commanders and, I think, we had a couple good ones and they were often wounded and went back and came back again. The one that was on line with us at the Battle of the Bulge was wounded, Lieutenant Clark, he was the, and Captain Conrad. I guess he was a Lieutenant too then. He was with the B Company alongside of us. And when we reformed up there on the ridge, Conrad took over and he was blown up in front of me as we marched across the plains to Vermögen. The only story I know about Patton, because, you see, we were with the 1st Division until we cleared the Ruhr pocket, and then we got shoved on trucks and down to Patton. Now, Patton was a gung-ho General, you know. And one of my good buddies, the same one that led the patrol, was a sergeant by this time and he said they were in this little town and in comes Patton, you know, all in his pearl-handled revolvers and his General's jeep and here our troops were all lined up on the road, slouched all over, ignoring him completely practically, except that "Oh, oh, there's Patton!" And he says, "I don't know who's in charge." My sergeant friend didn't admit to nothing. He said he stood behind the truck, and he says, "I'll be back in ten/fifteen minutes and I want these troops lined up spic and span and saluting me when I come through." Charlie said, "Boy, I did it." He had these guys up there. We were at attention and saluting the General when he comes through—boom, right on his jeep! He demanded that and I guess the slapping incident did happen. I guess I don't hold that against him. He was a great tactician and a lot of bluster, which I didn't think was called for. My favorite general was Omar Bradley.

Mark: Why is that?

Wiberg: He was a GI's general. He always followed through. You always knew he was there and although we didn't see much of him, everything he did was for the betterment of the troops.

Mark: Okay. So, after the Bulge, you started to move into Germany into the Ruhr pocket.

Wiberg: Yah. They cleaned out the Bulge about the middle of January or make that the end of January because it was about a six week total time. We, then, pulled back off line after we cleared some of the Siegfried Line. And we were pulled back into reserve, got the chance to go through the showers, get some clean uniforms, and then we went up a little ways north to Aachen and kicked off across the plains there. Our company commander – what happened was that we were attacking and you hit a pocket of resistance and you clear that and move ahead. This was an open area, but there was a shell hold. The Lieutenant and radioman were in that shell hold and I was off to the right a few yards away in another one. It turned out that an 88 Tiger tank had zeroed in on that shell hold. They do that too, you know. They go for logical places that people are going to congregate and they blew them right up. It was bad. It was very bad. After that, we kept moving; our division hit the Rhine about the 6th day of March, and we were up near opposite Bonn at the time, and all of a sudden we got word they captured a bridge – get on the truck so we got shuttled down to Remagen. The 9th Armored had taken this bridge and the Germans had already – it was a railroad bridge that went into a tunnel – and the Germans had planked it over because they were retreated across it. They failed to blow it so several of the battalions of the 9th Army had crossed already when we got there and, if I remember the date, I think we went across on the 7th, or 8th, or 9th somewhere in that timing. I think we were the last battalion of our group. Most of them had crossed over during the night. The approaches were under heavy shelling by the Germans. Remember there is a steep bank on that east side of the Rhine so they had to shoot from way down to get an angle on the bridge and they were hitting more of the approach than anything else so it was a dangerous place to get started. It was barely dawn so I could see a little bit when we ran across. Boy, when you started running, you just ran and ran and ran until you crossed that river. At the same time, the engineers were keeping the bridge open and also starting to put the pontoon bridges up. They were working off to the right of us as we crossed over.

Mark: So things were moving then?

Wiberg: Oh, yah, things were moving. One of the guys told me that with his group, as they crossed over, they were running and if they were earlier than us it was pitch black because we were just starting to see some light and this

guy fell into one of holes in the bridge. He said that what saved him was that he was holding onto his rifle over his head and it bridged the gap. Two guys behind him hoisted him up and threw him back on. So you can see that there were some emotions flowing. As we got into the tunnel on the far side, we were totally exhausted so I sank down on whatever was available to sit on and after I started to catch my breath and got a little bit of light in there, I see a hobnailed boot off of whatever I was sitting on. So, I decided, whoops, it was time to get moving.

