

**Narrator: Gen John W. Vessey, Jr**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.**

**Date of interview: 10 April 2012**

**Location: Vessey residence, North Oaks, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber**

**Edited for clarity by: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D., May 2012 and January 2014**

**(00:00) = elapsed time on digital recording**

TS: Today is Tuesday, 10 April 2012. This is Thomas Saylor speaking, and this our third interview with General John W. Vessey, Jr.

General Vessey, last time we talked about the activation of your Minnesota Army National Guard unit, and that this unit was relocated to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. In the course of 1941 there was participation in the Louisiana Maneuvers in late summer, August-September 1941, and we talked a bit about being away from home for an extended period of time and being in the American South, which was also new for you.

Today I want to move to an event, a before and after event really, and that is December 7, 1941, when Japanese forces attacked the American naval and air base at Pearl Harbor. Do you recall what you were doing when you first heard that news?

JV: Yes. As I think we discussed last time, we had returned to Camp Claiborne from the maneuvers in the Carolinas the day before. The night before, we got back.

TS: So the 6<sup>th</sup> of December.

JV: Right. I went to chapel on Sunday morning and had planned to have a quiet Sunday afternoon reading and I think some friends convinced me that I should go to the day room and play pool with them. So we were in the day room at the pool table with the radio on, and the news came that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor.

TS: How did you hear that news or understand that news?

JV: The difficulties with Japan had been in the papers through that autumn actually but it certainly, I think it was a surprise to all of us that we were at war. I think that the prospect of Japan attacking the Hawaiian Islands was something that was beyond our imagination; at least it was beyond mine. But it was clear that we were at war when that happened. I believed that the prospect of us going to war was quite high, principally because of [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt's support of the British, and the likelihood of going to war with Germany being higher than that of going to war with Japan.

TS: How did you come down on that question of interventionism and isolationism? You're a young person here, but you're in the service. How did you feel about that debate prior to Pearl Harbor?

JV: I guess I thought that wiser men than I would deal with it, and that we as ordinary soldiers in the United States Army would then deal with it one way or the other.

TS: Right. General, would you describe yourself as someone at that time, nineteen years old, who kept up with the news? You mentioned the news was in the papers. Were you someone who read the papers, listened to the news on the radio?

JV: Sure. I had a subscription to the *Times-Picayune*, the New Orleans [daily] paper, and I was little smug because I was the only guy in our tent that had a *Times-Picayune* subscription (*chuckles*) who was willing to hand out, I've forgotten what it was, but I think it was \$1.75 a month or something like that. It seemed like an awful lot of money out of what we made.

TS: I remember you saying how much a dollar was in those days.

JV: But, yes, I kept up with the news.

TS: Think about the Germans and the Japanese. You mentioned the possibility of war with Germany and Japan. How did you understand who these Japanese were, for example. They're in the news. Now who were these people?

**(6:15)**

JV: I knew only one Japanese, one person of Japanese extraction. That was Ed Yamazaki, who was in our outfit. Ed's father was a Japanese immigrant who had married a good Minnesota Norwegian woman. Ed Yamazaki was a six foot tall, handsome young guy of Japanese and Norwegian extraction. Ed's father told him to go to court and change his name. In the early spring of 1941 Ed finished that task, and he became Ed Evans. I've forgotten where he got...he told me where Evans came from, but anyway, he became Ed Evans. He was a good friend, a good guy, and he was sort of torn about changing his name, because he was proud of his father and his father was a successful businessman. But his father anticipated the anti-Japanese attitude in the country, and Ed Yamazaki changed his name to Ed Evans. Like me, eventually Ed got a battlefield commission and then moved to the Air Corps. He was a communicator in our outfit, and eventually retired from the United States Air Force, a colonel in the Air Force.

TS: So it worked out for him.

JV: Yes. But for me, that was the single example of what might happen at that time. Later on the Nisei<sup>1</sup> outfits, both the 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion originally and then the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team, both fought as parts of the 34<sup>th</sup> [Infantry] Division, later on during the war.

TS: How about an anti-Japanese feeling that you perceived around you before or after Pearl Harbor? I mean, this was part of the news as well. How did the military, the Army, work to deal with anti-Japanese feeling – or to encourage it?

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<sup>1</sup> Nisei: children of Japanese immigrants.

JV: You didn't have to do much to encourage anti-Japanese feelings after the attack on Pearl Harbor. I remember Roosevelt's words to the Congress the next day, which were broadcast, "the day that will live in infamy."

TS: Did you listen to the speech then?

JV: Yes.

TS: Was that something that people were gathered to listen to, or that you listened to yourself?

JV: No, no. I think the day room was full.

TS: At that point because we weren't yet at war with Germany, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, was the expectation in that immediate aftermath that you'd be going, this unit, to the Pacific?

JV: Yes. Already parts of the 34<sup>th</sup> had already gone in that direction. When we were mobilized originally we had a tank company. The tank company was from Brainerd [Minnesota]. They went out to Fort Lewis [in Washington state], and I think by that summer, we knew that the tank company was in the Philippines.

TS: That's right, they were. And that story of course has been told about how they were part of the Bataan and Corregidor history in the Philippines.

JV: Right.

TS: The unit history of the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division<sup>2</sup> notes that "certain units of the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division were dispatched to key places in southern states for security purposes after Pearl Harbor." What do you remember about that?

JV: We went to the Gulf Coast, the Alabama Gulf Coast. What I remember most about that is that our battery commander, Bill Martin, somehow he had a hunch that we would go early. So right after Pearl Harbor he assembled the battery and told us, "I don't have any official information, but it is my hunch that we will be moving early." So he said, "I want half of you to go on leave starting tomorrow and take two weeks leave, and when that half returns the other half will go on leave for two weeks." So we went at half strength down to the Gulf.

**(12:20)**

TS: So you were not in the first group that went on leave.

JV: I was in the second group.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Story of the 34th Infantry Division. Compiled by Members of 34th Infantry Division, 1945.* At: <http://www.34infdiv.org/history/34narrhist.html> Last accessed 8 Jan 14.

TS: And when you went down to the Alabama Gulf Coast, what were the orders? What were you told you were doing there?

JV: Guarding against who knows what. An invasion of the Gulf Coast. The rumors of spies and saboteurs and so on and so forth were rampant at that time. Frankly, most of it seemed a little silly.

TS: Even at the time?

JV: Yes. On the other hand, Pearl Harbor had just been attacked, so it wasn't hard to turn that silliness into seriousness if one thought about it a little bit.

TS: So what did a typical day look like down there on the Alabama Gulf Coast?

JV: We were doing some guard duty at installations around Mobile, making sure that it was secure.

TS: It sounds pretty uneventful, quite frankly.

JV: Exactly. Boring.

TS: So a lot of standing around. Did you come into contact with the local population now and then, and what kind of rumors or thoughts were people talking about?

JV: I don't remember any particular contact with the local population. We were living in tents, that is in pup tents.

TS: Two man tents.

JV: Yes. Clearly camped out for temporary assignment, which indeed ended quickly. I guess it took us a couple days to get there. So by the time we really figured out what we were doing down there it was time for me to go on leave – which I welcomed.

TS: How did you spend your two weeks of leave?

JV: With family and girlfriend.

TS: Up here in the Twin Cities.

JV: Yes.

TS: When you had departed you were a soldier in a peacetime Army on a one year federal activation. That's all different now when you see family again.

JV: Yes.

TS: How was the mood among people, knowing that now you're in something different?

JV: It affected my father, I think, more than anybody else. Most the rest of our family, the kids were all younger than I and all still at home and in school. I guess my oldest sister had started nurse's training, and she was the only other one out of high school. So it was sort of fun for them to have big brother soldier boy home. A lot of questions and so forth.

TS: What did you dad have to say to you?

JV: He didn't say so much to me, but I remember talking to my mother after the war, and he said to my mother, "I'll never see that boy again." Of course he died within a few months – nine months later he was dead. So I think it affected him more, obviously more than anybody else.

Then there was...the Nicollet Hotel had advertised a big New Year's Eve ball. I've forgotten what the tickets were, but they were pretty pricey, and I bought two. Then I got a telegram. I think it arrived on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December saying, "Return immediately." I checked to see if I could turn in those tickets, and I couldn't get a refund on them.

TS: Immediately doesn't mean wait until after New Year's.

JV: *(chuckles)* I waited anyway.

TS: Did you wait?

JV: I did. We were going to go to that New Year's Eve party, and we did. I headed out for Louisiana on the first train on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January.

TS: When you left Avis, Mrs. Vessey, how did you part from each other? What was the understanding?

JV: We didn't have any understanding other than that we would stay in contact with each other. I think her view of the relationship was that it was a little more set in concrete than my view, but she was right. *(chuckles)*

**(18:30)**

TS: Just based on how people part at times like this, was there an understanding between the two of you that the relationship would pick up where it left off? Or how did you sort of perceive of this as you were on the train heading to Louisiana?

JV: Other than the duty to exchange letters... *(trails off)* Clearly if we had been ordered to return immediately, something was going to happen. And it did happen. I got back to Alexandria, Louisiana on the train, [and] took a taxi cab to Camp Claiborne, which was pricey. It was thirty miles out of Alexandria. Got out there to find the company street empty. They were gone.

TS: In reading the [34<sup>th</sup> Infantry] Division history, it notes that, “the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was early on ordered to Fort Dix, New Jersey. The War Department had selected the 34<sup>th</sup> to be the first U.S. division to go to the ETO.” Was this part of this transition to Fort Dix?

JV: Yes.

TS: So it was very early.

JV: Yes. Of course I inquired, when I could find somebody to talk to. There was a civilian employee there who said they're in a train on the sidetrack at Oakdale, Louisiana. So I had asked my taxi driver to stay once we could see that the place was empty, and so I spent a little more money to get to Oakdale.

TS: How far was Oakdale?

JV: About fifteen miles.

TS: So you put a good number of miles on the taxi.

JV: Right.

TS: You caught them with your gear and everything.

JV: My gear was on the train. My buddies had packed it up.

TS: But you needed to make the train.

JV: Right.

TS: When you get on this train, now it's clear you're going to....you knew where you were going?

JV: No.

TS: Just moving.

JV: We were moving.

TS: Pretty soon you were in Fort Dix, New Jersey. What was the mood among your friends in the unit and other people in the unit about what was happening now?

JV: We knew we were going overseas. Obviously everything we did was preparations for overseas. We turned in all our heavy equipment to have it shipped overseas. We were left with our individual packs and rifles and one barracks bag. So the time then was spent on individual training, marksmanship. I can't tell you how many times we went to the rifle

range. And road marches. We did twenty mile road marches until we knew every road around there in a circle of twenty miles out from our part of Fort Dix.

TS: How long was your unit at Fort Dix before it moved overseas?

JV: We were there until April [1942], I think it was.

TS: So three months anyway.

JV: Yes.

TS: During that time, I mean you're still attached to, you're still part of this field artillery unit. Were you practicing that as well?

JV: Oh, yes. We'd do simulations.

TS: Was there live firing going on?

JV: No, no. The cannons were gone. We'd turned in our cannons. Surveyors could survey and the communicators could practice communications.

TS: Right, but actual firing wasn't going on?

JV: No.

TS: Did you have a responsibility for mortars as well?

JV: No.

TS: Just heavier guns.

JV: Yes.

TS: So you weren't firing anything.

JV: No. I think the biggest thing we had, we had left our fifty caliber machine guns, because we mounted those on the ship for anti-aircraft purposes on the ship that we went on. I think the whole business of moving troops overseas – I had only a one-sided view of it at that time. It was clear the Germans were sinking ships in the North Atlantic at a great rate, and trying to get transports to move people was obviously difficult. The *Normandie*<sup>3</sup> – it was rumored that we would go on the *Normandie* ... Anyway, we got delayed several times,

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<sup>3</sup> *Normandie*: ocean liner, launched 1935; used during World War II for troop transport. Caught fire and capsized, 1942.

but we finally moved out on a ship called the *Aquitania*<sup>4</sup>, which was rumored to have been a sister ship of the *Lusitania*<sup>5</sup>. It was a four stacker, a former luxury liner.

**(24: 40)**

TS: So the unit was packed on the ship or you packed yourself onto this ship. Was this your first ocean voyage?

JV: Yes. Oh, no – it probably was the first real ocean voyage. My dad and I had gone from Seattle to Victoria Island, Vancouver, B.C., on a big ferry actually.

TS: That's right, you had. Right. This journey, a bigger ocean, longer duration. What do you remember about that ocean voyage?

JV: First it was a long trip. I've forgotten how many days it took in those days. But we had a huge convoy and a huge escort. In fact we had a battleship as part of the escort. Many destroyers and corvettes. I remember we went to Halifax, Nova Scotia first and then the convoy was sort of assembled there at Halifax. We went from there past Iceland. Then the escorts were changed there with a higher number of British ships than American ships taking us the rest of the way. A number of ships in the convoy were sunk.

TS: I was going to ask you about this knowledge of the presence of German U-boats. So not only was it rumor, you could see.

JV: It was very evident. We had depth charges dropped so close to the *Aquitania* that the ship sprung a leak.

TS: So you could see the evidence and hear the evidence of the Germans around.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: How did that make you feel on board the ship knowing that the war was literally right there now?

JV: You had a lot of respect for the sailors that are out there on those destroyers and corvettes<sup>6</sup>. You hope they know what they're doing when they're rowing around and dropping depth charges.

TS: You saw ships sunk in the convoy you were in?

JV: Yes.

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<sup>4</sup> *Aquitania*: ocean liner, launched 1913; used in both world wars for troop transport. Scrapped 1950.

<sup>5</sup> *Lusitania*: ocean liner, launched 1907; torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat, 1915, with 1,198 casualties.

<sup>6</sup> Corvette: lightly armed patrol and convoy escort vessel.

TS: Describe what that looks like from being on board a ship. What could you see?

JV: As I remember it, all the ships that were sunk were sunk at night, and you could hear explosions. We generally knew what ships were around us. I've forgotten what they were, but you could see that ships were missing.

TS: So the next day, when it was daylight, you could see the effects of this.

JV: Right. And you could hear it, of course, all night long. So it seemed to me that we were very well protected. We had a lot of escorts, and it was clear that the United States was not interested in losing any transports full of soldiers.

TS: Exactly. How did you pass time on board ship from day to day?

JV: We assembled and went through some military training business. We had a new battery commander that we had acquired just shortly before we left. After we left Camp Claiborne and got to Fort Dix we got a new battery commander, who was a great man. He was an older man.

TS: When you say older from the perspective of someone who is nineteen, is this a guy in his thirties or in his fifties or ...

JV: I'd say in his mid-thirties someplace.

TS: Okay. So it was clearly a different generation or a different age cohort than you.

JV: Yes. I'd say for him every day was a training day, from the day he took command until the end of the war. Every day was a training day.

*(background noise – lawn care equipment outside)*

TS: Was he Regular Army?

JV: No. No, he was an Iowa National Guardsman.

TS: Were Regular Army officers being integrated into your unit as time goes on now?

JV: Beginning then, yes. Some of the battalion commanders were replaced by Regular Army officers. By and large anybody that was elderly and clearly unfit was not going with us. And of course we lost a lot of people to OCS<sup>7</sup>. In fact my commander had urged me to apply to OCS. But, hey, we're going overseas.

TS: At that point you preferred to go overseas than stay stateside for OCS.

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<sup>7</sup> OCS: Officer Candidate School.

JV: Yes, right. My feeling was I would much rather go overseas and go to war with the people I knew than become a Ninety Day Wonder<sup>8</sup> and go off to school.

**(34:50)**

TS: Was there a kind of a contempt for these so-called Ninety Day Wonders among men like yourself, most of the guys?

JV: No, not really because we sent some really good people to OCS from our outfit. The first OCS artillery battalion commander in World War II came from our battery.

TS: No kidding.

JV: Yes. I don't think there was contempt for them. It was just a question of whether you wanted to stick with the guys you started with.

TS: Was that a powerful draw for you?

JV: It was a powerful draw for me.

TS: Outside of military duties on board the ship there's a lot of days.

JV: We played a lot of bridge.

TS: You a good bridge player?

JV: Not as good as I was in those days. Our cabin was four NCOs<sup>9</sup> from our battery living in this one cabin. I suppose it was about a third class cabin that we had. But it was a bridge game that started about the Statue of Liberty and kept going until we got to Greenock, Scotland. *(chuckles)*

TS: Is it important to have something to do to pass the time?

JV: Yes. Of course there were numerous lifeboat drills and so forth too.

TS: So the war was omnipresent. You could hear it, you could see the effects of it and you were living it day to day.

JV: Right.

TS: How did you feel about the fact that the war is getting closer every day? What kind of emotions did you have about that?

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<sup>8</sup> Ninety Day Wonder: U.S. World War II slang, "a person commissioned as an officer in one of the armed services after 90 days or a relatively short length of training." (Merriam Webster dictionary)

<sup>9</sup> NCO: non-commissioned officer

JV: We're in a serious business and we'd better be serious about it. For me it was recognizing that there was a whole lot that I didn't know about what we were going to have to do.

TS: That suggests that there's learning for a peacetime army and learning for a wartime army, and those are two different things.

JV: You don't want them to be two different things, but they clearly are two different things. In those days the maneuvers were, as we've discussed before, the bang-bang you're dead sort of thing and that sort of force on force training was unrealistic. We didn't know how to do that.

TS: That's something you mentioned improved over the course of the war and was something that you were particularly interested in then after the war, training, effective training.

JV: Yes.

TS: Now the ship docks in Scotland, you said?

JV: We were supposed to go into Belfast but, as I said before, depth charges had been dropped so close to the *Aquitania* that it had sprung a leak on one side. As a matter of fact many of the troops were moved to the other side. We had quite a list when we came to Belfast, so apparently the port was unable to accommodate the *Aquitania* so we went to Greenock, Scotland, and moved and loaded on to North Sea lighters that crossed the English Channel. *(telephone ringing)*

TS: Which merely delayed the arrival in Northern Ireland by some time and made it a little more complicated.

**(41:40)**

JV: Yes. And got us introduced to who would really get seasick when the sea was rough and who wouldn't, because it was a very rough ride and I think most everybody on that boat except a few of us were seasick.

TS: You didn't get seasick?

JV: Right.

TS: Those lighters are much smaller than the ship you had been traveling on.

JV: A lot smaller.

TS: Once you got to Northern Ireland, was the unit placed in one camp where it could train together?

JV: Our first posting was to Port Rush, which is sort of a seaside resort on the north coast of Northern Ireland. We landed at Londonderry and then went by truck to Port Rush; we were billeted in civilian houses there, that is, these houses, I suspect they were resort houses. Port Rush has a very famous golf course there. At that time it had the oldest hydroelectric tramway in the world and the Bushmills Distillery<sup>10</sup>, which makes one of the two really good brands of Irish whiskey. So it was quite a resort town. We were, as I said, billeted in these civilian houses, and we stayed there probably a month.

TS: So we're talking April into May now.

JV: Yes. Then we moved to Omagh, North Ireland, which is much nearer the border between the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland, and moved into an old British camp there. In fact it was made over from a place called The Workhouse, which was built during the Irish Potato Famine.

**(39:45)**

TS: In the nineteenth century.

JV: Yes. So we had part of the Workhouse, which was this ancient building, and the rest of us were in Quonset huts<sup>11</sup> on the same grounds there.

TS: Were those newly constructed by the U. S. Army?

JV: No, they were there. The British army had constructed those.

TS: So everything was already existent and reconfigured.

JV: Right.

TS: And were you at this location until the unit ships out for North Africa?

JV: Generally. We stayed there through the summer of 1942, and there was a lot of training going on then. By that time the Light Artillery Battalions became equipped with the British twenty-five pounder, and there was a good training area in Northern Ireland called Sperrin Mountain Range. We did quite a bit of active artillery firing.

TS: Which you hadn't been doing in the States.

JV: Yes. And the training was much more serious than it had been in the past, and things that we hadn't really faced up to. One of them was chemical training. The Germans had chemicals, and we knew that the Germans had chemicals, and everyone was concerned that

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<sup>10</sup> Bushmills: a whiskey distillery in Bushmills, County Antrim, Northern Ireland. Founded 1784.

<sup>11</sup> Quonset hut: lightweight prefabricated structure of corrugated galvanized steel, with a semicircular cross-section. Used extensively by the U.S. military during World War II.

they might use them, so we spent a lot of time in chemical warfare training. We had a number of NCOs that went to the British chemical warfare school and came back to train the rest of us.

Then there were two British basic training places there, one for the Royal Ulster Rifles and the other one was the Iniskilling Fusiliers. So we had cooperative training with them. They had good combat style small arms ranges that we didn't have in the United States. Basically we fired from a hundred yards, two hundred yards, three hundred yards and so forth on the rifle range in the United States. The British had these combat style ranges, where targets popped up and you put them under fire anywhere from twenty-five yards to a couple hundred yards. So we were able to use those ranges for rifle fire training. And we did a lot of physical fitness training. We had two twenty-five mile road marches a week with full pack and rifles. So the training was quite intense.

**(43: 55)**

TS: You mentioned light artillery, a twenty-five pounder that was obtained from the British Army, was being integrated into the unit?

JV: Yes. All of the light battalions in the 34<sup>th</sup> Division got twenty-five pounders, and the medium artillery battalion maintained the old World War I Schneider 155.

TS: Those are the ones you mentioned last time we talked. So these are not being phased out yet.

JV: No.

TS: Just a point of reference: are those two, the light and medium artillery, those are the two units you would have typically...

JV: ... in the division artillery. Yes.

TS: The mortars, again, are not your responsibility?

JV: No.

TS: Did you work with a type of machine gun as well?

JV: We had machine guns, but the machine guns were for anti-aircraft events. We had an ample number of fifty caliber machine guns.

TS: Did you practice on those as well?

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: Camp life. Daily routine sounds like a lot marches I hear and actual live fire exercises, physical fitness. Busy days it sounds like.

JV: Yes. They were all busy days.

TS: Being at war with the Germans was there an understanding that you were going to be in action against the Germans at some time in the not too distant future?

JV: Sure. Sure, that was the expectation. Of course there was a lot of intelligence training, a lot of training on identification of aircraft, German aircraft and British aircraft, American aircraft. Spent a lot of time on that.

TS: Being able to visually sight them.

JV: Right. Then German uniforms, German and Italian uniforms, the equipment, what their equipment looked like and so forth. Of course the British were far ahead of us on this, so they helped us a great deal.

TS: What kind of opinion did you personally have at that point of the German and the Italian soldier as a fighting man?

JV: We didn't know much about the Italians. All of the German allies that fought on the German side were considered inferior to the German forces. But the Germans we knew to be very competent. The Germans had defeated the French and British in the spring of '41 there and the Germans were knocking on the doors of Moscow by this time, indeed all of Eastern Europe.

TS: Does that mean there's fear or respect, or what's the difference?

JV: I'd say respect. We knew that we would fight against a competent enemy, and we knew they were well equipped and well trained.

TS: What were your personal responsibilities now? Hearing about general training and different types and a lot of it, but on a day to day basis what were you doing?

JV: By this time I had been promoted to staff sergeant. We haven't gone through this, but earlier I had been promoted to sergeant and I had been pushed back into the communications business. By the time we were in Ireland I had been promoted to staff sergeant...in fact before we left [Camp] Claiborne. My job was chief of the message center. My job was to route the communications by the fastest possible means to make sure that everybody got what they were supposed to get in the line of communications. So I had agents, runners, but our original runners rode motorcycles. Later on those were traded for Jeeps. But I was given other responsibilities, because we weren't in a wartime situation. So I got assigned with a lot of physical fitness training responsibilities. I became the chemical warfare NCO for the battery, so I organized the chemical warfare training. Somehow the battery commander thought I was the best guy at identifying aircraft, so I was in charge of the anti-aircraft training and aircraft identification.

TS: So you have a number of responsibilities that are being assigned to you.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you find you rather liked this business of soldiering?

JV: Yes, I did. I was entrusted with some fairly significant duties. It seemed fairly significant to me at the time.

TS: Sure. You're nineteen, twenty years old. Getting off the base for a moment: For a young man who grew up in northern Minnesota, what was this countryside like in Northern Ireland? How would you describe it?

JV: It was rural. The greenness of Ireland is aptly portrayed in song and verse and legend, I guess. It is certainly green. There's plenty of rain and a lot of grass and a lot of sheep. *(chuckles)*

TS: What idea did you have before you arrived in Ireland really of what this was going to look like?

JV: I think my ideas of what Ireland was going to look like would probably have been drawn from songs like "My Wild Irish Rose" and things of that nature. *(chuckles)* I had no idea what it was going to look like. Of course in many ways it's like farming in the northeast of Minnesota except the landscape is considerably different, but there are a lot of rocks in the fields and using mechanical equipment is difficult. At least it was in those days. And there wasn't much of it; there was a lot of horse-drawn equipment.

TS: So you could see that.

JV: Yes.

TS: Really non-mechanized farming.

JV: Yes. And peat was the primary fuel for cooking and heating fires in the farmers' houses.

TS: How about in your own quarters? Was it also used there?

JV: Coal. We were in Omagh which later on, in recent years – I say recent – before the peace in North Ireland Omagh was the site of some pretty big fighting between the Irish Republican Army and the Orangemen. But at that time we didn't see any evidence of that, although we had been warned of the existence of the IRA. I suspect that many of the people that we associated in the civilian community were in fact members of the IRA. I don't have any evidence to support this, but there was one bar in town called Charlie McAleer's Cocktail Lounge. Nobody outside of Belfast had a cocktail lounge other than Omagh and Charlie McAleer. Charlie McAleer had gone to the United States as a young man and had owned a bar in Seattle, and went back to his hometown in Northern Ireland and opened up another one. He bragged that it's the only bar outside of Belfast that had ice also, because the Irish didn't put ice in their drinks. But Charlie McAleer set aside a room for the NCOs of

our outfit there, and we'd go down there and have a cheap round of fish and chips and a glass of Guinness Stout or if you were so inclined wash it down with something stronger.

TS: Did you like going to town?

JV: Yes, it was fun to go to McAleer's and joust with the local Irishmen. Joe Stewart, our supply sergeant, and I bought a horse and an Irish jaunting cart.

TS: I'm curious. Where does a noncommissioned officer and his friend keep a horse and a cart?

JV: We kept it on the parade ground at the workhouse until the first sergeant decided that he didn't want the parade ground decorated with our horse manure.

TS: What possessed you to buy a horse and a cart?

JV: Joe Stewart, his family had come from Londonderry not too many years before. So Joe Stewart was born in the United States, but his parents were both from Londonderry and talked a great deal about it and he had family members in Londonderry and knew far more about North Ireland than any of the rest of us. Joe Stewart thought that getting a jaunting cart was the way to make some time with the Irish girls.

TS: Tell me how that worked out.

JV: It was a bust. *(laughs)*

TS: You mean the girls didn't go for a nice American in his uniform, and his horse and cart?

JV: No. They thought it was undignified for Americans; it was a total bust. The horse we got, I think it was on its way to the glue factory when we bought it.

TS: There's a very nice photograph you have on your office wall in there of yourself and Joe and this cart. That suggests there are pleasant memories attached to it.

JV: Oh, yes. It was a lot of fun.

TS: Talk about a pleasant memory you have of that horse and cart.

JV: Just going down the streets of Omagh and seeing the reaction of the local people in Omagh. Some of them smiled and waved at us and thought it was great that a couple of these crazy Americans would be in this jaunting cart, and others had looks of disgust and approbation.

TS: That sort of continuum of responses to that incident – what was the response of the population as a whole to having all you soldiers, all these Americans, in their midst?

JV: I think it was a great strain on the population. The saying generally in the British Isles about the Americans was, there were a couple things wrong with them, three things: they're overpaid and oversexed and over here.

TS: Did you feel the brunt of that at times?

JV: No. I was never treated better as a soldier in any civilian community than I was in Omagh, North Ireland.

TS: You passed through a lot of them too.

JV: Yes.

TS: So that says something for them.

JV: Right. We were welcomed there. When we left – it was supposed to be a big secret that we were leaving, but the natives knew we were leaving. The people in Omagh knew we were leaving, and a group of them gave up their Christmas rations to have a farewell dinner for the NCOs in our outfit. I remember that.

TS: Talk about that.

JV: Mrs. Porter's Teahouse was the place where the dinner was. I'm sure that Mrs. Porter probably had much to do with arranging this thing. We had a nice roast chicken dinner as a farewell dinner. A number of the local people there. They weren't officials or anything like that, they were just neighbors in the general area where the battery was stationed, out near the workhouse.

TS: How many soldiers and how many local people would you say were at this event?

JV: Somewhere I have a picture, and I could count them. That will take a little searching to find that. But there were probably twenty-five of us and probably that many from Omagh.

TS: It sounds like a positive end to what you describe as a positive interaction with people, because you were there for four, five, six months.

JV: Yes, it was. It was a good experience. As I say, I never remember being treated any better as a soldier. Certainly treated just as well in some places.

TS: That's a pretty powerful statement – you passed through a lot of places. Being there for so many months, General Vessey, how did you keep in touch with your family and friends at home?

JV: By letter.

TS: Were you what we call a good letter writer?

JV: Probably not. I was probably better at it there in Northern Ireland than later in the war, because writing letters was difficult and of course they all had to be censored. You knew that one of your officers was going to read your mail. What you wrote was pretty bland.  
**(1:07:40)**

TS: How did you decide what to tell people, because people received news and information different ways?

JV: Part of the training was, "Loose lips sink ships," was not to disclose information. So putting anything military into the letter was expressly forbidden. At least it was implied that it would be a bad idea. So you didn't know what was being cut out by the officers.

TS: Could you say where you were or that you were going?

JV: We could say we were in Northern Ireland. We could say that, because that was in the press.

TS: And you could talk about local people or...

JV: Talk about local people, or we went on a road march or that sort of thing. So I'm sure that letters, other than knowing that your son or brother or boyfriend was alive, probably seemed pretty dull.

TS: And the way you describe it sounds like those letters got more difficult to write when there was more to leave out of them.

JV: Yes. Later on when we were actually in fighting, what are you going to say?

TS: It's almost easier not to write in some cases?

JV: Easier not to write. And of course the V-mail came into existence after we left Northern Ireland. But they were great, because it was one sheet of paper. You could write big and fill it up and that was the end of it.

TS: So there were advantages of that. How important was it for you to hear from people at home?

JV: It was a joy to hear from people at home, and particularly to get a package now and then. Our old Scout troop, the mothers of Troop 21, supplied cookies to the members of Explorer Post 21 throughout the whole war.

TS: Throughout the whole war! They followed you along?

JV: Right.

TS: That is excellent. I didn't know that.

JV: And our church, the people at church wrote regularly. I think my mother kept a duty roster with the other kids to write to me, because I would get letters sometimes from my sisters Marian and Jane.

TS: Right. Going to North Africa, were there rumors about where and when you were going before you actually heard officially confirmed?

JV: We had no idea where we were going. Knew we were going, but didn't know where. Now the first units of the invasion went and landed, it was 6 November, I think it was, of '42. The 34<sup>th</sup> landed at Algiers. We were not part of that.

TS: Right. I was going to ask you.

JV: By that time we knew where we were going.

TS: Because they had gone ahead of you.

JV: Yes.

TS: Right. When did you actually – you and the unit you were with specifically – land in North Africa?

JV: We landed in December. Toward the end of December.

TS: Sort of wrap up the months you were in Northern Ireland, because that turned out to be a long time in one place, as you were kind of moving.

JV: Yes. We went to England to stage to go to North Africa.

TS: From Portsmouth or Southampton, one of those places?

JV: We were in a camp about halfway between Liverpool and Norwich.

TS: So central there.

JV: Yes. We loaded in Liverpool.

TS: And went all the way around?

JV: Right.

TS: Another fairly long sea journey.

JV: Yes.

TS: From the months you were there in Northern Ireland, were you able now under wartime conditions to see effective leaders and effective leadership coming to the front?

JV: Yes. At least you could judge about the leadership in your own outfit. We got a new division commander, who stayed with us only while we were in North Ireland, and got another one...we got a new one before we left Fort Dix. Then we got another new one in North Ireland that took us to North Africa. But that's pretty far removed from a staff sergeant in an artillery outfit, except that the second turn of division commanders, we got a fellow named Ryder, Doc Ryder. Doc was the name he went by. He was a World War I vet and knew the importance of unit cohesion and knew there was a lot more being a part of the 34<sup>th</sup> Division rather than being just your own little chunk of it.

While we were in North Ireland the First Ranger Battalion was formed from the two divisions that were in North Ireland. By that time the First Armored Division had come to North Ireland as well, so there were two American divisions in North Ireland, and the First Ranger Battalion was formed out of the First Armored and the 34<sup>th</sup>. C Company of the First Ranger Battalion was primarily made up of artillerymen from the division artillery. In fact, our battery commander went on to command C Company of the First Ranger Battalion, and I would have gone with them I think, because he wanted me to, but I was in the hospital recovering from a hernia operation at that time.

TS: How might that have changed your Army career had you not been in the hospital and gone with that unit?

JV: It certainly would have put me through a different set of circumstances, because the First Ranger Battalion was essentially wiped out at Cisterna at the Anzio beachhead [in 1944, in Italy].

TS: And a number of those men were captured as well.

JV: Yes. Bill Martin, who was our battery commander, was killed there.

TS: Learning and teaching: You were giving training to people. Did you feel yourself as a pretty good teacher or trainer at that time?

JV: I don't know whether I ever thought about that. It was what had to be done, and I was charged with the responsibility, as were the other NCOs. So I had my chunk of it and took it seriously I think.

TS: What would you say you learned during this kind of wartime training about the importance of cooperation and communication?

JV: Obviously that team building was the key. You were going to build a team for whatever project you were going to undertake. You had to build a team, and the team had to work. I think that was evident from the very early training.

TS: From what you learned – because you were interested in team building your whole career – what did you start to learn makes an effective leader and an effective team builder?

**(1:15:20)**

JV: Having people that would be effective parts of the team. Now in the Army you get dealt your hand. That is, you don't get to pick and choose. You're not hiring the soldiers that are issued to you.

TS: Right. They're issued to you.

JV: But you do have some freedom to assign responsibility among those people and you also have the freedom to use whatever team building methods that you want to use to build the team. What I tried to do is – even in some of those simple tasks – is make a game out of it. Reward people for being the best at whatever we were doing, and in the same fashion inspire those who didn't do well to try to do better, whether it's identifying enemy aircraft or hitting the target on the machine gun range or copying code with Morse code from a modulated continuous wave radio or whatever it was. Make a game out of it. The same with – we did a lot of, not a lot but plenty of training with high explosives. Training to blow up enemy mines and so on and so forth. Practicing dealing with mines when you know that the mines that you have out there that you're going to find aren't going to blow up, but you want to put as much realism into the exercise, as you can and inspire the soldiers that are working on that task.

TS: What you're describing sounds like in other words more positive reinforcement than it is being a yeller or a person who is accentuating the negative.

JV: Yes. I was never a shouter or a screamer. In fact, it used to annoy me when I'd see people doing that. Maybe it comes from the people that I worked for early. I remember when I first became a surveyor we were always timed, the survey problem. You had to get the battery centers located as accurately and quickly as you possibly could, which meant getting to work early. But we had a survey sergeant – in fact the fellow I talked about earlier who went to OCS and was the first OCS field artillery battalion commander in World War II – but Maurice Steensland was a cool customer. We'd get the order from the commander, which would outline what survey we had to conduct. Steensland would come over and sit down underneath a tree and tell us to leave him alone. He'd sit down and pull a cigarette out of his cigarette pack, smoke a cigarette. I once asked him why we always wasted that ten minutes or so while he smoked the cigarette. He said, "We're going to be timed on this operation. We have to do it in so much time and we have to do it accurately, and I have to tell you people what to do in order for us to complete that task." He said, "If I sit down and think about it, I'm far more likely to tell you to do it the right way than I am if I just stand up there and start giving you orders before I've thought through what the objective is." I thought that Steensland's philosophy was a good one to carry on through the rest of my life, although I didn't smoke the cigarettes. *(chuckles)*

TS: But that's a lesson that you internalized as a way of communicating with and motivating people.

JV: Yes. Let's do it right the first time.

TS: That's a good example. When you got the word that you were staging to England it was then...action somewhere was imminent. How did you feel about that? I mean, it's getting closer all the time and now it's like right in the next minute, so to speak.

JV: That was what we trained for and what we expected to have happen. I think for me and for most of the people that were around me was, let's get on with it.

TS: From what we read people reacted at that time to these impending combat situations very, very differently. Some, we read reports of bravado or nervousness or nerves or what have you. There seemed to be a range of reactions and how people anticipate things.

JV: Well, if you aren't nervous at the prospect of being shot at there's probably something wrong with you. (*chuckles*) So I don't think there's anything wrong with being a little nervous at that prospect, but that's why you want to convert that nervousness into energy to succeed. That you are ready and that the unit that you're responsible for is ready and that the men around you are as prepared to keep themselves alive and do their duty as you can possibly prepare them.

TS: Did you feel after all those months of training that you personally and the men you were with were ready?

**(1:22:00)**

JV: I thought we were ready to do what we had been trained to do. Now it didn't take us long before we learned that there were some things we hadn't been well trained on. I think the thing we learned early on is, individual protection is something that you can't overdo. For example, building shelters and bunkers and stuff like that. We were very naïve about the adequacy of the protection that we built. Once you saw what a German 150mm<sup>12</sup> shell would do or a 200 kilogram bomb would do, you discovered that you needed to fill a lot more sandbags.

TS: Does that only come with the experience of seeing that you need to do something differently?

JV: For us it did. I hope that our experience was translated into better training for the rest of the Army that was to come later. Certainly fighting against German tanks, we had been taught that you need to hit certain parts of the tank, but seeing the tank hit with shells or anti-tank fire and so forth and then nothing happening to the tank brings home those lessons very clearly. Hey, you should hit it someplace else. And the difficulty of firing at a

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<sup>12</sup> German 150mm: basic division-level heavy howitzer during World War II.

dive bombing Stuka<sup>13</sup> and so forth is brought home very quickly when you expend a lot of ammunition and the airplane keeps coming.

TS: That can't be a good feeling. On the eve of North Africa then, let me wrap up for today and in thinking about Northern Ireland and the preparations for going to North Africa, ask if there's anything else you'd like to add to that.

JV: I don't think so except the understanding that I had that we had a pretty good outfit, that it was basically a National Guard outfit. We got a lot of new people in just before we left for overseas because we had sent a lot of the other soldiers and NCOs to OCS. But we had a good outfit, one that was dedicated to doing what it had to do and was generally ready to do it. We had a good battery commander, good executive officer, good motor officer. Had a good supply sergeant, my friend Joe Stewart. We had a good mess sergeant and a good motor sergeant. Generally the administrative ends of the organization were well tied together. They knew their duties. Our company clerk was Miles Zimmerman, who later became a federal judge. So we had talented people doing their jobs.

TS: I've heard you say more than once, it's all about the people.

JV: Yes.

TS: So having good people increases self-confidence as well.

JV: Right.

TS: On that note then let me turn this machine off for today.

### **END OF INTERVIEW**

Source referenced during this interview:

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Book II • Pisa to Final Victory

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<sup>13</sup> Stuka: Junkers Ju-87 (from German *Sturzkampfflugzeug*, or dive bomber); two-man (pilot and rear gunner) dive bomber and ground-attack aircraft.