

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

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

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**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, 17 April 2012, and this is the fourth interview with General John Vessey. My name is Thomas Saylor.

General Vessey, today we're departing or transitioning from Northern Ireland, where you had been for a number of months in training and seeing this unit sort of come together. All in all a time that you found positive and enjoyable, that both the people and the training were useful; your comments last time were fairly positive about that time.

JV: Indeed.

TS: Embarking for North Africa. We know from the unit history [of the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division]<sup>1</sup> that the unit moves there in November, and your unit arrived in North Africa later.

JV: Yes. I assume it was by design. Having been far away from the planners of invasions of continents at that time (*chuckles*), it appeared to be part of the plan. The invasion of North Africa, the Torch Operation as it was called, involved a regimental combat team of the 34<sup>th</sup> Division and the division headquarters, or at least a part of the division headquarters landing at Algiers. The Algiers Task Force was under the command of the 34<sup>th</sup> Division commander, that is General Ryder<sup>2</sup>, and then the rest of the division came later. The first units landed, made the invasion at Algiers, and that was the Task Force that had come from the United Kingdom. The other parts of the invasion of North Africa had come from the States, part landing in Morocco and part landing at Oran, in Algeria. When we came, we came into the port at Oran.

TS: Right. Embarking – you embarked for Oran, for Algeria, in Northern Ireland?

JV: We did not. We went to England. We went to England and we were staged there. We were there for a couple of weeks at a camp. It was between Norfolk and Liverpool.

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</sup> Charles W. Ryder (1892-1960); U.S. Army officer. General Ryder commanded the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division from May 1942 to July 1944.

TS: You mentioned that last time, that's correct. That's my error. When a unit – the unit you were with – actually gets on board a ship, logistically that's a big operation?

JV: It is a big operation.

TS: What did that look like from your perspective? A unit going on board a ship.

JV: You've just described it. It was a big operation. *(chuckles)*

TS: What were you responsible for?

JV: Making sure that all of our equipment got to the port and was loaded, and that the soldiers had their individual equipment with them and that it was complete, and that we were in good health.

**(4:40)**

TS: Does that mean you supervised the loading of guns, munitions, et cetera?

JV: Equipment mostly. We had the ammunition for the weapons that we had went aboard, the trucks and so forth. It was loaded so that when we got off, you could fight.

TS: Right. So literally it was rolled on in a way so it would be rolled off ready to go.

JV: Yes. Actually much of it was hoisted off.

TS: As opposed to rolling. And you personally, you were supervising or responsible for other soldiers to ensure they had their personal kit with them.

JV: I was the first sergeant of the battery, and of course you did work through the NCOs that were in charge of various sections of the battery. My individual responsibility was working with the battery commander to make sure that we did what he wanted to do and did it in a way that he wanted it done, and then checked to make sure that the other –

TS: Loading a ship and unloading a ship like that – did that get easier with time? Because you did it more than once.

JV: Oh, yes. Like anything else, the second time ought to be a little easier than the first time. At least you can correct the mistakes that you made the first time around.

TS: Right. When you got on board the ship then, what kind of quarters did you have? You're a first sergeant now.

JV: This was an Australian ship that we went on, and for the moment I have forgotten the name of the thing. It had been used often as a troop transport, so the crew was thoroughly familiar with transporting soldiers and equipment and so forth. It was not a luxury liner; it was built to be a transport.

TS: Because you had come across the Atlantic on an older ocean liner, the *Aquitania*, and this was not an ocean liner.

JV: No, this was not. It was an ocean going ship.

TS: Yes, but it wasn't a passenger liner.

JV: It wasn't a passenger liner, no; it was built as a troop transport. As far as the living quarters, we had a stateroom with...I think there were four of us – no, there were six of us in the stateroom. It was okay.

TS: What goes through your mind when, I mean you're leaving England and you know that the next place you're going is a place where there's actual fighting going on. That hasn't been the case before.

JV: Right. It focuses your attention. We knew we were going to war and it was time to... I think I told you, on the way to North Ireland we had a bridge game that kept us going most of the way across. We didn't play any bridge on the way to North Africa.

TS: Why not?

JV: Because we spent the daytime hours reviewing training. When we weren't doing that we were sleeping.

**(9:25)**

TS: So it sounds like a much different voyage this time.

JV: Yes.

TS: How were the men that you worked with? How did they seem to be preparing themselves? I mean, human beings internalize things in different ways.

JV: I'd say that the fact that we're really going to war focused the attention of almost everyone. You always have a few soldiers that, even when you're being shot at, that don't recognize that we're in a war. But we had a good group of NCOs. They were in the process of refining the team building that had gone on in previous training. The thing that we knew we would face would be the fact that enemy air would be over us, and identifying the airplanes became far more important. We were still under the impression that chemical warfare might occur, and so paying attention to chemical warfare.

TS: No kidding. So this was still if not expected, it was to be planned for.

JV: Yes. Then it was a matter of we disassembled and reassembled machine guns and individual weapons, and reviewed training for the various things that we'd have to do on the battlefield. You can't do much aboard ship. There's not much room. But we did have room to have classes and we brought along enough training aids to be able to make the time reasonably useful.

TS: How many days were you at sea, do you recall?

JV: It was a long trip. I have frankly forgotten the date that we sailed. I'm sure we can find it. But it was quite a long trip. Of course I think they were trying to keep the Germans uninformed, at least guessing about where ships were going. So it seems to me that we got out into the Atlantic, and it seemed like we were sailing in circles for a long time. Finally when we went through Gibraltar, then we went quickly straight to Oran.

TS: You mentioned a few moments ago that your unit had good NCOs. From your perspective, what makes a good NCO?

JV: First, having the technical knowledge required to do what his team is supposed to do. Secondly, having the leadership and the training skill to impart that knowledge to other people, and having the leadership to be able to build a team out of the soldiers that he has. And with that the character and integrity required to gain the confidence of the soldiers.

**(14:00)**

TS: Is that hard to do, gain the confidence of soldiers who are under you?

JV: The answer to that is, if you know what you're doing, the answer is no, it's not hard. But if you don't know what you're doing and you don't have those skills, and you don't have the integrity and the humanity to build confidence in the people that you're leading, then it ranges from difficult to impossible.

TS: I see. Who were some of the good NCOs in this unit that you recall?

JV: Bob Kelsey came from Enderlin, North Dakota, worked for the railroad before he got into the Army, had been in some sort of a supervisory maintenance position working for the railroad, and knew his job. He had a good sense of humor and could, under very difficult conditions, still keep the troops happy. [Jim] Gregg was our mess sergeant. Gregg was a superb NCO. He was a union organizer. He organized the grave diggers union (*laughing*) in Minneapolis. But Jim Gregg would produce a good meal and get it to the troops no matter how difficult the circumstances were. He was one of these guys, he always knew where the ration point was and he got there and drew the rations, got them to us, and he always had some innovative way of improving the lousy rations that we had during the Tunisian Campaign.

TS: Were they lousy? By comparison.

JV: For the most part we ate British rations. They weren't lousy. The rations were okay, but they weren't something Americans normally ate. Usually the rations came in the form of packs for fourteen soldiers, which is the way the British ration was packed in those days. I don't remember whether a squad had fourteen people in it or why it was that way. It was canned food. Three basic menus, main menus. One was haircut oxtail, and another was steak and kidney pudding, and the other was Irish stew which was a lamb or a mutton

stew. You won't find any of those on the menu in any McDonald's or places where American youth eat today. (*chuckles*)

TS: We can draw our own conclusions from that. Okay.

JV: And tea was the drink rather than coffee.

TS: When did British rations disappear and American supplied rations begin, do you recall?

JV: Toward the end of the Tunisian Campaign we were beginning to get some American rations.

TS: Once you started to get American rations in the unit did that continue going forward then?

JV: Yes. From then until the end of the war we ate American rations.

TS: One thing that I know you mentioned before was it was on this journey from the U.K. to North Africa that your father died.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you receive that news while you were on board the ship?

JV: No, no. No, I didn't receive that news until probably...we were already in Tunisia when I learned that my father had died.

TS: How do you remember that? How did the news come to you?

JV: It came in a letter.

TS: And did your supervisors know what the content of this letter was before you got it?

JV: No.

TS: Just a sealed piece of mail.

JV: Yes. Just ordinary mail from my mother.

TS: How did you react to getting that news?

JV: I was not surprised that my father had died. I knew that his health wasn't particularly good, and I knew [from] letters earlier that I'd received in North Ireland, I knew that my father was back in the Vet's Hospital [in Minneapolis]. So it was sad, but not surprising.

TS: Your dad died – what did that mean for your mom and the rest of your family?

JV: It meant that my mother was left with six kids still in school or training of some kind. I think my oldest sister by that time had started nurse's training. But the rest of them were still all at home, and with a mortgage.

TS: As the oldest son were you eligible to get out of the service and take care of your family now?

JV: I don't think so. It never came up.

TS: Your pay at that time, did that enable you to send money home at all to take care of your family?

**(21:00)**

JV: Oh, yes. As I said earlier, when I got promoted to first sergeant in Northern Ireland on 1 September 1942, the first sergeants were promoted to master sergeant that same day. So I got a very sizeable pay increase, percentage-wise. It was \$72 a month to \$96, or something like that. Don't hold me to the accuracy of those numbers, but they're within the ballpark anyway. Starting much earlier I had started sending more than half my money home to the family.

TS: Your siblings – you're the oldest. Did any of your other siblings go into service during the war?

JV: My brother Don, who was the middle of the seven children, finally became old enough to join the Navy. He joined the Navy in the last years of World War II.

TS: And did he serve stateside or did he serve overseas?

JV: He served overseas in the Navy and then was discharged, and then was called back for the Korean War.

TS: So he was in the Reserves and was called back then.

JV: Yes.

TS: To get back to your situation, you weren't entirely surprised by your dad passing away, because his health had been poor. When you arrived in North Africa then, you'd been in Northern Ireland, and I know from your descriptions you paid attention to what it looked like and felt like in a way. North Africa is a different place altogether. I'm wondering, as you close your eyes and remember that, if you can just sort of from your perspective describe the terrain and the people, the sights, the smells of North Africa. What's that like for a young man?

JV: It was a new world. We went to an old Berber town almost immediately. Tlemcen<sup>3</sup>, in the Atlas Mountains. So we went some distance from Oran. It must have been a hundred miles or so from Oran into this old Berber town. We went into the barracks of a French colonial regiment. It was the home barracks of the Second Spahis, which was an Arab White Horse Cavalry outfit that was part of the French Army. The regiment itself had already been moved to Tunisia, and the rear echelon was still there. It was our living quarters for maybe two weeks. We'd already come through the transition from the living quarters of the American Army in the United States to the living quarters of the British Army in Northern Ireland, and now we made this next jump into the living quarters of a French colonial regiment.

TS: How do they compare?

JV: *(chuckles)* It was downhill all the way. *(laughter)*

**(25:30)**

TS: That's being frank about it.

JV: I think that the two places that you inspect, if you go to inspect a barracks in the United States Army, the first two places you go is you go to the latrines and the second place you go is to the mess hall, and see how the food is being prepared and under what conditions.

TS: Talk about those two places. How were the latrines there?

JV: *(chuckles)* There was a stream of water that ran down a stone ditch and it had footpads on either side of that stream of water. You straddled it and took care of whatever relief you were required to take care of at the time.

TS: Number one and number two same place.

JV: That's right. Same place.

TS: This is not a building, this is just a trench?

JV: This is inside the building. The mess hall was equally as primitive, but the mess hall was less of a problem for us because we had our own field kitchens at that time. We set up the field kitchen.

TS: What was the terrain? You mentioned the Atlas Mountains. You're from central Minnesota. Look around: what is the terrain like?

JV: The Mediterranean coast of North Africa is a very attractive place physically. Close to the sea you've got reasonably fertile land growing fruits and vegetables of all kinds, and of

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<sup>3</sup> Tlemcen, inland town located in far northwest Algeria.

course this is French colonial North Africa at this time. So farmers were growing things that Frenchmen eat as well as the things that the local people, local Algerians, ate.

Then you moved back. The terrain rises fairly sharply into the Atlas Mountains. I've forgotten the altitudes; they're not particularly high, but they're relatively steep. Then of course on the other side of the Atlas Mountains is the Sahara Desert. So in a fairly short space of time you've got these drastic changes in terrain, whereas here in Minnesota you've got woods and lakes and stones to the northeastern part of the state and the rest of the state is prairie and rich agricultural terrain. It goes on and on for miles, and it doesn't stop at the border of Minnesota. It goes on through Iowa and Nebraska and Kansas. So the changes were a little sharper.

TS: Rocky terrain?

JV: Rocky. The Atlas Mountains certainly. And along the whole North African coast it seems that at around Oran there the coastal plain was fairly wide, and then it gets narrower and narrower as you go toward Tunis, and the desert comes into play a lot earlier moving south from the coast at Tunis than it does in central Algeria.

TS: When you encountered people, interacted with them or just saw them, what kind of people are you seeing here?

JV: Arab women wearing burqas. The men in Oran in western dress, with fezzes on their heads. But as you got farther into the mountains, into the Berber country, the men wearing Arab robes, and sandals on their feet. Then the smell is completely different. The smell of the food.

TS: What about that? How would you describe the difference?

JV: The smell of the food is much more pungent. For us, here, we've got a lot of open space. So you go outside here and you don't smell the food anyplace. You don't smell people cooking. But there they're cooking over charcoal fires to begin with, and with a lot more spices than we use. So if you go into an inhabited area that's one thing that's pervasive, is the smell of the cooking.

TS: Did some of this cooking and some of this food find its way into the rations that you or your unit ate on a regular or semi-regular basis?

JV: No. No. The only thing we got that was at all local were eggs. Jim Gregg, our mess sergeant, would trade tea leaves for eggs, and Jim may have been the cause of much of the clash between the Western world and the Arabic world because I'm sure the tea leaves he traded had already been used.

TS: I wonder how many times he made that trade then. Maybe only once. (*chuckle both*) So there was some contact at some level with locals, even if it was trading food, or did you personally have a chance to interact with local people much?

JV: No. No, very little. When we got up into Tunisia most of the civilian population were out of the battle areas that we were in. Once in a while there were still some shepherds or camel herders or somebody like that that you'd run into. I remember our unit ran into a camel herder – what we wanted to do is, we wanted to trade something with him to get a ride on a camel.

TS: How did that go?

JV: *(chuckles)* It took a lot of sorting out. We didn't have anybody who could speak Arabic at all, so it was difficult carrying the point across. At first he thought we wanted to buy a wife. *(laughter)* As I remember the incident, he was willing – he had one he was willing to sell.

TS: So he wasn't insulted by your...

JV: Then he thought we wanted to buy a camel, and he was willing to sell a camel. We finally got to the point that we just wanted to practice a ride on one.

TS: Did you actually do that?

JV: Yes.

TS: How was that for a young man who grew up in Minneapolis?

JV: It wasn't like riding a motorcycle. If you're subject to seasickness, riding a camel will do it for you I think. It seems to have an extra joint, in addition to those that a horse has. I'm not an animal husbandry guy, so I'm not sure what the answer to this thing is, but the camel has sort of a wavy ride to it.

TS: How do you get up on a camel to ride it anyway?

JV: You get some help from the outside.

TS: We don't have pictures of this one? No pictures?

JV: No, I don't think I have.

TS: So it was a horse and a cart in Northern Ireland, and now a camel. This is a subject we have to come back to I think when we get to Italy. *(laughter both)*

**(37:00)**

Now the unit history for the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division states that between December of 1942 and early March of 1943, a period of several months there, it talks about training, ongoing training, and some first initial engagements with the enemy. So I'm going to refer to the unit history here just for one quote. "On 18 February 1943 the main part of the 34<sup>th</sup> Division was defending a gap in the mountains leading to the Sbiba-Rohia Highway. The Germans moved against this line with powerful armored and infantry forces, but although

German tanks succeeded in infiltrating into our positions, all enemy efforts to occupy ground were neutralized by the massed fire of our artillery.” Were you part of what I just described here?

JV: Yes. We had moved to the front by that time. I do not recall the exact dates, but we made this long march from this Berber village in the mountains to Tunisia, and we did it at night. Movements were all at night, and blackout. It was a long, difficult march just making sure that you got everybody to the right place at the right time.

TS: Was that part of your responsibility?

JV: It was indeed.

TS: How many men are we talking about that you’re essentially responsible for?

JV: A hundred and thirty.

TS: That’s a lot of guys. All it takes is a couple guys to make your life more challenging.

JV: Yes. You’re following blackout lights of the vehicle in front of you, and if it makes a wrong turn and you don’t know where you’re going ... And we had no maps of the area through which we traversed. We had sketch maps that were drawn up before we’d start out each night.

TS: It’s not much to go on.

JV: No. We did make it. It was a difficult, sort of a fitting introduction to the war in North Africa. This is hard stuff.

TS: Was it the terrain or the actual movement?

JV: You’re moving at night, and trying to stop and camouflage yourself in the daytime. I’m sure that our camouflage was relatively ineffective, but we weren’t attacked at any time during the move. As the division history says, we came up into that south central part of Tunisia, took on defensive positions, and we actually were under the command of the French 19<sup>th</sup> Corps at the time. So the division was in a corps commanded by a Frenchman, and we had our first engagements there.

Then on 19 February, Rommel’s attack<sup>4</sup> came, through the battle which is now usually called the Kasserine Pass battle. But the most difficult battles in my view took place farther east, at Sidi Bou Zid.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Erwin Rommel (1891-1944); German Field Marshall, commanded German and Italian forces during the North African campaign.

<sup>5</sup> City in central Tunisia; sometimes spelled Sidi Bouzid.

TS: As the unit history talks about the German efforts to occupy ground being neutralized by artillery, what is the role of artillery in this scenario that the unit history describes?

JV: It was to disrupt the enemy attack at that particular time. We were right on the line between the forces that Rommel had brought up through Libya and into Tunisia, and the German forces that had come over to occupy Tunisia from the European mainland. So the first Germans we ran into were those that ... had come from the mainland. The far more battle tested Germans, under Rommel...

TS: Those had come from Libya?

JV: Right.

TS: This massed fire of artillery, technically how does that happen? I mean the unit history says there's this fire of artillery to break up this attack. Technically, what is actually happening?

JV: As I think we described earlier, there are two keys to massing artillery: one is tying the artillery together either by survey, so that you've got fire from a common geographic base, and the other is the communications to permit you to do that. So you need your artillery batteries tied together geographically. The surveyors do that, and you need them tied together with communications, so it's either radios or wire communications. In North Africa it was a combination of the two. Our radios were poorer there than they were later on in the war. We got much improved radio communication. So wire communication was far more important in North Africa. So if you can tie the artillery together by survey and communications, and identify the target and locate it accurately, you can bring the fire of all artillery pieces that can reach that particular target onto that target.

**(45:00)**

TS: As the first sergeant, what is your responsibility in what you're describing?

JV: My responsibility was to see that the surveyors had competent leadership and training, and were able to do their job and were properly fed and provided with transportation and the support that they needed; that the communicators were properly trained and had the logistic support and were fed and watered and uniformed so that they could do their job. And the other thing the headquarters battery had is, we had the meteorological section which provided the meteorological data to the artillery, which is important in the accuracy of artillery fire, that you know what the winds aloft are and the pressure density.

TS: Wind especially, I would imagine. For weapons that fire shells over several miles, it could throw them off enough to be significant?

JV: Right.

TS: As the artillery is actually firing, what are you doing? Do you communicate literally with those three that you've just mentioned?

JV: No, not really. As first sergeant of the headquarters battery I just enjoyed the reassuring sound of the artillery firing.

TS: Were you monitoring results in order to correct as required?

JV: The things that we had to contribute were communications and the survey and the meteorological data and if it wasn't good, somebody complained and we had to get our act together.

TS: So the surveyors are reliant on forward observers?

**(47:30)**

JV: No. The surveyors are reliant on finding a known location, preferably one that's known on the ground and on the map.

TS: To make that a coordinate in a sense?

JV: Yes. And then taking that location and extending it to all of the artillery so that they're all tied to the map accurately. Then the forward observers will see the target and tie it to the map by eye or by triangulation or some means and then pass it to the fire direction center, who provides the firing data to the cannons.

TS: And tells them literally, adjust in the following way or don't adjust.

JV: Yes. A cannon, you can elevate it. Three things you can do: you elevate it to a certain elevation which, with a given charge, will send the projectile a certain distance. And then you have the ability to move it laterally, and if that's tied to accurate direction which is tied to the map or you look up and find the North Star and take an azimuth from the North Star and convert it to the azimuth on the map, whatever the deviation is for the particular map in that particular year. Then you point it accurately, and then you've got a fire direction specialist with the fire direction center who converts that range to elevation for the cannon and for a charge to put behind the projectile.

TS: The projectiles and the charges could be mixed and matched, right? I mean there were different projectiles and different charges depending on...

JV: Yes. The projectile for any given cannon is usually stable; that is, its weight may vary somewhat, and then you make some minor computational arrangement.

TS: These twenty-five pounders...

JV: That was the production weight, twenty-five pounds. By lot number it might vary 25.1 or something like that. But that would be identified with the particular lot of ammunition that you got, so you made some adjustment for that.

TS: I've read about artillery and I don't know very much, but there are high explosive shells or armor piercing shells, different types of shells that you would use in different...

JV: Right. For different purposes. Basically, most artillery shells for World War II were just high explosive shells and you produced casualties, like personnel casualties or light equipment casualties, with the fragmentation. Then you produced heavy material casualties, like a tank or a truck or a house or something like that, by the explosive power of the projectile. And you could see that 105 millimeter, which is about four and a half inches in diameter, that shell weighs thirty-three pounds. That's the basic weight for a 105 shell. A 155 cannon has a projectile, 155 millimeters, about six inches. It weighs a hundred pounds. Ninety-six pounds is the basic weight.

TS: So three times as large.

JV: You can see that the power and weight of the projectile varies exponentially almost with the change in the diameter of the projectile. An eight inch howitzer projectile weighs two hundred and three pounds. So it's double the weight of the 155.