Mark: As you drive into Germany, what was that combat like?

Wiberg: It was really fierce there for a while.

Mark: I was going to ask, did the German resistance die down a little bit? Apparently, not.

Wiberg: Not then. No way. We had – because, of course, they were trying to throw us back into the Rhine. And so we expanded this bridgehead slowly and by that time I was a Company runner, going from Company to Battalion. And we moved off to the right and I remember—you know how things stand out in your mind—namely because the battalion headquarters was in an old manor house, but they called it the castle – Schloss Arenfels. I still remember it today because I had to go in there with messages. I didn't sleep there, but I was in there and I was able to take a postcard. And so the rest of my days, I carried that in my vest pocket. I still carried it all the way so I could remember that, because it was turned over to the battalion. As far as I could see, they preserved it. They didn't allow anything to go on there. But the particular Company, as we went and opened up this bridgehead down along the Rhine, we hit this town of Honningen and our Company was assigned to go through there and whatever happened we didn't get proper artillery fire supporting us and we got cut up bad. I'd say that, except for the Battle of the Bulge itself, that was where we lost the most men right there in Honningen. That was pretty much south of the bridgehead before we jumped off and went straight across. And we started to move after we broke out of that bridgehead there. We went straight across there and I was surprised I couldn't remember where it was, but we went over to—it was north of Frankfurt not too far, and the reason I remember now is after taking a tour of Germany a year ago, why I found I was going right through this place, but I didn't remember anything about it at the time. It was just north of Frankfurt a little ways.

Mark: Yeah. I'm sure it changed a lot. I'm sure it's in the books. So when VE-Day happened, you were where?

Wiberg: What happened next was that we were shifted north. In other words, we stopped going right from Frankfurt and were diverted to go up and help them clean out the last of the Ruhr pocket. We were really going through rolling hills and wooded areas to get there and I think we took the last of the pocket. It was the city of Iserlohn which is right on the lower end of the Ruhr pocket. We did capture that and an enormous number of prisoners, but that time, because they were all being attacked. Remember on the north was Monte's whole English Canadian Army and they were driving straight through and cleaning that end of it, so we finished up from the south. And as soon as that was done, we were put on trucks and we were shot straight through to the right part of Bavaria. And it was the other side of Frankfurt and down a ways and I know we shot past Schweinfurt. Schweinfurt was the ball bearing city of Germany and it was leveled. It was just leveled. I never saw anything like that. It was just a pile of rubble – that was all.

Mark: Right. Just devastated.

Wiberg: From there on, we went down and we were on trucks and they would hit our resistance trucks and we kept going and crossed the Danube. We had a fight going across the Danube. Some of our people got cut up and this was the last now of Hitler's group that he had thrown in everybody in there. Some of them were still SS and they were proud and hard fighters. We crossed the Danube and the Danube is not blue, believe me, dirty brown. We headed down and we were pretty close to Austria when we finally stopped. They held us up so we knew something was happening. I think it must have been the 2nd or 3rd of May, looking at the book. I couldn't remember. My memory always said the 8th to the 10th of May, but I think it was the 8th, actually, that they declared it and the word slowly spread. When you are out as a Division and we were pulled back, I mean we celebrated, but you don't do much celebrating that way unless a few of them liberated a little wine or other liquor. That happened too. Whatever you could find was drunk. You drink it up.

Mark: Now, of course, there was still a war going on with Japan, did you think you might end up over there?

Wiberg: Yes. Oh, yes. By that time, what happened then, they took the Division and put us into guard duty. In other words, each Battalion, every Company had a certain number of towns. What you did was go out on guard duty. It really was a nice and relaxing deal. You collected all the weapons that were in town, a lot of them were just sporting rifles and things like that. Destroyed most of them, managed to take a souvenir home if you thought it was good and then we were just on guard duty and we were at Marktheidenfeld on the Main [River], which isn't too far from Frankfurt.

They had a municipal pool there so it was pleasant duty. We weren't supposed to fraternize of course, but that is a rule that is easily broken.

Mark: I was going to ask how you got on with the Germans when you had actually just invaded the country. How did the Americans get along with the German civilians?

Wiberg: Mostly good. I think that the majority of the people, I mean most of us only spoke a little broken German so we didn't have good communication, but the majority of them were thankful to have that damn war over. Except for those who were soldiers and maybe were wounded and back, or old men from World War I. They stayed away; they were pretty sullen. Most of the people that was not the case. We had good cooperation from the Bürgermeister and those in control because we helped them.

Mark: So the war is over – oh, there is VJ-Day. Now you mentioned that you thought perhaps you'd be going over to Japan. Do you recall VJ-Day?

Wiberg: Well, you see, a little bit. Because this was August 15 and we were still on guard duty. I'm sure we cheered it when we finally got the news, but all it meant was hoorah, that we didn't have to go to the Pacific. They had started separating people out by that time and sending those with just a few points, that hadn't been in combat long, they were sent back to the United States already to be prepared to go to the Pacific. But we were still on guard duty when they closed that out and then they started to change things around. Those of us who didn't have a terrific number of points, we had to stay around for a while. I think the Division went home with a bunch of other older troops that had a lot of points. I was assigned to the cigarette camps.

Mark: Lucky Strike or whatever?

Wiberg: These were at LeHavre and I was at Camp Homerun and, being a college student, why they gave me a lot of temporary stripes and our job was paying off the officers that were going home. So I was Master Sergeant. It didn't mean anything, but they didn't dare let a PFC pay off the officers; that would be terrible. So it was just another case of the Army's doings and it was great for me for a while. Meantime, while I was there, I had a chance to get into Paris and I even got back to London so this was good duty. The only time that we could actually move around in all the time that we were in Europe, you know, on our own, and see things.

Mark: So you came back to the States when, early '46?

- Wiberg: Yep. What happened then was after they decided they had enough points, they sent us home, but not through cigarette camps there, they sent two or three of us on up to Antwerp to ship out via Antwerp. Reasoning? I couldn't even hazard a guess. It didn't matter, I had a chance to see Antwerp and by this time, the Belgians were rebuilding. There was goodies in the windows, cakes and crullers and things like that. The bombed out areas were being cleaned up. You could just see the industriousness of the Belgian people.
- Mark: I'm sure it was a welcome sight too.
- Wiberg: Oh, yeah, right. You feel, "Hey, something good is going to come out of this." This made me feel, "Something is happening." We did go out through Antwerp. Came across, back into Boston, and home. That is, we went right back to Camp McCoy. I was mustered out of Camp McCoy and took the train home to Minneapolis and, you know, these Vietnam veterans, and Korean veterans, they say, "Hey, we didn't get any welcome". We were so damned glad to get home we didn't care for nothing. All we wanted was to get on with our lives and we didn't even think about a parade or anything else. We were just glad to be home. They keep saying they need a memorial. Tell me where there is a memorial to World War II. We don't need one. We got the cemeteries. They are full of memorials.
- Mark: Okay. The war is over and you mentioned it was time to get on with the rest of your life. So I want to talk about that a little bit. What did you do? What were your plans for getting on with your life?
- Wiberg: Take advantage of the GI Bill and continue going to my engineering education.
- Mark: And you did that.
- Wiberg: I did that.
- Mark: You went to the University of Minnesota.
- Wiberg: Just picked up where I left off and, of course by this time, what had happened before the war – of course, there was a lot of emotion. My brother-in-law, turned out to be my brother-in-law, we'd gone to junior high school and high school together, Don Lesch. He got so upset because of the war. He volunteered in the middle of that first year while I continued to go to school. He became a bombardier in the Air Force. That was the good part of it from his standpoint over there in the CBI. By the time he came back, he went back to engineering. I went back to

engineering. He was a little behind, however, every one of these guys was ready to go to school, no goofing off, no nothing. We're going to get our education, we're going to get going right now. The grades of everybody was way higher than it was before they went in service.

Mark: I've talked to a lot of vets who went to school here on the University of Wisconsin campus. I would imagine up in Minneapolis it was pretty much the same, but describe what the campus was like. Was it full of veterans? Mostly veterans in your classes and that sort of thing?

Wiberg: Yes. Mostly. Most of them were a little older because of being in the service 2/3/4 years. So it was an older group and because I didn't live on campus, never did, I don't have the allegiance to the University of Minnesota that so many of the others have, where they were in fraternities and so on. I did know a lot of them, but most of them didn't go into fraternities. The engineering students went into what they called—I think one of them was called, "Pioneer Hall." It was a dormitory. They didn't have time for fraternities. There wasn't much of that going on.

Mark: And they were all very serious, I take it. You mentioned that.

Wiberg: Yes. And a lot of them by this time were married. Now I didn't get married until the last semester. That would be September of '48 and we got married then, I just had the one last semester to finish. I graduated in December of '48 and immediately went to work for American Ice and Dairy in St. Paul.

Mark: There was no trouble finding work at all?

Wiberg: Well, it was, a little. I had an offer from Boeing, but I didn't want to go to the West coast and there were not that many offers out. Nobody was begging you to work, but I got this offer here in St. Paul and so I started in February. So, you see, I graduated in December so it was really only a month and a half, essentially, so it was not a long time.

Mark: I just want to go back and cover one more thing. As for the GI Bill, did that cover your expenses?

Wiberg: To me it did. I was living at home. Why sure, I was living at home so, therefore, it gave me living expenses, which helps, something to put away, didn't have a car. I think I bought a car about the time—just before we got married. It was an old beater, 1941, beat up car that had been used for a taxicab. It lasted until we rolled it over on our honeymoon. That was a bad thing.

- Mark: So you got work in Milwaukee then in 1951?
- Wiberg: Yes. Then I saw an ad for something in Milwaukee, found out that it was at A. O. Smith and I came down here for an interview and started with A. O. Smith in Milwaukee and stayed there, mostly.
- Mark: Okay. As for other sorts of veterans' benefits, did you use other sorts of programs, for example, home loan?
- Wiberg: No. I found that the home loan was available but the other loans were as good or almost as good. And so we had one with Equitable Life Assurance, but that wasn't until 1955 so it was a while back. What we did use was that Minnesota declared a veterans bonus.
- Mark: Oh, you got a bonus from Minnesota.
- Wiberg: Yeah, we did get a bonus from Minnesota. You didn't get it in Wisconsin. I think that my wife—as you know, was a WAVE, so we both got a bonus and I think it was all of \$300 or something like that.
- Mark: What did you do with it?
- Wiberg: We invested it in the stock market.
- Mark: I remember that story now.
- Wiberg: That became our initial investment and piqued our interest and we're still in the stock market.
- Mark: [Laughs] I've got just two more things I want to cover. One involves other sorts of social and psychological readjustments to society. Vietnam veterans came home and very publicly complained about some of the emotional and psychological problems they experienced. Did you experience any such thing?
- Wiberg: Nope. I'm very pragmatic and low key and I don't go out and try to set the world right or anything else. Perhaps my emotional stability is better than some of them. Also, some of us Swedes are taciturn anyway, but I do know that perhaps the fact that we were on combat only that one year was a big help. A few of those guys, and like I say, I was a runner therefore, I was not on the front line every day like these other guys were and we had one guy that still doesn't want to come to our annual reunion because apparently he has deep feelings that have never been resolved.
- Mark: That happens sometimes, even among the World War II vets.

