Alan Woolworth was born on 19 August 1924 in Clear Lake, South Dakota. He attended local schools and graduated from high school in 1942. Alan entered military service in February 1943 at Ft. Snelling, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, completed Basic Training, and joined the artillery battery of the 6th Armored Division. In February 1944 this unit was sent to Europe to prepare for the upcoming invasion of France. When this unit did not participate in the D-Day invasion, but continued training in England, Alan transferred to the infantry, and became a member of a machine gun crew. In fall 1944 he was posted as a replacement to Co B, 314th Regiment, 79th Infantry Division.

In November 1944 this unit was moved to France, and up to the line. By the end of the war in May 1945 Alan had seen action with this unit in western France, in Alsace-Lorraine; Belgium; the Netherlands; and western Germany. From May to August 1945 he served on occupation duty in western Czechoslovakia, near the city of Cheb, overseeing the movement out of the country of ethnic Germans. After some months of waiting, in November Alan was rotated back to the US and in December 1945 discharged with the rank of private first class. Alan returned home safely, but his twin brother had been killed in action in July 1944 while serving with the US Army in Italy.

Again a civilian, Alan worked in his father's construction business for a year, used GI Bill benefits to obtain his AB degree in History and Anthropology in 1950 from the University of Nebraska, and then completed an M.A. in Anthropology from the University of Minnesota. Alan's career included positions at the State Historical Society of North Dakota (1952-57); the Dearborn, Michigan, Historical Museum (1957-60); and the Minnesota Historical Society (1960-98). With the Minnesota Historical Society, Alan's positions included museum curator (1960-1967), head of Museum and Historic Sites Department (1967-1968), and chief archaeologist (1969-1979).

At the time of this interview (October 2001) Alan Woolworth lived in Maplewood, Minnesota.

Alan passed away on 13 August 2014.

**World War II military awards:** Combat Infantry Badge; Purple Heart; Bronze Star.
Interview key:
T = Thomas Saylor
A = Alan Woolworth
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***) = words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: It’s the 31st of October 2001, and this is our interview with Alan Woolworth. Mr. Woolworth, first, on the record, I’d like to thank you very much for taking the time to sit and talk with me.

A: It’s a pleasure. I feel a kind of obligation to do this type of thing and to share these experiences with people. The current generation doesn’t understand what things were like fifty-five or sixty years ago.

T: Is that part of what you mean by the term “obligation”?

A: I think so, yes. We have so many media now to record and transmit human thought and emotions, that a soft-spoken voice is a valuable one.

T: Because I do have some biographical background on you, I’ll just jump to a question about the 7th of December 1941. Can I ask you what you were doing when you first heard that news?

A: I was at my parents’ home in Clear Lake, South Dakota. A cousin of ours, who was in the military service, had been visiting with us. He was just on the point of leaving, and somebody turned on the radio and we heard this. We were all very shocked and taken aback. A lot of young men enlisted very soon after. I was still just seventeen then, I guess. There was a lot of patriotic fervor. Excitement, of course. We had such a long period of kind of a disaster in the Pacific. We weren’t really prepared for it. It was very encouraging to finally be able to begin striking back with some of the naval and aerial battles, carrier battles, the carrier war.

T: Was your reaction, as a high school student, how did you internalize this news? Differently than your folks, do you think?

A: My father had served in World War I in France and Germany, and there’s a strong tradition in my family of military service. Any war since the time of the Revolutionary War. I guess I realized that it was a duty, that we have a wonderful country and that it’s up to us to preserve it, at all costs. My older brother had been in the service for a year or so. In August of ’42. Anyway, he had been in the service for about a year then.

T: You, yourself, were you drafted or did you volunteer?
A: It’s kind of a complex thing. They eliminated volunteering at that point, but you could volunteer for induction. That’s what I did.

T: What does that mean to volunteer for induction?

A: Everyone had to register, of course. You given physical exams by a local doctor. I’m sure that the Draft Board got a quota periodically, every month or maybe every few months. They would go down their roster of people and send you a card, a postcard. It was kind of amusing. “Your friends and neighbors have chosen you,” or something like that. I had mine, my military induction, at Fort Snelling. That card, [that military induction card] is there, [in the military records kept at Ft. Snelling].

T: You volunteered for induction? Did you then select which branch of the service you wanted to go into?

A: I guess I was more interested in just the Army. I didn’t have any yen to be in the Navy or the Air Corps.

T: Why is that?

A: Well, I don’t know. There are a lot of different branches in the US Army, just in different areas. I hadn’t thought too much about that. The bulk of the armed forces were in that, in the Army. Of course, the Air Corps was the US Army Air Corps for a long time through that conflict [and it didn’t become a separate branch, the US Air Force, until 1947].

T: You had a twin brother. Is that correct?

A: Yes, that’s correct.

T: What was his name?

A: Arlan.

T: Did you and Arlan volunteer and go in at the same time?

A: No, he went in later.

(1, A, 97)

T: Did he volunteer for induction as well?

A: Yes, but I think but by that time they changed enlistment. They changed, and the government established the Selective Service Commission. I think they changed their procedures, and I think they then instituted the volunteering after that.
T: And your brother also joined the Army, is that correct?

A: Yes. He was in a paratroop regiment.

T: Alan, where did you go for Basic Training?

A: To a place in the desert, the California desert, near Indio. [I joined the] Sixth Armored Division.

T: Was it a camp or a fort or...?

A: Oh, no. It was a very large camp with thousands of men there. Armored equipment, tanks, artillery and that. A great variety of infantry units. A complete armored division, with all those components.

T: What kind of memories do you have of Basic Training?

A: I don’t know. I think like most people... I’d been in high school. I didn’t get along too well there, especially toward the end of it. I could see that the war was coming, and I’d be involved in it. I fretted about it. The superintendent of schools was a very fine person, but kind of authoritarian. He ran a pretty tight ship there at high school. I didn’t get along too well the last year or so.

T: So you were happy to be moving along?

A: Oh, yes. To get out of it. One of the big shocks or, I guess, rewards of being in the service was being treated like an adult.

T: You were eighteen when you went into the Army. Is that correct?

A: Yes, that’s right.

T: When you were in Basic Training, at this point you didn’t know whether you’d be sent to the Pacific or sent to Europe. Is that right?

A: I think we were pretty sure we would go to Europe, because there really wasn’t much of a place to use armored divisions in the Pacific, except maybe say on the plains of northern China. Once we got that far, then of course it would have been slaughter, because we had such tremendous equipment and the Japanese didn’t, in terms of armor.

T: Would you say you were more anxious to fight the Germans than Japanese or didn’t it matter to you?
A: It didn’t really matter a great deal. We didn’t know much about the Japanese. They were almost a mystery. We certainly knew who the Germans were. There were a lot of German Americans in my community. The men there had served in World War I. They were often children of immigrants or grandchildren. Their children my age were serving in this war. They didn’t feel any kinship with the Germans. I think we were very ... Well, we had these ties with Great Britain and France and the Western world. Many of us saw clearly that the Nazi regime was a grossly secular thing, a grossly secular state. They didn’t have any respect for religion, or they created a cult based on Wagnerian operas and Lord knows what, you know.

T: Would you say you saw yourself as part of a great western crusade, in a sense, to save...?

A: Yes, in a kind of a low key way, yes. We saw it in those terms pretty much. The alternatives to winning were just unthinkable. It was very interesting. Let me digress just a minute. The options open to young people like me when I graduated from high school were very meager in that small town, country town. My parents were industrious. We had a nice home and all that, a good life style. But there wasn’t any money to send me to college. Very few people did go to college from my community—maybe half a dozen at the most. None of the girls did. A great waste of talent.

