

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

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

**Date of interview: 20 April 2012**

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

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, May 2012**

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

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

TS: Today is Friday, 20 April 2012, and this is our fifth interview with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor.

General Vessey, today we wanted to go back to 1943 and the Tunisian Campaign, and the engagement known as Hill 609. I went to the [34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division] unit history<sup>1</sup>, and I'm going to read just a sentence here about training and preparation. "After a very grueling and somewhat discouraging introduction to heavy combat at Fondouk, all units passed through a rigorous week of training with special emphasis on night attacks and the cooperation between infantry and artillery in the assault behind a rolling barrage." What was deemed necessary for some kind of rigorous week of training? What had happened at Fondouk that had indicated something needed to be addressed?

JV: In the first battle of Fondouk, I think you could say that almost everything that could go wrong went wrong. The air failed to show up on time. The attack plan had the line of departure for the infantry behind ground that the enemy already controlled, and the artillery preparation was drawn up around the infantry plan and the line of departure that the infantry commanders or the division commander, whoever made the plan, had drawn on the map. So the artillery preparation had no effect on the first German units that the infantry encountered, and the infantry as a result ran into a strong German defensive position before they reached the line of departure and things went downhill from there.

TS: I see.

JV: The second battle was better organized. I have forgotten the exact details of how the command arrangements were adjusted for the second battle. As I think I told you in the last session, we were under British command at that time, and the British commander [General Kenneth Anderson] didn't think the 34<sup>th</sup> Division was very good. I think he had probably formed that opinion before the first battle, and frankly we probably reinforced his opinion, the way that battle went.

The second battle was reasonably successful. As we discussed the last time, in between those two battles the artillery put on for the infantry a demonstration of following a rolling barrage, and then the second battle the artillery and infantry coordination was

---

<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 3 Mar 14.

better, but still not as good as it could have been. At first, as I mentioned the last time we talked, the rolling barrage was something that needed to be thrown out.

TS: Yes. I wanted to go into that a little more, because it was a tactic that was developed during World War I and was effective. Why was it no longer effective from your perspective as an artilleryman?

JV: World War I was really a battle of lines, that is, with each side having intricately constructed trench systems as close to the enemy as they reasonably could be. The term “no man’s land” came from World War I, and it was the land between the two trench systems. Attacks had limited objectives, because you had to get through the first line of enemy trenches. The land between the two lines was patrolled by both sides and each side tried to establish outposts beyond the main line of trenches to sort of creep up on the enemy. The rolling barrage... when the infantry attacked in World War I they attacked with large numbers covering all of this ground, shoulder to shoulder. It was a throwback to the way wars were fought even much earlier, before gunpowder as a matter of fact.

The principle of mass has always been one of the principles of warfare. That is, you want to assemble as much mass at the point of decision as you can, and more mass than the enemy has. Up through World War I, the principle ingredient in mass was humanity. But World War I, well, even beginning with the Civil War, firepower had begun to replace part of the humanity in mass. In World War I then the machine gun as well as artillery began to do it more. So by World War II, the humanity needed to protect itself from both machine guns and artillery. So you didn’t see big lines of infantry – you saw small pockets, with a squad. Infantry squads maneuvered within themselves, with fire teams covering part of the squad as it moved from one objective to another, and with the use of artillery and machine guns and heavy weapons to support that maneuver.

TS: Does that mean that in World War II artillery played a less significant role than smaller things like machine guns or mortars?

JV: No – they had a heavier role. In the first place, the accuracy of artillery improved and it wasn’t so much that the accuracy of the weapons improved as it was the way to use the weapons improved. As I think we discussed earlier, the great contribution that principally American artillery made during World War II was the massing of artillery on given targets so that you could literally pulverize a piece of ground. I watched as many as ten battalions firing at the same time on given targets, at various times of war.

TS: As crews became more practiced or proficient they could fire rounds more quickly?

JV: Yes. It’s not only the proficiency of the crews, but better weapons and in some cases the weapons made that speed. But generally, through World War II the number of rounds that you could fire in a minute was determined by the size of the weapon. The 105, five rounds a minute was an easy sort of a task, but with the 155 you couldn’t fire that fast because, first, you had to swab out the chamber after every round because you didn’t want any residue of the last charge in there when you put the next charge in. If you did, you had an explosion. So the bigger the cannon, the fewer rounds per minute you could fire.

TS: How mobile were these guns? I mean some were self-propelled, but many weren't. With 105s or 155s, how easy was it really to move these guns around and put them where they needed to be?

JV: Again, the size determined the ease of movement. The 105 was an easy weapon to move. You could pack it up and be ready to go within minutes. The 155 took a little more time. You had to do a little digging and leveling and so forth to put it in position.

At any rate, back to Fondouk. We trained between the two battles of Fondouk and we trained after the battle of Fondouk. But by that time the II Corps, the American Corps under General Bradley, was given a sector of its own. Still under the British First Army Command, but the whole corps was together and under its own command and there was a little more American cohesion then. We began to get some American logistic support. Eating American rations, for example.

TS: Right. You told me that up to this it had been British [rations] and then the French kitchens.

JV: Yes. The fellow that wrote *An Army at Dawn*, Rick Atkinson; a wonderful book. That really illustrates the conditions in the American Army, not just the 34<sup>th</sup> Division but the whole United States Army, and coming to grips with going to war in North Africa against a seasoned enemy.

TS: I think the title of the book, "An Army at Dawn," has double meanings, right? And it was a dawn as you've described it. It was almost on the job training in a way.

JV: It was. It was indeed. Every day was a training day.

TS: And yet you talk about the training that had gone on stateside and in Northern Ireland. So it wasn't as if the U.S. forces were going in unprepared. But is it safe to say, summarizing what you've been saying, that you can only know so much until you actually enter into a combat situation, and then you really learn?

JV: Yes. But we have learned since then how to train much better. I think that's one of the great lessons that has been learned from World War II, particularly in Viet Nam and Korea. The improvements in training for the American forces has been superb, and I think we probably do it better than anybody else in the world. Certainly at least during my time, and I hope we don't forget how to do that. We don't want to fail to put the effort into that training, because it's a lifesaver. It's one of those things that permits you to win and win quickly if you're better trained than the enemy that you face.

TS: The enemy you faced in the Hill 609 region the end of April 1943: why was that particular German position significant?

JV: We were back in northern Tunisia by that time. Not far from the coast and on one of the direct roads to Tunis. Clearly the Germans had invested a lot in the defense of Tunisia, and

I'm sure that one can make a great argument that it was probably a stupid idea on the part of the Germans to spend that much effort to defend a hold in North Africa. It was hard to justify strategically, except that it did help them keep some control of the Mediterranean.

TS: Right. In your position, from your perspective, were you aware at the time of how significant this position was, and what would be entailed from the artillery perspective to dislodge the Germans?

JV: It was just another day in the fight for people at my level at the time, except that it was clear I think to most everybody in the division that we had learned a lot at Sidi Bou Zid and first and second Fondouk and had grown as a division. There was certainly a lot more coherence to the division's effort.

TS: The terrain in this Hill 609, if you describe that for someone who hasn't been there, what was that area like? What did it look like?

JV: As I said, it was closer to the coast than we had been. It didn't appear to be desert-like as much as the terrain in Fondouk and farther south where we had been. 609 was the height in meters. There was a rugged two thousand foot escarpment and it did indeed control the road to Tunis.

TS: Where did you observe this engagement?

JV: The night before the battle for 609, I don't think most of the history accounts that I've read say much about this if anything, but we were issued Atabrine for the first time, which is an anti-malaria drug. And the instructions were to take six Atabrine tablets.

TS: Six?

JV: Six. So we took six Atabrine tablets the night before, and I think that was the instructions for the whole division. It made about half the people very sick. I was moderately sick, but not as sick as many of our people were. We had people lying on the ground vomiting from six Atabrine tablets.

TS: I was going to ask about the number, but that's what the instructions were.

JV: Right, those were the directions. So the infantry, in fact everybody, the infantry, the artillery was at low strength the morning of the attack on 609. As I said, it was a steep hill. The infantry had a tough time just climbing it.

TS: Literally climbing it.

JV: Yes.

TS: And where were you physically?

JV: We were in a position just to the west of 609. It was one of those places where you could see the infantry fight from the artillery positions.

TS: And from an artillery perspective, what guns were most useful in this particular battle, given the German positions on this hill?

JV: The artillery was very useful. All of them. The artillery preparation was reasonably good, and the artillery contributed much to the fight during the fight for 609.

TS: Did the Germans have artillery as well up on top?

JV: No. Their artillery was to the rear, much as ours were. I don't remember the exact details of the battle, but there were several counterattacks as the infantry gained positions on the hill. Anyway, it was eventually successful.

TS: Right. In this or in other artillery engagements, how much is the risk or the fear of counter battery fire?

JV: That's part of the plan always, to neutralize the enemy's artillery as you know it. As a matter of fact, that "Lessons Learned" that you gave me has Pete Peterson's squib about counterbattery and how the evolution of the duties of the division artillery intelligence officer become the counterbattery officer. Not only counterbattery for artillery, but Peterson's duties evolved into the counter mortar program as well, to neutralize the German mortars. In fact much of the way we go about it today grew out of work that Pete Peterson had done in both counter mortar and counterbattery.<sup>2</sup>

TS: Could or would an artillery unit like your own typically be assigned to do both, to be firing on targets as well as counterbattery fire, or was it one or the other?

JV: You can only shoot at one target at a time with any given cannon obviously, so the attack plan would include plans for countering enemy artillery and mortars as well as...the last thing you'd undertake would be shooting at the infantry positions. But you'd have as part of the plan some fire that would go intermittently on the enemy artillery. When it fired you would shift your fire to the enemy artillery, particularly if it was being effective against your own infantry.

TS: Knowing that each side was engaged in a chess game almost of trying to neutralize the other, was it important to move your own guns and in a sense to stay one step ahead of counterbattery measures?

---

<sup>2</sup> *Lessons Learned in Combat: November 1942 – September 1944* (Headquarters, 34th Infantry Division, Italy, September 1944). Source: Charles L Bolte papers, Box 6, U.S. Army Military History Institute Library, Carlisle Barracks, PA. At <http://www.34infdiv.org/history/34div/LessonsLearned.pdf>. Accessed 10 Jan 2014.

JV: Yes, perhaps. But once the battle started you didn't want to move your artillery when the battle's underway, because you want the fire available to help the infantry. So it's choosing a position beforehand from which you can cover the targets that you need to cover. Generally, you move the light artillery forward, as far forward as you can reasonably be safe before the battle starts, and then you shift fire by moving where the cannonballs go.

TS: Okay. As opposed to moving the weapon itself.

JV: Right.

TS: The [34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division] unit history says that, "by May 1 the division had placed four battalions in a circle around the mountain and, supported by a tank company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division and by the heaviest artillery fire we could muster, the assault was begun. Using a screen of artillery shells very skillfully, the infantry closed to hand grenade and bayonet range." A screen of artillery shells is not a rolling barrage? Are those separate things?

JV: No, it's not a rolling barrage. It's identifying the targets and taking them under fire.

TS: While the infantry is moving or before they actually depart?

JV: Both.

TS: Okay. So it was part of a plan ... not to wait like we did in the early days of World War I artillery, and then infantry attack. They could happen simultaneously.

JV: Right.

TS: The engagement at Hill 609 was successful as you mentioned, and by 1 May the unit history indicates that this battle was concluded or nearly concluded. It was only eleven days later, on 12 May, that the entire German and Italian forces in Tunisia surrendered unconditionally and the Tunisian Campaign was won. Was Hill 609 correctly perceived at the time as really the last significant action to happen before the Germans could be pushed out?

JV: It was the last big well defended position that the Germans held. From then on it flattened out toward the coast and our forces were able to move quite rapidly and the German defenses were less organized. Not well organized from then on.

TS: As American units moved forward rather quickly the way you're describing this, were prisoners taken?

JV: Many. Yes.

TS: Did you witness this, or was this something that happened forward?

JV: They were marched to the rear once they were captured. From 609 on we had large strings of German prisoners being marched to the rear through the artillery positions.

TS: What did you make of these Germans? I mean, this is the first time you've had them that close to you.

JV: They were defeated enemy prisoners going to the rear. I must say that in those days that part of the German Army looked well fed, and the uniforms were in good shape.

TS: What kind of treatment did you observe German POWs receiving from their captors?

JV: According to the Articles of War at that time. They were disarmed and marched to the rear, and provided medical care and treated humanely.

TS: So you didn't witness any maltreatment of German POWs at that point?

JV: No. In fact many of those prisoners came to the Upper Midwest. And were in prison camps in Minnesota and Iowa.

TS: They were, yes. Particularly those captured early on like that, yes.

At the end of the Tunisian Campaign, it's May [1943]. It's been four, five months that you've been in North Africa now. If we consider that period of time, in what ways do you feel you matured as a soldier or as a man since you arrived in North Africa all those months ago?

JV: I think as we discussed last time, there was a lot more cohesion in the unit. We knew each other as individuals better and knew the capabilities, weaknesses of individual comrades and soldiers, and we were generally a lot more competent than we were when we marched from Oran into Tunisia. Certainly as for me I knew my job better and certainly did it with a lot more confidence than I had at the beginning. I knew the other NCOs in the battery much better, knew which ones needed more supervision than the others and tried to provide it. Fortunately we had a wonderful commander, Lloyd Reiser. I think we discussed him before. Captain Reiser was a top notch commander. I had much more respect for him, and had begun to know the officers on the staff. Watched people like Peterson and Buck Smith, Captain Woodrow M. Smith, who was one of the others who wrote "Lessons Learned." Our chaplain, Holy Joe Walker ...

TS: Of course that was his nickname. *(chuckles)* Did you call him that?

JV: Not to his face. *(chuckles)*

TS: Okay. Good man?

JV: He was a great man. He was a big man, physically big. Tall, athletic. Episcopal priest. Had been a missionary to the Inuit in the Hudson Bay area before World War II. One of

these guys that would shout, "This is the day the Lord has made." (*chuckles*) He could get a smile on a soldier's face no matter what the conditions were.

TS: That's important.

JV: Yes.

TS: How often were you able to attend any kind of religious services in the field?

JV: Holy Joe Walker had – for those of us who were not Roman Catholic or Jewish – services every week, and so did our Catholic chaplain. He had religious services every week, and usually on Sunday. Sometimes they were interrupted by enemy artillery fire or something like that.

TS: Did you have a Jewish chaplain too?

JV: We did not. We did not. But there were Jewish chaplains in the division who traveled around and provided that. The Jewish population in the division was, I'd say, pretty small.

TS: You mentioned some officers there who made an impression on you. What kind of continuity was there among NCOs and also the officers? Same people sticking around?

JV: Yes. Certainly the good ones stayed around. There were some changes in the officer ranks after the Kasserine Pass battle and some more after the first and second Fondouk, but generally the real leaders stayed around. There were some promotions among the officers. The NCOs, we had lost a few to sickness and a couple to battle casualties and so forth. But replacements by and large came from within for the NCOs. During the course of the war, later on during the war in Italy, we got a few people who were already NCOs as replacements, that came from other units.

TS: Who would you say was your best friend in the unit?

JV: I'd say probably Bob Kelsey was my best friend. Bob was from Enderlin, North Dakota. Worked for the railroad. Worked for the Soo Line. He was the chief of the meteorological section. We had been friends through the time in Camp Claiborne and through the Louisiana and Carolina Maneuvers. Bob got married just before we went overseas. Our first sergeant at the time was one of these guys that really believed that if the Army had wanted you to have a wife they would have issued it to you. (*chuckles*) So Bob Kelsey got married while we were at Fort Dix waiting to get on the ship, and we would stuff his bed with pillows at night, because we had head count every night in the barracks, so that Bob had a little bit of a honeymoon. (*chuckles*)

TS: So you covered for him. Why did you and Bob get along so well?

JV: I don't know. We enjoyed each other's company and had a few good laughs together. He had a great sense of humor. And we remained friends until he died.

TS: So after the war too then.

JV: Yes. He stayed in the Army, became a Regular Army warrant officer. Headed the meteorological training at the artillery school at Fort Sill, Oklahoma for many, many years.

TS: Did you run into him again? Because you passed through Fort Sill.

JV: Oh, yes. We'd find a way to get together. Then Ken Goodell, who was a warrant officer at the time and was our motor officer, he and I got along. He was much older and helped me with my first sergeant's job, a job for which a twenty year old or twenty-one year old was probably not mature enough to handle. But Ken Goodell helped me a lot, and the same with Kenny Goodell – we remained friends until he died. In fact, when we were first married we went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and he'd already been stationed there. He and his wife sort of took us under their wing, were mother hens to us.

TS: These aren't just friendships you're describing, they're lifelong friendships, bonds that stayed forever.

JV: Yes.

TS: Thinking about things forever, what's a human or a life lesson that you feel you learned in North Africa?

JV: I think the fundamental lesson was, learn your job and do it well. The fact is that every day for a soldier, in battle every day is a day that you learn something new, and you have to work hard to apply those lessons. The other lesson is, that nobody does it alone. You need to continue to strengthen the team and find ways to build the team to have it work together better. I think that particular lesson, finding ways to keep the morale of the troops up...some people said warfare is hours and hours and days and days of boredom interspersed by moments and days of stark terror.

TS: Is there something to that?

JV: Yes. So keeping the troops with a good outlook on life and understanding that we're going to stick together and get this job done is an important facet for people at all levels, whether you're a high commander or an ordinary soldier at the bottom of the heap.

TS: Right. Everyone reports to somebody.

JV: Yes.

TS: I was reading the "Lessons Learned" article and a number of people writing in there, the officers writing, talk about changes and developments in artillery. I wanted to ask just about how jobs developed or changed for a couple of things. Liaison officers: for a lay person, what does a liaison officer do?

JV: The artillery liaison officer generally is the fellow who goes to the supported infantry and provides artillery advice. In particular, in World War II the field artillery battalion sent liaison officers to the infantry battalion commanders and they were the artillery advisors to the infantry battalion commander, usually at his side wherever he was during the battle, and helped him plan the supporting fires for his own attack or for his own defense. They were very important people in the way the United States Army functioned in battle, particularly in World War II.

TS: Did that job change over the course of the war or how it was defined or used?

JV: I think before the war the liaison officers were the guys on the staff who didn't have much to do, but during the war they became sort of crucial to the artillery doing their job correctly. So choosing liaison officers in peacetime, if the job is one where you think it's somebody that doesn't have much to do, you're not looking for the brightest light in the string of lights. But in wartime it turns around, that you want one of your absolutely top notch officers to take on that position.

TS: It sounds like he would need to understand both artillery and infantry in a sense.

JV: Right.

TS: Forward observers. A job that you actually had later in the war. Again, just for a lay person, how would you describe what a forward observer does?

JV: In those days the forward observers were generally low ranking lieutenants, second lieutenants principally, and you provided a forward observer with each infantry company and his duties corresponded to those I described for the liaison officer. He was the infantry company commander's artillery advisor, and actually the fellow who undertook direction of fire to support the infantry company in either its attack or defense. Again, even though he was one of the lower ranking guys in terms of rank itself, was an absolutely key person in the success of the artillery doing its job. I think Buck Smith described him in that "Lessons Learned" business. Because they were low ranking and some of them fresh out of OCS or officer training of some kind, or like me when I got the job originally was freshly commissioned second lieutenant, the judgment factor had plenty of room for improvement. But the infantry company commander, as well as the artillery chain of command and people like Buck Smith, taught a lot of us how to be good forward observers.

TS: How did the position or the responsibilities of a forward observer change over the course of the war?

JV: It became far more important. Originally when we went to war in North Africa, the artillery's idea was that the observation post of the artillery battery would be occupied by the battery commander and that he would address the fire to support the infantry. He would be the principal adjuster of fire to support the infantry. That didn't work, because you need these people that are with the infantry that knows where every man on the

ground is, every friendly person on the ground is, and can identify the particular part of the enemy that's obstructing his infantry company, whether it's a platoon or a squad or whatever it is that is obstructing it. So the forward observer and the liaison officer became far more important in terms of putting artillery fire on the battlefield. By the time the war ended you seldom saw an artillery battery commander at an observation post – they were at the battery making sure that the battery was safe and conducting fire in the proper fashion.

TS: So almost a completely different set of responsibilities.

JV: The emphasis of getting artillery fire on the target went to the forward observer and the liaison officer.

TS: In that same document they talk about the importance of reconnaissance. How is reconnaissance tied in with those first two jobs, liaison officer and forward observer, and how did it change over time?

JV: What Buck Smith was speaking about [in "Lessons Learned"] in terms of reconnaissance is being prepared to move the artillery firing pieces, the batteries, forward into position. The terrain the division fought in, principally desert in North Africa and then mountainous in Italy, either one of which provide fewer and fewer made to order artillery positions. If you've got a nice flat farm field you could deploy the artillery battery easily, but if you've got steep terrain and no roads ...

TS: Right. So there's the ideal picture book where you would wish for flat open and maybe protected by some hills in front of you, but how often do you have that?

JV: Right.

TS: That document finally talks about the developments in infantry artillery teamwork. You've been talking about this ongoing here. By the end of the war in 1945, how much better were we at that as a military force than we had been at the beginning?

JV: I can't speak for the whole Army, but I can certainly speak for the 34<sup>th</sup> Division. By the end of the war we were superb at it. We knew how to do it and it was done almost automatically. What you had to do is make sure that new replacements and so forth, particularly among the infantrymen where the casualty rate was of course a lot higher than it was among the field artillery, that new officers who came into the infantry understood the importance and understood how we did it and so forth. But generally the division as a whole knew it very well.

TS: You mentioned about integrating replacements. Did that get easier too over time, bringing new people up to speed?

JV: We knew more about how to do it by the time the war ended, but it was never easy and it meant that every day was a training day.

TS: What made the integration of new people a challenge? Because in a sense if we're getting better at training, one argument could go if they're well trained, why can't they be integrated very easily?

JV: I think the general training that they got before they came overseas improved as the war went along. The replacements during the latter part of the war were probably better trained than the replacements that we got during the first part of the war. On the other hand, every outfit, even though the Army itself has a general doctrine, practices, techniques and procedures that are common enough that ought to be transparent from one unit to the other, there's still a difference from unit to unit. That is, you command A battery; I command B battery. We're going to do it a little differently or emphasize one thing or another.

TS: Even though we've both read the regulations.

JV: Yes. If you come in as a replacement in my outfit, we're going to get you to do it the way we think is the best way to do it. So that has to be undertaken. Then the other thing is that the new replacements, there's a certain apprehension about arriving as a replacement in an outfit that's a veteran outfit in a campaign. I could tell you stories from now until tomorrow morning about replacements and dealing with them.

TS: Tell one of those.

JV: (*chuckles*) This is somewhat later in the war. We were at the Anzio Beachhead<sup>3</sup> and got some new replacements in. This one young fellow looked like...he had to have lied about his age to get into the Army, because he looked like he was about thirteen or fourteen years old. I was giving the replacements the standard orientation that I had developed to give new replacements. I dismissed them to go to their sections, and he turned around and somehow he had in big high letters on his field jacket, on the back of his field jacket, I think it was New Hope, Pennsylvania High School, class of 1943 or '44 or whatever it was. (*chuckles*) So I called him over. I said, "You need to get a new jacket. Take that to the supply sergeant and turn it in and get a new one."

Then I got to thinking about it for some reason or other. We got a requirement to send a soldier to the Red Cross in the city of Nettuno<sup>4</sup>. The Red Cross had a donut kitchen there, and they made donuts. They particularly took them to the hospitals, but occasionally they'd bring them around to the units. The Red Cross needed a soldier to help with the donut kitchen. So I thought this kid ought to go help the Red Cross in the donut kitchen. He doesn't look mature enough to be this far forward or to do whatever it is that we have to do. So I sent him to the Red Cross. Went back and checked on him a couple of times and always got a big package of donuts to bring back to the unit. The Germans had a couple of

---

<sup>3</sup> Anzio is a coastal town located 35 miles south of Rome. Allied forces staged an amphibious landing here in January 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Coastal town, located two miles south of Anzio.

big railroad guns, 280 millimeter railroad guns<sup>5</sup>, long range guns that they had up in the Alban Hills. They were appropriately named Anzio Annie, and these things would usually fire at night because they were kept in railroad tunnels and rolled out. Anyway, fired a big shell.

TS: By the way you were describing the shells of the 105s and 155s I can only imagine how big the shells were.

JV: The 280 [shell] was [560] pounds. It was the size of a medium aircraft bomb. The donut machine got hit directly with a 280. Fortunately it was a dud, it did not explode. But it hit the machine while our boy was there and he got well cut up with aluminum fragments from the donut machine and burned with some of the oil, hot oil that was in the donut machine. So in attempting to save this young man I had him become a casualty. I went to see him a couple of times in the hospital. In fact when I got commissioned he'd been finally evacuated to the general hospital in Naples. When I got commissioned I had the opportunity to go see him again. He never did come back to our outfit, but he did go back to duty someplace.

TS: So you saw young kids from time to time. Were you just getting older or were they actually getting younger?

JV: He just looked younger. He was actually a high school graduate. Just looked young.

TS: As you're getting ready to go to Italy, what had you learned about the importance of good communication?

JV: That's the key to it, I've often said. Nicholas Murray Butler<sup>6</sup> gave a lecture at Vassar [College], probably before World War I. I don't think he had this title for the lecture at the time, but it's been reprinted many times and it's called "Butler's Five Evidences of an Education." His first evidence was mastery of the mother tongue. I've often said I've seen more things screwed up on the battlefield and in the Pentagon because of imprecise, inaccurate use of the English language than for any other reason, I think. It doesn't mean necessarily that having good English will solve all those problems, but getting the point across will help solve those problems.

TS: The [34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division] unit history tells us that "the fighting in Tunisia did come to an end on 13 May 1943. Almost at once preparations were begun for the conquest of Sicily, and the 34<sup>th</sup> Division received the vital if not very exciting job of helping the invading troops to make a smooth departure from Africa. The 34<sup>th</sup> Division were the housekeepers for Sicily," the unit history says. "Several provisional truck companies were organized using vehicles, drivers and mechanics from the field artillery battalions of the division who,

---

<sup>5</sup> German 280 mm gun, on a railway car mount and with a range of 40 miles. Manufactured by the Krupp firm and used throughout the war.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Murray Butler (1862-1947); American philosopher, diplomat, and educator.

day in and day out, hauled gasoline to the airfields in an effort to slake the first of the bombers paving the way for the landings.” As this fighting comes to an end were you part of what I just described there, or were you in the hospital by this time?

JV: Finally we wound up around Bizerte<sup>7</sup>. We had a victory parade. I’ve forgotten if [Gen Dwight D.] Eisenhower was there or not. I’ve forgotten who else was there. But there were a number of distinguished people at the victory parade. Then we moved to just outside Bizerte. We were in a bivouac area there.

Then the Germans sent some bombers over. Several nights. One night I got nicked by a bomb fragment and was sent to the hospital. It wasn’t much more than a band aid wound, but it was enough to be evacuated from the aid station to the evacuation hospital. The doctors that examined me there discovered a pilonidal cyst and insisted that that needed to be repaired before I went back to my outfit. The surgery on the pilonidal cyst was a lot greater medical problem than fixing the minor bone chip and flesh that had been cut off by the bomb fragment. So I spent the whole summer of ’43 in hospitals or the convalescent camp. So I had no part in what the division did that summer.

TS: This being bombed you mentioned for a couple nights, you had been under attack like that previously, right?

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: Was this any greater in intensity or more frightening in any way than these previous ones?

JV: This was just an annoyance.

TS: Does one get used to that kind of aerial bombardment?

JV: If you’re the target (*chuckles*) it’s not something...there’s getting used to it. But if you have shelter and you can take shelter, it’s okay. It’s something that’s going to happen. As I said earlier, in the first part of the Tunisian Campaign, particularly at the times of the battles at Sidi Bou Zid and Fondouk, air superiority over the battlefield had not been accomplished by the Americans and we were bombed a number of times. But this, later on, these were night bombers. I think they were Messerschmitt 110s<sup>8</sup>.

TS: Twin engine planes.

JV: Yes. And they didn’t have a lot of bombs. The night I got hit we had been playing cribbage in the back end of a truck, as a matter of fact, when the bombers came over.

---

<sup>7</sup> Coastal city in far northern Tunisia, forty miles north of Tunis.

<sup>8</sup> Messerschmitt Bf 110: a German twin-engine heavy fighter, introduced in 1937 and used throughout the war.

Jumped out to get into shelter trenches. On the way from the cribbage game to the foxhole I got hit with the bomb fragment.

TS: What was the feeling when that actually hit you? How did you react to that?

JV: I was annoyed. (*chuckles*) I mean the war in Tunisia was over. There was no time to...

TS: That's right, it was. Was there the sense that...I mean trying to internalize this...was there the sense that wow, that was really close; it could have been worse. Or was it the sense of oh, geez, now.

JV: Yes. You could say it could have been worse. We had people that were hurt a lot worse than I was. But it happened.

TS: Yes. And you end up laid up in hospitals, as you mentioned, in both Tunisia and Algeria, right?

JV: Yes.

TS: And it wasn't just an overnight stay, was it?

JV: No. I spent the whole summer in the hospital.

TS: To pick up on what you said a moment ago, was that really recovering from the cyst operation much more so than the flesh wound?

JV: Yes. Recovering from the cyst operation. I could have gone back to duty within a few days from the bomb fragment, or at least a week.

TS: So talk about this summer. You're killing time in a hospital. How did you pass the time that summer? Suddenly you're away from the people that you know and the unit that you're in.

JV: You hope that somebody from the unit will come and bring your mail and say hello and tell you what's going on and perhaps trade the paperback books that you have for some new ones that you hadn't read before.

But as summer went on I was eventually evacuated to this convalescent camp outside Algiers, which was on the beach, on the Mediterranean. We were living in houses that obviously belonged to rich French people who had beach houses on the Mediterranean. So that became quite nice. But it was still boring. Some rich French family gave Eisenhower a sailboat, a ten meter sloop, with a diesel auxiliary engine. At one of the formations at the convalescent camp the commander said, "Who knows how to sail?" I had sailed an iceboat in Minnesota, and thought that qualified for a yes answer. I raised my hand, and I became part of the crew for Eisenhower's sailboat.

TS: Was he a general by that time already?

JV: Oh, yes. He was the commander.

TS: So you had a chance to actually meet him?

JV: No, I never met him. I had met him once before. Both General Eisenhower and Bradley came to our position the night before Rommel's attack [in February 1943, in Tunisia]. But anyway, fortunately the other person who raised his hand in answer to the question was a lieutenant from Maine who actually was a sailor. He knew how to sail. He was many legs ahead of me. So he and I became the crew on the Eisenhower sailboat. Then we had a set of duties. In the daytime we motored from – the boat was docked in a small harbor at a town called Guyetteville, just outside Algiers – and we would motor down to the convalescent camp and take other soldiers who were in the convalescent camp out fishing in the Mediterranean. And then occasionally at night officers from Eisenhower's staff would come down and look for a boat ride in the Mediterranean, and we did that. All the time keeping an eye out. At night you had to worry about both German airplanes and submarines. In the daytime it was generally considered safe. We didn't go far enough out when we went fishing with the convalescents.

TS: You could have worse duty than that, it sounds like.

JV: Yes. It was quite pleasant, except that by that time people from my outfit would come to Algiers. Our outfit then was stationed in Oran again, and people would come and remind me that, you'd better get back or you're going to lose your job. I couldn't get discharged because my pilonidal cyst wound hadn't healed completely.

TS: It took a long time to repair itself?

JV: In those days they just cut into it and then they wanted it to heal from the inside out. I think they have much a better procedure these days.

TS: So you were waiting. How did you ultimately leave this convalescent camp?

JV: When one of the fellows from our outfit came to visit me he said clearly, "We are going to go someplace fairly soon. Captain Reiser has kept your job open, but if you're not back pretty soon you'll literally miss the boat." So I saw the doc the next day and he said, "No, you're not ready to go." I decided to go anyway, and took the shuttle run into Algiers and bought a train ticket for Algiers to Oran. Rode the train to Oran and got a ride out to the outfit.

TS: Would you like to comment on the legality of that?

JV: It was illegal obviously. I was listed on the Mediterranean Theater's list of deserters for some time, until my battery commander got it straightened out.

TS: So you realized it was either take initiative to go back to your unit or you were going to get left behind.

JV: Right. Right.

TS: And ultimately reassigned somewhere else.

JV: Yes.

TS: Why were you so interested in ensuring you got back to the same unit?

JV: It was a good outfit. I didn't want to wind up a stranger in some other outfit.

TS: Fair enough. The [34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division] unit history talks about how your unit embarked at Oran and traveled to Italy. You're embarking on a ship again. This is a number of times; you're getting practiced at this. How was this process changing from the first time you did it? Were we getting better at loading and moving people on board ships?

JV: Yes. But it's still a strange thing to have to do. It's something, doing it once, doing it twice and doing it three times, you have recollection of the lessons that you learned. Of course the circumstances were a little bit different for the arrival at the destination in each case. There was no harbor – we knew when we left that we weren't going into a harbor, that we were going to disembark on boats. DUKWs<sup>9</sup> actually. Two and a half ton trucks that were amphibious that were used there at Salerno.

TS: This ship journey from Oran, when you left Oran on the ship was it clear to you and the other soldiers where you were going?

JV: Once we got on the ship we were told where we were going. But we knew where we were going.

TS: You knew anyway.

JV: Yes.

TS: An interesting point about how soldiers get information. Grapevine, rumors: how pervasive is something like that?

JV: We got on, we left Oran about the time the invasion took place at Salerno, and I've forgotten whether it took place just before or just after. But somehow on the ship we knew that the first forces had landed at Salerno. The ship ride was relatively short. We went on

---

<sup>9</sup> A six-wheel-drive amphibious truck, built by General Motors and used throughout the war.

an old British trooper. The name of the ship was the *Empire Trooper*.<sup>10</sup> We were considerably more cramped than we had been on either the trip to North Ireland or the trip to the British Isles to North Africa. The food was okay, but the bread had little specks in it. Most of the soldiers thought it was some sort of a seed to help flavor the bread. Unfortunately some soldier got to inspecting the seeds a little more closely and found out that the seeds had wings and feet. (*chuckles*) So the medics condemned the flour and that was the end of the bread on the ship. The only fellow who was really endangered was the smart aleck that found the wings and the feet.

TS: I suppose. That was the end of the bread, right?

JV: Right.

TS: You mentioned this landing at Salerno was not going to be a harbor and harbor cranes moving your stuff. How do you remember the landing at Salerno?

JV: Getting into the DUKW and riding to the shore.

TS: That process...I mean that sounds simple, but it's logistically a pretty serious operation.

JV: Yes. It's not easy.

TS: Being in one of these amphibious DUKWs, describe that because most of us haven't been in one of those before.

JV: When you think of ducks you think of ducks on a pond and that's about the way the amphibious DUKW was fit for a pond, but not really for travel over from the ocean liner to the shore. Up and down and wet.

TS: How many men on board one of these things?

JV: I don't know. Probably fifteen.

TS: Did the Germans know you were coming?

JV: I'm sure. It was a big invasion and the Germans had opposed the landing at Salerno, almost successfully. Surely they knew that reinforcements would continue to come. Yes, they knew we were coming. Of course air cover was very important, and we had good air cover. German planes would show up, but it didn't interfere with the landing, at least when we landed there.

TS: Right. The reinforcements that you were part of.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ocean liner, built 1922 and used from 1940 as troop transport.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you as the reinforcements come under any fire at all while you were moving from the ships to the beach?

JV: No, not moving from the ships to the beach. We did not come under fire. Once we got on land we were under fire fairly quickly.

TS: Describe the scene when you arrive on shore, because again you're not the first troops arriving there. What did it look like when you got there?

JV: You didn't have to get far from the beach to find evidence of the fight that had taken place. In fact the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, the Texas National Guard Division that made the invasion over the land that we landed on, had been reinforced by one of our artillery battalions, which by many was credited with saving the beachhead by stopping the German tank attack which got very close to the beach. So the evidence of knocked out German tanks and so forth was easy to see. Of course at that time we're busy. We're trying to get connected with our equipment and get it – none of which was easy. So I didn't take any mental pictures of the scene.

TS: But there was clearly evidence of engagements that had just happened right there.

JV: Yes. A big fight had just taken place. In fact it was one of those where you could still smell it.

TS: As you land individually, what is your initial responsibility or set of responsibilities? What do you have to do?

JV: Get the battery together and get it hooked up with its equipment and get ready to move on out to the fight.

TS: Did your equipment land with you?

JV: Yes.

TS: So it's a matter of finding all the pieces and arranging them, almost puzzle-like.

JV: Right.

TS: Were you satisfied with what you found and how much you found, and were things the way you expected them to be?

JV: Yes. We knew the loading plan, and got our stuff. For me there was a question of the motorcycle. During the course of the Tunisian Campaign our equipment authorization changed a number of times, the number of trucks and Jeeps and so forth that we in the division artillery headquarters battery had. In fact the whole outfit had changed as they

changed the tables of organization and equipment in the United States. So we were constantly adding or subtracting trucks and vehicles of some kind. We had kept one motorcycle, and the motorcycles were supposed to have been turned in during the Tunisian Campaign. But the first sergeant didn't have any place to ride. There was no designated spot for him. He didn't have a Jeep. So I kept the motorcycle and used it as my transportation. Captain Reiser wanted us to get rid of the motorcycle before we went to Italy. But by the time I got back the troops had already loaded most of the equipment, by the time I got back to the battery. Blessedly or maybe as a curse they had loaded the motorcycle, despite what Captain Reiser had wanted done. So the motorcycle arrived in Italy much to the consternation of Captain Reiser and to my delight, because I did have a ride.

TS: Did you find a use for that? Seriously.

JV: I rode it through the Tunisian Campaign and for the first month or so of the Italian Campaign.

TS: What finally happened to the motorcycle?

JV: We got moved across the front. The division did. Near Benevento.<sup>11</sup> We got moved across the front at Benevento. The Germans had knocked out – as we discussed earlier – every single bridge in Italy, and of course all of this travel was nighttime travel, blackout. Through these fords that you had to go through, bridge bypass. If you want to spend a difficult night, get on a motorcycle and have to go down steep hills and through three or four feet of water with the motorcycle and up a steep hill on the other side.

TS: With no lights.

JV: Right. *(chuckles)* In blackout conditions. So I voluntarily got rid of the motorcycle. I was going to load it on a truck that night and Captain Reiser said, "You brought that thing here, *(chuckles)* you're going to ride it." He said that sort of half-jokingly but...

TS: Half-jokingly you said.

On that happy note, why don't we call a halt here? Next time we'll pick up with a look at the tactical situation at Salerno and kind of move across the Volturno River, which happened three times – yes, three crossings. So I'll turn the machine off here.

## END OF INTERVIEW

---

<sup>11</sup> City located 30 miles northeast of Naples.

Sources quoted or directly referenced during this interview

*The Story of the 34th Infantry Division. Compiled by Members of 34th Infantry Division, 1945.*

At: <http://www.34infdiv.org/history/34narrhist.html>

*Lessons Learned in Combat: November 1942 – September 1944* (Headquarters, 34th Infantry Division, Italy, September 1944). In Charles L Bolte papers, Box 6, U.S. Army Military History Institute Library, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

At <http://www.34infdiv.org/history/34div/LessonsLearned.pdf>. Accessed 10 Jan 2014.