- Wiberg: I had a cousin. He's the one that I told you about in the 9th Infantry. He'd been in combat and was in bad shape. He was drinking and storming and for several years before he finally got this behind him and was able to take hold and form his own company. But, this did happen. Now a lot of us came back and we were—all the infantry people were pretty gun shy because of all the artillery so it was for a long time that you heard a long bang and you were ready to drop to the ground. Instinctive. It was the way you were able to preserve yourself.
- Mark: Right. Survival technique.
- Wiberg: If you didn't do things automatically, you were dead.
- Mark: This lasted about how long? When could you hear a car backfire and not think twice about it? Or can you still to this day?
- Wiberg: No. That disappeared, I guess I couldn't pinpoint anything like that. I'd say within a year most of us, and I, got over that.
- Mark: As for the medical problems, for example, there was a veteran here in Madison that was in the Bulge and froze his feet and to this day he doesn't like to go outside in cold winter days. Do you have some things like that?
- Wiberg: I didn't have that problem, but an awful lot did. We called it trench foot at the time, but it was frost bite and some of them lost toes and some of them regained, afterwards, after some of the flesh had peeled off, but they were always sensitized. I don't have that problem.
- Mark: I just have one last area I want to cover and that involves veterans' organizations and reunions. You mentioned that you have been to some reunions. You are apparently fairly active.
- Wiberg: I'm not active but I do attend and our Division has been very active and I think it has been forty-six years that they have had continuous reunions. We were formed out of the Pennsylvania area and, therefore quite often we've gone back to Pittsburg. And in fact, there is an R-Comm that has been reactivated with our patch—the 99th patch, Reserve command. They don't have combat troops but they have all the support troops. That is still existing but when they met in Milwaukee about ten years ago, the first time I heard of them, and since then I've gone to most of the reunions.
- Mark: For what reasons? What do you get out of it?

- Wiberg: You get to meet with the few people of your particular Company. Remember we had – a company is about two hundred people but you get as many as seven from our Company would show up. These are different people, different years, but they're the only people you could talk to. You didn't want to talk about these things with anybody else. So it's been that type of thing. We have even had some mini-reunions. I got to go to another one. Mainly, because it was my friend that was captured out at like I said, that rehab area in the Bulge and he was a prisoner then until we relieved him. He is fairly frail. Now whether that has anything to do with his combat and imprisonment, I don't know.
- Mark: As for some of the big organizations like the American Legion or VFW.
- Wiberg: I belong. What happened was I initially had belonged. My dad was very active in the VFW as a World War I veteran and then he later joined the Legion and he was Chief of Staff for his friend who was in a World War I veterans group, national commander. So he was very active. Now I belong to the VFW, but when we got married, Ella could only belong to the Legion because she wasn't overseas and therefore, I says, "It doesn't make sense, you belonging to one and me to another," so we both joined the Legion. She'd been a member already by that time. So we joined the Legion together and we've been officially forty-five years, something like that. We are active in that. We support it. I don't hold any office in the Legion and I have never pursued that end of it.
- Mark: Okay. Those are my standard questions. Is there anything you want to go back and touch on? Something I've missed?
- Wiberg: I guess that just to emphasize when we were in Louisville, a group of us guys went out, some of them were my Company and some of them were friends of the other guys and there were five couples and of the five men, I was the only one that wasn't either wounded or captured. So our division was heavily hit and I think we stick together unusually well, perhaps because of the Bulge, which meant that it all happened right then, the nucleus of it. If you'd been like my cousin with the 9th, you would have been – some guys left you in North Africa, were lost and came in with you in France and they were continually being replaced. We had been, too, later. Some of the guys that don't seem to have the same allegiance whereas because they were replacements.
- Mark: As for you, you went over there from the States.
- Wiberg: We went from the States. We were together the whole way. Not many of us were able to stay from one end to the other.

Mark: You were very fortunate it seems.

Wiberg: Yes. I was.

Mark: Okay, Is there anything else?

Wiberg: No, I think we've covered just about everything.

Mark: Okay. Well, I thank you for your time.

Wiberg: Thank you, Mark.

Mark: Very much appreciate it.

[End of Interview]