Martin Steinbach was born 8 August 1919 in Des Moines, Iowa, but his parents moved in 1922 to Loman, Minnesota, and then in 1936 to the International Falls area. His father operated a portable sawmill, and by the time he was fourteen Martin was working full-time to help support the family; he did this until enlisting in the US Army in the fall of 1940. Following Basic Training Martin was sent to Fort Lewis, Washington, where he joined the 41st Field Artillery.

With the US entry into the war in December 1941, the 41st Field Artillery was moved to California for further training. At the conclusion of this the unit was shipped east and then overseas to participate in November 1942 in the Allied landings in North Africa.

From this point until the end of the European war in May 1945, Martin remained with the 41st Field Artillery; he participated in landings at Sicily (July 1943), Italy (September 1943), Anzio (January 1944), and southern France, at Marseilles (August 1944). From late 1944 to mid-1945 Martin and the 41st Field Artillery were part of the force fighting across eastern France and into Germany. V-E Day (8 May 1945) found Martin in hospital in Metz, France, recovering from a hand wound. After release from hospital in July, Martin served briefly in Germany as part of the Allied occupation force before being rotated back to the United States; he was discharged in September 1945 with the rank of staff sergeant.

After military service Martin returned to northern Minnesota and labored briefly in the lumber industry before moving to International Falls, where he worked a number of years in the auto repair business. In the early 1960s Martin began work at Boise Cascade in International Falls, and he remained with the company until he retired in 1984. At the time of this interview (October 2001) Martin Steinbach and his wife lived in rural Koochiching County, Minnesota, several miles south of International Falls.

Bronze Star recipient, 1944

Martin provides detailed information on everyday life as an enlisted man.
Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: It’s the 5th of October 2001 and this is side 1 of tape 1 of the interview with Mr. Steinbach. First, let me thank you, on the record now, for setting aside some of your time to have a conversation about your experiences during the war. So, publicly, thanks very much.

T: The first thing I want to ask is when and where you were born.

M: Des Moines, Iowa, August 8th, 1919.

T: Did you go to school in Des Moines as well?

M: No. We left there. I was just a baby as far as I know; I don’t know nothing about that. We moved to Fergus [Falls], Minnesota, at that time. I was four years old when we moved up to this area [around International Falls].

T: Now you didn’t go to school in Iowa, either. You finished school up in this area.

M: Right. I went to grade school, most of the time, at Loman, Minnesota. Then we moved to Petersburg, North Dakota, and I went to school for a couple of years out there. Then we came back and I finished school in Baudette, Minnesota, to the eighth grade. That’s as far as I went.

T: After that, from talking to you earlier, I understand that you did some difficult work in the logging industry.

M: Right. On a sawmill. I worked with my dad on a sawmill. I helped him there.

T: I thought it was interesting, that was a portable sawmill that you mentioned.

M: Right.

T: How does a portable sawmill work actually?

M: You can disassemble it and load it on a trailer we had and then move it to another site, set up and saw some more logs. It’s quite a simple operation. It takes a couple days. But it’s not a big operation to change from transporting it to putting it into operation.
T: Now did farmers know that you were coming?

M: Yes.

T: Did you mail ahead, or call ahead? How did that work?

M: Generally, they would get a hold of us and tell us that they wanted the saw. They had a bunch of logs that they wanted to saw up and we'd just move over and set up the saw. Then go to the next farm.

T: How far away from your home base did you travel?

M: Most of our sawing was around Loman and Little Forks [Minnesota] and through that area. It's not really that long a distance. We were in Birchdale, too. That's about forty miles from here. That was about the farthest.

T: Kind of a smaller circle that you just kind of moved within. People got to know you after a while?

M: Oh, yes.

T: And your dad did that for quite a long time, didn't he?

M: Oh, yes. He ran sawmills for a long time. Long before I was born.

T: And after you were in the military, too?

M: Oh, yes.

T: You joined the Army before the US got involved in World War II.

M: I signed up for the draft. I think it was in November or December of 1940. Then I went in. I just volunteered and went in the 20th of February [1941]. I went in to Fort Snelling. The 28th of February I was in Fort Lewis, Washington.

T: Eight days later?

M: I had to catch a troop train that went out. There were four hundred of us from this area. Three or four states right around Minnesota.

(1, A, 72)

T: So that was very quick. You were at Fort Snelling and eight days later in Washington.
M: We got off the train in Fort Lewis. We were all lined up there and it was raining. It was colder there than it was in Minnesota. It felt like it. Of course, it was wet. The first sergeant was talking in front of us and he said, “I want to tell you boys right now,” he said, “the Army can't make you do anything but they can sure make you wish you would have.” (laughs) I never forgot that.

T: You joined the Army and not the Navy. What made you join the Army?

M: I kind of wanted to get into artillery. That's what I signed up for and that’s what I went to. The 41st Field Artillery.

T: So you knew what you wanted before you went there?

M: Not really, but after what they had down there that explained some of the stuff they had I kind of figured that. It was a 105 artillery battery unit that I went into.

T: How many guns were in your particular battalion? A battalion, right?

M: It was a battalion. Then you had batteries. There were three gun batteries and a headquarters battery. Each one of the gun batteries had four guns, so there would be twelve guns in the battalion.

T: What’s the crew of each gun? How many?

M: Seven.

T: So you were one of seven on a gun battery.

M: Yes.

T: What was your job specifically?

M: After we got ready to go overseas I was a corporal, a gunner corporal they called it at that time. Until just before we went overseas I was just a PFC, a private [first class]. Then after we got on Anzio [Italy, in 1944] a couple of guys went home on rotation with the staff sergeant from the first section. He went home. I was in the fourth section and that sergeant went to the first section and took over that one. He made staff sergeant. Then I was moved up to sergeant.

T: So corporal early, and you were up to staff sergeant later.

M: Yes. After the war was over I got staff sergeant. Just a sergeant then, during the war.

T: Martin, you were at Fort Lewis when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.
M: Right.

T: Let me ask you, before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, were there rumors among guys that something was imminent, something was going to happen?

M: No. We had absolutely no idea of anything. Most of the older soldiers were in town. It was on the weekend, Sunday morning. I was on KP. I did a lot of KP. I kind of liked it. You got plenty to eat, and it isn't a bad job. But a bunch of the young guys that lived in the barracks, when they said that the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor, they sent trucks into town to find the guys and bring them back to the base. We were living in the brick barracks in Fort Lewis. Then we moved out into the field to get away from the building in case of a bomb attack on the base.

T: So there was some fear on the side of the military that the attacks might actually hit the US mainland.

M: Oh, definitely. We went out on the coast then. We set up on the coast with seventy-five trench rifles for protection against an invasion. Which would have lasted a long time.

T: Right.

(1, A, 141)

T: Would you call yourself definitely surprised by the Japanese attack at all personally?

M: Everybody was. Nobody had any idea of anything like that, that I know of. There was nothing in the ranks of any possible chance of that kind of stuff. Just about like this deal with the towers in New York [on 11 September 2001]. You didn't know until the planes hit.

T: Right. That's a good analogy. What kind of emotional response did you have to hearing the news and digesting this news?

M: I don't know. Something similar to this outfit here [after 11 September 2001]. What do you do? You do what you're told. We had a job to do, and you do it the best you can. That's all you can do.

T: Would you describe yourself as more angry or worried or frustrated by the Japanese attack, or...?

M: No, I don't think you would be that. I'd probably say horrified by the idea that they would do something like that, but then you have a job to do. You protect whatever you can. Do what's necessary.
T: What was your job? For your unit, after we were involved in the war, how soon did a mission become clear for your unit?

M: I don’t know just what the dates were. We went down to California, flew down to Camp Roberts, California, and then we started training for amphibious landings and stuff like that. I think we were scheduled to go to the Pacific. We had a lot of training there. Then they went out on the desert and started training. Then they put us on the train. That must have been (pauses three seconds) in September or probably October [1942] when we went on the troop train and went to Camp Pickett, Virginia.

T: So you were at Camp Roberts, California for a good stretch of time?

M: Yes, right. Then we went to Camp Pickett in Virginia. We trained for more mechanized firing, like moving objects like tanks, trucks. That was our big deal because [German General Erwin] Rommel had tanks in Africa and that’s what we were headed for. Of course we didn’t know that.

T: You didn’t know that at that time?

M: No. All we knew was that we were training for combat.

T: Were there rumors circulating through the ranks about where you were going to go?

M: A lot of guys had ideas but nobody knew for sure, because even the Germans didn’t know where we were supposed to go. I don’t know if we landed where we were supposed to go or not. That’s where we wound up. They figured that we would be down on an island, Dakar [Senegal] or something like that down in Africa. That’s where the Germans figured we would hit, down there. But we went up further north.

T: So they kept the troops pretty much in the dark about the final location?

M: Oh, definitely. We really had no idea where we were going. Wherever you went, you were there. That’s it.

T: And maybe it had to be that way, too. When you joined the military, when you made the decision to go, how did your folks react when you told them that news?

M: No objection. My mother had passed away. My Dad was working in the woods. No objection to it at all.

(1, A, 206)

T: Supportive or value neutral?
M: Just one of the things that’s gotta happen, I guess. And my younger brother, he was next to me, he joined shortly after that.

T: Also Army?

M: Yes. He went to the Pacific, though. He was in Australia. He was in the motor pool, a mechanic.

T: So he was in the Pacific and you were over there?

M: Yes.

T: When you went to training camp, did you do your basic at Fort Lewis?

M: Yes.

T: Now the Army was still segregated then, wasn’t it?

M: Yes. They were just reorganizing the Third Infantry Division. That’s what I went into. It was an old division but they were reorganizing it.

T: The training in Washington, was that the farthest away from home you’d ever been?

M: Yes. I had been out to Montana just before that, but that’s all.

T: What kind of feelings did you have being in a new part of the country like that, out in Washington?

M: Just another place. I really never had a problem with anything like that, as far as going. Some of the guys that went in when we met on the troop train were, one guy said, “I’m supposed to get married in July.” He had all kinds of problems. He wound up right in there with the rest of us. (laughs)

T: Most of the guys that went on the troop train were from this geographic location, this area.

M: Yes. North Dakota and South Dakota and Minnesota and Wisconsin.

T: Would you say you have a positive or a negative memory of Basic Training?

M: I had nothing against it. To me it was something that you had to learn. You knew you had to do it so there was no use, like the sergeant said, “We can make you wish you would have done it, if you don’t do it.” I had no feelings against anything that I did while I was in the service.
T: From Camp Roberts to Camp Pickett, and then your unit was put on some ships?

M: Yes, we were loaded on. Then we went to North Africa. To Casablanca.

T: Now that was in late 1942 or early 1943?

M: November ‘42. We landed the 8th of November and the French surrendered the 11th of November, Armistice Day.

T: So the Vichy French Government was still resisting, officially resisting the Allies?

M: Yes. They were under the rule of Hitler, but they did surrender when we landed.

(1, A, 245)

T: When you shipped out you knew you were going somewhere in Europe or the Mediterranean area.

M: Yes.

T: What was your feeling when you actually got on board the ship to go across to Europe or wherever? How did that make you feel finally?

M: I’d have to say I kind of enjoyed it. It was different. We stood guard on there a lot of times at night watching for subs or anything that was around. Only one time, I and a kid from South Dakota, we were sitting in a boat way up near the landing boat. When they changed course they would blow a whistle or horn really loud. And it happened to be on this ship that I was on that it did that that night. It was dark, about midnight. They blew that horn and we both almost just about jumped in the lake. (laughs)

T: It must have scared you half to death.

M: It did! Not expecting anything, you know. And then something like that right over your head.

T: Those things are loud, aren’t they?

M: Yes.

T: Were the quarters cramped on board those ships?

M: Everybody had a bed that was on the ship. There were a lot of people in there. There were as many people in them as they could get in them. But each guy had a bed, had their own bed. It wasn’t that bad. But it was quite a trip. It took quite a
while to cross there. I don’t remember just what it was, but I think it was about three weeks. They’d go one way for a while, then they’d turn and go another way, and they zig-zagged all over the ocean.

T: Were you in a convoy of other ships?

M: Yes. There were four hundred or so ships.

T: No kidding? Was there any submarine activity against your convoy?

M: Not until we got to Africa. Then there was a French luxury liner that came into Casablanca and a German submarine came in underneath it. And he got right into the middle of the ships that were sitting there. Then at four o’clock in the afternoon this submarine came in and sunk four of those ships, and ours was one of them.

T: Most of the guys had gotten off already, you said.

M: Yes, but there were still a lot of troops on the ship. The fighting unit was on shore.

T: How would you describe the mood on the ship of the guys on the way over there?

M: There was a lot of seasickness, but it never bothered me. A lot of guys were seasick. I think that was more what they worried about than anything else. As far as combat or expecting anything, I don’t know how to say it. You expect it. If it’s there, if it comes, if it doesn’t, fine.

T: Kind of an acceptance of the situation?

M: As you go. Pretty well trained for that kind of stuff. We just never went into that kind of stuff. I think it was a lot different then than it is now, the way they trained us in the service.

T: As far as accepting the inevitability of it.

M: Right. Whatever happens.

T: A number of guys were seasick on the ship?

M: Yes. There were a lot of them seasick.

T: What’s it like being in a ship full of seasick guys?

M: That’s another thing. I stayed up on deck a lot of the time and I didn’t go down in the quarters where the guys were staying, except at night or when I had to. We got
one storm that, one end of the ship would be under water and the other end would be out of the water.

T: Going down and up?

M: Yes. When we were going through those waves. The waves would go right over the top of the ship. And then it might come over the front end while the propellers would be out of the water. And then it would go the other way. Then the water was getting pretty deep on top so they chased everybody down below. Sealed the doors up so they wouldn’t fill up with water.

T: Pretty serious storm.

M: Yes, it was a bad one. It lasted quite a while. After that, why then it was good going again.

(1, A, 308)

T: Now these ships anchored off of the coast there?

M: Right.

T: And you transferred to smaller vessels?

M: Yes, landing craft they called them. They were small. They carried one artillery piece and the crew for that gun. Each gun had a small landing craft. They dropped the front end when they hit the shore and use it as a ramp to get off.

T: Is that an LCI [landing craft infantry]?

M: No. These were smaller than that. They were really not very big. They had quite a bunch of them on the boat.

T: Those were lowered over the side first, and then men and material went down into them?

M: You’re right.

T: You got to the day where your landing craft and lots of others were filled with soldiers like yourself and you headed for the beach of Morocco. How were you feeling then when it was imminent that something was going to take place?

M: It’s not as bad as it really could have been; the Navy had knocked out a bunch of shore guns that they had before we landed. But they did have shore guns that they were firing at the ships. The Navy took care of them. Really, there were no soldiers
on the beach when we landed. We didn't have any opposition whatsoever when we landed until the airplanes started coming in at daylight.

T: What time of day did you land?

M: It must have been before daylight, early in the morning. Then you get on the shore and, once it’s daylight, you see all of these natives running around. Half of them didn’t have any clothes on, or just rags. You really wondered what kind of a part of a country you went into, or if you were still dreaming or if something happened. (laughs)

T: Had you been told to expect resistance, armed resistance?

M: Oh, definitely. The French were in no position to fight. I don’t think they wanted to fight. It was just the Germans who were there were forcing them to fight. Until we landed, and as soon as we landed—I think we landed on the 8th, and on the 11th they surrendered.

T: The Germans, too, or the French only?

M: Just the French.

T: The Germans pulled back?

M: No. We had to clean them out, but there were small groups of them. It didn’t amount to much at that time. Most of it was in Casablanca. We were landed north of Casablanca, I think about twelve miles. Of course the batteries all landed in different places. Each gun battery supported a different company of infantry.

T: So you were almost tied to, or linked to, a specific group?

M: Yes. The 41st Field and the 30th Infantry were a team. Then the 7th Infantry and the 39th Field Artillery. Then there was 9th and 10th Field. The 41st Field were all 105s. We had one more. It was a 155.

T: That's a bigger gun, right?

M: Right.

T: So your gun was fairly portable, wasn’t it? You could move it around pretty quickly.

M: Oh, yes. We didn’t land with that in Africa, but we got them right after. We were already on shore, but our equipment hadn’t all gotten on shore yet. We had the guns on shore, but we didn’t have a truck. Of course we landed with what they called a 75mm pack howitzer that they loaded on mules to carry them. But we didn’t have
any mules, so we had them all put together. They had wheels on them so we pulled them by hand.

(1, A, 359)

T: And you had been trained on those, right?

M: Right. But they were too big to take on shore. We had to have trucks to move them with.

T: So without the trucks you couldn’t move?

M: No. There was no way we could have moved without the trucks. That’s why we had the little pack howitzers.

T: Because you could transport those?

M: We could wheel those around. Just pull them.

T: So the important thing was to get some kind of firepower there right away.

M: Yes. To help the infantry come up.

T: From Morocco, describe the route you took from there.

M: We were there for quite a while. I don’t remember how long. Then the Germans were pushing the British around pretty bad up in Tunisia, Algiers, up in that area. [General George S.] Patton was already up there with his tanks. That’s where we went to from where we were. But by the time we got there a bunch of our soldiers had been taken up there before that and down to the lines, and our artillery was still stationary where we were. The Germans surrendered then. They surrounded them. They landed again in North Africa. They landed a force up in Tunisia, so that kind of cut the Germans off. That gave them a better chance. We went into Tunisia and Algiers, but we didn’t do too much fighting there. Fired a few shells, but it didn’t amount to much.

T: There was a lot of movement going on from Morocco to Tunisia.

M: That’s quite a ways.

T: Were you traveling a steady amount most days, or large amounts of miles at one time?

M: Most of that was just from Morocco right on up there because there was no resistance in between. That’s where the whole German Army was that was left. It was up in that area. Up in Tunisia, in that area.
T: Your unit ultimately encountered German resistance in Tunisia, so you were involved?

M: Yes, part of our outfit. My own outfit that I was in didn’t make contact with anything.

T: Once you were in Morocco or Tunisia, what was an average day like for you?

M: Mostly guard duty. You had troops out in case anything comes. You had your troops stationed around different areas. You always had guards out. Just go from day to day. If nothing happens, then you’re fine; if it does, well...

T: So it could change from day to day, that situation?

M: Yes. The biggest problem was the civilians that were there.

T: How so?

M: You could have your barracks bag setting beside you, and it would just disappear.

T: So you had to watch your stuff?

M: Oh, yes. The Arabs, they had them big white robes on. You never knew what was underneath them.

T: Did they follow the troops around? Or sort of come to where you were?

M: Most of them came to where you were. They would sell chickens and eggs and all kinds of stuff like that. They would come in. It was a little bit different. I don’t know why they were so... Their people were starving to death and they were selling everything they had to eat. They had more money than they knew what to do with, and nothing to do with the money.

T: Nothing to buy with it?

M: Right.

T: Was the relationship between the American troops and the local inhabitants pretty positive?

M: No. No. For example, if you got a pass or permission to go into town or something to have a beer or something, there were six guys that went together. You never went alone.

T: Why is that?
M: Because you never knew what was going to happen.

T: Did bad things happen sometimes?

M: Oh, yes. A few guys were killed, but not too often.

T: Really? Through something they did?

M: They would kill a guy for his clothes.

T: So it was safer not to go into town at all, it sounds like.

(1, A, 418)

M: You didn't go in very often. Once in a while you'd get a chance to get into a town or something like that, but you were careful. You always carried your gun.

T: Was that a problem? One could think that the people who, in a sense, you're liberating them from the Germans, that they would be pleased for you doing this. Did that make guys sort of wonder about that?

M: You'd think that the people would be more involved in working with the Americans, but they were still all by themselves. The French ruled Morocco, but these guys didn't think too much of France. I think that was the big problem. The Americans were the same as the French, and the French Government was giving these Moroccans fifty francs for a pair of ears. They were supposed to be German ears, but it's pretty hard to tell one from another.

T: So ears were ears for them.

M: They killed that guy and cut his ears off and sold them for fifty francs.

T: And this happened.

M: Fifty cents in our money. *(laughs)*

T: Sounds like for the local inhabitants anyway it was whether you're French, German or American you're still perceived as the white outsider.

M: Yes. That's more to it. That's about what it amounted to.

T: Did guys take that like, "That's okay, I can handle that," or was there a bit of kind of resentment against these people?
M: There again, there’s nothing you can do about it. You live with it. But you be careful, you watch. You stay on guard. You don’t take any chances. That’s what it amounts to.

T: Did that situation differ once you got to Italy or France?

M: Oh, yes. It was altogether different then. Even in Sicily, why, you were home then. As far as the civilians were concerned.

T: As far as the reaction that they gave you when you arrived there?

M: Yes. You were welcome in Sicily and Italy. I myself saw no resistance from any of those people. I was in those towns. But there again, you never went alone.

T: Is that experience from being in North Africa before?

M: Right. You don’t trust anybody. Especially in a war, you know.

T: What was the first place that your unit landed in Sicily?


T: When was that landing, do you remember? In 1943?

M: *(pauses three seconds)* Yes.

T: July maybe?

M: I kind of think it probably was. Yes, because that’s when we left Africa. Yes, that’s when it would have been. The 10th of July, 1943. That’s when we went to Sicily.

T: How did that landing differ from the one in Morocco?

M: It was a different situation there altogether. There were planes bombing the convoy and Germans were on the shores. There was one real bad area just off to our right where there was a real lot of resistance, but the Navy really laid a barrage in that area. We didn’t have too much of a battle. There weren’t that many because there was another deal, I don’t know whether it was a screw-up or what, but we were supposed to go to Sicily on a special day. We went out on the Mediterranean for three days, and then we turned around and went back to Africa. That night, Axis Sally came on the telephone and named the outfits that were in the convoy that was out there, and they got scared out of going to Sicily.

The Germans had occupied the southern coast of Sicily. After they turned around and went back they moved their tanks and their equipment further north, evidently expecting a landing from the north. When we got in there it wasn’t that
bad for a couple days. But we caught up to them. The Italians, as soon as we landed in Sicily, the Italians all surrendered. The soldiers. There was one place where there were two MPs leading about six hundred Italian prisoners. There wasn’t too much serious with that.

T: Did you ever encounter Italian troops that did resist?

M: No, not that I know of. Of course, in the artillery you are behind the lines a little ways most of the time.

T: Sounds like the situation in Morocco, where the French were anxious to give up.

M: Yes, the Italians were ready to surrender, too.

T: When you landed at Sicily with your unit, were you using the same kind of landing craft, the same basic pattern?

M: Yes. Well, no. When we landed in Sicily we had an M7 tank with 105s mounted on it instead of the turrets. We had our 105s mounted in the tank chassis. So we had the tracked vehicles.

T: So the same kind of gun but a different way of carrying it.

M: It was self-propelled.

T: So you had a driver and...

M: We still had the same number of crew members, seven.

T: How many of the seven guys that you started with in Morocco were still around now when you landed at Sicily?

M: All of them.

T: Same guys?

M: I never lost a man while I was in the service.

T: Did guys rotate in and out of your particular battery?

M: Not really. There were a few guys that came into the battery, but that was mostly later on, after we got up into Italy. Anzio, in that area. I didn’t get any into my section because I had a full crew all the way through.

T: That sounds different from some of the stories I’ve heard from guys in the infantry, where there was a lot of turnover.
M: Oh, definitely. Infantry was bad because you were right up on the front lines all the time. Rifle fire. We weren’t, most of the time.

T: Being in the artillery, what was the greatest fear really? It wasn’t, obviously, rifle fire. What was it that you guys worried about?

M: Artillery.

T: Other artillery?

M: Yes. When we got into an artillery duel in Sicily. We went across Sicily, our unit crossed Sicily, then we were pulled back and the 45th Division came in and took over. They were going down the north shore of Sicily, and they ran into a problem. We were supposed to be off for thirty days and we were off a week and we were back on the line. We were up on the north shore. We got into an artillery duel with a German battery.

T: You couldn’t see them, of course.

M: No. Probably about five miles. Evidently we did a better job than they did because they quit firing before we did.

T: That’s interesting. Any kind of real personal combat was sight unseen for artillery.

M: Right. We could shoot seven miles with the 105s.

T: Seven miles. Accurately?

M: Oh, yes. Hit a barrel at that distance.

T: In the artillery, did you fear aircraft attack from ground support aircraft?

M: Yes. We had antiaircraft guns right with us all the time. We shot down a lot of planes.

T: So that could have been a problem for you.

M: Oh, yes. In Sicily one night eleven German bombers came over. No, that was on Anzio. Getting ahead of myself here.

T: Was German aircraft a problem in North Africa?
M: No. I don’t think I saw any in that area we were in. It was up in Tunisia. They had them up there but nothing serious. Most of the problems in North Africa were the tanks. Tanks and infantry. (*clock chimes in background*)

T: Had your average day changed? I mean, getting up and meals and what you actually did during the day? Had that been changing much, or was that pretty much the same?

M: Pretty much the same all the time. You didn’t sleep a lot and you slept with your clothes on. You were prepared. It could happen any time. You had to be ready. When they’d holler, “Fire Order,” they meant it.

T: That means up and get to it?

M: Quick. You didn’t have a lot of time.

T: So you slept near your guns?

M: Yes.

T: What about Army food?

M: What’s that? *(laughs)* We had C rations mostly to start with, and then after they came out with the K rations we got them. Nobody was getting fat on them.

T: I’m beginning to get the idea. So you guys weren’t getting hot meals?

M: No.

T: You were getting C rations.

M: Once in a while we would get into an area where the cooks dared to come up to the front lines where we were.

T: So you guys were close enough to the line not to get rear echelon support for food, but not close enough to see the other side?

M: Yes. Most of the time.

T: What about these C rations? Tell me about them a little bit.

M: They had quite a few different kinds. You could heat them generally in a can of water or something like that. Of course we were lucky in the artillery. The shells we had had different powder charges in them. They came in different sizes from one to seven. A lot of time you were shooting two or three other charges, so you’d have the
rest of them. We’d save that gunpowder, and that’s what we used for heat. You could build a fire...

T: With gunpowder charges?

M: Put a little something down there to hold a spark and you could throw that gunpowder in there a couple three of those little kernels at a time. You could heat up a cup of coffee in a hurry with it.

T: So there was use for that stuff?

M: Oh, definitely. We didn’t throw any of that stuff away.

T: Could you heat your C rations with it, too?

M: Sure. Boil water in a hurry with that. There was no smoke, and there was no fire.

T: Right, smokeless powder. Was that standard operating procedure, or was that frowned upon?

M: Nobody bothered us.

T: It must have been okay.

M: Nobody didn’t have any arguments with us anyway. They would have had an awful time changing it, I think.

T: Did you have a kind of C ration that you thought was your favorite of the bunch?

M: The most of what we got was hash. They had beans, pork and beans. Wieners, cut up chunks of wieners in beans, and stuff like that. It really didn’t make that much difference. You ate what you had.

T: These were individual portions, right?

M: Right. Just a little can. That was a meal.

T: Was anything else packed with that little individual portion?

M: No.

T: Like a vegetable or crackers or cigarettes?

M: No. Once in while there would be crackers. We’d get little packages of crackers.

T: Which one of those C rations did you particularly dislike?
M: I don’t know. I ate all of them. It didn’t bother me. I ate whatever I got.

T: Who decided who got what? There must have been an assortment, right?

M: The only time you had a choice or a chance at something like that was when you got where the cooks were. They had big containers that they heated. They’d just throw them in there. You take the can out and eat it. But we just had the cold stuff with us and we would eat whatever was there.

T: Did you get coffee regularly up there?

M: We generally had coffee we could make. You could heat the water up and make instant coffee.

T: Instant coffee though.

M: Instant coffee.

T: Those were little individual packets, too, that came with your meal?

M: Yes.

T: They came with your meal?

M: I don’t know if it came. All that stuff was separate.

T: So you might get a box of coffee packages or…

M: You’d get so much, and it would last you for a week or something. Then you’d get some more. Enough to last a few days, until they could get you some more one way or another.

T: Did guys trade stuff like cigarettes or coffee or C rations to other guys for other things? Was there trading going on?

**End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.**

M: I don’t think so. I think they just ate whatever they got. I don’t remember any of them trading anything. Right after they got the K rations then they traded with civilians. They had a chocolate bar in them.

T: Because the K rations came later then, right?

M: Yes.
T: Was the quality of the food better?

M: We still had the C rations, too. There was stuff in the K rations. They had little cans of minced meat, Spam. We had some Spam in the little cans, and that kind of stuff. It wasn’t that bad. You’d survive on it all right, it wasn’t a problem. You just didn’t get fat, that’s all.

T: Was there enough food?

M: Like the Army said, you’ll never miss a meal but some of them might be delayed a little while.

T: The Army has a saying for everything, don’t they?

M: Oh, yes. (laughs)

T: Martin, what was the first time that your unit really came into a situation where you were under fire from the Germans?

M: That was Sicily. That was the first time that we ever ran into combat with another outfit. Of course, the infantry were in contact with them a long time before. We had no idea what we were shootin' at.

T: You had coordinates only, right?

M: They’d tell us where they wanted us to shoot. Coordinates on the guns where you’d shoot where they wanted you to. Some of them were pretty close. They had to be pretty accurate then.

T: Sicily lasted until late 1943, is that right?

M: Yes.

T: At that point the invasion of Italy, I think, was already in the planning stages.

M: Right. Yes. I believe it was the 45th and the 36th Divisions that landed at Salerno in Italy. That was another time we were supposed to get a break and we didn’t get it. We had to go in. The Germans were still shelling the beaches when we got there.

T: At the beaches where you were landing?

M: Yes. Then they went in and the division got into position. The first combat they got into there, the first fight is always the hardest. (***)

T: At Salerno.
M: Yes.

T: Different subject: Did you ever get leave or time behind the lines to rest and recuperate?

M: That’s what I was talking about. We were supposed to get a month and we got a week.

T: So this was something that was regularly promised or scheduled?

M: Pretty much standard. Very seldom were we ever off more than a week at a time. Sometimes, like on Anzio, we landed in January 1944 and we didn’t leave Anzio until June. Constant fire there, all the time.

T: North Africa, Sicily, what did you guys do when you had rest and relaxation?

M: Nothing much. They’d go to town and get drunk probably. Of course there was a lot of alcohol around there, but nobody trusted that either. They’d make... Like the Italians, they’d want to sell you a bottle of booze, they’d make them take a drink before they’d buy it.

T: Make them take a drink out of it?

M: Right.

T: Why’s that?

M: Because you didn’t know what the hell was in it. They weren’t selling you something that was going to kill you when you drank it.

T: Was that something guys worried about in North Africa? What they are actually selling you?

M: There was nothing in North Africa, to get much to drink there. We never had much of a chance at that. Pretty much out in the field all of the time.

T: Was there alcohol available out in the field?

M: No. Beer or something you very seldom ever saw.

T: It was behind the lines that alcohol was available?

M: Yes.

T: How about other things guys did on R and R time?
M: Honest, there weren’t too many of them that got any. They might get two or three days at a time. I think I got one leave, for three days, all the time I was over there.

T: So essentially you were either behind the lines, but not really on R and R or on leave or anything.

M: No, you were on duty.

T: That’s why your thirty days of R and R could be shortened to a week.

M: Yes. You were there. You just get off your line to get a little relaxation. Weren’t expecting too much trouble at the time.

T: Did you find yourself thinking much about the enemy in an abstract sense, of who those people were over there, on the other side, that we were fighting?

M: We knew who they were. There again, they’re just like us. They’re soldiers and they’re doing what they’re told to do, and we do what we’re told to do. I never really had a problem with that. I know a lot of guys did.

I was over in Germany in 1987. I went back. The division was still there, and they took six guys back to the division for a reunion they had. They wanted the old ones with actual war experience to tell the young troops that were in the division at the time what to do, what to expect. That was the same thing there. They had no idea what they were getting into. One colonel stopped me one time and said a lot of the stuff that I told him, and he said, “How do you know this stuff is going to happen?” I said, “You’re there for a while. You learn. And you remember what you learned then. How to take care of it.”

T: Were these guys on the other side, were they the enemy or were they Germans, or were they...

M: They were mostly Germans. Like I said, the French and the Italians surrendered as soon as we landed.

T: When there were Germans, did you find yourself thinking of them as individual soldiers or as just the enemy, or in a more abstract sense?

M: The enemy. That’s about what it amounted to. Get rid of them or they get rid of you. One or the other. Just about what it amounted to.

T: Did you think it was easier in a sense for guys in the artillery who weren’t confronted with a face-to-face thing to carry on with the war?

M: Oh, I’m sure. I’m sure it would be easier. We did get into a deal, but we’ll come to that a little later on. Really, you’re all by yourself back there, shooting up to seven
miles. Of course we were seldom that far behind. You could reach out seven miles behind that target, behind the infantry, get out on front of them. Like their artillery, they had the same thing there. But they had railroad guns and stuff like that that we didn’t have.

(1, B, 155)

T: Did you ever encounter German POWs?

M: Not personally. I saw lots of them.

T: Later in the war?

M: Yes. In Anzio, Sicily, a few there. Most of them were after we got into Italy before we ran into too much of that.

T: You saw these guys from a distance, or…?

M: Yes.

T: How did you feel? Was it a sense of hating these guys, or pity?

M: Not really, no. To me it was just another bunch of soldiers. And I think they felt the same way.

T: That’s how they saw you, you think?

M: They had a problem. They do what they’re told, and we did what we were told.

T: Do you think your reaction is pretty common to most of the soldiers who you came into contact with?

M: I think so. I think for most of them it was the same. You get times when it gets pretty scary, like with some of the bad places we got into. You’re really not sure what’s going to happen or if you’re going to be here tomorrow or fifteen minutes from now, or not.

T: That’s an interesting subject you bring up, the thought of fear as a concept. Were there times that you remember that you felt real fear about your own…?

M: Yes.

T: What was one of those times when you felt that?

M: That was up in Italy. That was after Anzio. We got into a situation where I was going to jump off from Anzio and head off for Rome. That was a big deal. We went
up one night and dug gun pits, and then the next night we moved the guns in. So everything was done in the dark.

T: Self-propelled guns again?

M: No. This was trucks pulling the 105s in. We moved up the second night, set our guns up and there was a shell hole in my gun pit. I told my crew, “This is as far as we go.” I knew it. There was no doubt that we were not going to leave that place. Because of that shell hole in that gun pit. It was perfect. No way we could get away from that. We got daylight and started shooting. We found out infantry was behind the 105s, the 60mm mortars set up behind the 105s. We were out in no-man’s land between the American infantry and the German infantry with our artillery. That’s enough to kind of scare you a little bit right there, because what do you do against rifle fire? Well, a sniper started shooting at us. You could hear the bullets whistle past every once in a while. All at once my gunner corporal, he just dropped. I said, “Did you get hit?” He said, “No. But it was so close I could feel the heat from the bullet when it went past my ear.” So I called the command post and told them to call number four out. I said that we couldn’t fire until they got rid of that sniper that’s out there. So he said, “Okay.” We were so close to the front lines we couldn’t shoot at the front lines. There was some brush in front of us, some trees. We actually had nothing we could shoot at to do any damage to the Germans at that time. So they said okay. There was a wash about like from here to the road, that ditch out there.

T: So twenty or thirty meters.

M: Yes. I told the guys to get away from this gun, get over there in that hole! Nobody would go. I said, “Okay, I’m taking the phone and I’m going.” I told the gunner corporal, “You be sure everybody is out of this gun pit and then you come.” They all got down there. They never fired a shot at any of us while we were going across there. Nobody fired a shot while we were doing that. We got in that hole. We weren’t away from that gun fifteen minutes and they laid the mortars right on top of it. If it wouldn’t have been for that sniper, we would have been there.

T: Yes. That’s right. So the sniper chased you guys away from the gun, and thank God he did.

M: Right. Otherwise we would have been there. The gun was completely destroyed. We had five hundred rounds of ammunition in the pit behind the gun and that started to explode and that was flying around and that was exploding. It was hell for a little while. Our truck burned up. The gun was gone. We lost everything we had. All we had was what we had on.

T: All the guys were okay?

M: Nobody got hurt.
T: Is that one of those times when you really found yourself thinking, “Wow, that really could have been, and only this particular set of circumstances kept it from being worse than it was?”

M: Right. You do remember those little operations.

T: Does that change the way you approach everyday life then after that as a soldier?

M: No.

T: That’s just an incident you file away?

M: It’s one of those things like I told the guys, I knew it. As soon as I saw it I knew what was going to happen.

(1, B, 241)

T: How did other guys, were other guys more bothered by this than you?

M: The whole crew was shook up because of that shell hole in there. They knew what was coming. Everybody knew it. We lost a few guys on that trip, but I never lost anybody. In one of the other gun pits one guy was in a foxhole and a shell landed between his legs and blew his legs off. You had a lot of casualties, but my particular unit we ended with the same crew we started with.

T: That’s really amazing actually. You think of all the things that can happen over the course of a couple years and your crew was able to stay together like that. That’s amazing.

Martin, Anzio was early 1944. You were at Anzio for about six months, is that right?

M: January to June 1944.

T: Was that a stalemate situation?

M: What it was, we had landed. When it first started we went to cross the Volturno River. We had a little problem there, but we got across the river. Then we went up to that monastery that was up on top of that hill. The Germans had fortified it and we couldn’t shoot at it.

T: Monte Cassino?

M: Yes. We couldn’t shoot at that. So they were stalemated. Then they moved another outfit in. They took us back and we went into amphibious training again. Then we landed on Anzio. We went around behind the Germans and landed on
Anzio. That cut their lines off, their supply lines into the monastery. That’s where we were until they broke out of there. We stayed there until they broke out.

T: Was that a difficult situation to be in?

M: Well, it was a situation where you were getting shelled every day. Under constant fire there. You could see the shells come in. You could actually see them, if the weather was just right. Looked like a football coming.

T: These were German units, right?

M: Right. That were shooting at us. That’s where I got wounded, was on Anzio.

T: Could you talk a bit about that? I saw your Purple Heart. What happened there, exactly?

M: I still to this day swear that shell hit me. I know it didn’t, but my jaw, it hit me right here in the face and went back into my neck. It cut that blood vein in everything in my face, the nerves and everything. My jaw was dead from here to here. (motions with hand, center jaw to back left) There was absolutely no feeling. I knew that jaw was gone, because there was nothing there. I got hold of a medic. I was bleeding like a stuck hog. He brings out a little two-inch patch and I said, “What are you going to do with that?” If I had thought, if I didn’t have a jaw I couldn’t talk or anything like that. He said, “I’m going to put it on that hole in your face.” And I happened to think that I had a mirror in my shirt pocket. Just a little mirror, a couple inches square. I took that out and looked at it. When I saw that hole I wasn’t even hurt. It was all together different. I was just completely relieved. I suppose, you know you ain’t got a jaw, and then you find out it ain’t nothing but a little hole. I didn’t hurt, but why it bled so damn much, I couldn’t figure that out. After they got me back to the hospital and they found that piece of shrapnel laid right against the cord in my neck. So if they would have cut that off I’d have been running around in circles I suppose.

T: So the piece of shrapnel came from a larger shell?

M: Yes, from the shell. But I’d swear that that thing hit me before that shell exploded. But the shell landed in front of me. Well, I was in a foxhole. We had our foxholes dug and then we covered them with shell cases and some dirt over the top of them, so we had good protection in the foxhole. But it was open in the back. The shell landed behind the foxhole and this piece of shrapnel came back the other way and hit me. I still swear that it hit me before that shell exploded, but I know it didn’t.

T: Can you describe the sensation? Was it a loud sound or a burning sensation or what?
M: It felt like I would say if somebody had about a twenty foot black snake and hit me in the face with it. That’s just about the feeling you would have had. It burned just like fire. Of course, that’s hot. When the steel went through there it was hot. That’s what made it feel like that.

T: How large a piece was it?

M: About five-eighths of an inch long and about a quarter of an inch in diameter.

T: Were you evacuated then from that position to a field hospital?

M: Right, yes. But they couldn’t move in the daytime. This happened about two o’clock in the afternoon and we couldn’t leave until it got dark. They couldn’t get any vehicles in there until after it got dark.

T: So they stabilized this wound?

M: They just put that patch on there and that’s all it was to stop the blood.

T: That kept the blood from flowing?

M: Yes. It had stopped by the time we got out of there. I put my thumb in my throat to stop the blood. That had stopped by the time he got through playing around with that little patch.

T: That mirror made a real difference, didn’t it?

M: It was an all together different situation. (laughs)

T: Were thoughts going through your head before you pulled that mirror out about what’s going to happen to me now?

M: Well, yes, because I knew I didn’t have a jaw. I knew it was gone. There was absolutely no feeling. There was nothing there.

T: Your hand must have been bloody from touching that.

M: The blood was just covered. I was soaked in blood. Obviously the blood just shot out of there.

T: Was that a time when you found yourself thinking, “This is the end of me?”

M: No. No, I really didn’t. I just knew I had to get help, and I thought it was a lot worse than what I found out it was.

T: You were evacuated by darkness then to an aid station or a field hospital?
M: Yes, right. And they found that piece in there. Then they put me on a boat and sent me back to Naples, and nine days later I was back on the line again.

T: Nine days later?

M: Yes.

T: Were there still bandages on you or something?

M: Yes, I still had bandages on.

T: I guess they took good care of you there in Naples for nine days anyway.

M: Oh, yes.

T: Was that the only time you were in a field hospital?

M: Yes. Well, I had malaria one time. I had a little touch of that, but that was the only time it was serious.

T: What kind of place was the field hospital in Naples?

M: Tents.

T: Not buildings. They didn’t take buildings at all.

M: No. It was tents. I know one night there, it was about ten o’clock at night, and the nurse said, “Aren’t you sleeping yet.” I said, “No, I’m not tired.” So she gave me a little green pill. I don’t know what in the hell it was, I have no idea. The next morning she says to me, “How did you sleep last night?” I said, “Good. I never woke up all night.” She said, “The hell you didn’t. It took both me and the ward boy to keep you in bed!” I said, “Why didn’t you wake me up so I knew about it?” (laughs)

T: What did you do? Did you roll out of bed?

M: I have no idea what I was doing. She said they couldn’t keep me in bed. I was going to get up. I don’t know where I was going. I don’t know what the hell that pill was, so the next night I asked her, “How about giving me another one of those little green pills?” She said, “To hell with you! You ain’t getting any more pills!” (laughs)

T: After the last night, no wonder! (laughs)

M: (laughs)
M: Oh, yes. Lots of them lost their arms and their legs. The same day that I got wounded, one guy got one leg almost shot off. He still had it, the leg was still there, but it was all tore up.

T: Were there other guys more seriously wounded than yourself in the hospital?

M: They went someplace. I don't know where they went, but they went home or someplace. They were of no use in the war.

T: Were some of these guys then evacuated back to England or the States?

M: They went someplace. I don't know where they went, but they went home or someplace. They were of no use in the war.

T: You were back on the line at Anzio within nine days?

M: Right.

T: Your unit finally did leave Anzio. Can you describe how it finally moved?

M: I told you about moving this gun into this gun pit that had a hole in it. That was the start of the jump off there. Then from there on they just walked right into Rome.

T: Rome was July 1944?

M: Yes. Were you there for the liberation of Rome?

M: Yes, we went in there.

T: What was the reception from the Roman population for the Americans?

M: They were happy. All of the civilians and everything. They were satisfied to get out of the rule of Germany. We went into one little town, that was after we got to Rome. I was sergeant of the guard there one night. I figured I'd probably be on there for a week at a time. I had a command car and a driver. We had base stations and checkpoints all over around the area. We went into one little town in the morning and there was nobody around. So I said to the driver, “There’s something funny here. This ain’t right. There should somebody moving around someplace.” So I started walking around knocking on doors. Finally an old fellow came out to the door and I asked him, “What’s the deal? There’s nobody around.” He said the people were all scared. He said there was a farm just a couple miles outside of town where the man was killed and the woman and her daughter were raped, and then they were killed, and that American soldiers had done it. It was a special unit. They told us what unit it was. It was an outfit that had a special patch on their shoulder. They told us what it looked like. I was with a lieutenant, the two of us, we went around there for a few days and finally turned it over to the Italian police in Rome. They took over from there and we went back to our outfit again. Just try to find somebody when there’s a lot of guys in a unit like that. But to find out who did it, I
don’t know if they ever found out. That was the only incident that I know of during the whole war where anything like this happened. I suppose somebody got drunk and...

T: Martin, one of the things I wanted to ask about was, was there a person you who met that made a real positive impression on you? A person you came into contact with in your unit, for example, who you looked up to?

M: There were a lot of them. Your officers, the good ones. Then we had some bad ones. We had some good officers. Of course we had one general, they called him the Doughboy General. He’d go right up to the front line and talk to the guys in the foxholes and tell them, “They’re not going. I want you to go with me.” And they all went. You have some leaders like that and then you have some that nobody would do anything for. It’s just their attitude towards it, what they expect. I don’t know what they are, if they’re God or who they are, but it doesn’t work when you’re in combat.

T: Were you close to the guys in your battery?

M: Oh, definitely. They were all a family.

T: Did you come to depend upon other for things on an everyday basis?

M: You have to. You have to depend on each other. Everybody has a job to do. They have to do that. If they don’t do that the whole crew suffers. It’s a situation where everybody works and they work together.

T: You said you had a good crew of guys?

M: Yes, I did. I had a real good crew. They always used my gun for getting on target for some ungodly reason. It started in the States. The sergeant that was running the unit before I made sergeant, he was good. He knew artillery and he knew it well. So I had a good teacher. He was a little fellow, he was from California. Sergeant Hanson was his name. After he left, why, for some reason they always used the fourth section in the gun battery to get on their target. On Anzio, before we jumped off to Rome, they moved seven guns. They took two out of each battery and we had a roving gun; it was a half-track. A mobile gun that ran around all over. He’d fire a few shots and then go someplace else. You’d set them all in a line. There were, I think, about two hundred yards apart from the front one to the back one. They just set them right in line like this was the way we were going to shoot here. The gun would be set like one here, one here, one this way. (motions with hands) They were spread out over a hundred yards. And then when they start firing, they are all shooting in the same elevation so they’re covering a hundred-yard wide sweep across an area. They were using a delayed fuse.

T: On the shells?
M: Yes. When I was in Germany a colonel asked me what the idea was. “What was the reason for that?” he asked. I said, “Colonel, I have no idea. All I know is, that when we were doing that firing at moving at targets before we left the States, the colonel took us down and we looked at that gun and it looked like you went in there with a field cultivator and tore it up.” So he said, “What would be the difference between that and an airburst?” I said, “I can’t tell you. But my idea is that when that shell hits the ground with a delayed fuse, it ignites the fuse. Before that fuse goes off, that shell is back in the air and it’s laying flat. It explodes and the force of that thing is down. All the bottom part of that. In an air burst, when the shell is coming down, it explodes and it spreads all over.”

T: Including up, right?

M: Right. This, the force is all down. I don’t know just how long we fired there. It wasn’t very long. Then they stopped and over two hundred Germans surrendered. They came out of there. Some of them were bandaged, some of them were carrying others. We were moved right up on the front line. We were right up close to the infantry when we were firing. So we were firing at a flat trajectory, right on a level with the ground. How many were killed and crippled and couldn’t move, I don’t know. But there were over two hundred of them that surrendered. About that time a smoke shell landed beside us and they hollered, “March!” Boy, it didn’t take us long to move. Because what comes right afterwards is hell.

T: Because a smoke shell is to mark location.

M: It’s to mark your location. To know where you are. When you see that land you had better get out of there, because it’s coming.

T: Did it indeed?

M: Well, we got out of there before that. We got moved out of there. If they shelled the area, I don’t know. But we weren’t there anyway.

T: Talking about your gun crew, was there somebody in the crew that you were especially close to?

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M: My gunner corporal. I thought he was a Mexican. His name was Mercelado Martinez. After the war, after we came back here, we had army reunion every year. We were up in Spokane, Washington. He came to that and I talked to him for a while then. The next year we were having it in Minneapolis, and he was going to bring his family up. So I kind of looked forward to seeing that, to seeing him come back. Then he passed away before the reunion.
T: This was right after the war happened?

M: Well, no. It was a long time after the war was over. It must have been fifteen years ago, something like that. Then we went down to Texas; we had a reunion in Houston, Texas. After that was over I told my wife, “Let’s go down to Houston,” because he lived in Rio Grande City. That was on the south border of the United States and I live on the north border. I said, “Let’s go down and see if we can find his family.” So we went down there and we stopped out of town about fifty miles, in the evening. We wanted to come in, in the daylight.

So we went in the morning, sitting there having breakfast in a little restaurant. A fellow was sitting there, and he said, “Do you know what these guys are talking about?” They were all talking in Spanish. I said, “I have no idea.” He said, “They’re talking about that cap you’re wearing.” I had a VFW cap on. Then he started talking and I told him that I had come down here to see if I could find where Mercelado Martinez lived. He said, “He’s my neighbor, or used to be. He’s dead now.” I said, “I know he’s dead, but I wanted to meet his family.” So he disappeared; he went in the back someplace. I didn’t know where he went. Pretty soon he came back and he said, “There’s a party on the telephone that wants to talk to you.” He had gone and called his wife. She couldn’t talk very good English. I found out then, I told him I thought they were Mexican, and he said, “No, they’re Indian.” I thought he was Mexican all the time, and here he was an Indian.

T: He had never told you that?

M: No. We never discussed it. But he had a Mexican name, right. That’s what I was going from.

T: I think that’s logical. Sure.

M: I went and talked to her. Her neighbor lady was there. She could speak good English, so she talked to me for a little bit. I asked if it would be okay if I came over and visit with them for a little while. So we got over there. They were kind of not knowing whether we were going to accept them, or they would accept us or whatever it was. We got out of the car and went and talked to them. They invited us in the house and had a cup of coffee and talked for a little while. Finally she told me, “Your wife could sleep…” They had a bed. It was just a one-person bed, a single bed. She said, “If you can sleep in the van.” I had that big van out there. I said, “That’s no problem. Sure.” Then this guy, too, he told me that the VFW was having a meeting tonight. He said, “We’d like to have you come.” So he came over and picked me up and took me to where the meeting was. Then we came back and she decided she would sleep in the single bed and let us have her bed. I told her it wasn’t necessary, but she insisted on it. So from then on we were pretty much friends.

T: That’s a good story. So you did see him a couple of times after the war.
M: Just that one time. But then they took us over to Mexico and we went around a little bit there. Then we came back. We were there a couple of days, then we left. We went out to the cemetery where he was buried.

T: Did you keep in contact? Did you make lasting contacts, guys that you kept up contact with after the war?

M: A few of them. My wife still gets a letter from her, don't you? (turns to wife, seated across the room)

Wife: From Martinez? Yes.

M: The rest of the guys have these reunions and stuff. Traveling around, a lot of times we stop and see some of the guys.

T: Have you long attended reunions?

M: Yes, quite a while. The last couple of years now I haven't been to them. We always had some other thing come up about that time.

T: Can I ask you, when you attended the reunions, what was it that prompted you to go?

M: I don't know. You get to see a lot of the guys that you knew. A lot of them did come. A lot of them from this area that had moved away after the war was over, you get to talk to them and see them again. I don't know, it's just a fun thing. It's like going back to a family reunion, the same thing. Of course, there's a lot of new guys, but you get acquainted with them, too. We enjoyed it. My daughter, my youngest daughter, she went with us a few times. She enjoyed it.

T: A different theme. When you were away from home for an awful long time, 1942 to 1945, how...?

M: February 1941 I left.

T: That's right. You were overseas for more than three years as well by then. How did you stay in touch with family and other loved ones back home?

M: Write a letter once in a while. Not too often. I'd get a letter once in a while. Not a lot of mail. I don't know. (pauses three seconds) You knew they were still there, you know, and everything. I don't know.

T: You weren't really a big letter writer yourself?

M: No. I never had much use for writing letters. They had a, I don't remember what they called them now.
T: V-mail?

M: Yes, V-mail. Write a couple paragraphs or something and let them know we were still okay and everything.

T: Did you do that once in a while?

M: Oh, yes. I would send a letter home to my dad once in a while.

T: Did you notice other guys? Was mail important to most guys?

M: Oh, a lot of them did. There were a lot of them writing letters pretty much steady. Of course, a lot of them never got home, and when they did, there would be a whole bunch of them together.

(1, B, 530)

T: So the mail service wasn’t regular?

M: No.

T: Did you get mail the same way, too, that guys would get a stack?

M: Yes. Once in a while you’d get some mail and then you probably wouldn’t see any for a month or something like that.

T: Would you read through them and try to put them order?

M: Yes.

T: Martin, you moved then to southern France in August of 1944. Your unit landed in southern France.

M: Yes, down by Marseilles.

T: How was that landing different from Anzio and Sicily and Morocco?

M: They were firing 20mm mortars at us when we landed. Not mortars but anti-aircraft guns at us, when we landed down there. We had those two and a half ton GMC ducks, they called them. Artillery was loaded in them and they ran them up onto shore. They took a hoist and lifted the gun out of there.

T: So the actual technology of landings had really changed since your first one.
M: Oh, yes. Oh, definitely, yes. When we landed in southern France, the rudder, a shear pin or something, broke on it, so they couldn't steer it. They have two drivers, the pilot and the co-pilot. The co-pilot crawled down in the back end and he turned the rudder. The other guys hollered at him to tell him which way to go. That's the way we went into southern France. (laughs) Made the invasion.

T: Was there German resistance here?

M: It was quite a bit of resistance in southern France. There were two German armies. We surrounded them. There were four railroads then. One of them was big enough that you could just about crawl through the tube on it. The tube where the projectile goes through was two flatcars long, about forty, fifty feet. They had a little railroad track right on top of the railroad cars, and they'd haul all of the stuff, the powder, projectiles. All that stuff was hauled out by soldiers. They'd load it and then fire it.

T: It was a huge gun.

M: Yes, it was. The other three were smaller than that one, but they were all big, they were all railroad guns.

T: Were you using the self-propelled guns now?

M: No, we were pulling them by truck. That's the way we went all the way through. Sicily is the only place we had self-propelled guns.

T: Did you prefer one or the other?

M: I don't know. I think that you had a little better control with the separate gun, when it was on the ground. You could maneuver it better, and get around to positions where you needed it.

T: Was it more accurate, do you think, or not really?

M: I don't know about the accuracy, but they were good. They were real good as far as I was concerned. We had good forward observers. But they have to be right up with the infantry.

T: They would contact you with the coordinates of where to fire and also check accuracy?

M: Yes. They'd tell us where they wanted us to shoot. You generally shoot a smoke shell and they'd get an idea of where we were. Then you'd go from there to your target. About the third shell, you were on. Then the whole battery would come in and fire.
T: That’s the situation where, if you’re on the other end, you’ll want to start moving out of that --

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

T: What I wanted to ask you, with the time in France where you’re not using the self-propelled guns again, I noticed from the stuff you showed me in the frame with your awards that you won a Bronze Star as well. Have we come to that instance yet, when that happened?

M: I think that was probably more on Anzio. (telephone rings—brief pause)

T: Martin, you were just starting to talk about your Bronze Star that you were awarded.

M: I kind of think that probably came on Anzio. The British were getting in a little trouble. They were on our left flank. The British Army was in there, and they were running into a problem. They were going to move us over into their area, and we went over and dug gun pits one day. This was in the daylight for a change. We were all done digging the gun pits. The Germans were shelling. There was some eight-inch artillery behind us. The Americans were firing at the Germans and the Germans were shooting at them. It had been going on all the time we were there.

All at once we heard the German guns start firing. But they weren’t shooting at the eight-inch guns, they were shooting at us. There was absolutely no warning of any kind, no smoke shells, no nothing. There just came a barrage right on top of us. They had something pretty close that they knew where they were going, knew what was going on. Everybody happened to be in a gun pit. Nobody was up out of the ground. There was one kid in my outfit, and as soon as the artillery started falling around he wanted to get up and run. At that particular time he was in my gun pit. He jumped up and took off, and I jumped and grabbed him around the legs and held on and laid on him until it was over.

The first sergeant in our outfit was in my gun pit, and he would tell the new guys when they came in, “It’s pretty rough to start with but you get used to it.” We found out that day that you don’t get used to it. He was just as white as a sheet of paper by the time that was over. Those shells were falling all over the place around there. Why somebody didn’t get killed, I don’t know. There was one guy got wounded. A piece of shrapnel about five or six inches long with a long point on it, and that point stuck between the cord in the back of his ankle and the bone. It just stuck through the meat. It didn’t really do any damage. That’s the only guy that got hit out of that whole crew, and they really laid it on top of us.

T: Were you awarded a Bronze Star for something that happened at that time?

M: I kind of think for stopping that guy from running. It could have been because the first sergeant was there. That’s the only time that I know of that there was anybody around that had any idea what was going on.
T: Was that a younger kid? Somebody who was new?

M: No. He was with us all the way through. But he was just that way. When we were in that artillery duel in Sicily he laid in front of the gun and his shirt looked like you had poured a pail of water on him. I told the sergeant, “Get him out of there! He’s getting the concussion from our gun and everything else.” *(parrot squawking in background)* He was laying right in front of the wheels on the gun because there were sandbags and stuff around in front of it. He was laying behind those sandbags. He was just a total wreck.

T: And he was that way more than once you said?

M: Yes. All the way through he was that way. I don’t know. He wasn’t in my gun section. They took him out of there. I don’t know where he went to from there. They got him out of there because he was of no use to anybody that way.

T: Were there other instances that you saw of guys who reacted similarly, guys who were really unable to cope?

M: We had one in Italy, at that monastery there. He was an infantry guy that they brought down out of hills, and he was shell-shocked. That’s what they called it at that time. They had an awful time. Even to start a car or a truck motor up or something, he’d just go all to pieces. But they got him in a jeep and took him back. They got him out of there because he was just totally uncontrollable.

*(2, A, 97)*

T: Was he wild or more sort of stunned and unable to move?

M: He wanted to run. He’d go, just get away. They don’t like it. Maybe they can get away from it. That’s the most horrible thing you can do if there’s shells falling around, is just run. You want to get into a hole. If there ain’t none, you just dissolve into one.

T: Is that a human reaction, to try to just get away from what you see as the threat?

M: I think it must be something in their nerves or something that they figure they can run away from it. I have no idea. The way they react to it is just the very opposite of what you should do. And that is just to get down on the ground and stay there. Get as close to it as you can. And you can get awful close. *(laughs)*

T: Press yourself down. And there must have been some times when you didn’t have advance warning to dig a hole.

M: You didn’t, no. You had no idea. You were right out on the open ground.
T: Now from Marseilles the movement was north, I guess, right?

M: Right.

T: I noticed how you had a couple other places mentioned. Colmar [in Alsace, France], and then your unit moved into Germany as well.

M: We were on the Rhine River, our whole division. We got through forty-five miles behind the American lines. At Strasbourg, Germany. We went in and captured that town, it was a factory town. We were having a good time there. We were right on the Rhine River. Germans were on the other side. Some guys there had some instruments, a bunch of prisoners there that were working in those factories. Of course, they freed all of them. Everybody was happy. They were drinking and dancing and having lots of fun. For a couple days. Then they went back.

There was another time when the French Army and the 36th Division were on our right flank. That was in that Colmar area. They were getting in trouble there so they took us, the 30th infantry and the 41st Field Artillery, back. We went into that Colmar pocket. That was the hellhole of the war there, that was. (pauses three seconds) An engineer lieutenant went out, and there was a bridge across the river there. He went out and inspected the bridge and he told them it was safe to run tanks across it. The infantry got up to a canal. There was a canal. It was all irrigated land, it was flat. They got up to that canal and they looked over the top of it and there sits a bunch of Tiger tanks over there, those big ones. So they called back for tank support. The first tank got out on that bridge and down he went.

T: From German fire?

M: No. The bridge went down. They'd cut the bridge. The engineer didn't find it. When the tank got on there he went down. Well as soon as that happened the Germans came across the canal with those tanks. Then all we had was the artillery, but we were almost direct firing at them. But our infantry were following the German tanks back. What do you do? You stop the tanks. That's all you can do. We got all the tanks, killed all of them, but there was a lot of Americans that went along with it.

(2, A, 154)

T: Is your artillery effective against tanks?

M: Oh, definitely. Yes. It was bad. We lost a lot of infantry guys on that trip. The only way they could tell the Americans from the Germans, the American rifles were brown and the Germans painted their rifles white, for the snow. They were all white uniforms. You have no way of knowing who you are shooting at, really. Of course, what we were shooting at was the tanks. We had to stop those tanks. We got all the
tanks. Then they went across and cleaned the damn pocket out. But it was hell for a while there.

T: Would you call that perhaps your worst experience of the war?

M: That was the worst battle we were ever in. There was no way. The tanks were shooting at us. We had tents set up there and there were eighty-eight holes in the tents. For some reason or other they never hit a gun. I don’t know why. But the shells were all over the area.

T: Once the pocket was cleaned out, the advance actually across the Rhine into Germany was able to take place?

M: Yes. Then we went up to Worms, Germany, and crossed the river, the Rhine River. Then we went into Germany. Then most of the war was over. It was just a matter of cleaning it up and going through it.

T: Did you notice German resistance being less intense than it had been?

M: I think at that time the Germans knew. We captured some Germans in Germany that said, “We might be losing here, but we’re winning in Africa.” Now you tell me you can’t keep people from knowing what’s going on? The war had been over there for a couple years.

T: That’s what they said?

M: And they thought they were winning in Africa.

T: Nothing could be further from the truth at that time. This is 1945, right?

M: Yes. We were getting into 1945 there. Now we were in Germany.

T: Where did you unit end up on V-E Day [8 May 45]?

M: Berchtesgarten. Hitler’s hideout.

T: You were all the way down? Your unit traveled a great deal.

M: We went to Nuremberg, Munich. Near Munich we hit a bad deal there. There was a big concentration camp, where they burned all the bodies.

T: Was that Dachau?

M: Yes. They had flatcars in there with people piled on them like pulpwood, about two or three feet high. There were bodies laying on there, just like pulpwood. They would incinerate them. Throw them in and the incinerator and burn them up.
T: When your unit came through here, were you part of the group that saw this first, or that liberated those camps?

M: Yes. There was guys laying on the ground, dying. Some of them, you might as well say they were dead, but they were still alive. They were starved to death. That’s what it amounted to. They had nothing to eat.

T: What kind of reaction did that bring from guys, for example, who encountered this?

M: It was one more liberation. There were a lot of prisoners there. A lot of the people would go into the town and catch the big German guys that were in charge of everything there and kill them. Beat them to death most of the time. You didn’t know what was going on.

T: They were killed by whom?

M: Prisoners. As soon as they opened the gates and let them out.

T: So they went and looked for the Germans.

M: We captured one town down there, I don’t remember what the name of it was. Or one area there. There was a Polish woman there, one of the women where the Germans had backed the truck up to the Polish church. They came out of church and right onto the truck. And this one woman was one of them. One of the first ones that went down. She was way down in southern Germany. She said she had had one baby, where they said they were going to make this super race. She said she never got a chance to see it. But she could talk Polish, and we had one kid in our outfit that could talk Polish, so he talked to her. She said she worked with the Germans and said that Hitler was always coming up with a secret weapon. She said she’d watched the American planes or Allied planes flying over and bombing Nuremberg and Munich and all the big factory towns, Kassel and all of them. She said now the last two days there weren’t any Allied planes. What happened? Did Hitler have his secret weapon? Now you talk about dumb. To keep people that dumb, that they think...

T: So there was information control that was really successful?

(2, A, 227)

M: They can do it. She said then this morning the German soldiers came running back, some of them were riding horses, some of them were throwing their uniforms and guns away. Just getting away and the Americans were right behind them.

T: That was right at the end then.
M: They had no idea. Yes, that was right at the end of the war. There was really nothing left then, it was more cat and mouse then.

T: Once you got into Germany, what was the reaction of the German civilians to seeing you guys?

M: That was a different situation. Harvest time was there, haying and harvesting. Those people were in the fields working, women and kids and old men. They never stopped working. All of the rest of the places, France and Italy, as soon as the Americans moved in, they quit working. “Take care of us.” But the German people, it was just like nothing happened. They went about their work the way always did.

T: Was there a sense of nervousness or fear on the soldier’s part about the Germans?

M: I don’t really think so. I’ve got a little story. Once place we went through, there was a bunch of pigs out in the field. Probably seventy-five, eighty pound pigs. There were four or five of them there. A couple of the guys jumped off the trucks, we were just moving real slow. They caught one of those pigs and they got it back and threw it on the truck. A little kid came running out of the house. He hollered, “That’s my pig. Please don’t take it.” They turned the pig loose. It isn’t that serious a deal, you know, you get guys that think, the hell with you. But they were civilian people.

T: Were there any positive interactions with adults, adult Germans, or was there still a bit of...

M: No. It’s just like you were going through an area again. There were no hard feelings that I could see. After the war was over we were stationed in Fritzler, Germany, and there was a tavern there. A woman ran the tavern, an elderly lady. We used to go down there in the evening and have beer and talk to her. She said that when Hitler first took over, he got the people behind him. They thought he was doing a wonderful thing; he was building Germany up to come out of poverty into the high-class way of living. But nobody understood where this was all coming from. What he was doing was taking it out of the other countries around and bringing it into Germany. But he put everybody to work. They were building superhighways and big airfields and all kinds of stuff. She said that after the people discovered what was going on, it was too late. The SS troops. You never knew who they were; they could be your neighbor. She said you say anything against Hitler and you’re dead. Just that quick. She said it could be your neighbor; it could be anybody. So nobody said anything. They were real careful. If you talked to somebody you wanted to be sure who you were talking to and what you said. She said it was really dangerous to say anything against Hitler. He had those SS troops and they were all over Germany.

T: That was after the war ended. What do you remember about V-E Day?
M: I was in the hospital.

T: Why were you in the hospital?

M: I got shot in the hand here. *(holds up hand)*

T: What's the story behind that?

M: I did that myself. *(laughs)*

T: There must be a real story here.

M: There were two of us playing with this cockeyed rifle. It was unloaded and everything and I was going to clean it. I put my hand on the end of the barrel for some reason or other. I learned you don’t do that. I dropped the cleaning rod, and some way or other it hit the trigger and it fired. Now where that shell came from, I have no idea. But it blew a hole through there. *(holds up hand)* It went in right there and came out right here. Separated these two bones. It didn't break any, but this finger and this thumb, they were dead. There was no feeling in them. The nerves were cut off in there.

T: You sound like there was some luck and bad luck in there.

M: Right, yes. It happened on the 2nd of May, and the 8th of May the war was over.

T: Where were you in the hospital now?

M: At Metz, France. They flew us back. A kid had a pistol. I had a couple of them. I had made a shoulder holster. I found a German, well, there was a leather factory. There was a bunch of German hides, so I took a piece of one of those hides and made a holster. I had a German Luger pistol. I made a shoulder holster for that with no seams in it. I had that on when this happened. I took that off and left it with the guys and went back. One kid had a gun with him, a little pistol, I don’t know what it was.

We got back to the field hospital. The doctor was talking to this kid. He had lost a finger. He was on a tank, the machine gunner, and the end of the barrel caught a branch on a tree and swung the gun around and hit his finger against a building. The building was just wide enough for those tanks to slide through between them. It cut his finger off. He had this gun and this doctor told him he’d trade him a bottle of whiskey for that gun. So he gave him the gun, the pistol, and he got the whiskey. We were sitting there under the airplane waiting to get ready to go and both of us were drinking out of it. Nobody else would drink. “You’re gonna get sick when you get on that airplane.” We were the only two guys on the airplane that didn’t get sick.

T: Really?
M: We were up in the cockpit with the pilots, talking to them. We were having a good time. *(laughs)*

T: You didn’t get seasick on the ships or airsick on the planes.

M: Didn’t bother us, either one of us.

*(2, A, 309)*

T: You were in the hospital in Metz, France when the surrender was announced. Was there a celebration at the hospital?

M: No. The war was over, that’s all, as far as anybody was concerned. It was over before that. We knew that. It was just a matter of signing the papers, I guess. *(pauses three seconds)* I was in there until, I think it was July.

T: A couple of months you were in the hospital then?

M: There was nothing wrong. It was all healed. It was eleven or twelve days after we flew out of Germany and landed in France before I saw a doctor.

T: Really?

M: The kid that lost the finger had the same thing. He would get an infection and it was starting to stink.

T: What was the story there?

M: Well, the war was over so the doctors were all celebrating, I suppose.

T: So you guys sat there and waited?

M: Yes, waiting. We told the nurse, “Are you going to change these bandages, or we will.” They said, “We can’t do it. We have to have the doctor’s okay to do that.” I said, “To hell with the doctor. You change them or they’re coming off.” So finally she did. She changed them, but there was infection down in the wound. Then she would change the bandages every day.

T: The doctors were nowhere to be seen?

M: No. He finally came around and looked at it. Everything was okay. He was happy.

T: What about the kid that lost his finger?

M: Same deal. He was healing up, too.
T: Eventually I guess you will heal up! *(laughs)*

M: One day we were sitting there and I said to this guy, “Why the hell don’t we get out of here? Let’s go see if we can’t find out where our outfits are and go back.” He said okay, tomorrow morning, Sunday morning. We took off just before daylight, hitchhiking. We found out where our outfit was and we both went. Get the first sergeant to take you back and get you discharged from the hospital. I got back and I talked to the sergeant, and he said, “To hell with them. They don’t care where you are.”

T: You hitched all the way from Metz back to Germany?

M: Yes.

T: That’s a stretch.

M: Yes. It didn’t take long. There were a lot of military vehicles on the road then, so we got a ride pretty easily. I never did go back to the hospital.

T: They never contacted you?

M: They never bothered. Nobody ever had anything to do with you until it was practically all healed up and everything.

T: This is July 1945.

M: Right.

T: You stayed at the hospital an awful long time.

M: For nothing. I said, “I’m going to stay for a while. Stick around.” So they put me on guard, a crew guarding a bridge across the river. We had one of these little wall tents set up there, and we were staying in that. They’d bring us out dinner and supper. One day I was standing on the bridge looking in the water, and here comes a big old brown trout up the river. I ran over on the other side where the sun was shining in and he comes sailing up through there right close to the shore in about a foot and a half of water. So I got the rifle and I let him have it. He flopped belly up and I jumped down off the bridge and grabbed him. I took him out and there was enough fish in that one fish for seven of us. We all had fish supper that night. Sent it back with the cook when he came out for dinner, and they brought it back for supper.

T: That’s a good story. And that was in Germany?

M: Yes.
T: Martin, was your unit scheduled to be sent to the Pacific?

M: No.

T: Okay, so you guys knew you were done.

M: Yes. Part of our outfit went to the Pacific. Just one regiment of infantry and one battalion of artillery.

T: But the majority of you guys, the gun crews, did not go?

M: No. We stayed there.

T: Did you expect then to be sent back to the States right away?

M: They were going back every day. They were sending troops back. But I wanted to stay over for a while. I stayed until September. I didn’t remember if it was September or October, but I knew it was in the fall.

T: Did you want to stay longer, or did you want to go home earlier?

M: The first sergeant tried to get me to stay for a year, to sign up for a year. Bullshit. I would stay there for a while and when I get tired I’ll go home. And that’s what I did.

T: You could pretty much decide when you wanted to go?

M: Yes.

T: What finally convinced you to say, “I’ve had enough. It’s time to go.”

M: I don’t know. I just figured I might as well go home for a while. Then we got back to wait for the ship to come, and we sat there for a couple weeks. Then I was the senior non-com[missioned officer] in the outfit there. They were coming back on the point system. I think I had 157 points and the next guy had 57.

T: You had been in from the very beginning.

M: Yes. I was kind of in charge of a lot of the inspection of the new guys coming in. Tell them what they could take home and what they couldn’t. You weren’t supposed to take any firearms or swords or anything like that. Sometimes they had some beautiful swords, some of them did. I almost tried taking a couple of them home but I figured I better not, because they said if you got caught with any of that stuff they’d send you back. Probably to the Pacific.
T: That’s a pretty big threat.

(2, A, 371)

M: I said, “Well, I’ll take some handguns but that’s all I’m going to take.” I had them in my bag.

T: Those got through okay?

M: Oh, yes. I was in charge of the whole crew. They loaded everybody that was in the area, the replacement depot kind of a deal, except the crew I was with. --

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

M: But they didn’t have room for my crew on there. So they said we’d have to wait until the next boat came in. That was okay.

T: This was in France?

M: Yes. We unpacked our stuff. Then the guy comes in and says, “You guys get down there to that boat right away. They said they can make room for you.” Then everybody had to hurry up and get their stuff back in the bags and jump in the truck. They hauled us down there. When we got on the boat I told the guys, “Now, you guys keep your beds made, your floors clean around your beds. Keep your mouth shut and you probably won’t have to do anything all the way back. They don’t know we’re here. We’re going to have nothing to do.”

And exactly the way it worked. We had to keep a daily record of everything. I came back and I went into the office and handed them to the sergeant sitting at the desk. He took the thing and threw it in the wastepaper basket. He never even looked at it. I said, “What did I keep that for?” Government policy. Everything went in there. The next thing they had an inspection of our stuff. They had to inspect everything. I just shoved those guns I had in the bed and covered them up. I set my clothes and stuff out on the bed.

T: So those guns came back here with you okay? A number of different places you were inspected, but no big deal.

M: Just the one. Just the one time. That was Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. I got out of there. I got on the train and came back to Minneapolis. The first thing we did we ran into Earl Wallace from the Falls [International Falls]. He was walking down the street. We spent the night fooling around there talking to him and the next morning the train took off and we weren’t on it. Then we monkeyed around there with another kid from the Falls with me and I said, “Let’s go catch the bus. We can catch the bus.” We had a train ticket and a bus ticket. He said, “I’m going to go have a beer before we take off.” I was waiting for the bus. I said, “Don’t spend much time.” The
bus was coming and I ran down to get him to tell him, it was just across the street. Before we got back the bus was gone.

So we hitchhiked out of town, out of Minneapolis. We got out to the outskirts of town and the guy let us off. Here comes a brand new school bus. We waved him down and he stopped. We got on and he took us to Little Falls [Minnesota]. It was Little Falls that he was going to deliver the bus to. We got a ride that far. Then we got off the bus and we started hitchhiking again. We got a ride with a minister of some kind and his wife. They picked us up and gave us a ride up to (pauses three seconds) someplace along the road there, anyway, where we could catch the bus. We caught the bus there and got into Bemidji [Minnesota]. That’s as far as that bus went.

We stayed in Bemidji that night. We went out to a tavern someplace out in the country. Danced a little bit, drink a little bit. He got plastered. We both had a little bit of money, since we just got out. So I watched him pretty close and stayed with him. We got a taxi that took us back to the hotel in Bemidji and stayed there that night. I had a hell of a time waking him up in the morning. We caught the train then from there on in to the Falls.

(2, B, 80)

T: The train went from Bemidji to the Falls?

M: Yes. So we got on that. We got back to the Falls.

T: Quite a route home.

M: It was a lot of fun. It took us about three days to get home from Minneapolis, but we made it.

T: At that point time wasn’t an issue, though, was it?

M: No. I guess my Dad was getting kind of worried about what the hell was happening. He knew we were back in the States but he had no idea where we were.

T: When the war ended in Europe did relations between Americans and Germans change at all?

M: I don’t know if it changed or not, but it was just like going over to your neighbor’s house as far as I was concerned. They were just as friendly as anybody else. But they were a lot more appreciative of the Americans than a lot of the other countries were. They did work when they helped themselves. They did do their field work and they had no problem with it at all. There was one instance there in the town where we were stationed. An SS trooper’s wife lived there. They had two kids. He sent word in to her some way, I don’t know how, that he was coming in to kill her and her kids because she was fraternizing with the Americans. But this was an SS troop. So we put a twenty-four hour guard on her house, but he never did show up.
T: So maybe he knew better?

M: He probably figured he would never make it anyway. We still had those guys to contend with. We watched for them.

T: Were there incidents of lone soldiers, single soldiers, Germans, after the surrender who were still out there?

M: None that were willing to fight anyway. Outside of those SS troops. The Germans, actually, didn’t want to fight after a certain point in the war. The soldiers did, but the people didn’t. They knew that they’d lost the war and that it was just suicide to do anything.

T: Did V-J Day, that marked the end of the war against Japan, have an impact on you guys in Europe?

M: Not really, no. Everybody was happy, but that’s about it. I was still in Germany at that time; I stayed over there. It didn’t affect the way anybody felt over there. They knew the war was over, that was the big thing.

T: It sounds like there wasn’t much of a celebration.

M: Not as far as we were concerned, no.

T: For you guys, V-E Day was the thing that marked the end.

M: Yes. Right.

T: V-J Day was more of an abstract thing that was...

M: Someplace else.

T: The other side of the world, wasn’t it?

M: Right. Yes.

T: It was almost five years between when you left and when you came back.

M: Right.

T: How did you notice life back home had changed in those five years?

M: I don’t actually think it did. I don’t think there was that much of a change in it. I don’t know. I just came home like I left, that’s all. As far as I was concerned I had no problems with coming back or with anything that went on, outside of one time my
cousin and I were at the Flying Nightclub or something. We were having a drink. There was a G.I. standing at the bar with a uniform on. And she said, “Look, the Army makes drunks out of all those soldiers.” I said, “Suzy, how many guys are standing beside him?” I said, “All you’re looking at is that uniform. You’re not looking at the rest of those guys.” There were fifteen or twenty guys standing there beside him just as young or younger than he was. But he had a uniform on, so he stood out. But she couldn’t see that.

T: She noticed the uniform, didn’t she?

M: The uniform. The uniform made him a drunk.

T: That’s interesting that she noticed that. You said you didn’t have trouble adjusting—did other guys in the area here seem to?

M: No, I really didn’t.

T: Did you start working right away when you came back then?

M: A little bit once in a while. I don’t know what I really did do. I didn’t do a lot to start with. I bought a sawmill first, to start with, and that never panned out. That folded up, but then I went to work for my Dad on his sawmill. Monkeyed around that summer [1946] with him.

T: So you were busy working at one thing or the other from the very start?

M: Oh, yes.

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M: I managed to keep busy, find something to do. I went into the mill and went to work there.

T: You would say that you didn’t really notice the community here had changed a whole lot?

M: No. No, it was pretty much the way I remembered it when I left.

T: What was your initial reaction to finally being out of uniform after five years? Did you feel different in any way?

M: Not really, no. I just walked around doing stuff. I never forgot any of the stuff that I went through in the service, everything that had happened. It was something that was just put aside and went on with daily life, as far as I was concerned. I tried to do what I figured was right.
T: Like turning a page in a book or something?

M: Yes.

T: What was the easiest thing for you as far as getting back into civilian life?

M: I don't know. Trying to find money enough to buy a car or something like that, I suppose.

T: Was that something you wanted to do? Were cars hard to find?

M: No. There were lots of cars. Just the idea to have the money to do it with. I think I had seven hundred dollars or something when I came home. But I didn't want to spend that, either, all at once.

T: That was a lot of money then, wasn't it?

M: You’re not kidding; it was at that time.

T: Last couple of questions here. I mentioned earlier it was about what you felt the war meant when you were in the middle of it. How would you describe that?

M: I don't know how you would say it. It was a job. You knew you were trained for a certain job. You were doing that, and you did it the best you could. You know that you need a clear mind. That was one thing that I didn’t like, the guys who were drinking a lot. I could not see that because you needed everything you had to stay alive, and when you’re drinking you can't do that. I can't say that I didn't take a drink, but I was very careful of how much I drank or anything else. I didn't drink enough that would cause me any problems, so that I had a good idea of what was going on.

T: So you saw it as a job. Do you reflect on it differently now when you look back?

M: Not really, no. I think if more of the guys that are having these problems would do that, they’d be a lot better off.

T: If they saw it simply as a job that needed to be done?

M: As a job, instead of killing people or something like that.

T: Personalizing it you mean?

M: Yes. A lot of these young veterans, especially Vietnam, which was a bad deal. That was really a bad deal all the way around. I know one summer I signed up twelve Vietnam veterans in the VFW. A lot of guys told me, “You’ll never get those guys.” I said, “You don’t know how to talk to them. That’s all the trouble. Go sit
down and talk to them for a couple hours. Pretty soon they see that things can be a little different. That everybody isn’t against them.” That was the attitude that they had. They still have that problem. A lot of them. One guy told me that he stays in the house and keeps the windows covered. I just can’t believe that a guy would let that get to him like that. Get out there and join the people and learn how to live with this thing. I said, “You can’t change it. You ain’t going to change it any. But you can make it better, if you just live with it.” But it’s hard for a lot of them to do that. There are some of them that do, that is coming around, getting out of it. They’re a lot better off now than they were. But there’s a lot of them still carrying that.

T: The guilt?

M: Yes. We had one national commander in chief [of the VFW], Billy Cameron. He was from California. He had stepped on a mine or something. Anyway, a mine blew up and pretty near tore his back off. He came home on the plane, him and another young guy. They were both sent home wounded. They landed in San Francisco. They got off the plane and the civilians around there were calling them baby killers and stuff like that. That was the name they were hanging on them. It was the most stupid goddamned thing they could ever do. It’s not their fault they were over there. He said he made up his mind right there that he was going to everything he could, because he was commander in chief of the VFW.

T: Does it matter how the society views the war that you guys were part of?

M: Definitely. Society’s got a very large part of it. That’s what ruined the Vietnam veterans, was the people. This one kid was telling me one time that they were out at either K-Mart or Menards. He was talking to another Vietnam veteran. Some guy walked past them and said “There’s a couple of them baby killers.” I said, “I wish I would have been there when they said that.” They just take it under their hides and live with it. To me, you fight back. You don’t take that stuff.

T: That’s a tough situation for those guys, isn’t it?

M: It is. That’s really a bad one. That guy was probably never in the service either. To come up with that kind of statement, something that’s been over for ten, fifteen years and they’re still carrying that around.

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T: About your own war experiences, have you always been comfortable talking about them with people?

M: Yes.

T: So if I had asked you for this interview in 1950 or 1960 or 1970 or 1980, you would have said yes?
M: It wouldn’t have mattered to me. It’s just one of those things. You never forget. Never forget any part of it. But, you don’t live with it.

T: As far as letting it consume you?

M: Yes. It’s just like drinking. You get in the bottle and you can’t get out. You take a drink and you’re okay. But you crawl in that damn bottle and you’re there.

T: A healthy way to look at it. You talked about not being able to forget. Are there certain memories that come back to you more often than others?

M: Oh, lots of times, yes. Some incident will happen and you remember something. It’s nothing that bothers me at any time, but it’s just something that you think about. It’s there, but it’s not going any place.

T: Martin, is there anything else you want to add?

M: I think that pretty much covers that area. There’s not too much in there.

T: Let me thank you very much for the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW