

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an Interview with

GERALD WILKE

Technician Fourth Grade, United States Army

December 15, 1997

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WILKE, GERALD F., (1916-2001) Oral History Interview, 1997.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 105 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips

Master Recording: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 105 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips.

Abstract

Wilke, a Madison, Wis., native describes his World War II service as a tank mechanic with the 529th Ordnance. Wilke talks about going to school with Orson Welles when he was in grade school. He mentions he got his BA from the University of Wisconsin in 1938 and that he worked nights for the Gisholt Machine Company so he could earn money to stay in law school. Wilke talks about his job at Gisholt being considered essential employment and tells of the work speed-up that occurred following the attack on Pearl Harbor. He states that he was in his late twenties before he went into the service. He describes basic training at Mineral Wells (Texas), heavy maintenance tank training at Bowie (Texas), and civilian tank-engine school at Flint and Detroit (Michigan). He provides great detail about light tanks and medium tanks. Wilke mentions that he was given a series of IQ tests; his grade was 159 out of a perfect grade of 160 in the mechanical aptitude test. He comments about holding tank maneuvers in Leesville (Louisiana) and how they surprised, and captured, a platoon that was on maneuvers too. He touches upon setting up a prisoner of war camp in Oran (Algeria) on a place called the Polo Grounds. Wilke states that he fixed Sherman-like tanks and he was involved with tank convoys from North Africa to Sicily. He characterizes Patton as the best soldier that he knew of during World War II. He talks about how the 5th Army, under Patton's leadership, forced the liberation of Sicily. Wilke describes the storm boats the 529th heavy maintenance tank ordnance built. He tells how the infantry were able to be towed behind the tanks, and because the enemy couldn't see the storm boats they could get close enough to the bunkers, throw hand grenades into the 'pillbox', and the German's would surrender. Wilke relates that his captain and sergeant received a Certificate of Merit for the idea of the storm boat. He touches upon his homecoming to Madison just before Christmas.

Biographical Sketch

Gerald Wilke, a lifelong resident of Madison, Wis., served as a tank mechanic with the 5th Army Division during World War II.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1995.

Transcribed by Kristin Pachal, 2002.

Transcription edited by Gayle Martinson, 2004.

Interview Transcript

- Mark: Today's date is June the 16th, 1995, this is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Gerald Wilke, a lifelong resident of Madison and veteran of the Second World War. Good morning thanks for coming in.
- Wilke: Good morning Mark, I'm glad to be here. My wife was here before.
- Mark: That's right. I did want to mention that we did interview his wife several months ago. And so now we're going to get the other half of the story, I guess you could say.
- Wilke: Yeah, now that you found out that she and Eisenhower won the war.
- Mark: [laughs] Okay, I suppose we should start at the top as they say and perhaps you could 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.
- Wilke: Certainly. I was born on March 12th, 1916 here in Madison, Wisconsin. Which makes me somewhat of a freak because I'm a native born.
- Mark: It's kind of like a native Californian, you don't find too many of those?
- Wilke: There aren't many.
- Mark: [laughs]
- Wilke: I spent practically all of my life in Madison, except the first couple of years when I was just outside of Madison on a truck-gardening farm. I went to the Madison Public Schools, several of them. And finished East High School—
- Mark: I was going to ask what part of town you grew up in.
- Wilke: Well, I started out on 1144 E. Mifflin Street then moved to the south side and then moved to 208 S. Broom and then 208 N. Francis, and after that my folks bought a house and moved 2017 E. Dayton Street. When I lived on N. Francis, I went to the old Washington School.
- Mark: Which isn't in existence anymore is it?
- Wilke: It's down where the Senior Center is today and that apartment development down there. When I was going to school down there, third and fourth grade, Orson Welles was in my class.
- Mark: Is that right? I know he's from the state here.

Wilke: Well, his guardian was I believe the manager of the Lorraine Hotel when it opened, which now is owned by the State of Wisconsin.

Mark: So you finished school and you had to go to work—

Wilke: No, I didn't finish school with high school. Then I continued on, I went to the University of Wisconsin, I got a BA in 1938, I continued on by going to the University of Wisconsin Law School, eventually I ran out of money, I had to also find work while I was doing this, during the summertime. And I went to work for the Gisholt Machine Company, worked nights.

Mark: Now that's still in existence, but I don't know what they make or what they do there.

Wilke: Well, the Gisholt Machine Company prior to World War II and subsequent there to, was one of the major machine tool manufacturers, do you know what a machine tool is?

Mark; Not exactly.

Wilke: A machine tool is a machine to make other machines.

Mark: So is it like pneumatic drills and that kind of thing?

Wilke: No. They made turret lathes, they made balancing machines, they made all sorts of things. And they had manufactured things- oh for probably fifty years before that. So there was a lot of old machines that got pressed into use. I happened to be fortunate, I worked in a department called "repair and miscellaneous". So we'd get little odd jobs, sometimes we'd have to take a machine apart in order to use something as the sample to test whether we did it right or not. [laughs] I was working there at the Gestalt, continued to go to law school and so forth. Lo and behold my number came up in the draft and I'm working at what they thought was essential employment. And they gave me a deferment.

Mark: And I was going to ask—

Wilke: I got a deferment for working down there—[unintelligible announcement in background]

Mark: Please ignore that. If I could shut that off I would but I can't.

Wilke: That's all right.

Mark: No it's not, but go ahead. [laughs]

Wilke: Now that I know what it is. Well anyway, I had this deferment and the first deferment I got was granted in November of—

Mark: Of 1940?

Wilke: 1941. Prior to Pearl Harbor. Supposedly six months deferment and the usual blah blah blah and they were supposed to find somebody to replace me and of course this never takes place. So I was contented to work there nights and go to school days and so forth, nice full day. [laughs] but making fairly decent money. Doesn't sound like much today but in comparison to what the wage scale was then it was very good money and I was putting money away in the bank. Anyway—

Mark: If I may interrupt for a minute, at the Gisholt Plant, as the war in Europe started to heat up and as America started to prepare militarily, was there more work there? Was there more business? Was there more activity at the plant that made the machines that made the machines? Did the war impact on what you were doing?

Wilke: Yes it did. It would have been plenty busy before because it was a very essential industry and we were making all sorts of stuff for everything that made anything. And selling all sorts of machines to General Motors and Ford and everybody else that had the big contracts. And then when this came along, I remember I went to a union meeting, we used to hold our union meetings on Sunday because that was when nobody was working at that time. And on December 7th, I went to a union meeting at the old Eagles' Clubhouse, which was located where the City/County building is today. Anyway, I went to the meeting. Not many people at the meeting, came home from the meeting, I was going to listen to see how the Giants were coming out. The New York Giants were playing for the championship and I'm listening to the radio and all at once [imitates the radio announcer] "We interrupt this program to announce that the Imperial Japanese Air Force has bombed Pearl Harbor, stay tuned for further details." Blah blah blah. Everybody's face falls open. Listening intently to this. That night, on Sunday night, at midnight, I went to work because I was on that shift, midnight to eight. And I went to work. And that was the big discussion down at the plant too. I don't think production was real high that night. There was an awful lot of conversation. And less than a week later we had another meeting called at the request of Gisholt Machine Company because they wanted to go on a seven-day a week, twenty-four hour a day production. And they had set up a program to do that but they wanted the union to change one thing in the agreement. We had an agreement where by over forty-hours you got time and a half and you got double time for Sundays and holidays. They wanted the waiver of the Sunday and holidays because it would be too expensive they thought. So we hold a meeting and in shifts, each shift held a meeting at the eastside Businessman's clubhouse, which is the old one on Atwood Avenue, not the new one, and we agreed to do this.

Mark: Was it out of patriotic spirit? Out of practicality?

Wilkes: Out of patriotic spirit. Despite there was one veteran from World War I who got up at the meeting and he says “Here’s to the American eagle because I’ve been through the mill, the real Star Spangled Banner is the good ol’ dollar bill.” Never forgot it. I think he was genius. [laughter] Anyhow, we passed it. Two weeks later, Gisholt requested that we go back on double time for Sundays and holidays. They were on a cost plus basis though.

Mark: Oh the cost plus fixed fee, yeah.

Wilkes: And here’s to the American eagle! [laughs] And we passed that and we agreed to do it with an awful lot of comments from us about them just being plain greedy.

Mark: I would like to keep this focused on the military things—

Wilke: Well I’m just telling what that was. Well when my deferment ran out I figured I’m gonna be in. So I reported to the preliminary preliminary and they found out that they couldn’t see in one ear and out the other and that I had a pulse and that sort of thing. So I’m so called 1-A. But I don’t hear anymore. After awhile I asked the draft office, “What’s up?” They said “Don’t you know?” “No.” “Well, Gisholt put in for an extension of your deferment.” “Oh?” They said, “we turned ‘em down.” “Okay, when do I go?” “Well it isn’t as simple as that.” They said they got notice too and they appealed to the State and the State hasn’t ruled on it yet. “Oh.” A little while later I found out the State had ruled on it and said I’m 1-A but Gisholt has appealed. In the meanwhile I’ve done nothing.

Mark: And you had no idea this was going on.

Wilke: No, I’m just number one guinea pig. And they appealed it primarily because the State says that it might be a good idea if they did. They wanted to have a national ruling on it; nothing like this had come up.

Mark: A test case.

Wilke: It just so happened that I happened to be early in the line. [laughs] So, I waited and I waited and finally I got notice from them. The Federal has ruled on this. You **are** exempt. You are I think 4-A or something like that. Exempt classification. Up to this point I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t enlist because I was 1-A but they wouldn’t take me because I’m in limbo. So I went up to the draft board and said “I waive my deferment, if I can.” “Yes you can.” “I waive my deferment and I’ll go with the first bunch.” I made a mistake. I should have gone and waived the deferment over at the Navy recruiting office because in the Navy, they’d a given me a commission and then sent me to school. Army didn’t do things like that. “You look like a Dog Face, you’ll be a Dog Face.”

Mark: And you apparently looked like a Dog Face.

Wilke: I looked like a Dog Face. So in September of '42, went down to Milwaukee, but since I was such a good guy and volunteered and stuff like that, they let me carry all the papers for all the other fellas. [laughs]

Mark: You were also a little older than the rest of these young guys.

Wilke: Yeah, I was older than them.

Mark: You must have been pretty near thirty by this time?

Wilke: Twenty-six, twenty-seven years old. And um yeah, I was older, had more experience and so forth. I got down there and lo and behold they said, "Yes, you're fine, wonderful." Anyway a bunch of us after we'd run around and got a physical and all that sort of stuff we're all standing there with our right hand in the air and pledging to give—I think that was on the 12th of September of '42. So I had two weeks to get things in line and I came back and arranged quitting the job and all that sort of stuff. And spent two weeks seeing everybody I knew, basically having a pretty dog-gone good time and so forth. And then I went into service. I went down to Great Lakes, and again I had the privilege of carrying the papers, and we got down there and they give you all your basic examinations and your uniform which more or less you try to find something to fit and get all that lined up and the fella that was acting as the non-com in charge of this one bunch of raw recruits tells me "I don't think you're gonna go into infantry." I said "Oh?" "No" he says "You're gonna be sent down to a place in Mineral Wells, Texas." Well, all I knew about Mineral Wells, Texas was they made crazy water crystals down there. Sort of a laxative type of deal. And I was down there to have training in base immaterial. It didn't make any difference what I went into to, just basic training. So I went down there and had basic training down there and a—

Mark: What sort of training did you do? I mean a lot of rifle and marching?

Wilke: Oh yeah, you know get up and you start out with maybe a five mile hike and then a ten mile and build it up, twenty mile hike and all that sort of stuff. And out to the rifle range and this and that. All the various kind of training including combat course training where you crawl on your belly like a reptile and under the barbed wire and they had these little pot holes off to the side with charges in 'em. They always had 'em down under some water so they went "boom" the water and the mud splashes on ya and gives you the realistic effect and meanwhile they've got some machine guns mounted that are firing overhead. So you don't stand-up. And once in awhile you hear one of those hit against a post. That gives you a little more religion and you stay a little closer to the ground. Anyway, you crawl across this thing and you crawl up and crawl down the landing over a wooden wall that they've got down to a water hole down below on the U.S.S. Yardbird, that's what they called the training exercise, that's for landing and so forth. Used it only once, afterwards. But anyway all this type of training, we're getting all this training and at the end of the period I get sent

down to Bowie, Texas where I became part of the 529th Ordnance, heavy maintenance tank. And this was an Ordnance company that had been sorta built up and recruited and both officers and a lot of the enlisted personnel, probably about fifty percent of them, from Syracuse, Binghamton, Endicott City, Albany, places like that in New York. Some automobile dealers thought up the idea. They had good mechanics and why not use them. And some of the fellas had been ratted rank, nobody too much I think the most that anybody had was— there was one older gentleman, who happened to be a T-4 which was a Model T sergeant. Well there were a lot of Model-T corporals and quite a few Pfc.'s and that sort of thing.

Mark: See now I was in the Air Force, a number of years later. I've seen the T insignia but I'm not—

Wilke: A Corporal's stripe is just the two inverted V's. A Model-T corporal was a technician, 5th grade. It's the same pay as a corporal but it had a T underneath that insignia and of course PFC was just a single inverted V. A Model-3 sergeant was T-4 then there was a T-5 that was like the old three V's with the rocker underneath with the T in the middle and that was the equivalent of staff sergeant. Then of course there was tech sergeant and master sergeant. And the first sergeant looked the same as the master sergeant except had a diamond in the middle and anyway this outfit was getting basic training. We fellas got in there and we showed 'em how to use rifles and how attach a bayonet, took 'em out to run them through the bayonet course and things like that. And while I was there getting basic training, lo and behold one day I went over to where we were having training and the Lieutenant took a bunch of us fellas over there for some special training on something and there was a 1st lieutenant there that I recognized and he recognized me. And he came over and wanted to know when I had gone into military. I told him and it turned out that he and I, back in the early days when I was going to University had worked for the athletic department and we had a real good concession, we sold taffy apples at the football games. At a nickel apiece. A bushel of taffy apples. I remember very well that there was a fella there by the name of Dick Splinter that ran a candy company that made these and this particular lieutenant had married later, Dick Splinter's daughter. Got acquainted this way and he and I had been in school together. Well he had finished up law school while I was in first part of the military and lo and behold he had been called into active duty. So here he was and he was a 1st lieutenant, because he got his commission through ROTC in 1938 and they promoted him one rank to 1st lieutenant and here he was down there. He asked if I could come over and have dinner with him and his wife because I knew his wife and she'd like to see somebody from back home. Well, I said, "I'll have to get permission to do that." So he said "I'll ask your lieutenant." So he said something to my lieutenant. I think as a result of that, the lieutenant looked at my record and realized that hey, I knew something. I actually had gone to school and so forth. And I think he was a little impressed. So at Thanksgiving I find I'd been promoted to PFC, five dollars a month, it sounded heavenly. [laughs] And in addition I was to go to tank-engine school at Flint, Michigan and at Detroit, Michigan for ten weeks. Well that sounded good too. So

that's where I went. In late December, January and February and then went ten weeks there. That was a marvelous— it was a civilian school, taught in the factories. We lived in the hotel and we ate our meal in a restaurant.

Mark: No buglers and tents for you in this phase of your life.

Wilke: In that phase. And there was a corporal that was in charge over the hotel of us and a whole bunch of others and there was some 2nd lieutenant who that hadn't figured out what to do with who was more or less in command. Somebody had to sign papers. And so that's where I was there for awhile and it was delightful. I loved it.

Mark: Now what did you do? What sort of training was this? Learning about tanks?

Wilke: Tank engines.

Mark: Tank engines.

Wilke: See at that time they had a light tank and they had a medium tank. Light tank had either two Cadillac engines mounted to feed into one final drive or a Pratt and Whitney seven-cylinder radial engine. The medium tank had a **crown metal gold star nine-cylinder radial engine** that's more powerful than the other one. A special tank engine designed by Chrysler Motors which was in effect five Dodge engine, six cylinder engines, mounted into one final drive and they mounted this in such a way that there was one upright, two that came in at about a thirty degree angle and two that were mounted that came up with the head really on the slanted downward coming up below there and they fed up into a final drive on the basis of 1- 1.8, it was a mechanic's headache and driver's dream. Because if you could get the engine to turnover, and one block of cylinders start firing, it would run. You could move the tank just to move it, with only two of the blocks running. Drivers loved it. You didn't get stuck with this thing. It didn't leave you high and dry. But mechanics hated it. Try to find trouble in a thing like that. They all fired at a different time. That's a real headache. And they had five distributors, they had a fancy carburetor that fed into all five blocks and the carburetor was as big as some small engines are today. And everything was huge on the thing. Then there was another tank engine. Ford invented one. And it was a powerful engine. Not designed for economy. It had what was known as a square bore. Now I'll explain what a square bore is. That means the diameter of the cylinder and the length of the stroke of that cylinder are the same. It was a five inches across cylinder and went five-inch stroke. That sucked in a lot of gas in every cylinder and it was a v-8, it was big. It was a good. It was a good engine. And they were just getting going well with that thing.

Mark: And so this is what you learned at Flint?

Wilke: And in Detroit. What we did, all of us, we spent two weeks on each engine. We took them apart and reassembled them and then started them up.

Mark: No small task I'm sure.

Wilke: Well by that time you found out what was inside that engine. You knew how to work on that engine. Oh but I loved it. And I liked it a lot better than some of the fellas who probably were much better mechanics than I was.

Mark: Now I was going to ask, what sort of guys got into this. I mean you came from an industrial background yourself. Were a lot of these other guys along the assembly lines—

Wilke: Well some of the fellas had been car mechanics and they'd— and you took these exams, you see you had an IQ test, then you had the dot test and I took that test and they found out that I'd never be a telegrapher and then we had a mechanical aptitude test, and the mechanical aptitude test, when I took that I breezed through that like Grant going through Richmond. There was a possibility on that test of getting perfect grade of 160. I had a 159. That's why this guy up there at Fort Sheridan says, "You aren't going to end up in the infantry." He'd seen that and he knew [laughs] he knew. He knew right away. That guy, that aren't never going to put him in the infantry. I had this good mechanical aptitude test so after that I wrote and got a furlough before I rejoined my outfit. It was an awful good time to be able to go home if I ever was gonna. I was close. And I had a two-week furlough and then went back down to Leesville, Louisiana because outside that is where they were holding maneuvers out in Louisiana. I think some of those people down there made money when they had maneuvers on their land. They probably got compensated for it. Pine forests, swamps, any kind of snake you ever heard of was there, few alligators, anything else. It was Camp Polk. Leesville, Louisiana was the sight of two very important federal things, Camp Polk, Louisiana and the only leper colony in the continental United States and I think the leper colony was the preferable spot. [laughter] Got out of there on maneuvers—

Mark: So what did you do on these maneuvers?

Wilke: We got out there and I'd been put with this recovery unit which was enormous wrecker and it had a crew, there was five of us there. And I was **crack** engine mechanic listed then. That was my m.o.s. **Crack** engine mechanic. And then there was a guy who was a track mechanic for taking care of the bogeys and track and that sort of stuff. Anyway there was five us on that wrecker. And we had to go out and we had to get a hold of a tank that was supposedly in trouble. And haul it off to a spot so that out in the field we could put a new engine in it. So we're pulled over in the yard in one of these so-called Louisiana farmers which was a double log house under one roof, it had a space down the middle between the two, all roofed over, which like a nice big covered porch, breeze blew through there, quite comfortable, I mean it was designed well for their purposes. And these people they raised bacon hogs. What they do with their hogs is they notch the ears, put notches in the ears like a brand. Turn

'em loose out in the—they'd eat pinecones, they'd eat anything, they'd also eat snakes, snakes stayed away when you had a hog around. And they'd eat anything. And they used to raise chickens and guinea hens. Well we loved the fact that they had the hogs around that kept the snakes away and they had the guinea hens, the best alarm you had in your life. Nobody comes close to you [imitates hen noise] make an awful racket but you know they're a lot like chickens in that respect and this sort of thing, they had a nice garden and all this.

Mark: You called them so-called farmers, I get the impression that they were kind of poor compared to the kind of farms you saw.

Wilke: Oh yeah, very poor in comparison to anything here in Wisconsin. They were like poor as church mice. But nice people.

Mark: Black or white?

Wilke: White. And worked hard. We were out there and we supposed to get our rations brought out to us and lo and behold they forgot to bring 'em. So here we had a tank and crew from the tank and us and all together there was ten of us guys out there and we didn't have any food. Well, soon as you ran out of the stuff that you carried with you, we approached this lady about would she make a dinner for us? And how much? So she made a dinner for us. Roast guinea hen, it was all like all dark meat chicken. And she had vegetables, very typically southern. We had things that she had canned and things like that. Sweet potatoes, you know yams instead of potatoes and she made a pie of some sort, I don't know, it was wonderful. She charged us a big sum of a dollar apiece. And thought she made money and she probably did. Everything was grown. And she thought that was good. We ate it, oh did we eat it. Anyway, meanwhile we had changed the engine on this tank. And we were all out there along about the middle of the night, along about 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning, we were just about ready we were gonna go back and work with our units, and we hear these guinea hens making the noise. Everybody's awake. Everybody gets their weapon. There'd been, the opposition, about a platoon strength had decided to try to capture us.

[Side 1, Tape 1, Ends]

[Side 2, Tape 1]

Wilke: Headed up by a lieutenant. And instead of them capturing us, we captured them. When we got back to our company, I thought Captain Edwards was gonna kiss everyone of us guys. Oh, this looked good in his record, commanding an Ordnance company. And on maneuvers they capture a platoon and of course these fellas with the tank outfit, their C.O. is very happy about that too. And I think we done too good of job of it because we went back into camp and we started stenciling all our clothes and getting ready to get on—

Mark: Go overseas.

Wilke: Go overseas. Bang.

Mark: So when did that finally happen then? This is in '43 sometime or other.

Wilke: Yeah, oh went over in the spring of '43. And here it was—and we traveled from down in Louisiana by train, headed us north and ye gods we wound up past Memphis and we got up around the Ohio River and then we started going east and then we got close to Pittsburgh and we headed through the Andirondacks. One night I was on guard duty on the train and the only guard post that we had was at the kitchen, in the baggage car. And we pulled into this one stop and stopped and they loaded rations. Mess Sergeant was there while they were doing this and so forth and several of us standing on guard duty you know, watching everything. They brought everything on there. Then maybe four o'clock I was done with guard duty and went to hit the bunk and went to sleep and I was just interested in sleeping I didn't even get up to eat. Everybody got up to eat breakfast and they ate breakfast. We got into a place down there and they took us over to Camp Patrick Henry.

Mark: In Virginia.

Wilke: In Virginia. That's where we ended up. I never thought Patrick Henry and you saw that and you heard "Give me liberty or give me death." It's a hell of a way to die [laughs] Anyhow we were there at Camp Patrick Henry and the guys started getting sick. All sick to their stomach and there were only a few of us who didn't get sick and I'm one of 'em. And then they find out that I hadn't eaten breakfast but I had been on guard duty when loaded these— and somebody sold the Army a bunch of tainted—ah what do you call it, not bacon, it's like bacon?

Mark: Some kind of pork?

Wilke: It's pork anyhow. It was tainted and all it was was food poisoning but everybody got awful sick. There was a day that that outfit was shot. Everybody, from the C.O. right down. And lo and behold I got into an interrogation and sat at a table and there must have been five, six officers sitting around there from medics and the M.P.'s and this and that, asking me all sorts of questions. Finally decided that I hadn't been the culprit and wasn't in on any nefarious plot to kill off part of the Army. Anyhow that's what happened on that little trip. But then from there we took off. And we were part of a—I don't know how many ships it was but it was big group and we were on a converted banana boat that had been made into a troop ship. We were tween decks. Now tween decks means just that, in between decks. And we were set up in facilities that they built over a hatch. And it was bunks five high, they were two foot by six foot to accommodate a man, his two barracks bags, his gas mask, his rifle, helmet and a hundred rounds of ammunition period. And there were about eighteen to twenty-

four inches apart. If you had the next to the bottom one you had the ideal one because you could sit on that one. But what a deal. We got on this troop ship and I thought Captain Edwards was the—we all thought he was one of the lousiest men that ever lived. He volunteered our services while we were going over but it took us two weeks. Best thing he ever did. Every third day, everybody with a rank sergeant or technician third down hooked KP. The top three graders, every morning had ration detail the hold below us was a refrigerated hold and they went down in there and they would come out with cases of apples, they'd bring up the bananas that they had down there any kind of fresh fruits, oranges, things like that. And the steward that was in charge informs these guys, he says "You know, it's never been known that all of that gets up there. At least one case gets broken." We went right to our deals. So we always got extra oranges, apples or something. Which was a big treat out in the middle of the ocean.

Mark: I'm sure it was. [laughs]

Wilke: And plus the fact that since we were hooking duty like that we could make use of the ship's stores that they opened up. And they sold Coca-Colas® there. They made ice cream and we could get an ice cream cone or buy a candy bar. A little place like that was just—oh it was heaven. As far as we were concerned. Then we realized that the C.O. who had been apparently in World War I and knew something about everything, he had done us a real favor by volunteering our group. And we got these goodies. Well we went across in a convoy and oh my God, you're zigging and zagging and there's these Corvettes that they're runnin' around and there's destroyers with us and there's—I don't think we had anything bigger than a destroyer but—a destroyer looked pretty good over there you know. Those guns looked pretty good when you looked over and saw 'em out there, way out in the flanks. Pretty fair sized convoy. And we headed across—

Mark: And where'd you land?

Wilke: Well, as we're going across, we got over in warmer clime, at night we noticed something, first time I'd ever seen it of course being from England like this, I saw phosphorous rolling in the water at night. Beautiful you know. Almost blue neon color. Big globs of it floating along. We went through the Straits of Gibraltar, headed along the north coast of North Africa and we went into Oran. And when we came into Oran, I made notes so I'd be sure to tell about that, when we came into Oran, the French had scuttled their navy there so the Germans wouldn't get it. And we're weaving our way through this harbor and there's turrets sticking up and funnels and things like that. Just like you're weaving through reefs which they amounted to. They had done a good job. They'd scuttled those things, they were right down there on the bottom and the Germans never got 'em there. Germans. I think the Germans were really rough on any French naval personnel they came across. They were apt to get shot for just breathing. But anyway, we came ashore in Oran as I'm goin' down the gangplank carrying a couple barracks bags, rifle, loaded down looked like a pack

horse. I said to the guy next to me “It’s a good thing our mothers don’t know where we are today.” He says “Why is that?” I says “Do you know what day this is?” “No.” I says “This is Mother’s Day.” Went ashore on Mother’s Day of ’43. Got to shore and the first place they took us out to a place called Lion Mountain and we were out there sleeping out under the stars because it was dry as a bone out there. Just outside of Oran and the next day we started getting some of our stuff including some of our trucks. And as soon as we had some stuff, they hauled us back into Oran and out to a place called the Polo Grounds. Just a beautiful green, like putting green. They played polo a lot. We were supposed to set up a prisoner of war camp because they were squeezing between the British eighth and the first armored corps which we find that we were then a part of. There was no place for the Italian and German troops to go. There was a squeeze. And they getting ‘em by droves. And they’re loading up shiploads of ‘em. They bring ‘em down, we made a prisoner of war camp, an Ordnance outfit? What did we know about making a prisoner of war camp? All we knew was we had to keep ‘em under control. And we laid down Concertina wire, laid down two on the bottom and then one over the top of it, which made a pretty good barrier all the way around this polo grounds. Each corner we erected a tower, two by fours and so forth, with a platform on top of the railing guard and a ladder to get up and down each four corners and up there we mounted two machine guns. Guys went up there on their duty and they were up there watching and if they’d had to they’d a just fired. We covered that thing like nobody’s business. Made one gate into the thing and well armed it and then we brought in the PW’s. And we split ‘em up. They were all enlisted personnel and they’d be either Italian or German, but not mixed. Get fifty of ‘em, find out who was the ranking non-com, “You’re in charge.” He supposed to select two (??) guys, bring a blanket, because a lot of them had their stuff still with ‘em, bring a blanket in the morning, two fellas, in the blanket we’d throw c-rations. I don’t know if you knew what c-rations (combat rations) were in those times but they consisted of little cans, meat and beans. Meat and vegetable stew. Then you’d have one other can of the dog biscuits, sealed up.

Mark: They’re not really dog biscuits?

Wilke: Well we called ‘em dog biscuits. They were biscuits. They were turned out by the Ohio Tile Company. I swear that was the only outfit that had a press that could compress ‘em that hard and bake ‘em that much. They were like bricks. You could put ‘em in a cup of water and they’d soak for an hour and you barely could get a little off the top. Oh they were hard. You got ‘em into your gullet, they had everything in it you know. There’d be a can of those for every guy. And then they’d have two five-gallon cans of water and they’d haul ‘em back to their outfit. We had to get some sanitary facilities. Well there wasn’t any way to build a bunch of latrines. So right down through this beautiful manicured polo grounds, right through the center, straight as an arrow, about a foot and half wide, slip trench.(??) And the guys that dug the slip trench got special ration. They got k-rations. And they were in a box that looked like a Cracker Jack® box and they opened it up and it had a can of some sort of meat like Spam® or something like that and maybe some cheese, and there’d be some

crackers in there and there was always a little package with four cigarettes. And that was like passing out gold.

Mark: Now these were the prisoners who were digging this trench.

Wilke: Yeah, we got prisoners. And the guys that dug that trench, they got the special rations. They dug this trench down through there. We don't have roll of toilet paper one. None. You just figure out a way. So a lot of 'em did. [laughs] They used the Algerian, or Moroccan or Tunisian money that they might have had on 'em and they figured it was more use to them then anything else. I seen 'em using that and I said to one of the fellas, "Soon as we're out of here, there's gonna be some enterprising people right down in there and they're going to get all that money." And I said "You know when you come right down to it, it isn't much dirtier than the rest of the money that we had." If you come right down to it, paper money is pretty dirty stuff. So that's what they were doing. We had these, and all we were doing was holding 'em, and then as quickly as possible they started to process 'em.

Mark: And send them to the States or something.

Wilke: And send 'em to wherever they were going to send 'em. A goodly number of 'em ended up in the United States and were they lucky.

Mark: Now, did you get a handle on the moral or the condition of the German and the Italian troops from observing them?

Wilke: The Italian troops were beat.

Mark: And you could tell looking at them, talking to them?

Wilke: They were beat. They'd lost. They were beat. There was no more fight in them than there was in a five-year-old boy. They were a beaten bunch. But some of the Germans, especially when you got up into the non-coms, that had some rank, that might be equivalent to a tech sergeant or staff sergeant or master sergeant or something like that—

Mark: They were a little bit more spirited?

Wilke: There was one fella, we had him on a work detail and he inclined to talk and would speak some English. That's why we used him so much because we could communicate with him. [laughs] And I remember there was one sergeant with us, a guy by the name of Albert Drouse, Belgian extraction, he could speak a little German, but not much. But anyway, he asked this German non-com he says "What would you do if you got a hold of my gun?" He says "I'd use it and I'd escape." He plain let you know, don't turn your back on me. And well, you respected him for it. That's the kind of guy that I hope they shipped over here to the United States and

gave 'em the real treatment of sending 'em across the country so they saw all the fields growing with stuff so they went past these factories working at night and things like that and he might get the idea what the hell is Adolf thinking about trying to beat a country like this. You know, because that's what a lot 'em found out. But anyhow, we worked on that sort of stuff. And that probably lasted oh maybe best part of three weeks or so. And then we had all our gear together and we went out and we started to do what we were supposed to do.

Mark: Which is fix tanks on the battlefield.

Wilke: Fix tanks. And we were getting a lot of the tanks that had been in on a lot of fighting. A hell of a lot of 'em had had a lot of things happen to 'em. I said "you know, you might be a tank engine mechanic but boy when there was work to be done you done anything. And changing track on a tank is a heck of a job.

Mark: Now what kind of tanks were these? These weren't the Stuart tanks were they? Where these the Sherman's? Or what? I'm not as familiar with tanks as I'd like to be.

Wilke: They were like a Sherman tank. A lot of these were the old style that had a turret with a thirty-seven and a half millimeter gun in it and then they had a Swanson off on one side with a seventy-five millimeter that didn't—that was mounted on the right side. You had to maneuver around so you could fire those right. And that had a five-man crew with it. But changing track was a deuce of a job cause you had to disconnect the track and then get the engine started so that the engine would peel the doggoned track away so it'd lay down there like and then get a new track and attach it in and try to bring it up to snub and everything else in the process you'd discover all sorts of things that you had to do along the way like the bogeys which are like little wheels that ride down—see it'd be sprocketed and the final drive like a sprocket on a bicycle. You know a big sprocket up there to hold it. And on the back end it had another one like that that was to keep the track in line. But as it went down along, it pulled itself on these bogeys that rode then they had some other wheels that were on the upper part to keep the track from sliding down, things like that and these played on the underside of the, not the face of the track but the opposite side of the track. And some of these would be shot and we'd have to fix those up and it was a lot of work getting 'em back in shape. Getting 'em back in shape so they could roll up the way, so they could get up there around Basurti and be used for when we painted all the bumpers over and suddenly became the 7th Army under Patton. That's how we got a new Army. Everybody back home thought there was a separate Army! Same guys, different insignia. So no patches on your soldier. Well anyhow, we were working on that sort of stuff and changed engines. A lot of it was major. And everything on a tank is big. And they got an inspection plate underneath where tank is in back and it's held up with live bolts that go through the armor plate into the body of the tank itself and they had a real fancy device to take those off. It was called a human being with a wrench [laughs] These inspection plates weighed better than two hundred and fifty pounds.

You'd get underneath, lay on your back, get your knees right up against 'em. And the counter sunk hole would be a place to put a box socket with a wrench on it, a long wrench. And you'd tug to get 'em loose. What you'd do is you were holding that thing up there with your knees against that thing like a jack as you loosened these up to get 'em out so that then by using your hand you could sorta let it down on the one end and slide it off of your knees so you could pull the damn inspection plate out so you could get at anything underneath there to loosen connections—because you had a back doors that opened, two big doors, you had some things on the top that opened up and these hinged, but nothing down there. This was two and a half, three inch armor plate So in case you went over a mine or something like that, it wouldn't put a piece of shrapnel into the engine you know. I had plenty of those on there. That's where my—eventually my varicose veins came from too. But anyhow—

Mark: Did you have trouble getting parts and those kinds of things? Or did the supply lines—

Wilke: We had supplies, plenty in North Africa and then we convoyed all the way over to Lake Basurti and we were set up there and we became part of the Sicilian deal and I made two trips over delivering tanks from North Africa over to Sicily, trying to catch up with Patton's outfit. Boy that was like a wild goose chase.

Mark: Chasing Patton around?

Wilke: Oh my God. You know, you never had any idea. You knew what outfit you were going to and everything else but you might be over there and you come ashore and maybe there'd be four or five tanks. And then you'd have a Dodge 4x4 or 4x6 with you, somebody driving it in order to haul the guys back to the Port of—so then you'd start chasing out after Patton. And you'd check with M.P.'s along the way and finally catch up and deliver your tanks and I tell you when—Sicily you know is shaped like a triangle, the point to the north is up at the Messina Straits, the point to the west is, out in the end of Sicily and the point to the south is just opposite North Africa and it isn't very far across, just a little poke. It's like going from Florida to Cuba, there isn't much. There isn't a lot of water. They'd get us over there in a hurry. And these LST's they'd shove up to shore and the gates would open and off we'd go. And so I made two trips over there. The first time he'd just started up the southern coast. Patton went across there and he was supposed to go up the southern coast to the western point and then back across the other way. But British 8th Army under Montgomery, thank God Churchill wrote up his history because I don't think Montgomery could have commanded a platoon of police. They went ashore and they were supposed to go along up past Mt. Etna up to Messina. Patton went across all the way down to the west tip of Sicily back across the north to the Straits of Messina and headed back down and met Montgomery poking along. He says "It's safe now, you can come." And Patton had one idea, take it. Get enough men and enough stuff and go! He only knew one, forward. He must've read the motto on the State Capital here. Anyway Patton, as I've often said, was probably the best soldier I ever knew of

in World War II and the worst human. I don't think he had morals of anything, just get the job done. That's what you needed.

Mark: Is this something you thought at the time or is this after years of reflection?

Wilke: I thought it at the time. I thought it at the time. He was—you know they came out with an order that he wanted to come up with a uniform for the tank outfit that was better than they had. And it ended up that a lot of us had those jackets and stuff like that afterwards. But he wanted something that didn't dangle all over the place. He didn't want stuff hanging. That was bad. Oh man.

Mark: Are you alright?

Wilke: No.

Mark: Can I do something for you?

[interruption, Wilke not feeling well, tape stops]

Wilke: We were talking about—

Mark: Patton.

Wilke: Patton, yeah. Well that was my time with them. We changed our patches on our uniform and got credit for Sicily and so forth and when that was over with we were part and parcel of fancy plan we repainted our bumpers and we put new patches on and that's when I found out there was something called a 5th Army. I became part of the 5th Army. And we convoyed across the top of North Africa from over there at Lake Basurti, right along the coast out in front of God and everybody so you didn't have to be a spy you just had to have eyes to see these troops and equipment and all of that sort of stuff, rolling down. And we went all the back over to Oran. Well if you go all the way over to Oran, if you knew anything about looking at the map, you'd realize that Oran, that's due south of Marseilles and all of that sort of stuff. It even bypasses Sardinia and so forth. Must be gonna go into Southern France. It must be where the thing is coming. And then we got on ships. And we got on one that was run by the British. His Majesty's troop ship O'Trottle (??) It was an old old boat that had been around forever in the British merchant marine was making a lot of money running a troop ship. And we get on there and they parked us wherever we could. I can remember there was eighteen of us fellas in one little room. We slept in hammocks in a little part of the deck someplace. We'd go down and get food twice a day, steward down there give out the food and very British. [in British accent] "Food for aye-teen men" And three hungry guys could have eaten every smidge of it and been hungry. Oh jeez it was slum gullying. We sailed out and instead of going any other direction we went back right back along the coast of North Africa all the way down, sailed all the way down to Malta and then back up and came up through the

Straits of Messina. And in, down below, Salerno. And when we came through the Straits of Messina, we were in a convoy and came through there, and boy the old sirens went off. And I remember that here was these officers materializing all at once all over the deck. And they were standing there with sub-machine guns. And they gave out the order to the guys, they'd shoot the first man that threw anything overboard. A ship up ahead of us got hit by torpedo. You could see the damn thing go up in the air like that and then settle back down and pretty soon lines coming off of the thing and guys coming off of it like nobody's business. Take care of yourself, don't worry about them you know. We kept on going. And we pretty sure that some of those guys on there were from our outfit. And they were because we had about fifteen guys on there, each with a truck. Those are the trucks that had our supplies and our special equipment. Our small arms, our instrument deal. All the special stuff. Well they caught up with us after. But we went on. And then we stood off shore there and went ashore and that's when I found out about the making use of going down the net. Because they started taking things off and I got assigned to bring some Jeep ashore and it had been lifted on this thing and went down this doggoned netting and it's a hell of a thing going down—nothing very romantic about going down those landing nets. Got ready to step off and I stepped off and I'm right along side the anchor on this barge that they got to take ashore and they rammed us up onto shore and then drove the Jeep down the beach and delivered it to the rank that it had to go, got back with my outfit and luckily our wreckers were with us but we didn't have any supplies. And we didn't have any special equipment trucks, stuff like that and here we are on shore and we're supposed to start fixing up tanks again and half-tracks and tank destroyers and whatever other wheeled vehicle is around. We go out with wreckers and we look for tanks that have been knocked out. And we're hauling these tanks in to our outfit; some of 'em have been knocked out and hit. We're gonna cannibalize 'em for parts cause everything was a break down. And grave sergeants come in and go through 'em and get any bodies that were in there and down the road from us and I found a place down there that sold Marsala wine and I went down and I bought some and I had a whole canteen full. And it tasted pretty good but it's one good thing was that you drink enough of it and it kinda immunized ya' against smells and what you were gonna do. And I got to be a guy that they'd put me down inside these tanks to take parts of 'em so we could use them. And one of the things was there was an instrument panel that was about a foot to fifteen, sixteen inches long probably eight inches deep and stood about ten inches high and in the back there were a lot of these male / female connections screwed on with a collar to hold 'em in place. And this had all the indications on there of everything on the tank so the driver knew you know how many rpm's he had out of the engine, whether it was running right, everything on there, the whole works. And we needed one of those to fix the tank. And this is in this one tank. So I go down into what had been the driver's compartment and the final drive on that thing had been shot. A shell had come through and it had hit the driver and he had been killed. And it ended up in the final drive which was the transmission, differential, the whole works, it's all shot. And they'd taken his body out of there but it still smelled, sickly sweet and I'm down there and I'm taking this damn thing out. I betcha I worked two hours getting that thing out

because I had to feel around, undo these, and pull ‘em all out. Had to get to all of these places where it’s bolted down and so forth and finally got it out of there. And up in the turret we took parts out of there, this was in one of the old tanks. We removed the seventy-five and we removed the thirty-seven and a half out of it and we’d taken the machine gun out of it, we took everything out of that. Working this thing but you know you pick up the smell. I felt like the outhouse you know on Halloween. I expected somebody was going to tip me over. And meanwhile our rations were—we’re back to basics again. And we were eating three meals a day, cooked by our cooks. This day they’d cook up all the c-rations that were meat and beans and maybe the next meal it’d be meat and vegetable hash and the next one be meat and vegetable stew and of course we had the dog biscuits with it. And they got a hold of coffee and they made coffee for us. Boy that coffee was hot and strong.

Mark: Now you’re in Italy right? Which is known for it’s cooking, did you get to sample any of the local things? Did you get to supplement your diet should we say?

Wilke: Oh, later on we got to but not right then. Those people were hurting. They didn’t have anything. And incidentally, supplementing our food. We went out with the wrecker. We were going to go and retrieve something; came along and there was this guy, Butler who was driving the truck. And Butler was a great big—looked like and talked like typical truck driver he’d been in civilian life. But he could drive a truck like nobody’s business. I think you could have given him—you could have set two planks across a chasm and he’d held the wheels on there and you’d a gone across. As long as he was driving he had nerves of steel. We’re driving along there and he says to me “Wilke, what in the hell is that over there in the field?” I says “That’s a water buffalo.” He says “A water buffalo? What’s that?” Well I said “Now, the Italians took a wrecker down in Africa called Italian Somalia land and I says it’s below Ethiopia over there and they had it over there. And over there that’s one of the animals that’s—and I said they’ve sorta been domesticated to a degree. I said they use that as a beast of burden and it’s a great big animal and it’s awful strong and he says “What’s it like?” I said “ Well it’s sorta like an overgrown beef cow. It’s like a big overgrown oxen.” He says “Is it good to eat?” I said “Well yeah, you could eat it. It’d probably be a little tough but it would be edible.” We had a fifty-millimeter machine gun mounted in the hole over the system driver. He stops and he gets this machine gunner round trained on it and sets it for a single shot and to fire a single shot you had to grip with both hands and compress the trigger with your thumbs. And he got it all lined up on this water buffalo that was grazing over there along side the road and he squeezed off a shot and *Kachong!* He caught that thing right in the back of the neck, back of the head. I think he probably hit right square in the spinal cord and it just made a forward flip and lay there with its legs in the air. He jostles the truck around back over there and we took a spreader bar and we stuck the spreader bar between the two back legs and with chains and so forth we hoisted this animal up in the air as high as this hoist would allow us and when we did, the head of that thing was down hanging within six inches of the ground. I says “We gotta bleed this thing, take the blood out of it.” Looked around, the only thing I had around there was a

bayonet. I went in with the bayonet, dug underneath the chin and out. And I thought it was a red Niagara Falls coming out. Oh my God. You never saw so much blood come out in your life. But then we kinda got chains around and pulled it back. We headed back to our outfit and we came in and our C.O., Captain Edwards, sees us coming in with this thing. “What in the devil you got there?” Bishop says “Captain you’d never believe it, I think it hit a landmine.” [laughs and pounds on the desk] The Captain walked over and looked at this hole that was through its neck. He says “yeah, real sneaky these Germans, 50-calibur Bouncing Betties.” He knew what happened.

Mark: So was it good?

Wilke: Yeah, we skinned it out. Got over there with the cooks and I’m sorta giving instructions because my father had worked out of Oscar Meyer’s in the beef guild and I’d seen what they’d done out there. And we skinned the whole thing out. Skinned it all out and you know, entrails out and everything else and when went to get everything out of it, I says “You know, if this is like beef, the liver and the heart ought to be good.” And they got the liver out of that thing and my God what a liver and a great big heart and so forth. And they started looking up recipes on what to do. And then they had this enormous head and we skinned out the skin and I says “You know, we ought to scrape this hide off here and I bet you we could trade that off. Somebody give us something for it.” Well anyway they scraped as much of the stuff they could you know and with what we had we split the thing down through the middle. We took the head, I told ‘em I said “Now, out there at Oscar Meyer where my dad worked, they took all of that what they call “jaw meat” off of it and they took the tongue out of it and they took what they call “jaw meat” out of there.” And I said “they cut it all up and they sold that for a pretty good price to the chop suey outfits.” They wanted something that had short fibers and they could cube all up and make it into the meat that they needed. So cooks were following instructions and they were doing it. And they pickled the tongue and a few other things and they cut the liver up into slices, fixed it up for liver. We could get a hold of onions all right. So we had some liver and onions but the bulk of this animal, they cut it up into beef, into pieces. It was gonna be like, well, big chunks of beef. And I said “You know, we should marinate it with wine.” So we went down and we bought some good ‘ol bottle of Chianti, dago red, onions and so forth. We got a hold of some garlic and all that sort of stuff in there. But for about two days our outfit dined off of a big old water buffalo. And we had it for breakfast and we had it for lunch and we had it for dinner and it didn’t come out of any can and we were awful happy about it and we ate it all up and we enjoyed it. Well that was one of the incidents that happened along the line.

Mark: I’m looking at your discharge here. And you basically just worked your way all the way up the Italian peninsula.

Wilke: Kept right on going. We kept on doing various things and after we got, well in Naples see we’re just outside of Naples at a little spot called Tatoria. We were

camped there and there was an air raid one night and there was one of the fellas in our outfit that had been on that ship that was run down, Milford Zolfi. Nice fella, real nice guy, came from Syracuse, real nice one. An air raid started up that night and Mil was up and outta his tent and he started runnin' down the way and he kept bouncing off of a wire fence. Just running, running down the way. All shook to death. Shortly thereafter, he was an older fella too, the officers got him over to the hospitals and so forth and Mil went home. He got a discharge. Mil was the same as shell-shocked.

Mark: It's fairly rare though I take it?

Wilke: What?

Mark: In your experience, going shell-shocked or battle fatigued.

Wilke: Battle-fatigued. But he had it. I mean you have an air raid and he was – but he got a discharge but there weren't too many of those. But our fellas, when they got hurt, they cut themselves or they dropped something on their hand and had some broken fingers or things like that.

Mark: Anyone get killed doing this sort of thing? Like maybe some unexploded Ordnance or something dropped on their heads—?

Wilke: No, not like that but we had guys died in our outfit.

Mark: From fire?

Wilke: No, most of it was— two guys drowned, that was later on. They had repaired a duck, took it out to test it and it sunk. And one guy couldn't swim and the other guy tried to save him and the result was they were both gone. One was a guy by the name of Jones who was head of the automotive and he tried to save this kid that we had us from down in Alabama that couldn't swim. And that shook us all up. They were buried up near Anzio. While we were down here, southern part, Anzio took place and we delivered tanks up there to Anzio beachhead and coming into Anzio we load up in Naples and we'd go up to Anzio and land 'em and take 'em to the outfit and then come back home. So coming into Anzio, well you're too young to understand, a lot of people are too young to understand, it was like chained to home plate with Dizzy Dean on the mound out there with a bushel basket full of balls that he could fire at your head. All you could do is just duck.

Mark: And that's what Anzio was like?

Wilke: Because Anzio Nettunno had been these resort towns, beautiful beach, just beautiful. Sandy beach, just like down in Miami. But all around it was a ring of hills and the Germans were all up there and they knew every inch of this land down here. They'd fire at anything. They'd fire at you. It was an awful feeling. When they went ashore,

there at Nettuno-Anzio, there was no opposition. They just should have had some more troops with 'em and they'd gone right straight to Rome. They'd a gone right into Rome. Fact is there was some advance units that got over close enough to see what Rome looked like. But they just didn't have enough—actually they didn't make it big enough. So as a result, they sat there all the time and waited and waited and waited for spring and we were all stuck. At the same time they had—you know Monte casino is up there so you couldn't get across the river, Monte casino. Everybody got to see everything down there whenever we had a chance, we go out and see something but oh God it was—it was pretty rugged, some of that country down there. And see nothing about Italy is flat. It's all a rib of mountains down through the middle of it and you fight from hill to hill. And when we were down below and they were trying to figure out ways to bust out and things like that, some general had read something about what the Russians had done with an outfit that looked like stone boats that were pulled behind tanks and he came upon an idea and we were supposed to make 'em. And near Naples had been an Italian naval depot and they had torpedo tubes and all that sort of stuff. Anyway we got a hold of it and we made 'em up and the 529th heavy maintenance tank. And some tents. We made these affairs that were cut out of this torpedo tube steel and they were a little over six feet long and a man could lay down in 'em. We had this armor plate we routed up in the front and they were fastened out so a squad of men individually in these things could be towed behind a tank and there was a a-frame came up from the back of the tank and there was a cable release up to the thing that towed 'em, swivel up there and the man in charge was in the first one of these on the right hand side and he had a cable release that he could release and it released these individual little storm boats that the men were in and they were towed behind the tank and the result of being towed behind the tank, they got right down into it and they were traveling along there, they ended up that they were practically underground. Couldn't see the fella. And they made a whole bunch of these to take up for infantry to ride in behind the tanks up there in Anzio when they were busting out and they'd go out past the pillbox and they'd release one of these. The fellas would get out of these, run over to this pillbox and the Germans had neglected to protect themselves from the rear. They'd get over there, throw a hand grenade into a pillbox and it would go off and the survivors would come out "*Comarade*" with their hands in the air. Worked like a charm! Just worked like a virtual charm. Busting out around Nettuno-Anzio with these little stone boat things in the back of the tanks. And boy once they found out that these worked, everybody was willing to ride in those because you couldn't get hit. You had to fire into the ground. When they made these, they wanted this all written up. And so they approached our outfit, you know to write it all up. And the Captain got a hold of me to come in and I was supposed to write this up, what we had done. So, here I am, I'm writing this stuff up and take it up to C.P. and they're typing it up for me, stuff like that. We got all done with writing all this up for our outfit and end result was the captain and sergeant that had been in charge of this project and another lieutenant all got the Certificate of Merit. They got decorated with a medal and up came the general who was in charge of ordnance for 5th Army and gave out these medals and when they gave these medals to these guys, it looked like you should be at least in

charge of the whole Chinese Army. Beautiful set-up. These three got these medals and then I found out later that my write-up had helped an awful lot so nobody hated me. [laughs] Shortly thereafter, a Major Sessler from 53rd Ordnance Group headquarters came up, talked to me and some others, found out that there was a guy that was going home on rotation from 53rd Ordnance Group headquarter and they wanted me to come and replace him. And so I went down to replace Sergeant Vernon Harrison who had been with the 525th Ordnance that had originally come over when they supplied the British with American tanks. [tape stops recording momentarily] Okay, now I can tell you about what the 53rd Ordnance Group headquarters, I got with that and from a GIs standpoint, that was heavenly service.

Mark: Why was that?

Wilke: There was forty-five enlisted men, eighteen officers headed by a full colonel. We had our own mess, had a mess sergeant and two cooks and we had P.W.'s to do all the KP. The motor sergeant had two prisoner of war assigned to him that done all the grease monkey jobs, all of that sort of stuff. We come in with a jeep, if we had to use chains, they'd take the chains, they dip 'em down in oil and desolate, rinse 'em all off, straighten 'em out, put 'em back in the bags. They'd check all of the fuel, your vehicle, the oil, everything on it. They cleaned everything up. It'd be in apple-pie order ready to go again. In our mess, for forty-five enlisted men and eighteen officers we ate well. Along the way we had liberated which was come across and ice cream making machine that had been in the front of a building where the building had been blown. We liberated that thing. We got that all running very well. We had our own generator so we had electricity.

Mark: I suppose you guys were quite handy with equipment, fixing things up and making—

Wilke: Well, yeah and we were all ranking guys see. So we could fix any blasted thing that found. We had this running in apple-pie order this ice cream making machine. You could get all the ice cream making ingredients you wanted but who was going to be a mess sergeant that put a man on a cranking one by hand. But we didn't crank 'em by hand. We had one where we could make our own. So he let it be known that if we got one quarter of the what was turned out, he'd make ice cream for anybody. Well there was outfits showing up at our place all the time to get ice cream made. And we had ice cream on hand, any flavor you thought of, we had it in these containers. And then beside that, App was a good cook. He knew how to make things. He'd take dehydrated potatoes and he'd soak 'em until they were ready, about one half done and they'd been swelled up and then he'd take these and he'd deep fry 'em and we'd have French fries instead of dehydrated potatoes. He knew how to trade and we horse traded on everything and found out that these mattress bags which were six feet long and a yard wide, and they're like big sacks and they came in stripes, blue and white or brown and white or just plain white, and you could trade those to women who never saw a piece of cloth for years and it was a lot of cloth. This is four yards of three foot wide cloth, it's a lot of cloth, trade it to these women for almost anything. He came in

with a case of cauliflower from one of these women, he came in with garlic and onions and you know anything they could raise in their gardens, fresh. Oh man, this was wonderful. Cabbage, and so he horse traded around and we ate well. And he could make good real good food. Oh we ate good food. App didn't have the highest morals in the world, but you couldn't much blame him, he'd been overseas something like twenty-month and he got the word that his wife had presented him with a child.

Mark: You can do the math and figure that one out.

Wilke: You don't have to be much of a mathematician to figure that one out. And he went to see the Chaplain and App was Catholic and the Chaplain said "Well, you know you can't divorce her." And App says "I might not be able to divorce her but I'll never go home to her." And that's the way he felt about it. He found some Italian woman that had a lot of groceries around and he had one guy fake a marriage ceremony between him and this woman [laughs] so that he could get close to the supply of food. In our outfit we had fellas that could do almost anything. Then we got into a headquarters outfit, and we got into a building that had all sorts of things in it including a well, a storage system that worked, it was a wonderful set-up and furnace that worked and we had running water, hot water, everything else. Headquarters outfit. This villa that had been the headquarters for the head of this tuberculosis hospital was there, a general hospital took over TB (??) and all the quarters for the nurses and stuff like that and we had this headquarters in this one building. With this operating facilities and we had all these toilet facilities and stuff like that. We took two of these better facilities and we made them for women only.

[Tape 2, Side A ends]

[Tape 2, Side B]

Wilke: And we had this sort of set-up, it was very easy for us to get gals from a WAC unit that was connected with the Air Force to come up and have dinner at our place and so forth and we let 'em know when you came up there it was a good time—there was hot water and stuff like that to maybe rinse out—

Mark: The delicates?

Wilke: The delicates and hosiery and stuff like that and also a good time to get a shampoo and a bath and so forth. The girls would come up to see us and we had a quartet that we organized and the Colonel liked our quartet. First Sergeant sang bass, Sergeant Apt was the second tenor and there was another guy that sang first tenor and I sang lead in this thing. And he thought we were good. We weren't that good but we sang pretty good stuff. But then he'd invite anybody he could to come up. Including the Andrew Sisters and Arthur Treacher who came through with a show. And then he had us sing for them. I coulda died. They were real good people and they taught us a couple songs that they knew and this Arthur Treacher had a repertoire of dirty stories the like of which I'd never heard in my life. That man could tell stories for hours.

The Colonel thought nothing of inviting us to be part of this entertainment. I was with that headquarters outfit until the end of the war. I enjoyed myself with them, we really lived well and—

Mark: So that's this 24th General Hospital here?

Wilke: No, it wasn't.

Mark: I'm don't know why—

Wilke: Okay, I'll tell how I got with the 24th General Hospital. The war was over as far as we were concerned. We heard that Japan fell and every month the doctors kept telling me that I should be circumcised. I finally said "Okay, the war's over, give me the sick book, I'll go down and I'll go in." I did. Went in, bingo. I got circumcised at thirty-years of age and promptly told everyone of my friends, if you got a little kid, a little boy, get him circumcised, do it when they're born, don't wait til they're thirty years old, this is agony. [laughs] So I had that little job taken care of—

Mark: So you must have been transferred into this unit or something?

Wilke: No, then I got my turn to go home. I had plenty of points. Ready to go home and this 24th General Hospital was going home and they took all of us fellas that didn't have combat infantry badges, so we didn't have to lose out on our combat infantryman pay. So they transferred in anything into that and we came home on a ship out of Lake Horn. As we're coming home, I'm working on the ship's newspaper. That meant that I'd stay up late nights and I'd listen to the radio and we'd get the news on sports for all of the year. One night, after we were traveling across the Atlantic, they got a message that there was somebody that was sick with an appendectomy and the captain of the ship didn't want to do it and was there any medical outfit around that could? And we got in contact with 'em and one of our doctors on this hospital said he would go over and do it. So we layed side by side, shot across the bow, they had this breaches boy that our doctor could get into and he could go across from our ship over to this Spanish ship to take care of this guy who needed his appendix taken care of. And he rode across in this breeches boy over to that thing and then we stood by until he performed his operation and then he came back. That was quite a length of time that we lay there, bouncing out in the middle of the ocean. And he came back and he says "What a deal traveling across on that thing." It almost killed him you know. But he'd taken care of the fellow over there and removed his appendix and the guy was going to be alright he wouldn't have perontinitis or anything like that. And then we continued on.

Mark: Where'd you land at when came back?

Wilke: I came right back to the same place I left.

Mark: Fort Patrick Henry!

Wilke: Newport News, Fort Patrick Henry. I got there and jeepers creepers, here we were, we came ashore and they had PWs, German PWs that were taking care of all the detail work and stuff like that. And they fed us. We came ashore and they said, “Do you want a glass of milk?” “Yes.” Here was fresh milk. Great big glass of fresh milk. And they were making steak for us. “How do you want your steak cooked?” They asked you a question like that. And all we could answer was “Steak! You can give us that steak anyway you get it to us.” We’d a eaten it raw I think. And we had steak and potatoes, fried potatoes, and onions, eggs. They had all sorts of vegetables. We had anything we wanted in the way of food. I can remember they said they had soup, what kind of soup? They had some vegetable soup and they gave us a bowl of vegetable soup that was so thick you ate it with a fork you know.

Mark: Good to be home huh?

Wilke: Ohhh. And we’re eatin’ this stuff and we’re eatin’ this nice fresh bread and they had all the jams and jellies that you could think of to put on it. And then you could have pie. Apple pie with cheese. And we drank milk and we drank coffee and we drank—oh boy anything you wanted. And then pretty soon I was on the train and I was heading for Camp McCoy. I got up to Camp McCoy, couldn’t get discharged. The night before we got discharged, I’m laying there in bed and pretty soon I heard a bed just rattling on the floor. I looked over, here’s one of the fellas that had come home, he got a attack from you know the stuff you took your Atabrine for and stuff like—?

Mark: Malaria.

Wilke: Malaria. He got an attack of malaria. And he was shaking so bad his bed rattled on the floor and they hauled him off to the hospital to take care of his malaria. He probably got a disability out of that one. The rest of us guys, all we wanted—I should have laid there and moaned and groaned about my varicose veins but the heck with that, give me a discharge and send me home.

Mark: Which is what they did.

Wilke: That’s exactly what they did.

Mark: Now you got back to Madison then before Christmas didn’t you?

Wilke: Yeah. I was getting this discharge and I would ride the train to Portage and then Portage was supposed to—well I had my discharge. I called up my relatives, aunts and uncles, I had a couple aunts and a couple uncles in Portage. I told ‘em I was coming in. And they were waiting for me and I got off the train with all my stuff and they were waiting. I didn’t have very far to go to get the house of my Uncle Willard Hayes and my Aunt Elizabeth. My other Aunt Edna and her husband and my Aunt

Lucille and her husband and there we were all up there in the Hayes' household and I bought a bottle of whiskey and I plunked it down and I says "I hope you got some mix."

Mark: Hope you get some what?

Wilke: Hope you got some mix for this.

Mark: Oh some mix.

Wilke: And we sat around and we had highballs and I talked and my Uncle Willard Hayes had been in World War I and he knew what I was talking about and I got yapping with him and I talked to my aunts and to my uncles and we were having a good time and I think I was getting a little bit polluted [laughs] but awful glad I was home.

Mark: I have a couple questions about returning to civilian life and getting readjusted back into society. First of all, did you experience any sort of problems readjusting back into society? In other words, you mentioned your varicose veins, that was kind of a medical thing. Did you have any other problems? Did you have any—Some veterans came home and thought the civilian population didn't understand their sacrifices and that sort of thing, did you have any nightmares like some veterans did?

Wilke: I didn't have any nightmares. All I did is I got madder than the dickens at my mother. She started telling me about all her hardship and not being able to get all the sugar she wanted in order to do the canning. At which time I promptly told her about having to use gasoline to wash out your clothes in order to get anything clean and a few other things and telling her as far as I was concerned I didn't care if she never had an ounce of sugar the whole time I was gone. Gee that was terrible. No, as far as adjusting, I could go back to work for Gisholt you know and they were perfectly willing to have me come back, it wasn't much of a job. I told 'em that I'd only work until I could find something better but I believed in making a little money if I could and I promptly started writing civil service exams for the State of Wisconsin and as soon as I could, I lined up something with them. And I went to work for Unemployment Compensation Department with the State of Wisconsin.

Mark: In taking these tests, you got some veteran points I would imagine?

Wilke: Yes I got points.

Mark: So that helped?

Wilke: That helped. That helped and if I'd a been disabled, I'd a got more. But as far as I was concerned I was going to take advantage of every bit of points I had. And I told 'em honestly as soon as I had a chance to get a better job I was gonna work for something else.

Mark: Which you did.

Wilke: Which I did.

Mark: And also as I know, it was at your new place of employment where you met your wife.

Wilke: Yeah, that's where I met my wife. See I went to work for the Unemployment Compensation Department and my wife had previously returned there and they had given her the task of taking care of all the returning people and also the new ones that they were hiring. And that was all right with me. So I was her first pupil. And we were in there and I was getting my training, the two of us in the conference room and she told me that all these gals around there had found out that I was single, that made you live meat, and this had been one of those places where they had been short on men for a few years.

Mark: And they were glad to have you guys back I take it?

Wilke: And they were looking you all over. And she said they all wanted find out what kind of gal I was interested in. So I wrote a little essay to her on the kind of girl that I was interested in. And I foolishly said that my plans for matrimony, I didn't have any at the present time. That was in March of 1946 and on December 28th, 1946 I got married to this girl that I'd told that to. Well—

Mark: Hey when lightening strikes you know.

Wilke: Well she and I had an awful lot that we understood. We'd both been in service and that made a difference.

Mark: In what way did that make a difference?

Wilke: You didn't have to explain things. So many others you'd tell 'em and then you'd have to explain. You were in service. You were ordered to do this. You're soul wasn't your own you know. And she did--