

Narrator: Gen John W Vessey, Jr

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.

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(00:00) = elapsed time on digital recording

TS: Today is Tuesday, 24 April 2012, and this is our sixth interview with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. Thanks again – I don't usually thank you on the record, but thanks again. I've enjoyed these conversations so far.

JV: So have I.

TS: Let's pick up where we left off last time, which was September 1943, and that is at Salerno. We talked about the actual landing and the terrain there. I recall you saying the terrain was quite different from that of the areas of Algeria and Tunisia, where you had been. From a military man's eye, what's the tactical situation from your perspective as you arrive at Salerno?

JV: The initial battle, of course the Germans had more force there than the Allied commander expected to find, and there were some very difficult battles. When we got there, of course the landscape was littered with the residue of the difficult battles in securing the Salerno beachhead. But being in Italy was different from being in North Africa, in French colonial country. As I told you the last time, we had to move across the front and move through the Italian countryside. The first impression that I had was the welcoming by the Italian people. The people in southern Italy were clearly pleased to see the Americans there. At least all the people that I saw.

TS: How surprised were you by that?

JV: I was considerably surprised by it, because our leadership had told us to be prepared for a hostile Italian population, because the Italians had been on the side of the Axis up until a few days earlier. But I never encountered that anywhere in Italy, but particularly in southern Italy around Naples, or where we first landed at Salerno. It was clear that southern Italy had a lot more ties to the United States in terms of families that had emigrated to the United States.

You'd ride along the road...I told you the story about keeping the motorcycle. I still had the motorcycle when we got there. Riding along the road on the motorcycle I frequently encountered young boys or children with signs that said "My parents speak English," or something like that.

I told you earlier about my friend Bob Kelsey. I had Bob Kelsey on the back of the motorcycle one day and we ran past one of these boys. I said, "I'm turning back and ask him about it." We went back. The boy escorted us to his father's farm. It turns out his grandfather had come to the United States and made some money as a barber and had

returned to Italy to his hometown, and was certainly a hundred percent pro-American. He told us that he wanted to offer his services to the Americans, to tell them what he'd seen and what German outfits had been through the area and so forth. He was clearly a keen observer of the Germans. But he also wanted to invite Kelsey and me to dinner.

TS: Did you accept his invitation?

JV: We couldn't. We had a war to fight. (*chuckles*) But they told us what they were going to prepare for us and it was a feast. It would have taken us four hours to eat everything they said they were going to prepare, I'm sure. But it was evidence of the welcoming nature of the Italian people in that part of Italy for the Americans.

TS: That's an indication, good example, of that. On the other side, was there any reception that you recall that was less than welcoming by the Italians?

JV: I never evidenced it throughout the war in Italy. Now as we got much farther north, and certainly the last year of the war, the evidence of the partisans killing people who had been supportive of the Germans was clear.

TS: And you didn't see this at first.

JV: We didn't see that in southern Italy. I have a feeling that there weren't many people supporting the Germans. But that's from my limited observation.

TS: And that's the observations we're looking for obviously, is yours. How far ahead of you did the Germans stay? Did you close to them, or were they constantly staying a step ahead so you never really saw them?

JV: The Germans fought a delaying action through that part of Italy, and of course took advantage of every terrain feature that gave them some advantage in delaying the Allied advance. River crossings, particular pieces of mountain terrain and so forth, they'd organize a fairly strong defensive position. We didn't run up against a really well organized and well prepared defensive position until we got up around Cassino¹, in the spring of 1944.

TS: From your perspective, how good of soldiers were these Germans you encountered? Did they know what they were doing?

JV: By and large, the Germans sent some good outfits to Italy. There were a number of good Panzer and Panzergrenadier² divisions. I think there were three of their parachute divisions, which were elite divisions. But as the war moved along, the manpower situation

¹ Cassino, sometimes referred to as Monte Cassino, is a town located approximately 90 miles southeast of Rome. Best known for the battles of January to May 1944.

² Panzergrenadier: German motorized or mechanized infantry unit.

in Germany for replacements clearly became evident. We'd find more and more people from Eastern Europe, that had been impressed into the German Army.

TS: So not native Germans or German speakers.

JV: Not native Germans, who were low ranking soldiers. But when we first got to Italy that was not the case – they were Germans through and through.

TS: From the unit history of the 34th Infantry Division³ it says, “by the evening of 1 October advance elements of the 133rd Infantry reached the outskirts of Benevento⁴. The next day the town itself was occupied, and a bridgehead was secured across the Calore River.” I want to turn to the Volturno River⁵ crossings, which you mentioned and which the 34th Infantry Division unit history mentions significantly. To do so I'm going to turn to some remarks that you made in October 2009, that you passed on to me, from when you were in Italy. Your prepared remarks.

In talking about the Volturno River crossings you said the following: “I remember it as arduous combat in difficult terrain under unfavorable weather against a determined, skillful enemy.”⁶ If possible I'd like to unpack that sentence, because there are four things in there: arduous combat, difficult terrain, unfavorable weather and a determined, skillful enemy. I'd like to see if we could put some more meaning behind each of those. When you say “arduous combat,” what does that mean?

JV: The fighting was difficult. It was contested. That first crossing of the Volturno was the first major river crossing that the 34th had conducted, and this is after they've been in combat since almost a year before.

TS: That's right.

JV: It was a different operation. It was a fordable river, but it was raining. There was a lot of rain, a lot of mud at that time of the year. The original plan for the 34th [Division] to cross that river was that the assault elements of the infantry would ford the river by wading it at certain crossing points that the engineers had selected and had put ropes across the river to help the infantrymen get across. The water was deep. It was difficult, and it was important to get a bridge across quickly. The first elements got across and found themselves in a huge minefield, protected by anti-personnel mines. Getting the bridge approaches...it did not go well during the dark of the night that the infantry made its first assault crossing.

³ *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.

⁴ Town located 31 miles northeast of Naples.

⁵ Located in south central Italy, it enter the Tyrrhenian Sea northwest of Naples.

⁶ Gen John W. Vessey, Jr., “Remarks at Conference on World War II Liberation of Italy,” Florence, 22 October 2009. In author's possession.

(12:00)

TS: The presence of mines suggests that the Germans expected this might be a crossing point.

JV: Yes, right. The fordable areas were few for the Volturno, so it was important to get a bridge across. In those days the issue bulldozers that the engineers had were not armored, and open cabs just like you see on the road construction projects out here. And the engineers lost a lot of people, including fairly senior officers, trying to operate the bulldozer to prepare the approaches to a bridge. The artillery was important because, once the infantry got across, they were sort of sitting ducks in this minefield for the German artillery and automatic weapons. So the artillery became very important in suppressing the fire of the German artillery and mortars and machine guns.

TS: I was going to ask you about that, because your perspective wasn't with the engineers or with the assault troops, it was as an artilleryman. What was your perspective on these events you're describing?

JV: For that crossing, it was the first time that I had been sent out as an observer, to occupy an observation post and to report to the division artillery what was going on on the battlefield. I guess it was the first time somebody ever thought of promoting me beyond the enlisted ranks. It didn't occur to me at the time, because I was just simply to do it. Now I had gone to observation posts several times during the war in North Africa to accompany other officers that were in charge, who had asked for me to come along and help. But this was the first time that I went out and occupied an observation post on my own. So I had a pretty good look at what was going on at the crossing of the Volturno.

TS: When you say observation post, describe what that looked like.

JV: It doesn't look like much of anything. *(chuckles)* You try to make it look like it's not there. *(chuckles)* It was on a hill that overlooked the crossing of the Volturno, with a well-constructed foxhole for the occupants to stay there and get some protection from enemy fire if it occurred. But I recall the operation rather vividly, because it was a good observation post. You could see what was happening and what was going well and what wasn't going well.

TS: What could you see from this hill literally?

JV: You could see the crossing points where the infantry had forded. At least I could see two out of the three fording points. Then I could see the other side of the river, where the first company that was there was caught up in this minefield and unable to move essentially, until some equipment could be brought in to neutralize these anti-personnel mines that were there. The Germans had a thing that we called it the Bouncing Betty. It was a mine that was activated by trip wires primarily. Then it exploded and sent a charge up into the air, and then the casualty producing charge was up in the air like a small shell that exploded there with fragments.

TS: Would come down, would fire downward?

JV: It was a very effective mine, and what the Germans did is make minefields out of their anti-tank mines, which are anti-vehicle mines that would blow up anything. Not just a tank, but any ordinary vehicle. But then those mines were protected with these anti-personnel mines.

TS: It sounds like they knew what they were doing.

JV: Yes, they did, clearly. And they'd had a lot of experience on the Eastern Front certainly. And then you cover the minefield with fire. That's common for both of us, both sides did that. You'd have a minefield and then you'd have artillery and machine guns or mortars or all of the above that covered the minefield. When the enemy got into the minefield their mobility was slower and you took them under fire. And that's exactly what the Germans did at the first crossing of the Volturno.

TS: Could you see the German firing positions from where you were observing?

JV: You could see the machine guns. You could see them fire. You could not see the mortars and artillery from the observation post that I had. You could see the fire coming.

TS: So if you can see the machine guns, what was your job exactly? Were you supposed to call fire in on all these positions?

JV: The primary person to call fire in would be the forward observer with the infantry company that was under fire. Now if he couldn't see it, then someone else who could see it could call for fire. And there were instances in that first battle of the Volturno where I actually did call for fire. But they were not the primary calls for fire, which would have come from the forward observer with the infantry company.

(19:50)

TS: When you call for fire, for the lay person, how do you do that?

JV: You report a target to the fire direction center. Like for me, they would have to assign an artillery unit for me to adjust fire, and then you tell the artillery unit the location of the target. What you do is, you take your map and by best means possible inspect the location for the target on the map and then give the map coordinates to the fire direction center and report that you want to adjust fire on this particular target. The fire direction center would then send the fire commands to a firing battery and you'd get usually one round or sometimes two rounds, but usually one round from one gun, out there somewhere close to the target. Since you hadn't surveyed the location, it was an approximation. Then you'd adjust the fire. The technique in those days was, you had to visualize the gun target line and give your corrections to the firing battery along the visualized gun target line in terms of right or left so much, and you'd do it by yards. We used yards in those days. So many yards to the right or so many yards to the left, and then so much either add or drop.

TS: So literally almost moving the shell landing positions around a set of coordinates.

JV: Around the target. You would start out with a set of coordinates, but neither you nor the guns knew whether the coordinates were correct or not. So what you did is move the fire then, to move it onto the target that you had identified. In those days we'd bracket it by a hundred yards and then we'd fire for effect, under the assumption that the basic probable error of the weapon itself would scatter the rounds around enough to cover the target area. Then they'd fire all four guns in the battery. Maybe three rounds battery, three rounds, which would be twelve rounds all together out there. You'd observe that and see whether or not you had the desired effect and, if not, you'd adjust again. It depended on the ammunition situation at the battery. If the officer in charge didn't think the target was worth more fire, you wouldn't get any more.

TS: Right. Two things come to mind when you talk. This is a game of, it's an accuracy thing, so guns have to be accurate. What causes inaccuracies in weapons that fire over time?

JV: For the artillery, one is the basic variation between rounds of ammunition. That is, although ostensibly the production of the ammunition requires precision methods – so you want the same weight of the projectile, the same weight of the propellant – there will be small variations, and then the tube itself, each time it's fired there's some wear on the tube.

TS: These are rifled barrels, right?

JV: Right.

TS: And do they have X number of rounds before they start to go out of alignment or to lose accuracy?

JV: The more they're fired, the more wear there is certainly on the tube. They don't lose accuracy. What's accurate just changes. A given round won't go as far as the round that preceded it, but that's imperceptible in one or two round differences, but when you get to a thousand rounds, differences ...

TS: Then it would be noticeable?

JV: Right.

TS: Is a barrel or a tube something that is generally replaced over time?

JV: Yes.

TS: So once it reaches its life expectancy it can't be rebores or anything?

JV: I'm sure the material can be reused, but the tube itself is done for.

TS: That is the replacement item in a sense on an artillery piece of this era? The other moving parts are something that would last longer typically?

(26:10)

JV: Yes, but for the cannons that we fired in World War II, you wouldn't replace the barrels. In fact I suspect that most of them we had went through the war with the same tubes.

TS: Really?

JV: But you asked what changes the accuracy. The other thing are the meteorological conditions. The wind, the ballistic density. Then of course it's the accuracy with which the firing data is put on the howitzer itself. You've got range, which comes from the elevation of the howitzer, plus the charge that's put in it for that particular elevation, and then the direction in which the tube is pointed. That's the reason we talked about surveyors providing a location for the artillery battery and you want that as true to the map as it can possibly be. Then the other part of it comes in the location of the target, and the observer is inspecting the accuracy. And by and large when you're looking at another position on the ground from a position on the ground and just your set of eyeballs, the chances of being particularly accurate aren't necessarily very good. So that's the reason you adjust the fire. Anyway, it's basically a trigonometric issue plus a ballistic issue and a meteorological issue.

TS: All rolled into one?

JV: Yes.

TS: This means that of course observers have an important role to play, the way you're describing it. Does this also mean that observers were by definition then a target for the other side, because the other side knew that observers were important?

JV: Right. Right.

TS: As an observer, did you feel that you had to look out for being observed yourself?

JV: Yes. You don't want your observation post disclosed, because it would be taken under fire.

TS: Did that ever happen to you?

JV: Oh, yes. *(chuckles)*

TS: What's an example of that that you can talk about?

JV: I think one of the more interesting examples was later in the war, when the corps commander came to my observation post. He and a number of his staff were trying to figure out what was going on with the enemy position, where the enemy was and what their situation was. He called for his map and several of his aides went back down toward the bottom of the hill, where the road was over which they had traveled, and came up with a huge map about the size of that window on a piece of plywood or cardboard or something.

TS: Four feet by three feet or something like this.

JV: (*chuckles*) Right. And the corps commander wanted me to show him on his map where the enemy was. I had a little folded up map in my pocket that I thought was a much better map to display out there. But he was indeed the corps commander.

TS: He wants it on his map and that's what he gets.

JV: That's what he got. He hadn't left the observation post by more than three minutes I think when the first rounds of artillery came into our observation post.

TS: What had tipped the Germans off, the activity?

JV: The activity, certainly. Standing up there with a big map probably tipped off somebody. Hey, we must have some high brass there. Certainly no frontline soldier would do that. (*chuckles*)

TS: Right. You had yours in your pocket, as I recall you said.

JV: Right.

TS: In your remarks you talked about a determined, skillful enemy. These Germans were determined and skillful?

JV: Yes. They had a good defensive plan and executed it well. They made the crossing very difficult for us.

TS: What was artillery's role in securing the crossing of the Volturno River, from your perspective?

(32:00)

JV: One of the things that we had was the air observation capability. We had light airplanes assigned to the artillery. The basic ones were old J-3 Cubs⁷, and then we had one, a newer model, which was a Stinson L-5.⁸ That permitted our artillery to look over the hills, beyond the range of which the ground observers could see, and we could locate much better, more easily, the enemy artillery positions, mortar positions and things like that. So that was one of the principle advantages that we had early in the war.

At the first crossing of the Volturno those observation planes weren't used as well as they might have. I think that first crossing of the Volturno was an important lesson for the 34th, because we had a very capable division commander who was intent on making the division a successful combat division. He put our ordnance people in charge of making an

⁷ Piper J-3 Cub: a small, simple, light aircraft, used for training and also observation flights. Introduced 1937 and used throughout the war.

⁸ Stinson L-5 Sentinel: light observation plane introduced in 1942 and used throughout the war.

armored cab for the bulldozers immediately. By the time we crossed the second time we had an armored cab on the bulldozer. There was a better plan for using the air observation planes and the second crossing of the Volturno came a lot more easily than the first crossing did.

TS: And for this second – because there were three in total – were you acting as an observer again or were you in a different responsibility?

JV: I was acting as the first sergeant of the battery, my regular duty at the second crossing.

TS: So from your perspective were you just guiding the fire of the battery this time in response to observers and directions?

JV: Headquarters battery didn't have any guns. We didn't have any guns in the headquarters battery, but we were providing communications and survey and meteorological data, the things that the guns needed.

TS: So you had a chance to observe, to coordinate a number of different pieces that impacted how the guns were going to be used, how the different batteries were going to be used.

JV: I would say that would be elevating my position.

TS: You could see how all this stuff was fitting together, as opposed to being directly responsible for these pieces.

JV: Right. Right.

TS: Do you feel that being in a headquarters company gave you an advantage to seeing how the different pieces fit together?

JV: I didn't think so at the time, but it obviously did.

TS: Looking back how do you feel?

JV: It did later on, because I stayed in the artillery for much of the rest of my life. So what I saw turned into knowledge perhaps a long time later. But I saw it.

TS: That's right. So you didn't realize at the time you're saying how much possibly you were learning.

JV: Right. Right. Hey, I'm learning something that...it didn't occur to me at the time.

TS: Right. Okay. But later you could see that in fact you had.

JV: Yes.

TS: The three crossings. What was the significance from your perspective for the Americans of securing these crossings, and for the Germans of not being able to prevent them?

JV: They couldn't go forward. It was along the main axis of advance. We either had to get across the river or be stalled. Of course for the Germans, the longer they delayed us, the more time they had to prepare the prepared defensive positions around Cassino and the so-called Gustav Line.⁹ So the faster we got toward their main defensive positions the poorer their main defensive positions would be, and the more they delayed us on their side the better they'd be.

TS: Did both sides know this was the equation?

JV: Yes. Oh, yes, I'm sure.

TS: The unit history talks about the assault on Mount Pantano.¹⁰ What would you say about that? What would you like to say about that?

JV: It was evident that it was a very tough fight on Mount Pantano. I've forgotten exactly what the casualties were, but I think we lost three infantry battalion commanders on that mountain on the same day. It was up a bit north and east of Cassino, and I'm sure had been intended to be part of the Gustav Line defenses. So the Germans fought very vigorously there. Whenever a piece of terrain around Mount Pantano was lost the Germans counterattacked very quickly. The artillery had been attacked with counterbattery fire off and on throughout the Italian Campaign up through the first months, but the counterbattery fire was far more vigorous at Mount Pantano. In fact, it was the first time that the division artillery headquarters had been shelled seriously.

TS: So not only the batteries, but also your positions as well.

JV: Yes.

TS: We talked about being shelled before, but does one get used to how to manage that or how to handle that?

JV: I've forgotten how many casualties we had, but we had a number of casualties from the fire when we were in the Mount Pantano area. To say you get used to it...

(40:15)

TS: I'm looking for the right phrase there.

⁹ Gustav Line: a series of German defensive military fortifications in Italy, constructed 1943-44 and running from the Adriatic near the town of Ortona to the Tyrrhenian Sea approximately 30 miles north of Naples.

¹⁰ Mount Pantano is located northeast of Cassino.

JV: That's right. It's an emergency and the more you had to handle it probably the better you get at it, but ... I remember the dismay at Mount Pantano because our own ambulance got knocked out. So we had to move the casualties with different vehicles. It was an unpleasant time.

TS: Memoirs I've read of the time, of that war, men talk often about a first experience of being shelled or coming into fire of reacting one way, and that they say that over time one doesn't react the same way anymore. Would you agree with that?

JV: Yes. I think by this time casualties and having casualties and being shot at is not as – I don't want to say it's not important, it's important, but it's an interruption of what you're supposed to be doing to take care of your part of the battle, and you have to do it. You have to take care of it but you can't stop taking care of your part of the fight. You have to pay attention and by this time we had learned how to do that, how to take care of the things that we took care of to keep the fight going.

TS: Is that what one gets better at over time?

JV: Yes.

TS: The unit history says that the unit was out of the line after 9 December 1943, until early in January 1944. A month or a little more. How and where did you personally spend this period of time?

JV: We went back to near Benevento and spent Christmas there.

TS: How do you remember that Christmas?

JV: I remember it because Captain Reiser wanted us to have a good Christmas. So he told me to use the battery fund and get some wine for the troops to drink. There are two parts of this. One is we went out into the countryside to buy wine, and it's not a great wine growing part of Italy. It's not the place where the Chianti that you buy down here at Surdyk's or the other liquor store right down the road here. Anyway, the wine tasted pretty lousy. *(chuckles)*

TS: How did you go about looking for wine? I mean did you look for a wine store or how did you do that?

JV: We had an Italian speaking kid from New York whose family lived actually pretty close to where we were. But anyway, we went out asking for it and we went to merchants that had wine. We filled up five gallon cans, water cans, with the wine and took it back. It wasn't very good wine. We had one cook who was a lumberjack or a lumber camp cook from northern Minnesota. Rousch said that he could make a still and convert this wine into alcohol that we could make a better drink out of than the wine itself. So Rousch got some copper tubing from some knocked out German vehicles and cleaned it up and made a still.

TS: He did indeed know how to do this.

JV: Oh, yes. He knew how to do it.

TS: And did it work?

JV: It worked. (*chuckles*) And the other thing about Benevento and alcohol is that Benevento was the home of the Alberti Distillery. Its main product that it's known for outside of Italy is Strega, which is a sweet Italian drink. It's yellow in color. It's sort of a lady's after dinner drink, I would say. They also made brandy and gin. G. Alberti was so grateful for having his distillery freed from the Germans that through the rest of the war he gave a gift to the officers of the division. Started out with one bottle of Alberti's brandy per battalion. It eventually then came to one bottle per company battery or troop, and eventually by the time that Alberti got his distillery up and running full blast it was as much of the stuff as you wanted to get. So the officers really had a little alcoholic drink if they wanted to drink it.

During that Christmas, when Rousch set up the still, he worked all night Christmas Eve trying to get enough of this wine through the still to make a proper cocktail for the Christmas dinner for the battery. The rations had a powdered lemon drink. It was lemonade. So Rousch made a concoction with the powdered lemon drink and the alcohol that he had boiled off. (*chuckles*) The division artillery commander, Brigadier General Stanford, came to visit us, give us a Christmas greeting and thank us for our service and so forth. We welcomed him with a canteen cupful of Rousch's cocktail. I later learned from the aide that that we were the last outfit that the general visited that day, because he had to go back to his tent and lie down and go to sleep.

TS: I think the cook knew what he was doing. From your perspective, you talked about alcohol being available in increasing amounts. How did soldiers and alcohol mix under war conditions?

JV: There wasn't much of it. Through North Africa we didn't see any of it. Other than when we got up close to Hill 609, I think our mess sergeant found some wine and we perhaps had a glass of wine with one meal or a little wine in a canteen cup, I should say. And during the first part of the war in Italy there wasn't any to speak of. Later on we got a beer ration and I've forgotten what it was, but it wasn't much. Maybe a couple cans of beer for a week or something like that or a month.

TS: This is stuff supplied from the United States.

JV: Yes. It was canned beer and of course it came to you in the winter when you're trying desperately to remain warm. It didn't seem like much of a treat. When it came to you in the summer and you wanted to get cooled off, it was hot from traveling over long miles in the supply chain and came to you like hot water. It wasn't very welcome. I don't remember it ever being a particularly joyful moment.

TS: On periods of leave like this or periods when the unit was out of the line was there more access to recreational use of alcohol?

JV: There was, during that period we had Rousch's still so we had, at least Christmas Day of 1943, we had as much of that lemonade and alcohol as you wanted. But I don't remember any problems with it.

TS: That was my question. Yes.

JV: Later on during that same rest period Lieutenant Gerth, who was our executive officer, discovered that there was a British ATS¹¹ camp close to Benevento. ... [The ATS] was the British Women's Army Corps is what it was. ... Gerth suggested that we have a dance for the troops and that we invite the girls from the ATS camp.

TS: That really sounds like a fine idea.

(53:20)

JV: It sounded like a great idea. So Lieutenant Gerth and I went to the ATS camp to suggest to the commander of the ATS company that she join us with her charges for a dance. She agreed to this under certain conditions: that the girls had to come home under her command and had to be accounted for and so forth. A number of conditions sort of like the housemother at the freshman dormitory in a college.

TS: Maybe she felt like that.

JV: It turned out that the ATS Company was from Palestine.

TS: So they weren't from Britain.

JV: No. The commander was a red-headed Irish woman, a captain, from Britain obviously. I think Northern Ireland. But most of the enlisted soldiers were from Palestine. Curiously enough there were both Jews and Palestinian Arabs in this ATS company. When you look at the troubles today, they seemed to get along well. I didn't see any fist fights among the young ladies in the ATS camp. But anyway, we had our dance and we went to the G. Alberti Distillery and we got an ample supply of Strega, this liqueur that I had mentioned before. The girls thought it was great stuff. (*chuckles*) I say sort of jokingly that we loaded them up like cord wood at the end of the evening.

TS: Was the commander upset? Did she get all of her charges back?

JV: She was fine. I think she enjoyed the Strega herself. It was sort of the highlight of the war up to that point for our outfit.

¹¹ Auxiliary Territorial Service.

TS: You haven't mentioned a lot of interactions with women or alcohol up to this point and here they're both at the same time. Are those kinds of times when men can cut loose in a way? How important are those kind of times?

JV: I would suspect that if you attended one of our reunions thirty years after the war the guys would still talk about dance we had with the girls from Benevento.

TS: So it left an impression shall we say?

JV: Yes. (*chuckles*) It was sort of a fun evening.

TS: What did you like best about it?

JV: The thing I liked about it is that the troops liked it. The soldiers liked it. They had a good time. A lot of laughs at a time when we hadn't been laughing much.

TS: Yes. You haven't described a lot of stuff up until now that was really funny or humorous. It's weather or the Germans or the terrain or things like this. What did you look forward to the most when you had periods out of the line or rest periods?

JV: I would say first that they were very infrequent. ... One other time later in the war, after we took Livorno,¹² we had a little time on the beach, on the Adriatic shore. Rest, a good night's sleep. Actually Kelsey and I went to the 5th Army Enlisted Rest Center during that period, and it was at Caserta.¹³ In fact the 5th Army Enlisted Rest Center, the billets for the soldiers attending the Rest Center were in the king's stables at Caserta. Somehow the engineers had constructed bunks in the stable area, I think they were three or four high.

It was another amusing event. When you arrived at the Rest Center the staff of the Rest Center spent the first half day orienting you about conduct at the Rest Center and so forth. The first thing that you had to do was go to a venereal disease prevention exercise, and it was about as graphically crude and shocking as it could be, because what they had was soldiers who had various venereal diseases on one side of a screen with their private parts displayed below the screen. You couldn't see their faces. You had an opportunity, and one of the medics then pointed out which disease afflicting which soldier that was on the other side of the screen. They had a map of the town of Caserta with where you could get each of these diseases. (*chuckles*)

TS: You mentioned graphic and straightforward. That's about as graphic and straightforward as I think you can get.

JV: Right. By the time you'd finished the afternoon, then the military police would come in and tell you which establishments in town were off limits and where you were permitted to

¹² Livorno: a port city on the Ligurian Sea, on the west coast of Italy.

¹³ Town located inland, approximately 25 miles north of Naples.

go. By the time you got done with the orientation afternoon you were ready to get into your bunk in the Rest Center and go to sleep and stay there until the time was up. But actually it wasn't that bad. They had some pool tables and ping pong tables and the Red Cross was there with a donut machine. American Red Cross girls that would chit chat with the troops. Then there were a couple of restaurants in town that weren't off limits. You could go to these restaurants and get a pretty good meal for a reasonable price.

TS: As far as paying for things were dollars accepted or were there lira in circulation or what?

JV: We had an occupation currency. I've forgotten whether it was denominated in lira or dollars. I think it was in dollars.

TS: How did you get a hold of that stuff?

JV: You got paid in it.

TS: So your monthly salary, you could ask some of it?

JV: Right. For most people, for me as for most others, most of your salary went somewhere else.

(1:02:15)

TS: You were sending yours home, I think you told me.

JV: Right. It went home and I put a little bit into soldier savings every month. So you really didn't need any money for anything unless you went to a place like this Rest Camp.

TS: That's right. You wouldn't need to carry cash in your pocket really.

JV: Right.

TS: The need for rest or these rest areas makes me think about the pressures and the stress that soldiers come under. How often did you witness self-destructive behavior among soldiers?

JV: I didn't see any of it, and that's a thing we have discussed many times with the leaders of today's forces. We had one guy that came to our outfit as a replacement, he was from Texas and I've forgotten which town he was from. But anyway, it was one of these guys that, he had killed somebody else and was given the option by the judge of going into the Army or going to prison. He chose going into the Army, and he should have chosen the other route.

TS: Why is that?

JV: He was a bum. I remember he was the one guy that I really was enraged at, at the time. This happened in North Africa. He was supposed to be on the perimeter on guard duty one

night, and I found him in his pup tent asleep; he had just abandoned his post. We charged him, but we never tried him because he went absent without leave. Deserted.

TS: He did? Did you ever see him again?

JV: Never saw him again. He showed up on the, was on the list of deserters. Then he was apparently apprehended and tried for some other crime. The only really bad apple that we had during the whole war.

TS: You mentioned current forces, and the news is full of stories of increased suicide at bases stateside or abroad, of guys suffering from what in the '40s was called combat fatigue. Is there that great of a contrast between World War II and now, or was this something ... where was this?

JV: I don't know the answer to that. It may be that we didn't diagnose it well enough, that we didn't know enough about it and that today's people know more about it and are able to diagnose it. But frankly it never came up in our outfit during the war. I know that we had a number of people who went absent from some of the combat units, that were tried as deserters or for cowardice in the face of the enemy and were sentenced to fairly long prison terms in the correctional units, which were then in North Africa. Then they'd come back as replacements and what they got is three months out of the war or something like that. Later on in the war when General Charlie Bolte¹⁴ took command of the 34th Division, he decided that these people should be tried for absence without leave by special court martial rather than by a general court martial for the felony offenses of cowardice in the face of the enemy or desertion. So they were tried by special court martial for absence without leave.

TS: What's the difference in those court martials?

JV: It's the offenses, the gravity of the offenses, and the convening authority. For example, six months confinement was the maximum penalty that a special court martial can adjudge, whereas life imprisonment or death by firing squad or something like that is a general court martial. So he had the soldiers who left their outfits in combat most of them tried by special court martial with the charge of absence without leave. And then his idea was to have them sentenced to hard labor and perform the hard labor in the front lines by making fortifications for the soldiers who were not charged with anything.

TS: What do you make of that idea?

JV: I thought it was superb. And it reduced the rate dramatically.

¹⁴ Charles L. Bolte (1895-1989); U.S. Army officer. Gen Bolte commanded the 34th Infantry Division from July 1944 through the end of the war. Bolte also served from 1953-55 as Vice Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army.

TS: I can imagine a soldier, if he is so inclined to think like that, knowing that if I run away and get caught I'm going to get sent to the rear area for three or six months, that's what he wants anyway. Or it could be anyway.

JV: Right.

TS: So this completely reverses that equation.

JV: Right.

TS: Stories of the Soviet Union, Soviet forces in World War II, are full of lots of soldiers who were executed for deserting or for running away. Is that something that happened in our armed forces as well in World War II?

JV: We had one soldier executed and it was in the Northern European Theater. I've forgotten exact details.

TS: Is that the Eddie Slovik¹⁵ story?

JV: Yes.

TS: I remember reading about that years ago. So our forces chose to deal with that in different ways than the Soviet Union did for example.

JV: Yes.

TS: Let's go to Cassino for a few minutes. Is that okay?

JV: I'd like to get back to the Rest Camp. The wonderful thing about the Rest Camp is the great shower. A great hot shower.

TS: I take it from the way you're saying this one comes to appreciate that little thing.

JV: Yes. It was, (*chuckles*) it was like today going to the Ritz Carlton Hotel for a night.

TS: So you mentioned a couple of little things. You appreciated rest and you appreciated a hot shower.

JV: Hot shower. They had some good books to read.

¹⁵ Eddie Slovik (1920-1945): Army private, the only U.S. soldier to be court-martialed and executed for desertion since the Civil War.

TS: You had good meals apparently a couple places. At the end of a period like that is it easier to go back to the war or conversely is it more difficult to leave and go back? From your perspective.

JV: It was much more uncomfortable to go back to the unit but on the other hand, that was your life. Your life was with your unit. Again, it's like coming to Minneapolis and spending the night in a hotel. It's great, but let's go home tomorrow.

TS: Did you find yourself thinking about going back and thinking that you were kind of anxious to get back to the unit or not?

JV: No. It was enjoy the moment while you're there and go back when you have to go back.

TS: While you were a soldier in Italy how good of a letter writer were you in keeping your family and loved ones informed?

JV: Probably not very good. I didn't write as often as I should have, and I'm sure the letters were fairly dull and primarily because you knew that they were all going to be censored.

TS: Read anyway.

JV: Yes. One of the officers had to read them so there wasn't much you could say about the war. You could say, We're in Italy. We're in the high hills. We're in the lower hills. It's raining. The sun is shining. *(chuckles)*

TS: Sounds like pretty generic.

JV: Yes. I wrote letters to my girlfriend, who is now my wife, and she kept them all. Then at some time after the war she said, "Should I keep these things? Frankly, they're pretty dull." *(chuckles)* So we threw them out.

TS: How often did you get mail from people?

JV: By the time we got to Italy the mail system worked pretty well. We had V-mail,¹⁶ which was the photograph letters. One page. They came pretty fast. Maybe a week after it was written you got the letter. Then the regular mail came, and even with packages. We started to get packages in reasonable time. It probably took a month for a package.

TS: Do you recall specifically getting packages, getting things from home?

JV: Yes. I got a nice pair of leather mittens from my mother. I still have that pair of leather mittens. *(chuckles)* With a good wool lining. They were great.

¹⁶ V-mail letters were small sheets, approximately 7 x 9 inches; these were censored, copied to film, printed back to paper in the U.S., and delivered.

TS: So they were practical as well.

JV: They had a trigger finger on the right hand.

TS: She knew what to send you.

JV: Right.

TS: Why did you keep them after the war?

JV: They were good mittens. They're still good mittens.

TS: Excellent. I want to see those someday.

The unit goes back into the line or back into action in the first month of 1944, and it's at the battle of Cassino. Can we talk about that for a few minutes?

JV: Yes. We started out, you recall we crossed the Volturno [River] three times.

TS: Yes.

JV: We came up then generally to where the road split and we went north toward Mount Pantano, which was as I said on the north and slightly east of Cassino, before Christmas. Then when we came back into the line after Christmas, then we went up the road that the 36th Division, who was flanked by the U.S.-Canadian 1st Special Forces Group, on the road to Cassino. We started out at a place named Venafro, which was our first introduction to that fight up in that direction.

Written comments added by Gen Vessey, March 2014: "We should also add that the Brazilian Advanced Party arrived just before the bombing near Venafro; the first Brazilian casualty was there. Also, it was introduction to then Major Vernon A. Walters,¹⁷ who was the US Army liaison officer to the BEF [Brazilian Expeditionary Force]. Walters was later Lt Gen and interpreter for various US Presidents, as well as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence [1972-76], US Ambassador to the United Nations [1985-89], and US Ambassador to Germany [1989-91]."

(1:16:15)

TS: Let me show you a map [copy at end of interview] – and I'll add this to the record then too, and I have the same thing in front of me – which indicates terrain elevation as well as the units there. And this from the first battle of Cassino, 24 January to 11 February 1944. This plan of attack, as a military man, what does this map with the units and the contours say to you?

¹⁷ Vernon A. Walters (1917 – 2002): US Army officer and diplomat. Walters served in North Africa and Italy during World War II. He was fluent in Portuguese and four other languages.

JV: First that you're going into some pretty rugged terrain here. There's Monte Cairo, which is right north of Cassino and the hill up above Cassino, 1700 meters, which is 5000 feet high.

TS: Yes. That's a mile up.

JV: And then you've got the river valleys here, with the Rapido and the Garigliano and with the terrain there from 175 meters up to San Angelo at 601 meters and Monte Castellana at 771 meters. You've got, over a fairly short distance you've got some steep and rugged terrain.

TS: This is tricky fighting terrain, isn't it?

JV: Yes.

TS: When we look at the 36th Division there, there are three regimental combat teams it looks like on the map there?

JV: This is misnamed, because those are regiments of the 34th Division. It says 36th, but it ought to be 34th, because 168th, 135th, and 133rd were the 34th Division regiments.

TS: I am glad I showed you this then. And where are you on this map?

JV: We were at a place called Cervaro¹⁸, and it doesn't show enough of the terrain to the east really here.

TS: If you turn over to the back, Sir, I have another map there. Let me give you the color one here. There's the color one. That goes further to the east. Is that more helpful?

JV: Yes. *(reviewing map)* This is a very small scale map. Or large scale or whatever it is. Anyway it covers a lot of terrain.

TS: Yes.

JV: But there are a few things on here that...we were right about here. *(indicates location on map)*

TS: So by Mignano¹⁹, north of Mignano?

¹⁸ Town in Lazio region, located about 80 miles southeast of Rome.

¹⁹ Town located 45 miles northwest of Naples.

JV: North and west of Mignano. Mignano is the place where the Italians first fought on the Allied side. The Legnano Gruppo. I think we discussed that a couple of sessions ago.

TS: Yes, we did.

JV: Where I got to meet Luigi Poli²⁰, who then became Vice Chief of the Italian Army when I was Vice Chief of the American Army.

TS: As we look at this terrain here, either side with the sharp changes in elevation, the Germans had superior defensive positions. Is that safe to say?

JV: Yes. This was their main Gustav Line.

TS: From north to south or on this map from top to bottom.

JV: Right. As I said, when we came back into the line we came at Venafro, which is about here. It's not shown on the map, but it's sort of famous for two reasons: one is that there was a serious bombing of the American forces by the U.S. Air Force in Venafro before we got there. It was always sort of a joking thing when you'd see an Air Corps guy. Tell him, "Bombs away Venafro," or something like that to remind them that they'd made a grievous error there. But it was also a place where our battery got bombed seriously by the German Air Force, and it was the first time we ran into the new anti-personnel bomb that the Germans had constructed. Very similar to munitions that we developed after World War II that we called Improved Conventional Munitions which were sort of small grenade-like munitions inside either artillery shells or bombs, which then were scattered and exploded themselves. So you got much broader coverage and they were very effective against people. The Germans used that sort of a munition against us here at Venafro, and it was a bad day for headquarters battery of the 34th Division Artillery because both our officers were serious casualties and most of our vehicles were knocked out. And I found myself with responsibilities far greater than I expected to have, and I was essentially the battery commander as the first sergeant.

TS: Tell me how you handled that.

JV: With great difficulty. (*chuckles*) It was a growing up experience for me. The division artillery exec told me, "Well," he said, "I could take an officer from somewhere else where he's needed and put him here, but I think you can do this and so we're going to leave you in charge." And they did.

(1:24:20)

TS: For how long did you exercise that?

JV: It was for almost a month. Probably three weeks.

²⁰ Luigi Poli (1923-2013): Italian army officer. Chief of staff of the Italian Army, 1985-87.

TS: Talk about your new responsibilities. This is...obviously it happened suddenly, without warning.

JV: Yes. Right. Captain Reiser and Lieutenant Gerth were both serious casualties. Both evacuated to the hospital. Fortunately both came back eventually. But I had to think about things that I'd only thought about sort of tangentially up until that time.

TS: What were you now responsible for?

JV: Making sure that the battery did what it was supposed to do, to carry out its role in the war, which was provide communications for the division artillery, provide survey, provide meteorological data, and provide health and welfare and security for the folks that were doing that.

TS: How confident did you feel in your abilities as a first sergeant to manage this?

JV: It was sort of a wow, I've really got to get ahold of this. Again, I had great support from the rest of the NCOs in the battery and our motor officer, who was a warrant officer, was still around. Kenny Goodell, who we have discussed before, was there and he was a lot older than I and sort of got me aside and said, "You can do this."

TS: How did your daily routine then change once you had these new responsibilities?

JV: One was looking into far more detail at what the various sections were doing to make sure that they were accomplishing the job that they had to do, whereas before I made sure that the soldiers were secure and were fed and that their equipment was in shape and they were generally equipped to do what they were supposed to do. Now I had to look at the results of what they were supposed to do and to see that they did it correctly.

TS: Right. That's a huge step up in responsibility.

JV: Yes. Yes.

TS: So you have to find people who can in a sense manage those tasks that you might have been doing previously.

JV: No. I had those to take care of as well.

TS: Okay. So now you have responsibility now.

JV: Yes. Yes.

TS: And this at a time when again, there's action around, and the terrain is difficult.

JV: And the war is really getting serious. And we're about to engage in what had to be one of the major operations of the war for the 34th Division, which is the first assault into Cassino.

TS: That's what the unit history says as well. As I started to read the unit history about the first battle of Cassino, they mentioned the weather, and I went and read a number of Ernie Pyle's columns written from Cassino. Ernie Pyle's columns from Cassino are very descriptive, and what he talks a lot about is the weather.²¹

JV: Yes.

TS: He talks about mud and rain and cold and hunger as an attachment. He's writing about this for a reason. It must have been sort of ever present. How do you remember the stuff that I just mentioned?

JV: I gave you that little talk I gave to the Italian seminar here a couple years ago, and I think I mentioned the same things. Mud and more mud, and cold and more cold, and I think I concluded in that little talk that Ernie Pyle was probably right when he said if there had been no enemy other than the people blowing the bridges, that the march up the Italian peninsula would have been very slow at any rate, because the terrain and weather and the obstacles that the Germans engineers created alone were enough to make the march up the peninsula slow.

TS: What's the impact on troop morale and your own morale of this, of the mud and the cold and the wet?

JV: It was uncomfortable, but that made it all the more important that you do what you could to assuage those problems. That meant making sure the vehicles were kept in good repair, because we had to negotiate a lot of mud every day; making sure that the mess people did provide hot food for the troops; making sure that the NCOs were checking things like taking your boots off, finding out if the socks were wet, make them change to dry socks. Do everything you could to prevent trench foot. Check the soldiers' clothes to make sure that they had the right layering, to be able to stay warm. It was looking at a lot of little things that ordinarily you'd say, Well, he's a grown man. He ought to be able to do that himself. But the fact of the matter is that unless somebody checks, somebody is going to be lazy and not do it and if he becomes a casualty because of that you're short a person and the others have to do more work. And providing shelter from shelling, and so on and forth. It was tough digging. If it wasn't muddy, it was rocky. So making sure that the soldiers had adequate protection was just something that you had to do and required time and effort to do it. But it was important that it be done. If it weren't done, you created more troubles for not having done it.

²¹ Ernie Pyle (1900-1945); American journalist. Wartime correspondent, best known for newspaper columns featuring an intimate style and the perspective of the common soldier. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1944. Killed during the fighting on Okinawa, April 1945.

TS: Right. Where was your headquarters company, or what facilities did you have?

JV: We were out in the open, on a mountain across the valley from Cassino. It was sort of like an observation post because you could see the German artillery.

TS: So you could see them.

JV: Yes.

TS: And they could see you.

JV: Yes.

TS: If it's okay with you, let's pick up the rest of this Cassino Campaign the next time we're together.

JV: Okay.

TS: We hit ninety minutes and that's where we've stopped before, so I'll turn this machine off for today.

END OF INTERVIEW

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