**(52:30)**

TS: Wow! So these guns, the size of these shells for these bigger guns are quite large.

JV: Yes.

TS: Does the distance that they can fire also increase, as far as their range?

JV: Yes. The World War II twenty-five pounder was about 14,000 yards. The 105 was 12,500 yards. Now the World War I 155 howitzers that we had had the same range as the 105 – 12,500 yards. But the newer version of the 155 was around 16,500 yards. Eight inch was around 20,000 yards.

TS: Did you have all of those at some time during World War II, that you worked with?

JV: The division, in its own arsenal, after we got rid of the twenty-five pounders at the end of the Tunisian Campaign, we got American 105s. So we had 105s and 155s in the division, but then we were supported by eight inchers, and during the Italian Campaign as a forward observer I had the chance to shoot eight inch howitzers at bridges and houses that people wanted knocked down.

TS: Clarification: an eight inch gun counts as heavy artillery?

JV: Yes.

TS: As opposed to the medium and light artillery you've mentioned before.

JV: Yes. And for us, long range 155s are heavy artillery. For example, during World War II we had both self-propelled 155 millimeter guns, which were long range. They were at 26,000 yards. They counted as heavy artillery. Because of the range.

TS: Let me just stick with artillery pieces, because you know so much about them. What's the crew of these guns that you've mentioned? As the guns get bigger, do the crews get larger?

JV: Yes. The ammunition is heavier. For a 105, it's an easy job for one man to load both the projectile and the powder charge. For a 155, with a ninety-six pound projectile and probably forty pounds of firing charge, you've got a job for three men.

TS: Just the weight of the shell.

JV: Yes. And the distance that they have to move it. The gun is bigger. You've got to lift the projectile higher. And you've got to seat it firmly in there, so you've got two men lifting it and then one man ramming it with a rammer staff to make sure it's seated properly.

TS: So the crew of a 105 or a 155, how many men altogether are we talking?

JV: Again, I think the authorized crew was probably about seven, or was for World War II. It was about seven for a 105 and 155 probably about three more. Maybe ten. Eight inch, probably a dozen.

TS: So it was a lot of men as far as personnel required to make this gun work.

JV: Yes. You could make it work with far fewer, but not as efficiently.

TS: Right. You mentioned just the size of the shells. You had to move them somehow. How much care did we give in those days to the hearing protection and the noise of these things?

JV: In the early days of the artillery...of course the size of the cannons moved up. During training in the United States we had French World War I 75 millimeter cannons. So it was less noise to the firing charge. I've forgotten exactly when we pushed earplugs, but we should have pushed them a lot earlier than we did. For artillerymen it was sort of a test of manliness.

TS: Not to wear them?

JV: Not to wear earplugs or not stick your fingers in your ears.

TS: The demonstrations I've seen in watching films they seem extremely loud.

JV: Yes. They are.

TS: Did you wear earplugs?

JV: No. I can't ever remember wearing earplugs around cannons. Maybe later on in life when I flew helicopters. Again, it was sort of a test of your manhood that you didn't.

Finally of course we had ear protection. We had some ear protection with the radio headsets. Then they went to helmets for pilots. That was better ear protection.

TS: That's interesting about the kind of test of manhood, to not wear earplugs with artillery.

JV: It's a sign of stupidity is what it is. *(chuckles)*

TS: But we're talking about young men here at the time.

JV: Right. Exactly.

TS: Just as a related point, how does that work in the Army before you retired or even today, if you can comment on that? Are they still as loud and is ear protection still an issue?

JV: I don't think so. I think ear protection is accepted. It was by the time I left.

TS: So even in the '80s.

**(1:04:00)**

JV: Right. By the time of the war in Vietnam it was customary for artillerymen to wear ear protection. At least wear earplugs.

TS: Was it something that moved down the chain of command where it became more of an authorized, you will have your earplugs in.

JV: Compulsory. Right.

TS: So that had changed over time.

JV: Right. We learned a lot. I'm sure if we had studied properly the lessons of World War I we would have learned them earlier.

TS: Did we not study those lessons enough when it comes to artillery?

JV: I think we studied the lessons of World War I as it concerns how to use the artillery, but how to protect the cannoneers was an issue...of course the World War I cannons weren't nearly as loud.

TS: Yes. So maybe that lesson had to be learned with the new equipment.

JV: Yes.

TS: Let me skip ahead. As I read the unit history, Fondouk and Hill 609 played prominent roles in the unit history. Fondouk, according to the unit history, is dated 27 March to 1 April 1943. As I read the unit history, the quote was "the Germans held their line in strength." When we talk about in this case the Germans holding a position "in strength," what does that mean exactly to the lay person?

JV: Those are nice words to express the fact that in the first battle of Fondouk the attack was unsuccessful.

TS: That was the next point. It said that the result according to the unit history: "Assaults against these entrenched defenders failed."

JV: It did indeed.

TS: So when we say that the Germans are entrenched I think of course, okay a trench in the ground. But is there more to creating effective defensive positions than that?

JV: Oh, yes. The Germans, we should go back to the first battles when Rommel attacked. When Rommel attacked the basic part of the division as I said was part of the French 19<sup>th</sup> Corps and we were just north of the 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Corps, which took the brunt of Rommel's attack. But we had one regiment attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division at that time. We lost the whole regiment. Part of it was the way the regiment was deployed, and the other part was that the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division faced an overwhelming force. Numerical superiority, and then individual equipment superiority.

The Germans attacked with the best Mark IVs and Mark VIs, their best and heaviest tanks<sup>6</sup>, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division at that time was equipped with the Grant,<sup>7</sup> which had a 75 millimeter gun that had limited traverse. It was on the side of the turret, and the turret itself had a 37 millimeter gun in it. Neither of those guns could penetrate the turret or the front glacis of any of the German tanks, any of the medium or heavy German tanks. So in order to knock out one of those German tanks you had to get behind it and hit it in the rear with the guns that the Americans had. So they were at a distinct disadvantage equipment-wise.

The way the 168<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 34<sup>th</sup> was deployed on two different mountains that they were to use as strong points, the problem was they were strong points but overwhelming forces were able to bypass those strong points and break through what should have been the American line, and into the rear area. As a result you lost at least two battalions of the 168<sup>th</sup> Regiment and part of a third battalion of the 168<sup>th</sup>. So they were either killed or captured.

That battle, the closest town was the town of Sidi Bou Zid. That's where the fight really started. That was the beginning of the Kasserine Pass battle which the Germans then went west and somewhat north out of there to Kasserine, and were finally stopped at Kasserine. After that there was a major shakeup in the whole front. Fredendall<sup>8</sup>, the commander of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, was relieved, and Patton took charge of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps. Then we

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<sup>6</sup> Mark IV: the Panzer IV, a German medium tank developed in the late 1930s. Mark VI: the Panzer VI, a German heavy tank developed in 1942. Both were used extensively during World War II.

<sup>7</sup> The Grant, a U.S. produced medium tank also known as the M3, was used in the early years of the war.

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd Fredendall (1883-1963); U.S. Army General.

were moved away from the command of the French 19<sup>th</sup> Corps and under Patton's command at that time.

In fact after that battle we were instructed to build a demonstration of what the American weapons could do against German and Italian armor. The artillery was in charge of this demonstration. So we had dragged in some knocked out German tanks. We had a Mark VI Tiger and a Mark V Panther and a Mark IV tank and we had some of the Italian tanks and their infantry fighting vehicles lined up, and we had the twenty-five pounder, the 37 millimeter anti-tank gun, and we had been issued the first rocket propelled anti-tank weapons. The first bazookas, as we called them in those days. The smaller version of the bazooka. We were to have this demonstration of what the American weapons would do against these things at various ranges and so forth. General Patton was to come and see this demonstration.

**(1:09:00)**

TS: Okay. It literally was going to be, here's what these weapons can do.

JV: Right. (*chuckles*) We were a pretty rout order looking outfit, because we had no American logistic support through the entire war up until that time. It was all British support. Most of the division had stored its barracks bags at the town of Le Kef in Tunisia, which the Germans promptly bombed the warehouses in Le Kef and burned up our barracks bags. So we went through the war with what we had in our packs and what we had on our backs. And there weren't any laundries or things like that. Water was scarce. Generally at the morning mess we had tea. You got a cup of hot tea, and for us the routine was that you drank a little bit of your tea with whatever breakfast you had, and you saved the rest of the warm water for shaving.

Water was scarce. Our clothes were, I'd say, dirty at best. Some torn and worn out and so forth. In the meantime the American Army had changed the way officers wore their insignia. Before that time the officers wore, for example with the overseas cap<sup>9</sup>, the officers wore their branch of service on the cap and enlisted men had a braid the color of their arm. For example, the field artillery had a red cord around the outside of the overseas cap and the infantry had a blue one and so forth. Then you wore your regimental insignia on your overseas cap. The American Army had changed the officers' – instead of wearing regimental insignia, the officers had gold braid. All the officers had gold braid on their overseas caps. They changed it to putting your rank on the overseas cap, captain bars, and the same on the helmets. The officers would put their rank on the helmet, their insignia and rank on the front of your helmet.

TS: So second lieutenant, first lieutenant, whatever, would be on the front of the helmet.

JV: That word had not reached us yet, and our officers were still outfitted according to the regulations earlier. General Patton drove up, and I remember General Ryder and the artillery commander were there to meet him and they went out and saluted him, and we were all standing around close by, wanting to see this great man.

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<sup>9</sup> World War II-era slang term for the garrison cap, which is a foldable military cap with straight sides and a creased or hollow crown sloping to the back where it is parted. Introduced during World War I.

TS: So you knew who he was.

JV: Oh, yes. Of course we had fought against Patton in the Carolina Maneuvers, when we were part of the First Divisional Provisional Tank Destroyer Group. So we knew who Patton was very well. Patton drove up and he got out of his very well washed, beautifully painted Jeep. Beautifully painted Jeep, with stars on the front of it. Exquisite uniform, with his Sam Browne belt<sup>10</sup> and his cavalry boots. Got out of the Jeep and returned the salute of General Ryder and General Stanford, looked around at the rest of this motley crew and announced, "Worst disciplined troops I've ever seen in my life." And got in his Jeep and drove away. *(laughs)*

TS: That was it?!

JV: That was it. So we didn't shoot a round in the demonstration.

TS: But you remember that.

JV: Well! The next day we got orders, strict orders, about, first, the officers getting into uniform – and the officers had to wear neckties. And we had to wear our helmets at all times. That whole thing seems sort of disgusting and ridiculous to us, but Patton made us a better army by doing that.

TS: How so?

JV: By pointing out that, hey, do the little things right. It may not ensure that you'll do the big things right, but it helps.

TS: Is that one of the lessons that you internalized as a soldier?

JV: It did indeed. I carried my dislike for General Patton after that incident for a long time. But as the years went by I got to understand the importance of what he was doing. In fact I remember leaving my outfit in Vietnam. When I left the 25<sup>th</sup> Division in Vietnam, a bunch of the NCOs gave me a picture of them going to the shower. They had their helmets on; they had their flack vests on; they had their ammunition belts around their waists; and they were carrying their towels and their rifles. And otherwise they were unclothed. *(laughs)* It was sort of a joke of my insistence in the 25<sup>th</sup> Division Artillery, wear your helmet and your flack vest, and you're going to have your ammunition belt and your rifle with you at all times. *(chuckles)*

**(1:19:30)**

TS: They took you quite literally on that, it sounds like.

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<sup>10</sup> A combination wide belt and a narrower strap which passes diagonally over the right shoulder.

JV: You could almost trace that back to that incident, many years earlier in Tunisia.

TS: And so you did remember that incident. Did you also have a chance during the war to encounter General Patton again?

JV: No, I never did again. Patton went on and fought in Sicily and then went back to England and prepared for the invasion [of Normandy, in 1944]. But we did have, General Bradley<sup>11</sup> then took over. General Bradley had come up the night before Rommel's attack. General Bradley came to our position and introduced himself.

TS: Did you know him previously?

JV: No, no.

TS: Hadn't met him?

JV: No. But then he became the corps commander immediately after Patton, and took the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps through the rest of the Tunisian Campaign. Then years later, after General Bradley had retired and I was Vice Chief of Staff with the Army, one of my duties as the Vice Chief was, wherever General Bradley was when he died, it was my duty to escort his remains to Washington. But before that time General Bradley, when he'd come to Washington, he'd always stop in the Pentagon. Never forgot his duty to help train junior officers. He'd always sit down and have a question and answer session with junior officers in the Pentagon. Of course junior officers in the Pentagon are lieutenant colonels and full colonels.

TS: Junior officers – it's a matter of relativity here.

JV: Yes, right. But they were wonderful sessions. I just had occasion to remember one of them recently. One of the junior officers had asked General Bradley a question. He said, "If you had it to do all over again, what would you change for your preparations for the assault in Normandy and the march across France and Germany and the rest of the war?" General Bradley thought for a minute and said, "Yes, I would make one major change. I'd put a lot more emphasis on marksmanship." The follow on question was, "Why?" Bradley went on to explain that during the war in northern Europe, central Europe, he'd lie awake at night and listen to the Red Ball Express<sup>12</sup> go by his tent hauling bombs and shells and machine gun and rifle ammunition to the front, and realized that most of it wouldn't hit anything. He said, "We bought that ammunition at great expense to the American people, and we brought it across the Atlantic risking the lives of the mariners through the gauntlet of German submarines, and hauled it to the front and then shot it without hitting anything."

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<sup>11</sup> Omar N. Bradley (1893-1981), U.S. Army field commander in North Africa and Europe during World War II. In 1949, President Truman appointed him the first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

<sup>12</sup> Truck convoy system initiated in 1944 to supply Allied forces as they advanced from the Normandy invasion area toward Germany.

TS: As an artilleryman during the war, how accurate is that comment about the accuracy of the artillery?

**(1:20:00)**

JV: I would say it didn't apply to the artillery. I think by both our own evaluation, and the evaluation of our enemies, the greatest contribution we made to the tactics, techniques, and procedures during World War II was the ability to mass artillery.

TS: Accurately.

JV: Yes.

TS: We talked just a little bit about what happened at Fondouk, and these assaults against entrenched positions failed. With that you've now had a couple of combat engagements yourself and I'm wondering in what ways real combat experience differed from the way you had imagined beforehand it was going to be.

JV: For us, in our outfit, the big difference was the understanding of the power of high explosive munitions. The German 200 kilogram bomb on a Stuka [dive bomber] was a big bang, and anything that we thought about preparing individual protection and bunkers and so forth – we weren't even close to the sort of work and engineering that was required to protect ourselves even from artillery fire.

TS: When you captured German positions or moved past German positions, did you learn from their positions how one might construct things that are more effective?

JV: We learned more from ourselves. Fortunately we had a few officers who were World War I vets. Colonel Fritz Q. Peterson was the Div Arty<sup>13</sup> exec, and both he and General Stanford, our commander, were both World War I vets and they knew that our preparations were inadequate. For example, in the very first position we went into in Tunisia we constructed a Div Arty fire direction center command post with a lot of sandbags and a lot of timber, and Colonel Peterson came and said, "Do you think that's adequate?" We had filled a lot of sandbags and done a lot of digging and so forth, and answered, yes. He said, "Get that truck over here and drive it up on top." Of course we drove it up on top, we did what he said, and it indeed collapsed. We thought he was being smart alecky and overzealous until we actually got bombed and shelled. We discovered that Fritz Peterson was right, that we needed a lot heavier timber and we needed a lot more sandbags.

TS: Let me just pick up that thread you just mentioned there for a moment. This experience of being bombed from the air or counter battery fire, what was that like?

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<sup>13</sup> Slang term for Division Artillery.

JV: Initially it was unnerving, needless to say, and particularly the air business because it looked as though we were not contesting the Germans for air superiority. And I understand now, [after] many years of looking at the history and understanding what was going on, why the difference. But the fact of the matter is, when we heard airplanes during the early days, our early days in the Tunisian Campaign, we didn't look up because we knew it wasn't ours. And sooner or later you got to understand the noise that the individual airplanes made, and you could identify a Stuka or ME-109<sup>14</sup> from the sound of the thing. I somehow maintained the position that I knew we were going to win because God was on our side, but there wasn't a lot of other evidence.

TS: Is there a way to adequately prepare soldiers, in this case yourself, for what that's going to be like to be on the receiving end of that?

JV: Right. And we have made dramatic changes in our training during my lifetime, and I'm sure that they're continuing on over the twenty-five years since I left the armed forces.

TS: Talking about learning lessons, were you a person at the time who wrote things down, who made notes for yourself, and said, I've got to remember that?

JV: I wrote things down, but I'm not a very good repository for those sorts of notes other than in my brain. But I think there are certain lessons that I remembered from those days that were engraved in my mind, that governed the way I functioned and not only that but the influence that I had on the Army and the armed forces for training for future wars.

TS: What were some of those? Because from the very early times now, these engagements, I've heard you mention a couple things that you remember specifically.

JV: The first is the importance when we talked about what qualities should the NCO have, and I think I listed as number one the technical knowledge and capability to do the job. Guessing on the battlefield – there are certain things where you have to guess a little bit, but the less you rely on estimates and the more on facts and knowledge, the better off you are. So it is the importance of knowing your job and doing it correctly and drilling it so that you do do it correctly. And the importance of drills – for the artillery when you're firing that you always put things like the fuse wrench in the same place every time, no matter what's happened. You put it in the same place so that you reach for it and it's always there. Because when there's no pressure on you and it's a leisurely peacetime exercise, if you misplaced it you could look around and it's pretty easy to identify. But if somebody else is shooting at you, you want to be able to reach and pick it up without having to look for it, because your eyes and attention is focused on something else.

That's a small example, but the same is true for tank crews or infantry squads or artillery sections or whatever. The importance of having these things that are just routine things, but having them that are important, having them become rote so that they happen

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<sup>14</sup> Messerschmitt 109, a single-seat fighter aircraft first flown in 1936. It was Germany's most-produced fighter during World War II.

automatically in times of stress. The other is the importance of having a good plan to do what you're supposed to do on the battlefield, that is that the artillery and infantry are tied together firmly so that the infantryman gets the support he needs when he needs it. That takes more than just talking about it. You've got to practice it, and you've got to practice it with live fire so that the infantryman knows what it's like to have a 105 [artillery shell] land a hundred yards away from him and it's his, and it's there for his protection.

You started to talk about the battle of Fondouk, and the failure there in the first battle of Fondouk. The failures were, if you look at the record of that battle, the failures were numerous. Poor coordination between the air and the ground. There was supposed to be an air bombing at a certain time – it didn't show up on time. Then the infantry was supposed to follow what was then called a rolling barrage, where we fired ahead of the infantry as they went forward. That was a leftover from World War I.

TS: That's right. I read about that with respect to World War I as something that was learned during that conflict.

**(1:31:00)**

JV: Yes. After the first battle of Fondouk, there was great consternation in the 34<sup>th</sup> Division because we were under the command of Anderson<sup>15</sup>, the British 1<sup>st</sup> Army commander, who thought that the 34<sup>th</sup> Division was inept, that it was untrained and poorly led, and should be shipped back for retraining. It was sort of ghastly.

So we did a rolling barrage demonstration, and the artillerymen, in this demonstration of the rolling barrage, we took up the roll of infantrymen. We went out and had the other artillerymen firing in front of us as we went forward and had the infantry – at least the infantry officers and senior NCOs – watching this demonstration of the rolling barrage. Of course the rolling barrage was no longer used, because you don't attack with long lines of infantrymen going forward as they did in World War I or the Civil War or something like that. The effective infantry attack is much different, and supporting it with artillery is much different.

But anyway, those were some of the fallouts from that first battle of Fondouk in which the infantry was not used to attacking and using artillery. The air support was sort of a ho hum operation. It was completely ineffective. So the importance of tying those three together on the battlefield, that is air support, artillery support and infantry attacks, requires a lot of hard and difficult training. It's difficult today. If you haven't practiced it and refined your communications and other procedures properly, it won't be done correctly. You lose lives and endanger the operation.

TS: Did we learn from these first operations that didn't go optimally, that we needed to make corrections and we began to make them?

JV: Oh, yes. Yes. Yes. That was the wonderful thing about the commanders that we had, from General Bradley on through the division commanders and so forth. They knew what

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<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Anderson (1891-1959); British Army officer, commanded British 1<sup>st</sup> Army at the Allied invasion of Tunisia.

had to be done and I'd say for us, every day we weren't in contact or every day, that every day was a training day, no matter what was going on.

TS: So there was always something to be learned or refined.

JV: Right.

TS: By the time the North African Campaign was over, what I'm hearing is that the United States Army, at least from your perspective in the artillery, was qualitatively better than when it had landed in the end of 1942.

JV: Yes. All the way around. By the time the Tunisian Campaign was over, we had better equipment. We were far better trained. We understood battle. The leadership, the poor leaders had been called out by and large.

TS: Did you feel personally more confident in your abilities as a soldier then also, to be effective and to get the job done?

JV: Oh, yes. Right. I was first sergeant. Most first sergeants in the Army are pretty senior NCOs that have been around for a long time. I was a neophyte.

TS: You were twenty, twenty-one maybe.

JV: Right. So it was almost like Ned in the first reader initially for me. I had a lot to learn and had to work at learning it, and it was a lot more work than I thought it would be. It was full time work. Eventually it became routine for me to make sure that everyone was protected every night, that everyone got fed, that everyone had water, that we had a perimeter that was effectively defended, that people knew what their job was. And at first a lot seems sort of overwhelming. Then you finally learn to use the chain of command, use the other NCOs, and have a plan – and it can all be done in the time available if you plan it properly. Get it done. By the time that the Tunisian Campaign was over I was a lot more comfortable.

TS: Did you like being a first sergeant?

JV: It was a good job.

TS: During our next meeting, if it's okay with you, we can talk about what happened at Hill 609, which is an important part of the Tunisian Campaign.

JV: *(nods yes)*

TS: So with that I'll turn our machine off for the day.

JV: Okay.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

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