T: So for you, moving to the military was a step in a positive direction?

A: I think it was. I looked forward to serving and eventually, of course, you realized that the war would end and you would return to civilian life.

T: When did your unit, and you in particular, cross the Atlantic?

A: February 1944.

T: Did you go to England?

A: Yes, we did.

T: How long did you and your unit remain in England?

A: Oh, gosh. (pauses three seconds) We were there until, I guess, July [1944].

T: So a number of months. What was your mood during those months of waiting?

A: Kind of impatient. We were still getting ready. After a while, we were in southern England, south of Oxford a ways, about 35 miles. It was very interesting to see the enormous munitions dumps and all the tanks. Just row after of row of them standing along these country roads. Great piles, lots of artillery shells and bombs.
Of course they weren’t fused, but they were there in the wooden crates, covered by tarpaulins. Just enormous amounts of equipment that were there. The barrage units used to joke and say the barrage balloons were the only thing that held the island up. Just enormous amounts of equipment there. Supplies.

T: If you were there until July that means the D-Day invasion of France came and went, and that you weren’t part of that.

A: That’s right.

T: How did you react to the fact that it was happening, and you weren’t part of it?

A: I think we all knew that you couldn’t just slap an armored division on a beach. They have to get quite a bit a real estate before you can make room for moving large equipment units like that.

(1, A, 201)

T: So there was no sense of real frustration? You expected that there would be a little bit of lag time before an armored division like yours could land?

A: Oh, yes. We knew that, of course.

T: While you were in England for those months, were there times when you had leave or free time available to you to leave base and go into town?

A: Oh, yes. We went into Oxford quite a bit.

T: How would you describe the relations between soldiers and the local townspeople?

A: I think they were generally quite good. Of course, with my name I had no problems. And then I knew a great deal about English culture and realized the great link that our country had in terms of its political structure and traditions and the other aspects of our culture.

T: With other soldiers, were there occasionally problems or misunderstandings with the local population?

A: Oh, yes. The city people, I think, especially. Assuming you were an officer in the service. They were more critical of them.

T: Why is that you think?

A: Well, they’d call them limeys. Comment on their living standards. They didn’t have central heat. I think they were kind of backwards in some ways. I don’t know.
It’s a cultural difference. Of course, our living standards were considerably different.

T: Would you go so far as to say there was at times hostility between the two?

A: I don’t really think so, no. There were conflicts with the Negro troops. Some of my unit were southerners who didn’t get along well with blacks.

T: Did you have blacks in your armored unit?

A: Oh, no. Oh, no. [Our unit] was segregated.

T: Where would these people encounter blacks? Were they blacks in England or in other units?

A: Other units, say maybe, in the pub, or on the street somewhere. I’m not saying there was any great amount of hostility or conflict, but it did exist.

T: People, in a sense, brought their social values from home over to England, to Europe, with them?

A: Certainly. I was going to say, though, that I enjoyed going into Oxford, walking around with friends. Reading about the different colleges there and then going into the churches and seeing the memorials. Extremely interesting things there.

T: Was it your impression that a number of soldiers were interested in the culture of the surrounding area?

A: Oh, yes, quite a few of us [were interested in the culture]. Especially the better educated ones.

T: When soldiers go to town, what kind of things do they do?

A: In the rural areas we went to the pubs and drank their rather weak beer. [This moving from pub to pub.] It’s called pub crawling. We would drink one pub dry pretty much, then go on to another one. We got along well with the English people in town. They’re interesting. They’re different. Soldiers would sing. They [the British] were less self-conscious about it than we were. They’d say, “Quiet now. Jimmy’s going to sing.” And he would sing some type of a popular song, and we’d all clap. Probably buy a round of beer or something. Really got along well.

T: So there were good relations between those British troops and American troops?

A: I think so. Pretty much. In general, we used to compare equipment and our armaments, our rifles, their Sten guns and their Enfields, and other things like that. Of course, they weren’t paid anywhere near what we were paid.
T: They were paid less?

A: Oh, very much less. Probably just a few shillings a day. Maybe about twelve or fifteen dollars a month. We were getting at least fifty-five [dollars a month].

T: What rank were you at this time?

A: Private.

T: You were running about fifty-five dollars a month?

A: Yes. May I tell you an anecdote that’s kind of amusing?

T: Please.

A: We went out on artillery firing ranges quite a bit. To Salisbury Plain. Where Stonehenge and the Salisbury Cathedral are, in that area. To our artillery firing range. I don’t know how this happened, but the rabbits or hares, I don’t know, probably hares in holes, nobody had hunted them for a long time with the war on. We had some surplus [shells]. We used semi-fixed rounds. These artillery shells are in the casing that the projectile is put into. Say you’re going to shoot; there are seven charges. You’re going to shoot a charge five, which will go a certain range. You’d cut off charges six and seven on the edge of the casing, and then put the projectile back on, slam it in the breech of the cannon. [After firing a number of rounds] you get a bucket of those things, [those extra charges], a canvas bucket. Very flammable.

These soldiers were hillbillies really, most of them. They would take a few of those [extra charges] and throw them in the rabbit hole, and drop a lighted cigarette butt on it. It would flame up like a lantern so Mr. Rabbit would come out, and they would catch it usually. This went on for a little while. Then the gamekeeper came around and began complaining to the commanding officer about this. There they manage game and it doesn’t belong to the public as such, but to the landlord. This was kind of an interesting conflict.

T: How was this resolved?

A: Naturally orders were issued to stop doing that. I guess that they put an NCO in charge of these unused charges and they were burned at the end of the day or something, so the people couldn’t get at them. That was one little source of conflict there.

T: Alan, when was it that you finally landed in France?

T: And when you first arrived there, where was the first place that you were posted?

A: We weren’t posted. I’d gotten into an infantry unit. I didn’t get along too well. The [artillery] unit I was in was a National Guard unit. They’d been in service about, nearly three years at that time. It was all cousins; one would be from a town called Mexico, Missouri, another Sedalia, another from Louisville. These batteries. Another one from California. All these towns. They had everything locked up and there weren’t any chances for promotion. It was all cousin this and cousin that. I got out of there and went into the infantry training unit.

T: How did you get out? Request out?

(1, A, 298)

A: Yes. And then we were given more training as infantrymen. Then we were replacement units. There was a heavy attrition rate [among combat infantry]. We moved along and, of course, as our line advanced we were moved along with it. It took quite a long time to finally get placed in a unit.

T: It was closer to November 1944?

A: Yes. Actually late October, I think.

T: You mentioned in your recollections a number of times when you were involved in some heavy firing. I’m wondering if you could say something the necessity sometimes of being forced to point a gun and shoot at another person?

A: We used a lot of training films in the Basic Training and unit training. Basically what any government does, is to dehumanize the enemy. They’re the Krauts, the Huns, the enemy. It’s your duty to kill them, to reduce them, to destroy their capability to fight. I think a lot of us did have some constraints about it, but you have to remember that you had a very deep sense of loyalty to your unit. When you saw friends being killed and wounded and things like that, it made you wish for a callous heart. I think toward the end of this I pointed out that, one of the rather shocking things, was that we realized that we were becoming more professional, like the Germans.

T: As soldiers whose job it was to kill or be killed, you mean?

A: That’s right. You could see that pretty clearly. That is a little shocking to people that are reflective and contemplative.

T: Was there an instance that you can recall where you know you were firing at other people who were perhaps firing at you that you may have injured or killed another person?
A: Oh, yes, sure.

T: Can you talk about one of those?

A: I described it briefly in here (motions to his printed recollections of wartime service, which the interviewer read). It was kind of amusing. [It was March 1945 and] I’d been wounded for the second time, I think. I was fortunate in that the wounds were not very heavy. I had gone into the basement of a house or a bunker there, and there were German civilians there. I had been hit in the left leg with a piece of shell fragment. I went in there and I had a couple of grenades on me. That was my field jacket. We had buttonholes there. Carried a gun, of course. And I was carrying a .45 [caliber] Colt [pistol] and a machine gun. I went in there until the shelling stopped and then came out.

Another man in my unit came up. We were standing there on a low hill and I happened, I guess we were smoking cigarettes or something, just looking down about a hundred yards or maybe little more. A lower piece of land to a river or something. There was a column of Germans, Jerrys, about maybe fifteen or twenty of them, running single file toward a bunker. I yelled, “Look at the Krauts!” and got my rifle. We all did. We were shooting at them, dropping them. The German civilians were behind us. They had just come out of their bunker, out of the cellar where they were. They were screaming and holding their heads during the firing. Extremely upset about this. It made you pause and think.

T: Was it an automatic response by that time when you saw the German soldiers?

A: Oh, sure. You know, gee whiz, one big factor in this is that all across France and western Germany, when we were always attacking and we took our lumps. Many of us were killed and wounded. They said in this paper that about three times as many men cycled through the division as we normally would have had. It was a great kind of a relief. We relished the opportunity to finally get a chance to be on equal terms with them. They were in somewhat of a disadvantage. We were on an equal plane. We could shoot them for a change.

T: So the casualties really did contribute to a kind of callousness?

A: Oh, yes. I have vivid memories. We drew up, walking in long columns alongside of the road. They had pretty well cleared the mines and things like that. We’d start doing this maybe three, four, five miles back from the front. Poised toward high ground. Of course, that’s where the enemy were. Entrenched, on the reverse slope, you know. As we’d begin to get into some range, in the vision of their artillery observers, they’d start dropping 88s, cannon shells on us, and we’d break up into small groups, so we didn’t have a large concentration in one spot. We’d get closer and then finally got up within maybe six or eight hundred yards of their heavy mortars, their 80 mm mortars, and they would start laying on us. Those darn things. They just came right up on top of you and drop down and exploded.
(1, A, 365)

T: Without warning?

A: Pretty much, yes. There were only two things you could do then. One is get in a good deep hole and hope you don't get hit, or else run like hell and get out of there. That's what we did, of course. Then, as you get closer, they start firing at you with the heavy machine guns and their lighter machine guns. Of course we had our own artillery fire. We used that as a substitute for manpower. We simply didn't have the manpower there. We were fighting in the Pacific, too. We used artillery and tactical control of the air over the battlefield as a substitute for manpower.

T: You describe some pretty stressful situations both here and in the collections you wrote. Were there occasionally men who were not up to this level of stress?

A: Oh, yes. It was quite a common thing. I think everybody has some threshold. By that time I was about twenty years old and of course a lot of the older people are non-coms [non-commissioned officers]—

End of Tape 1, Side A. Tape 1, Side B begins at counter 376.

A: Many of the noncoms, or most of them anyway, and the older soldiers in our units were maybe in their thirties. Say some of them get up around thirty-eight or nine. We always called them “Pop.” That's kind of a joke.

T: Those were old guys for someone twenty years old.

A: Oh, yes. Very much so. They were almost twice our age. At any rate, I must have been a real trial to them. I think us younger people were because you don't survive in combat by being careless. You watch out. You're walking along a trail, you watch out for mines. You always have your eyes somewhere picturing in your mind a nice ditch, a deep ditch or a hole, foxhole, to jump into if you get under shell fire or, for that matter, machine gun fire. As I say, there was that sharp discrepancy in our ages. Another thing was they'd become kind of inured to having replacements. More replacements. You'd start out as an ammo carrier. You do this, you do that. You have to ask. You learn most by watching them and listening to them. They don't really go out and go a great deal to tell you all the ropes.

T: Were these older soldiers, do you think, more or less inclined to suffer stress or mental breakdown?

A: I'd say less, because they'd been there. They were the survivors. They'd been selected by a long process. Another thing is that they learned. A lot of us didn't form very close friendships because of that. It hurt just too much to have friends killed. There was a very nice sergeant there in the battalion that I talked with one time. His name was Ralph Vanderplum, I believe. I asked him, I said, “You know,
you’re intelligent, well-educated. Yet I notice that you don’t have any close associations with people. Any real buddies.” He said, “No, I learned to avoid that quite a while back. It hurt just too much to have them killed.” I’m not saying that the older people are calloused about it, but they were so accustomed to having these younger people come in and be wounded or killed or break down that that’s just the way it worked.

T: Can you think of an instance where you witnessed someone break down mentally?

A: Yes. We were up in the front lines around the town called Hagenau, in Alsace-Lorraine, in the Hagenau Forest. I was sent back to the battalion C.P., the command post, for something. I really don’t even remember what, but they had me take a psycho, as they called him. Some young fella that hadn’t been able to take it. He’d been on the line just a very short time. I took him and we got back maybe half mile or so and we were a little careless along a road, a trail intersection. The German artillery observer must have seen us, because he began dropping 88 shells on us.

T: Just the two of you here?

A: Yes. We dropped down and I supported myself on my arms so I wouldn’t have my torso down on the ground. You might get a ruptured diaphragm.

T: From having your torso on the ground?

(1, B, 448)

A: Oh, yes. From the artillery shell, yes.

T: From the vibrations?

A: Yes. It knocked down trees and great gobs of dirt were up in the air. Maybe a half dozen rounds or so and he stopped. This kid was just running. He was ahead of me quite a ways. I ran and caught up with him and said, “Don’t be a damn fool! Just calm down and he won’t see us. I think we’re safe.” He was just completely berserk. So I took him for a rest.

T: What kind of shape was he in? Was he able to communicate?

A: Not very well, no. He was white, gasping for breath, just extremely distraught.

T: How did other guys in your unit react to someone like that? Was there understanding, or was there hostility toward a person like that?

A: That was an interesting thing. The riflemen had a tougher time with that than we did. Some had been wounded badly, or probably they’d had a really rough
experience occasionally. Some of those men were put back into the headquarters platoon of the company, or maybe as stretcher-bearers or ammo carriers for the mortar squads or machine gun squads. But again, it was pretty hard on them. I’ve read [historian] Steven Ambrose’s things and he thought that the normal person could take it for about three months. I don’t know. Then I think of the World War I vets that stood it for literally years.

T: Alan, what did the concept of fear mean to you when you were over there?

A: I don’t know. I was pretty casual about it for a long time. Of course, I had a twin brother killed [in action in Italy in July 1944]. I didn’t want to cop it myself, thinking of my parents and our older brother, who was in Italy by then.

T: So three of you brothers all together were in the service?

A: Oh, yes.

T: Let me just digress then for a moment. You mentioned your brother. What happened to your brother?

A: He was killed in July of 1944, [fighting the Germans] in Italy. He was in a unit at the Anzio beachhead.

T: When did you find out about that?

A: I got a letter from my mother telling me about it.

T: So you didn’t find out right from the military? It had to go to your folks and back to you?

A: Yes.

T: How did that news hit you?

A: It was a blow. For twins we had considerably different interests. I was bookish; he was more an outdoors type. Loved farming and being out of doors, that type of thing. He had enlisted in this parachute regiment, and it’s pretty hazardous duty. It took a long time to get over it. We had him brought back in 1948 and buried in the family plot there where my parents are buried now. My older brother and I go there and put flowers on the graves and things like that. I avoid thinking very much about things.

T: Did you have time to grieve when you heard the news, or were you too focused on the daily existence and survival to really permit that?
A: I’d say I was focused on just the daily routine. *five second pause* Getting back to shooting. I think I did maybe describe it to you already. As I say, after a while you develop something, an animosity toward the Germans. I mean as a group. You realize that you had to reduce them to destroy their capability to fight, and you didn’t feel any emotion about it. It was like shooting a rabbit or a duck or something.

(1, B, 523)

T: Was that because those soldiers over there were trying to kill you, or was there a larger sense of “I’m doing this for my nation or for Western civilization”?

A: I’d say basically for my nation, and our society too. We recognized that factor. The contrast was so different. By that time, of course, we’d seen a lot of things that had happened: the brutalization of French civilians, and, of course as we got into Germany, we began running into DPs, or displaced persons. They were Hollanders and Belgians and French. They [the Germans] just scooped up just about every able-bodied man and woman to work in their war industries and to farm and to do other things. The Germans had a very structured society.

T: Did seeing those kind of human abuses make your job easier in a sense?

A: Oh, yes, of course. We got this weekly newspaper, a tabloid, the [official US Army paper] *Stars and Stripes*. There were a lot of very sensational stories in there telling about the liberation of some of these concentration camps and things of that nature. Well, for that matter, we’d talked to the French civilians and the Hollanders. We were in Holland for a while. You could see that the Germans had really brutalized those people.

T: Let me shift gears here and ask about minorities, for example blacks in the military. You mentioned there were no blacks in your armored unit.

A: Oh, no. There were blacks on what we called the SOS, Service of Supply. That was a separate quartermaster type of operation where they dragged replacement troops and supplies from the beaches of Normandy up to the front into northern France and northwestern France. Then finally, once again, the port of Antwerp [Belgium], they began putting in immense amounts of supplies right there. Shortened the supply lines a lot. The colored troops basically drove those trucks, or were stevedores and things like that.

I was sort of impressed with a lieutenant, a colored lieutenant, that was running a convoy like that. They got to someplace moving up where the bridges were out or something, and he had a very good map. He said, “It’s like this. A better road and bridge is still there about ten miles up here. We’re going to go up there.” You had to respect somebody like that. I did. Then again, we didn’t really see many colored troops in combat. Just once in combat. That was when we were in Germany, I believe. I really don’t remember. It might have been in northern France.
We were somewhere up near the Siegfried Line, in a pretty dense forest. We were coming to the edge of it. You could see an opening, an open clearing, maybe ten or fifteen acres of land. Some other dense firing, machine guns and other stuff. We saw some troops running through the snow toward us. They looked like Americans. Equipment, uniforms. So we drew back a little bit and they drew closer, and we recognized them as Americans. They were colored men. Colored infantry unit. They had fixed bayonets on their rifles, which was something a little unusual when you do that. We never got in any close quarters. We shot pretty much the M1s. Bayonet fighting is pretty nasty. At any rate, they were breathless and we helped get them in out of the open. I felt sympathy for them. They were so breathless. Many of them were almost a gray color. Their faces were gray. They’d apparently run into a pretty large German unit there or something. They had to retreat fast.

(1, B, 586)

T: Why’d they have their bayonets fixed? Did you figure that out?

A: I supposed while being in the close quarters, say in a woods like that, a forest, and these are well managed forests generally with a rather dense core, probably twenty years old. They kept on harvesting them every twenty-five, thirty years. A situation like that, you do run into the enemy sometimes in a very unexpected manner. I suspect that was the reason they had their bayonets fixed.

T: You mentioned bayonet fighting is rather nasty. Is that the word you used?

A: Yes.

T: Is that from experience?

A: No, I never saw it. Generally I suppose you’ve seen the [1998] film Saving Private Ryan? That is, I think, very authentic. Very characteristic where it dealt with the small unit. Close action, right on the Normandy beachhead. Just a little bit beyond it. As you got back further inland, there was a lot more room and you weren’t fighting nose to nose like that. You were shooting at each other at maybe a couple hundred yards or something, or maybe farther. Sure, sometimes you got in amongst them, but it wasn’t that common.

T: It was more the exception than the rule?

A: I would think so, yes.

T: In general, what kind of soldiers did those colored troops make?

A: I don’t know. I thought that generally they did well as stevedores and driving these trucks, things like that. We didn’t have any trouble. They were simply doing something very essential. I had no personal experience with them fighting, other
than just that one instance. I read reports about the Tuskegee Airmen, [a unit of black fighter pilots,] in Italy. The reports were very favorable. They had an awful lot at stake, too, even though they were not treated the greatest.

Of course there were stories in the *Stars and Stripes*. There was gossip about them taking their truckload of gas and just vanishing, going to some large city and selling it on the black market. Of course, I don’t think there’s any point in denying that toward the end of the war, by the time of the Battle of Bulge and later, there were rather large groups of these men in some of the bigger cities like Paris and Le Havre, Antwerp, and other large cities, where they could have their own little enclave. It was kind of a fluid situation. There was a lot of black market activity.

T: Were a lot of soldiers involved in that kind of black market activity?

A: Fortunately, I suppose, just a small percentage. But it naturally stood out, whether it’s common or not.

T: Alan, did you come across any women in uniform?

A: Oh, yes. We saw quite a few in England. When we’d go back for a pass or something, sometimes we’d see them, WACS, and I always respected them. Thinking that they’re doing something essential. It took a lot of courage on their part to kick over the traces of propriety and do it. I knew quite a number of them afterwards, and they were accepted in the veteran’s organizations and treated very fairly.

T: On the whole, you’d say that women in uniform did a good job during the war?

A: Oh, yes. Especially the Nurse Corps. The troops were very fond of them.

T: Did they work under difficult conditions?

A: Oh, yes. Yes, it was tough. The lack of privacy and regimentation, and a great deal of stress. I knew a woman. We have a book that we published here [at the Minnesota Historical Society Press] called *One Woman’s War*. Let me get a copy of that. I’ll show it to you.

T: You yourself were wounded twice. Is that correct?

A: Yes.

T: During those instances, did you come into contact with Army nurses?

A: No. No, I didn’t. I just went back to the battalion aid station. I was patched up. They always gave you a tetanus shot, and bandaged up your wounds. I was lucky. The second time I was carrying a machine gun. I kind of ran out of gas after a while, you know. It was quite heavy, about twenty pounds. It bounces up and down on your shoulder. The squad leader took it from me and gave me his rifle, an M1, and
ammunition. I carried it diagonally across my body. We were running across this field, trying to get into some shelter, and an 88 shell struck maybe twenty, thirty, forty feet in front of me, and you just see these gray slivers [of the exploded shell] coming at you.

T: Really? You could see them coming at you?

(1, B, 656)

A: Yes. Just very faint flashes of light almost. I had this hand just in front of the charging lever, the slide. If you know anything about an M1 rifle, you'd pull the bolt back. I call that the charging lever, the bolt. I just had my hand in front of that a little ways. I was carrying it about like this (across his body) and a pretty good-sized shell fragment hit and broke this finger [on my left hand] and lacerated my hand some. It completely ruined that rifle. Broke a gas rod in there. I got into a little shelter and I said I wasn’t hurt too seriously, and I handed this rifle back to my friend. He looked at it in disgust and threw it down. Inoperable. If I had gotten hit with that [shell fragment] I probably wouldn’t have lived. Right above the sternum here is where the head arteries branch, right there (points), and it was just fortuitous.

T: Did you have time to think about what that experience meant, as far as just the role that luck played?

A: Well, yes, I guess so. It makes you stop and think. You've never been scratched up to that point. You too are vulnerable. It always hurt to see someone lying dead or wounded on the battlefield. Part of it was identification and the empathy that you had for them as a fellow American soldier. It could just as well be you.

T: That’s right. In your opinion, what role did luck or chance play in the war, for the individual soldier?

A: I think it had a large factor. But again, with those of us that survived, we were careful. You didn’t take needless risks. When you had to charge some unit and were getting shot at, well, we usually softened them up with artillery fire. And then probably a mortar or something. Get in amongst them and start shooting. You watched out for mines and booby traps, spread out. You didn’t concentrate together in large groups.

T: Wasn't there only so much you could do, though? Because ultimately, when those shells came down...

A: You’re fatalistic then. Ask the people in World War I. When your number comes up, and all that stuff.
T: Do you think, Alan, that the role played by luck made your daily life easier or more difficult?

A: Normally I would have three or four or more men wounded from my unit than were killed. I don’t know. That’s a hard question to answer. I think a lot of us thought it was just good or bad luck. Of course, if you’re exposed often enough...

T: You’re throwing the dice again and again, right?

A: That’s right.

T: What I was thinking of was in a sense, if one thinks, it’s only luck, then one can worry a lot more. But, on the other hand, if one thinks it’s luck, then maybe some people will say, “Well, I don’t need to worry, to concern myself.”

A: I think one major thing that kept people going was our sense of unit pride. Belonging to a good fighting unit and having friends and acquaintances you didn’t want to let down.

T: Not wanting to let your colleagues down, was that an important emotion among soldiers?

A: Oh, yes. Very much so, yes.

T: In a way, did that help to compensate for the fear that an individual might have?

A: I think so, yes. I should digress and speak. Combat is pretty exciting.

T: What do you mean by that?

A: You live in a very heightened state. Your senses are all very alert. There’s a lot of action going on around you—there’s yelling, there’s noises, there’s odors, explosions, bullets zipping by. People dropping, and stuff like that. It is very exciting, I assure you. It’s hard to describe that. It’s a thrill.

T: Adrenaline?

A: Yes. An acceleration type of thing. You see, so much of combat is, sure, you’re in a foxhole with a buddy. You eat K rations and smoke cigarettes. You haven’t shaved for a month and you’re dirty. You’re tired and wet. The time that you’re actually under fire is relatively quite a bit less. Of course, if you expose yourself, somebody will shoot you. I don’t know. It’s so difficult to quantify the amount of times you’ll be exposed to firing. It is very exciting, I assure you.

T: Is it exciting in an “I’m looking forward to it” sense? Or exciting because of the adrenaline rush?
A: I suspect it’s the adrenaline rush mostly.

T: Do you think a lot of other soldiers had similar feelings about that?

(1, B, 724)

A: Oh, sure. I don’t know that I ever discussed it in those terms with them. I remember one time we attacked on the Ruhr River [in Germany]. We attacked a German position, where they had been at least. At night. The assistant gunner was carrying the machine gun. It was pretty heavy. I was running alongside him with a belt of ammunition in my hands feeding it in while he was shooting it. Our men, maybe a platoon of us, shooting at this house, positions there, the out buildings, yelling and whooping it up. I suppose partly to encourage ourselves, partly to intimidate the enemy. I can remember how vivid that was—the night lit up by the flashes of the machine gun and the other things. (pauses five seconds) As I say, generally the Germans were shooting.

T: Speaking of the Germans, was there any instance where you were part of taking German POWs?

A: Oh, yes. That was quite common. In northern France, or it might have been western Germany, but anyway, there was wooded terrain. By that time our company, our platoons, were worn down to about half strength or less, and you’d see a platoon of forty men walking down a road, and there may be about ten or twelve of them. They looked pretty beat up. They were assaulting these German positions, small ones mind you, three and four times a day. Losing men every time. We were just beat after a day like that. We dug in the forest. Somewhere we’d gotten a sheet of dark plastic. We put that over the top of the snow. There was snow on the ground. It was snowing yet. We set the machine gun up and had it covered with a K ration box opened up or something, the firing mechanism. We had a few men on watch. Suddenly, I heard some firing, and I just jumped right up and went right through that plastic and grabbed that machine gun and started using it. In just a very short time—

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

A: Pretty soon we began hearing screams. I can understand enough German to know that they wanted to surrender, so we stopped. I went out there with another fella by the name of Bjerke, he was also from South Dakota, and there were maybe eight or ten Germans there. Toward the end of the war, of course, they were using Romanians and Italians and god knows what else. Anybody that they could put in arms. These people didn’t have any fight left in them. They’d just been trying to escape. We had tactical control of the air, of course. Our fighter bombers would strafe and drop bombs on any vehicles or columns of people. Generally they were pretty much on edge. We went out there, and there were a couple of them that had
been wounded by the machine gun fire. It was dark. I told a German, I said, “Help your comrade.” A couple of them grabbed these two wounded men and supported them. I collected their pistols. That was a souvenir type of thing. I got three or four, good pistols, a Polish pistol, a Radom. We took them, we took their arms from them. Somebody came up from the rear and took them back to battalion headquarters and then on further back. That wasn’t too uncommon an experience.

T: To take German prisoners?

A: No, not toward the end of the war.

T: Can you generalize about how these POWs were treated when they were captured?

A: One time I wanted to kill one of them. What the Germans did, they would, in kind of a last ditch situation, they would dig in. They’d have a sandbag type of bunker, in the form of a square. Like this (sketches a square shape with his hands, on the table). (***) and they’d have an 88mm cannon in there. That long, gray deadly cannon, pointing at you. They would have actually have half a dozen men in there. They had been told to stay there and die if necessary to hold our advance. This is where I was wounded those two times.

T: By 88s?

A: Yes. Shell fragments. We were running across a field, not looking toward them, but we had our sights on something further on. Suddenly they would begin shooting at us with those damn things. Twice men were killed right beside me. The platoon sergeant, an older man about thirty-eight, went around behind this place with his carbine and shot two or three of them. The rest surrendered. He brought them back into our lines. They were very frightened. Not first rate front line troops, by any means. They’d probably been through an awful lot. A lieutenant named Altmeyer was running the company then. He was a likable person. I was at least making a show of thinking that I’d like to kill that guy because he’d just killed my friend, Harry Spence. Altmeyer just ruffled my hair up and patted me on the back and shoulder and said, “Aw, forget it. It’s just a part of war.” He was a very fine man.

T: Was it tough to resist that urge?

A: No, not really. I think I was just more play-acting. I thought about it often times and I’m very glad I didn’t shoot him in cold blood. I had no compunction about shooting somebody that had some arms—that was a different matter entirely. But those German prisoners, they were just horribly frightened.

(2, A, 85)
T: Were there occasions known to you where prisoners of war were abused or were killed?

A: Not that I know of, no. We didn't believe in it. We had been given a lot of instructions on the Geneva Convention and told what to do if we captured enemy soldiers. Of course, they were bound by the same covenants. No, I wouldn't have tolerated it. Of course after Malmedy and Bastogne [two places in Belgium where American soldiers were killed after surrendering], things changed some, I would say. But you still valued human life. You didn't particularly want to kill someone without any reason for it.

T: Let me shift a little bit here. How did you stay in touch with family and loved ones back home?

A: I'd write to them every couple of weeks.

T: Were you a pretty regular letter writer?

A: I think so, reasonably so, yes.

T: On the other end, how important was it to get mail from home?

A: It was good, a very good morale booster.

T: Did you get a lot of mail yourself?

A: Quite a bit, yes. From my mother and then, of course, from relatives and friends, high school friends and others.

T: Did most guys get a lot of mail?

A: Yes, the bulk of them did.

T: How about news? You mentioned the Army paper *Stars and Stripes*. Was that regularly available?

A: No. Kind of irregularly. We got it with rations. I'd say at irregular intervals. Toward the end of the war the thing was being published in several different places, Italy and France, and I'm sure England. I think greater efforts were being made to keep it up. Of course, we had Bill Mauldin's cartoons, which showed the life of the infantryman. It was very authentic. It was interesting to read in there about experiences of other people.

T: Did you read the paper when you could get it?

A: Oh, yes.
T: Most guys the same thing?

A: Sure.

([2, A, 123])

T: Alan, did you make lasting contacts during your time in the military? People you stayed in touch with after you were discharged?

A: No. I think one reason was that our backgrounds were so different. Some of them were from coal mining towns in Pennsylvania, others were southerners. In general, my life changed so much when I got back home. I entered college quite soon, and I spent the next five years or more trying to get along through that. Most of those older men went back to jobs and their girlfriends, or were married. I was going to say. This is kind of a generalization. Generally speaking, it was easier, I got along better with the southerners. We had kind of a similar ethnic background. The hillbillies were usually good riflemen. Very basic people. Of course, the westerners. We had so much more in common culturally. The big city boys, we didn’t get along that well. Much different type of outlook on the world.

A: A lot of people went through your kind of units, didn’t they?

A: Yes.

T: Did that contribute, do you think, to people not staying in touch after the war?

A: Oh, yes, sure. I wrote once or twice to a few of them and got back letters, and that was about it.

T: Have you been to any unit reunions?

A: Never have.

T: Is that something you feel you’re missing out on, or is it not important to you?

A: It isn’t that important. Certainly not any more. There was a division history that came out around 1950 or so, on the 79th Infantry Division.

T: Was that something that interested you then or would interest you now to read or more just as a curiosity?

A: I used something like that to write up this (motions to printed personal history). I’d say I look out of curiosity now. I had two daughters. Their mother, her father had been in World War I as a Canadian, and had been wounded five times. I didn’t
talk about it to them. I didn’t feel that there was really a (pauses three seconds) I
don’t know. It’s a part of my life that’s almost a closed chapter.

T: With that metaphor, when did you feel that you closed that chapter?

A: I don’t think it’s ever closed really, I mean, in a real sense. I think a lot of us had
trouble readjusting to civilian life, especially the ones that had been in combat. We
drank quite a bit. Caroused around. It took quite a while for us to settle down.

T: Back to your time in the service. Was alcohol consumption a problem for units
from what you observed?

A: I don’t really think so, no. There were a few. Like in Germany, a few of the older
men would get kind of... I guess they must have been used to it in civilian life. They
were more raw types of people, and they looked out for it. We used to get the raw
country wines or something like that, or the Calvados in Normandy, a very potent
stuff. A lot of it wasn’t fit to drink. I’d taste it and spit it out. That’s about it.

T: Was alcohol something that was present in the units even on the front lines, or
was it something that was very much kept out those lines?

A: Well, actually, the officers, say around Christmas or New Year’s, things like that, I
think the officers got a ration of it, or supply of it, maybe three or four quarts of
whiskey. The bulk of them were very decent; they shared it out amongst the men.
That’s one thing. Generally speaking our officers were very fine people. I had a lot
of respect for them, affection for them. I have vivid memories of them.

(2, A, 194)

T: Of a particular person, specifically?

A: Toward the end of the war we had a first lieutenant named Bill Donovan, who
was company commander. He was kind of a rough and tumble character. He was
pretty burly. He wore a .45 caliber Colt pistol on his hip and also carried an M1 rifle.
He didn’t stay back; he was right up there shooting with his troops. You couldn’t
help but respect a guy like that. If he told you to do something, you’d do it. Jump up
and jump to it.

T: Was it because he indicated his willingness basically to be right up there with the
average soldier?

A: I would say that. To share the risks. That was one of the tragic things about that.
The best and brightest. I saw just all kinds of second lieutenants and others
seriously wounded or killed in action.

T: Was Bill Donovan one of those?
A: No, he survived. He thanked us afterwards and said he was going to go on and make something of himself; he was a captain by then. This background [of combat experience] would be quite an advantage to him.

T: Whatever happened to him in civilian life?

A: I have no idea. I'm sure he went on to a profession. He was a very capable man.

T: Let me shift again and ask if you remember in April 1945 where you were when you heard the news that President Roosevelt had died?

A: Yes. We were in southern Germany, perhaps Bavaria. Of all things I was standing up on a... No, this was when the A bombs were dropped. [At that time, in August 1945] we were in a camp in southern Bavaria, southern Germany at least. They put a unit like ours into an area and we took complete control of the civilian government and everything, such as it was. It was a military government. Food rationing. We put up roadblocks on the roads. The roads were just filled with these displaced persons. We scooped them up and sorted them out, Hollanders, Belgians, French. Their economies were reasonably good. We sent them right back there to a camp where they were collected and then returned by truck convoys. The Ukrainians and others from southern Europe were kept in camps until we could work out some diplomatic arrangements. You were asking about...?

T: President Roosevelt’s death, in April 1945. How did you react when you heard that he had died?

A: Actually we were sad because he was a great leader. A fine person, an inspiration. One of my sergeants had known Harry Truman and had gone out with his daughter a couple of times. He came from Kansas City. We knew he had a president. Truman had a good reputation.

T: So you weren’t overly concerned? You were saddened, it seems, but not concerned.

A: That’s correct. I mean, the civilians or the British would speak to us about it. I said, “Well, it’s unfortunate. We’re sorry about it, but we do have a president.”

T: What do you remember about V-E Day, the 8 May 1945?

(2, A, 244)

A: Not a lot. It was more of an anti-climax. Let me backtrack a second. Something I think you’d be interested in. When the A bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki [in August 1945], I was standing up. I learned about that by radio of course. I was standing up demolishing the rafters of a bombed out house or
something in a little village or farm. We were going to use the lumber for something or other. Somebody yelled up to me, “Hey, Woolworth! Did you hear they dropped this bomb on the Japanese?” Of course I knew what it was. I knew enough about the atomic scale and U-235, or something like that. I call it kind of amusing. There were a lot of us didn’t even have a high school diploma. I was called in to explain it to people the best I could. The fission, the masses of uranium, the implosion of it actually.

But V-E Day came first, [in May 1945]. By that time, the war had kind of wound down. We’d fought through the Ruhr pocket [in western Germany] and had settled into an old Luftwaffe camp near [the city of] Dortmund, in [the city of] Essen. These are industrialized centers. We were guarding two or three thousand of these Ukranian displaced persons.

T: So you were up in the northwest of Germany when the Germans surrendered?

A: Yes. Then V-J Day came later, in August. I was having breakfast. I was in an abandoned house. What happened to us after May? Not too long after that our division was sent into western Czechoslovakia, to the Sudentenland.

T: After the Germans had surrendered?

A: Yes. Basically we were there in the Sudentenland to protect the Volksdeutsch [ethnic Germans] from the Czechs and the Communists.

T: How did you and those in your unit react to the news of Germany’s surrender?

A: We were happy about it. We could see it coming, of course. The Germans were surrendering in droves. I went back on a three-day pass to [the city of] Maastricht in [southeastern] Holland, and we drove by an enormous prisoner of war camp. This POW camp, it must have been a mile square or more. I had heard they were making guard towers with machine guns at intervals, maybe a hundred yards or less. There were guards up there watching those people. Shelter halves and tents and all kinds of things, these Germans were in there. There were supposed to have been about two hundred thousand of them. It reminded me of a turkey farm. So many humans, you know. If you’ve ever seen a large flock of turkeys, that’s what it looked like. There was no question that they were very good soldiers.

T: You say they had been surrendering in large numbers.

A: Oh, yes.

T: So that for you it was...

A: It was an anti-climax, yes.
T: Was there a sense in your unit of joy or relief? How would you characterize what you saw?

A: I’d say relief maybe, some joy. They’d been trying to build us, psyche us up for it. “Well, fellas, once this war’s over here in Europe, we’re going to take you back to the States. You’ll have a month or six weeks for furloughs. Then we’re going to retrain you and you’ll hit the beaches in Japan.”

T: And you already knew this?

A: This is what they were telling us. We told them, blank you, Jack. I think there would have been mass insurrections. We felt we fought our war. This is what the politicians and the staff officers were talking about, not somebody like us.

(2, A, 297)

T: But you mentioned earlier a sense of duty and Western civilization. Didn’t that extend then to Japan as well for you?

A: I suppose in an abstract sense. I think there was a sense of relief, of course, with the dropping of the two A bombs. That ended that war. [The planned invasion of Japan] really would have been a horrible thing. We would have lost a lot of people on the beaches. Japan would have just been leveled. Oh, Lord, they would have lost millions of people, I kid you not.

T: Do you feel then that the US Government was correct to use atomic bombs?

A: I do, yes.

T: How have your feelings changed on that question since 1945?

A: They haven’t. I regret it, I think. It was tragic. I remember when the Northern Great Plains History Conference was here in St. Paul, about 1993 or 1994, they had a history professor from the University of Mississippi speaking on this subject. There was some kind of hairy radical in the back that kept heckling him. He was convinced that we’d done something immoral, grossly wrong. That it shouldn’t have been like that. I told him off afterwards.

T: With what kind of arguments? What did you have to say?

A: Basically I put it that the loss of life would have been infinitely greater had we invaded. I’m sure we would have lost several hundred thousand men, but the Japanese would have just been decimated. There were a lot of them that had been killed already by aerial bombing, by the firebombing [raids by B-29 bombers during 1945].
T: When did you finally come back to the States, Alan?

A: November of 1945. I left Czechoslovakia and came back to Marseilles [France], and stayed in a camp outside there. That was probably July or August. They were redeploying other troops, I don’t know what for. We didn’t get on an Army transport until November 1945.

T: So you hung out in that camp in Marseilles for a while.

A: We were about twenty-five, thirty miles north, actually west, of Marseilles.

T: That was just killing time there?

A: Yes. I read a lot. Visited around. We had some recreation facilities.

T: Other guys were shipping out from there, going back?

A: Yes. When we were in Czechoslovakia they began taking about discharges or sending us back to the States. I think I mentioned this thing about the point system. You got, I think, one point for every month of service. You got ten points for wounds, each wound. I think for a medal like the Bronze Star another ten points. I forgot what else. First they would start at about eighty points [for eligibility to be returned to the US], and of course the older men—they would probably have families, and they shouldn’t have been in there in the first place—they were let out first, and properly so. None of us resented that. Then it got down to seventy and finally sixty-five or sixty-eight points, and I qualified. I just didn’t fit into a peacetime or garrison type of existence.

T: It took several months to get to where the point totals came down?

A: I was one of the sad ones. I was there for maybe three months or so. I was, I guess, not a misfit exactly. I think I was a good combat soldier, but I didn’t care much for spit and polish.

T: Which was what was going on in this camp near Marseilles?

A: Oh, sure. Well, no, not in the redeployment camp, but in Czechoslovakia they were trying to shape us up into smart-looking troops with polished shoes and shaves and all that stuff. That’s always a big struggle, especially in a democratic army like us. Most of us felt we were serving kind under terms of sufferance. Certainly there was a contract between ourselves and society. We felt that contractual relationship was pretty tenuous.

T: With the end of the war, was that for you kind of the end of the contractual arrangement?
A: I felt in some kind of an abstract sense. Being a philosopher and theorizing, I recognized those factors certainly. Of course you had sworn that you would obey orders, obey your superiors. And we knew we had to keep occupation troops, but they were bringing in fresh levies from the States, and that wasn’t a very appealing existence. It was pleasant not to be under stress or being shot at or all that stuff. I didn’t care for the peacetime spit and polish.

T: Did you come back to South Dakota when you came home?

A: Yes. We landed in New York, I think it was Camp Shanks.

T: That’s one of those transit camps.

A: Maybe I’m mistaken. I’d have to look. At any rate, we landed there and went through New York harbor. A band was playing and all this stuff. Of course they’d done this time and time again. But it was a great feeling to come in and see the Statue of Liberty and the New York waterfront. Then we were taken by train to a Massachusetts camp where we stayed maybe a week or ten days. Very damp, ponds of water around and stuff. Cold. Then we were plunked on a troop train and ran around the Niagara frontier and through Canada actually. Came back in the States around Detroit, and went to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. That was where we were discharged. My discharge was on December 3rd of ’45.

T: From there did you come back to South Dakota?

A: Yes. I was given a one-way railroad ticket. We got into St. Paul [Minnesota]. I had left from there almost three years earlier. We rode on this train. By that time there were just a few of us in the passenger car, maybe the caboose or something. A little train going up to Watertown, South Dakota. They stopped and I got off at a place about six miles north of my home. That line didn’t run through there. I called my parents, and my father came and got me and another fella from the same county.

T: What was it like to see your dad and your family again?

End of Tape 2, Side A. Tape 2, Side B begins at counter 320.

A: It was nice. He was very understanding, of course; he had had a lot of the same experiences himself in World War I.

T: Was your mom at the station there, too?

A: No. She was at home. I think my father and older brother came up.

T: Who was out of the service by now?
A: Yes. He had served quite a bit longer than I had, about four and a half years, I believe. At any rate, we went and visited relatives and friends. The old familiar scenes. We'd get together at cafes and drink beer nights and talk with each other. We had to catch up on things. A lot of the guys, had what they called the 52-20 club, that I wasn’t too proud of, they were given twenty dollars a week for up to fifty-two weeks. Employment compensation. My father very soon had me working in his contracting business.

T: So you never faced unemployment at all?

A: No.

T: You came from a small town. How did life in your community change, do you think, as a result of the war?

A: It became much more of a part of the larger world. We had radio and of course newsreels. The newspapers and communication like that. Gee, you had all these people plucked out of that little town and the surrounding countryside that you knew well. They were in the Marines, in the Navy, the Air Corps. They were in the Army like I was, and went to all kinds of odd places, Guadalcanal [in the South Pacific] and what have you. Our outlooks changed so much after you’ve seen a lot of the much larger world.

That was so evident when we entered college. The instructors were well-educated people. Most of them had grown up during the Depression and the Twenties and hadn’t had a lot of the advantages that we’d had in the military service. Travel. Sometimes you would correct them. There was a professor at the University of Nebraska, a very nice man, a history prof who was talking about the very large scale of structures, I think the Pentagon and some of our congressional things. I said, “Well, Dr. Anderson, I remember driving by in a convoy past Marlboro Palace. Churchill’s Marlboro Palace. And you felt like an ant in comparison with the scale of the structures.” And, of course, we had a lot of experience with living conditions. Actually, generally speaking in western Germany, the German farmers there were much better off in many ways than the French or English had been with a few refrigerators and nice modern stoves in homes. Really quite prosperous people.

T: Here at home, what would you say was the hardest thing for you with readjusting?

A: I had a great advantage in having a job right away. Being amongst relatives and friends. A lot of my peers. People I knew well.

T: That made things easier in a sense?

A: Oh, yes, no question about it. We all smoked. A lot of us drank more than we should probably. Kind of stuck together and gradually began filtering into civilian
life again. I don’t know. It took a long time. I got married quite a few years later. My wife would get irritated at me if I heard a sudden loud noise or something. I’d react.

(2, B, 468)

T: Did you have problems with sleeping at night, or have bad dreams for a while when you came back?

A: Oh, yes, for quite a few years. I would dream, or not dream, but just visualize one of those things, emotions, some of the tragic events. Of course gradually it began fading into the background, and I deliberately kind of compartmentalized the things, pushed them into a recess in your mind. And in a sense, something like this [interview today] is kind of a catharsis. I’d always realized that.

I guess that’s what I was doing when I spoke at that Northern Great Plains History Conference, about 1991. I guess, in my sense, there was a real generation gap between myself and these younger people that didn’t believe anything about that conflict. They were judging it from some very different standards. I felt that I had to justify our role, that we had to do it. This is basically what I kept telling them. I said the world would have been just unthinkable. They didn’t begin to know what the Nazis or the Germans did to those subjected countries. It was horrible. They went after the Jews. They were after the Slavs, the Gypsies. Practically any other group.

T: That’s an interesting perspective. The generation gap did matter, didn’t it?

A: Oh, very much so, yes.

T: What jobs did you have in the first years after the war?

A: I worked for my father in construction until September of 1946.

T: That was in South Dakota, right?

A: Yes. Then we began building commercial buildings in that town of Clear Lake. People were prosperous, they had saved money, but wanted a continuation of small town life. We prospered there. In September of ’46 I went down to South Dakota State College in Brookings, on the GI Bill.

T: How far is Brookings from your hometown?

A: Thirty-five miles.

T: Did you live at Brookings, though?
A: Yes. In the dorm. We went home on weekends. I began collegiate studies. Then in the summers or even weekends we went home. Sometimes my father would put me to work and things. Actually, during the summer months I worked for him. I worked putting in building foundations, laying blocks, concrete blocks. Putting in sidewalks. Things like that.

T: So you stayed busy during the school year and during the summer.

A: Oh, yes. Then in the fall of 1948 I transferred to the University of Nebraska and went into the Anthropology program. I had two field schools, the summer of 1949 and 1950. I spent quite a bit of time out in the field doing archaeology, learning field techniques.

T: When you think back on it now, Alan, what did the war mean for you personally?

A: I think first of all it meant that our way of life was preserved and that we could continue. I think that was the most important thing. And secondly, it just opened up all kinds of enormous opportunities for me to get an education. I had a high school diploma when I started—I went out five and a half years later with a Master’s Degree.

T: You had finished high school before you went in the Army, right?

A: Right. It opened up all kinds of career opportunities for me.

(2, B, 535)

T: As a veteran?

A: Yes. My life has been much richer for it.

T: So, on the whole for you, would you say that your war experience had more positives than negatives?

A: Oh, yes. Unquestionably.

T: Do you reflect on your war experience differently now fifty-five, sixty years later than you did at the time?

A: I think I can be far more abstract and philosophical about it.

T: Is that good or bad?

A: I think it’s good, sure. I think you’re looking at it with a more objective view. Of course, putting it more into context.
T: In a larger context, you mean, as opposed to right in the middle of it?

A: That’s correct. What I was saying a little bit before was they shagged people like me out of small towns and farms and other areas, and put us on the broad stage of the world at large. Our whole lives were changed. It was a much different world that we came back to. A prosperous one, with all kinds of options and opportunities. And yet, as I say, sadly enough, a lot of the young women didn’t have those opportunities.

T: You mentioned earlier there were a couple of paths for women in the military, but it was still rather limited, wasn’t it?

A: Yes. And for civilian life it was very limited. Marry, work as a clerk in a bank or a lawyer, work in a store of some kind. Be a beauty operator, take some training in that. Hairdressing. Maybe work in a family business if they owned something. That was about it. Women, of course, had teaching and nursing and things like that, but I have two daughters and many are surviving in this feminist atmosphere of work. The last twenty years it was kind of rough at times. I was kind of amused by it many times. Actually there are a number of Jewish people here. Good Americans. They had a lot more respect, use for the veterans, than the others do.

T: How has it been? Let me ask you that. How has it been as a veteran working? Are there other veterans here [at the Minnesota Historical Society], too?

A: Not like me. I’m one of the few, to begin with. I think the last one, because I don’t know if we even have a Korean War veteran here. We have some from Vietnam. That’s fifty years ago, Korea.

T: That’s right. Have you felt any discrimination against yourself as a combat veteran?

A: I felt so, yes, especially with the women here. You know it’s something that’s kind of coarse, and bloody and vulgar. They just as soon not recognize it. I’ll tell you an anecdote about that. It’s kind of amusing. About five or six years ago we published a book by a fellow named Paul Macabee called John Dillinger Slept Here, talking about the gangster era in St. Paul and vicinity. To celebrate that we went to one of these cafes, a little restaurant on a barge down here, No Waves Café or something it was called. Very nice place. Our secretary, our office receptionist, said, “I saw a Tommy gun once, in South St. Paul. It was captured and kept by the police department as a trophy.” Like a fool I said, “They’re great things for street fighting.” There was silence. Then the Monday—I think that was a Friday—the next Monday I was at the mailbox, the mail area here, and what happens but that woman came up and I talked to her for some reason. I’d been amused by that [exchange we’d had] and, just for the hell of it, I started demonstrating how to use a Thompson gun in close quarters. “You don’t fire continuous bursts. You shoot off two or three rounds. Target them
carefully.” She was moving back away from me, moving back away, moving back. I was amused by it.

T: Was there any question about why you would know that?

A: I didn’t describe what happened when the bullets hit a German, no. It was too graphic.

T: She didn’t want to know either?

A: I don’t imagine so. (laughs) I had an amusing experience, I think, on the 10th of October [of this year, 2001]. I was up in Grand Forks, North Dakota, again for the Northern Great Plains History Conference. A man with a woman from [University of Wisconsin at] River Falls was talking about the Sioux Uprising. I’m an authority on that. I spoke on the Dakota Indians. (*** We had a banquet Friday night. I happened to run into her there, and we had a drink together. A Canadian friend of mine from Winnipeg was there, and he sat down and talked. I told her this anecdote. I guess earlier I had told her a little bit about my experiences. I didn’t glorify them. It was just something that happened. I told her about this experience with this woman and talking about a Thompson gun. She told me she was a pacifist. I said, “That’s your privilege, but I don’t think that’s a very practical viewpoint on the world.” We didn’t quarrel or anything, but I could see that I was a little bit repulsive to her.

T: Do instances like that make you feel defensive or upset, or doesn’t affect you at all?

A: I think it used to upset me. I think now it just makes me laugh. I regard it as rather idiosyncratic nonsense. It’s like this situation [in Afghanistan 2001] with the Taliban and the Islamic jihad. This has been going on for a long time. It’s finally gotten up to a war level thing. We don’t have any choice—we’ve just got to go after them.

T: Does this country have the stomach for that these days?

A: I think so, yes. We have to be. We can’t back down. I feel sorry for the Afghan civilians, it’s really tough on them. They have no choice.

T: Mr. Woolworth, at this point, I’m finished with the questions and I want to thank you very much for your time.

A: It’s all right.

T: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW