

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 May 1, 2012. This is our seventh interview with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. It's a cloudy, kind of wants to rain day outside – since you can't see outside.

General, I'd like to go back today to our conversation from last time and link up to our discussion of the first battle of Cassino, January 1944. Again, we may have some overlap here and that's okay. We had talked about Ernie Pyle's columns from Cassino and the descriptive language that Ernie Pyle used talking about the mud, the rain, the cold and the hunger. I want to ask you about the German fortifications a little bit again. I know we touched on this last time, but what made the German fortifications there at Cassino, these defensive positions, so effective?

JV: Good planning, I would say, to start with. It became clear to us that the Germans had planned from the very beginning to make a stand at the Gustav line. I suspect that they used their experience on the Eastern Front to help them with the fortifications there. I can cite one example: we would knock the buildings that the Germans were using in their defensive positions, but all that did was make their defenses stronger.

They had some ingenious things. Actually they were fairly simple, but they seemed ingenious to us when we saw what they had. They'd constructed a two-man pillbox. It was an armored pillbox that could be towed behind a light vehicle or towed with horses for that matter. It had trunnions; actually at the center of gravity there were actually axles for wheels to go on, and then they would put this thing, this small two-man pillbox, inside an Italian building with two men and a machine gun inside it. Of course if you knocked down the rest of the house around it, all it did was give it more protection. As long as they could still see out and fire and had an exit to get their rations and so forth, which mean doing a little pick and shovel work perhaps, but it simply made the fortification stronger.

TS: Hmmm. Portable pillboxes.

JV: Yes.

TS: It is simple but ingenious, as you mentioned. And so, ultimately, it could be extracted, towed to a new building and the whole cycle would start again.

JV: Exactly.

TS: Pillboxes manned by a couple of men and some kind of machine gun.

JV: Right.

TS: German machine guns have a reputation for being, during that war, good. Can you comment on that?

JV: They had a much higher rate of fire than ours, and appeared to be very reliable. I'm sure that they had the same troubles that we had with jams and so forth, but we didn't detect it much. The soldiers called them burp guns because of the high rate of fire.

TS: You mentioned reliability. That's something I want to ask about. Given the weather that we're talking about here, which is moisture, mud, temperature changes, what kind of reliability issues came up with artillery, given the conditions we're talking about?

JV: I don't think we had any, I don't remember any reliability problems. The difficulties that it posed was getting through the mud. The American Army was pretty well equipped. We had what the soldiers called the deuce and a half, the two and a half ton GMC designed truck, with winches on the front of a number of them. It had good reliability, but it was still difficult getting through the mud in the Italian countryside. The other part was in the gun positions was keeping the ammunition dry.

TS: How does moisture impact artillery ammunition?

JV: If it gets into the propellant, of course, it damages the propellant. So keeping the propellant dry. Water doesn't hurt the shell itself.

TS: How about maintenance on guns? What kind of maintenance was required on the guns that your unit had, and is that something that becomes more challenging given the weather we're talking about?

JV: The basic light artillery piece during the Italian Campaign was the 105 mm howitzer. By the time the 34th Division went to Italy we had gotten rid of the twenty-five pounders and replaced them with American built 105s. It was a well-designed, simply designed, easy to maintain cannon. Howitzer. It was not difficult to maintain.

TS: What was required of the soldiers? I mean for the lay person, if you said gun maintenance, what's required?

JV: Cleaning and lubrication and checking the gas in the recoil system to make sure that it's proper, and doing anything with that was a higher level of maintenance.

TS: Were the soldiers trained to do that?

JV: Some soldiers were, yes. It was a rugged piece of equipment and into the Italian Campaign, the medium battalion got its old World War I Schneiders replaced with the new M-1 155, which again was a tough, rugged, reliable, simple, easy to maintain Howitzer. So

those were not difficulties for us. The only thing that provided maintenance difficulties was when the Howitzer got hit by enemy shell fire.

(9:00)

TS: How often did something like that happen? Counterbattery fire is something we've talked about.

JV: Relatively infrequently. We were still using the same cannons in Viet Nam many years later.

TS: These 105s and 155s?

JV: Yes.

TS: So they were durable guns.

JV: Yes.

TS: They stayed around for a while.

We've talked about North Africa and Italy. Of course simultaneously there is this enormous conflict on the Eastern Front. There is the Pacific. There is the Coral Sea, Midway, Guadalcanal by this time. How aware were you of the other theaters of this war, or was your mind set only where you were at?

JV: Speaking for myself, my principle focus was on the war in Italy. However, by the time the war in Italy had progressed several months, the *Stars and Stripes*¹ was a daily newspaper which we got perhaps a day late, but nevertheless we got it and it covered the war in general. So we were able to stay up to date on what was going on in the rest of the world.

TS: Did you?

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you have any friends or family who were engaged in the Pacific that would keep you interested from that perspective?

JV: Not in the early days, not at the Cassino time. My middle brother joined the Navy and was in the war in the Pacific during the last year of the war.

TS: How often did you communicate with that brother? I mean once he was in service too. Since you had something in common then.

¹ *Stars and Stripes*: daily newspaper published by, and for, the U.S. armed forces. First published 1861.

JV: Probably once a month.

TS: What kind of things did you want to know from him? If you were curious about something, what did you want to know from him?

JV: (*chuckles*) We joked a lot. My jabs at him were that he was on the ship sleeping in clean sheets and so forth, and his jabs to me were, "You really don't know how to live. If you'd gone to the right recruiting office, you too could have had clean sheets."

TS: He kind of got you there. When we think about Cassino again, this first battle of Cassino that your unit was involved in, those days, how did you personally experience the days at Cassino, that first battle?

JV: We were – I wish I had a map – I think the town was Cervaro,² the closest town to us. We were on the mountain just above Cervaro. You could see, from where we were you could see into the town of Cassino and of course the infantry battalions that were committed to the town were involved in some very, very difficult fighting. So there was a lot of fire to support them as well as to support the other two regiments that had gone around the side of the town and up the hills behind the town. In fact, the 34th's attacks on Cassino were well conducted. There were a lot of casualties there. The battalion that was in the town came out with a very small fraction of the number of men that went into the town. One battalion of the 133rd was commanded by an artilleryman named Kenneth Mearnes, who was later the commander of the division I served with in Viet Nam. Took an infantry battalion all the way up around, close to the abbey, and was actually overlooking the Liri Valley and had there been enough reserves to commit I think that the battle of Cassino could have been won a lot earlier than it was actually won.

TS: Yes, because it was much later. From your perspective then, did we underestimate these Germans and what it would take to dislodge them?

JV: Oh, I don't know. I was too far removed from the high command to critique its estimate. I think in reading the memoirs of the various high commanders, I don't think anyone underestimated the German command. The Germans fought skillfully. The Italian Campaign had only modest support obviously from the combined command or the combined chiefs of staff I guess you would call them, because they were preparing for the Normandy invasion. That was understandable. I think that looking at it in retrospect that our mission was (A) to move as far up the Italian peninsula as we could, which facilitated the bomber attacks on the rest of German-held Europe, and also drew forces that could have been used against the Normandy attack.

TS: How much of that was known to you as a soldier at the time?

² Small town located approximately 75 miles southeast of Rome.

JV: I'd say zero. First, we didn't know when or where we were going to attack in Normandy, and it certainly didn't cross my mind.

TS: In talking about the place of the Italian Campaign, there were some expectations of an attack in Western Europe eventually?

JV: Yes.

TS: There was the campaign in the Pacific, which by 1944 had turned the corner I think. Yet the Italian campaign existed as well. I want to turn to a journalist here for a moment. The journalist is Eric Sevareid.³ Sevareid covered the Italian Campaign in 1944.

JV: He's a Minnesotan.

TS: He is, yes. And he wrote some good dispatches, including this one which was written on November 7, 1944, and which appeared in *The Nation*⁴ on December 9, 1944. He was asking in this article really about the place of the Italian Campaign in the hierarchy of resources and of outcomes. He said the following towards the end here: "To this observer at least, it seems very late for commanders to continue to place blame for failure on weather and insufficient forces. Why should we not be frank about Italy and admit that Kesselring⁵ on a very small budget has done a masterful job in making a primary Allied force pay bitterly for every dubious mile of a secondary battlefield, that no matter what heroism our superb fighters showed, the monstrously difficult terrain of the peninsula, with its few roads winding through precipitous mountains made encirclement and destruction of a retreating enemy impossible at any stage, that the terrain was not an unknown quantity when the original plans were made. The Allied people and history may well ask whether the bloody Italian Campaign has been a 'victory', whether indeed it has accomplished anything of a decisive nature." He's writing that in 1944, asking about what happened and how it happened and whether this was a victory or what place the Italian Campaign should assume. As someone who was there, how would you respond to Eric Sevareid's comments?

JV: I would say that the same arguments are being made today by those who want to criticize going to Italy. I think, first, if you looked at the summer of '43 and said okay, we have two or three hundred thousand people in the Mediterranean. What are we going to do with them? And you look at the general situation in the world with what's happening on the Eastern Front; certainly the Western Allies had to do something. Saying we're not quite ready to invade central Europe yet, so we're going to sit on our hands for another year or so

³ Eric Sevareid (1912-1992); U.S. news journalist. During World War II, Sevareid reported from Europe as well as the Pacific.

⁴ Weekly U.S. newsmagazine, first published in 1865.

⁵ Albert Kesselring (1885-1960); German military officer and field marshall. He commanded various units throughout the war, including in Italy in 1943-44. Tried and convicted of war crimes at Nuremberg, 1946.

and do nothing, I think would have been unacceptable to Stalin. Stalin would have had a compelling argument, so something needed to be done. As Severeid said, has written there, the terrain in Italy was well known and if you were going to invade Italy the place to come was from the north and not from the south.

TS: Which the Germans did come from. Yes.

JV: That was well known. The history of that was certainly known to the people who made the decisions. On the other hand, if you look at what is your goal in the long run other than just simply defeating Hitler, and you talk about wanting a Europe that's not perhaps the mirror image of the Europe we have today but is pretty close. That is, there's been a few skirmishes in Europe since May or June of '45, but basically Europe has been at peace and the nations that have shot at each other have agreed to compete on the commercial field with wine and restaurants and other things since then. One has to ask, where would Italy be today if the Allies had not undertaken the liberation of Italy?

TS: Do you want to answer your question as well?

JV: I don't know the answer to that question, but I doubt that Italy would have the same outlook toward the United States that it has had since World War II or to the unified Western Europe. As I've said in that little talk to the Italian seminar [in 2009],⁶ it seems to me that once we were involved, once we had decided to go to Italy, that we were duty bound to try and free up the rest of the Italian people from fascism and the Nazi occupation. Difficult though it was. Certainly Italy has been a good member of NATO since then. Italian politics are not what we would want to have the United States emulate, but they work for the Italians. (*chuckles*)

(24:10)

TS: Diplomatically put, Sir.

JV: So I think that once it was started, it had to go on.

TS: It took on a life of its own, in a sense? Perpetuating itself?

JV: Right. Yes. And even though it was ill-supported... No, I don't want to say ill-supported; that's not correct. But it wasn't given overwhelming support. Forces were taken away for the invasion of southern France. Ammunition was limited, certainly in the last year of the war in Italy.

TS: Did you feel that on the ground at the time, knowing that resources were either not being sent or were being drained off?

JV: Oh, surely. Yes.

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

TS: How did that make you feel at the time?

JV: Just skipping on ahead from Cassino and the breakout from Anzio [during the last week of May 1944], perhaps really the best day of the Italian Campaign was marching through Rome, the day before D-Day in Normandy. And it was indeed a glorious day for the Allied soldiers that fought in Italy and it was a wonderful day for the Italian people. The streets of Rome were lined with smiling Italians and with wine bottles and glasses of wine passing them to the troops.

TS: I was going to ask you about that later, but since you're talking now, let's stick with that liberation of Rome. June 5 [1944] must be the day you're referring to.

JV: Right.

TS: And it follows this rapid breakout movement from Anzio, the Anzio Beachhead. You're talking about civilians and people in a city. Sort of talk about that, what that felt like and what you saw and experienced.

JV: Fortunately Rome was declared an open city by the Germans. They didn't destroy anything in particular, and we didn't bomb Rome, so going into a city that was something other than rubble was a new experience to begin with. Then seeing these hundreds of thousands of people that were on the streets. The streets were all lined with people. I remember that a young woman came out and stuck a rose in the barrel of my carbine. *(chuckles)*

TS: Were you marching on the ground or were you in a vehicle?

JV: I was in a vehicle, in a Jeep. But it was at a crawl because people, marching troops ... she stuck a rose in the barrel of my carbine and planted a kiss on my cheek. *(chuckles)* There were many others offering glasses of wine and what have you. If you had accepted a drink from everyone offering a drink as we went through Rome, the war would have stopped because everybody would have been drunk.

TS: You've mentioned previously how encountering civilians had been a positive thing. You hadn't encountered guerrillas or civilians who felt antagonistic towards your presence.

JV: No.

TS: This sounds like more of the same.

JV: Right.

TS: What kind of images did you have in your mind as a twenty-one year old young man of Rome beforehand? We've all heard of Rome. What was that going to be like for you? What did you envision Rome being like?

JV: You knew of the architectural treasures that were in Rome, and certainly wanting to see St. Peter's and the Vatican. And the bridges in Rome are beautiful bridges. A lot of white marble buildings. It was a wonderful city to see.

TS: Visually did it match kind of your expectations of what you had seen and read about?

JV: Even exceeded my expectations.

TS: What was the coolest thing you saw?

JV: I think the dome at St. Peter's.

TS: Because having seen that as well, talk about the first time it sort of came into your view.

JV: It was just sort of a, wow!

TS: You're there as a soldier, not a sightseer. Was there nonetheless time to see anything other than to drive by it?

JV: No.

TS: So it was seeing but not stopping.

JV: Right. Right. The war, we had a mission. But it was nevertheless an absolutely delightful experience.

TS: You've had plenty of things on the other end of the continuum that you've been talking about now that have not been delightful experiences with happy civilians.

JV: Right. It was a great day.

TS: In fact, it's a nice contrast to the battle of Cassino, and to leave that behind I'm going to quote from the unit history of the 34th Infantry Division.⁷ "The Battle of Cassino was a failure. The division had failed to take its objectives. German paratroopers had succeeded in blocking the best efforts of our troops to advance. Yet for those who were there and knew the difficulties of the assault, the tremendous strength of the German fortifications, to those men, Cassino was the outstanding achievement in the division's history." The outstanding achievement in the division's history. How do you want to respond to or comment on that?

⁷ *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.

JV: Again, you ask me to respond to that. I can't separate the twenty-one year old who was present from the fellow who spent an additional forty years in the armed forces and looking back at it. I'd say it was an outstanding achievement by the division. We fought against a well-trained, well-equipped enemy. The overall Allied force was not strong enough to breach that position, but I think as I said earlier, had there been any reserves to commit, that position could have been breached when Mearnes' battalion of the 133rd I guess it was, was up around and had outflanked the major German positions. If there had been another regiment to commit to the success of that attack, I'm convinced the Cassino front could have been broken at that time. The Germans committed things that we hadn't seen before, the *Nebelwerfer*,⁸ the rocket artillery, was a new thing for us. I'm sure it had been used on the Eastern Front, but we hadn't seen it before.

TS: Effective weapon?

JV: Yes. It was effective area cover. It was sort of a scatter gun. It wasn't particularly accurate, but it fired a lot of TNT at you. The shell itself was not very effective in producing casualties in that the casing of the shell, the metal was rather light and it didn't break into the small pieces that a conventional artillery shell did, but it was an effective counterbattery weapon.

TS: Because of its area coverage?

JV: Yes. Because of the area coverage. As we pointed out, the defenses themselves were well constructed. And the German Air Force, although we still had air superiority by that time, the German Air Force was still there and still operating.

(34:45)

TS: A failure. But what lessons would you say were learned?

JV: Bring enough fighters to the fight. (*chuckles*) At the point of decision. If you don't have the mass there, you don't succeed.

TS: Was this a good case in point for that?

JV: Yes. And we fired a lot of artillery ammunition and fired it effectively. I think the artillery did a good job there. The other thing I'd say about that battle around Cassino, it was evidence of the fact that we were indeed in a world war. We were relieved by two divisions: an Indian division and the New Zealanders. On our right at that time an Algerian division and a Moroccan division had moved up to Mount Pantano, from which we had withdrawn earlier. So on our immediate left was the 36th [U.S.] Division for most of that time. But on their left were a couple of British divisions. So Italy was truly evident of the fact that we were in a world war.

TS: Did you interact with men from other units?

⁸ *Nebelwerfer*: group of German weapons, similar to mortars.

JV: Particularly the New Zealanders, because the New Zealanders moved right into our position there and relieved us directly. In fact I shared my shelter trench with a New Zealander for a couple of days. A week or so I guess.

TS: So it's an interesting perspective seeing all these troops from other places. It brought home that this was a conflict not just between the United States and the Germans.

JV: Right.

TS: That's a very good point. The unit history notes that from 11 to 13 February 1944 the 34th Division was relieved from its positions, and the next major subject would be the Anzio Beachhead and the several months there. Just as an overview, the unit history talks about Anzio Beachhead from 25 March 1944 being in defensive positions until the offensive began on 23 May. So we talk about that period. Were you present from the beginning, from 25 March, about that time? You personally?

JV: Let's go back to Cassino for a minute. Because right after we were relieved, [in fact] we were still in the positions there and we were providing some artillery support to the New Zealanders [when] the bombing at the Abbey⁹ took place.

TS: Talk about that.

JV: It sort of wasn't a turning point in the war because it didn't seem to change anything, but it was a major point politically I believe. I've read several different versions since then of why the Abbey was bombed. The best of my recollection is that our division commander was against the bombing of the Abbey and I think perhaps, I think [General] Mark Clark¹⁰ was opposed to it. I'm maybe getting my wires crossed here for a moment, but it seems to me that the New Zealand commander did want the Abbey bombed, and it was bombed. Of course it was an amazing sight to see. These B-17s¹¹ coming over.

TS: Flying Fortress bombers.

JV: Yes.

TS: What could you see from where you were on the ground?

JV: I could see the whole thing.

⁹ Monte Cassino Abbey. Destroyed by U.S. aerial bombing attack, 15 February 1944.

¹⁰ Mark Clark (1896-1984); U.S. Army officer. Commanded U.S. forces in Italy, 1942-1945.

¹¹ The B-17 was a four engine U.S. heavy bomber, known colloquially as Flying Fortress because of its extensive defensive armament.

TS: Talk about what that looked like, because the films are pretty imposing.

JV: Yes. Of course the Abbey was on the mountain there for all to see, and it was a magnificent looking building. It was an all-day affair, the bombing of the Abbey, with B-17s, B-25s,¹² even fighter bombers in the end. It was an all-day exercise. So a lot of smoke and dust and what have you. It was clear that the Germans were firing from the smoke and dust before the day was over, so obviously it changed nothing.

I think probably the best account is the account of the German commander at that time, von Senger und Etterlin,¹³ in his book,¹⁴ when he talks about going to the Abbey and taking people out of the Abbey and so forth and trying to protect the people who had sheltered themselves in the Abbey. But it points out that there are some things that you can do from the air that are successful or that will certainly help the ground battle and other things you can do from the air that will just make it more difficult. I think it made it politically more difficult.

TS: The destruction of the Abbey.

JV: Right.

TS: What did you hear about, or what did you know about the political side to this question at the time?

JV: Not much.

TS: You could see the Abbey existing and not being bombed and all of a sudden it was.

JV: Right. And of course we were told the history of the Abbey. So the troops that watched the bombing thought the bombing was great, and it was the first time we'd seen a lot of bombs to help the ground war in any of the battles.

TS: As you think about it after the fact, was that the right thing to do, politically or tactically?

JV: No, it wasn't. Made no difference. If it were the right thing to do it would have changed the battle there, but it didn't change it. The fight for Cassino and Monte Cassino went on for another three months.

¹² The B-25 was a U.S. twin engine medium bomber.

¹³ Fridolin Rudolf Theodor von Senger und Etterlin (1891-1963); German Army officer. Commanded units in Italy, 1943-44.

¹⁴ The translated title is *Neither Fear nor Hope: The Wartime Career of General Frido von Senger und Etterlin, Defender of Cassino* (1963).

TS: That's right. The first battle of Cassino was called the first battle because there were others that came after.

JV: Many battles after.

TS: Thanks for adding that. Anything else you'd like to sort of integrate here before we move to Anzio, in March?

JV: I'd point out that the weather also was lousy at the time of the battle of Cassino. Quite a bit of snow and cold weather. There wasn't anything that was done at Cassino that was easy.

TS: And things that you've alluded to or talked about specifically are terrain, opponent and weather.

JV: Right.

TS: And that's a big threesome to have to work around. The weather or the terrain, were these two factors that were less in play or less serious when we talk about Anzio, for example?

JV: The terrain was in play, but the weather was a lot better. It was not a factor at Anzio.

TS: Talking about the unit moving along here several months, one thing I wanted to talk to you about is integrating replacements. You've alluded to this in the past at least once. From your perspective, what's the challenge in integrating replacements?

JV: Making them a part of the team. The team is functioning. It's sort of like having a walk on football player come out and expecting him to walk on to the varsity and begin playing immediately without having looked at the play book or understanding who the captain is or who is in charge.

That's why I'd like to go back to Cassino once more, because by this time, before we got out of there, Lieutenant Gerth came back and I was relieved of my principle duties at the time of being sort of the commander [of the battery] without having the title.

TS: Right.

JV: Lieutenant Gerth got back from the hospital and after we came out of the line and before we went to Anzio Captain Reiser came back. Lieutenant Gerth came back first and then Captain Reiser came back before we went to Anzio.

TS: So having people leave the unit sometimes permanently, sometimes temporarily meant a constant turnover of people or influx of new people.

JV: Yes. Certainly for the artillery, where the casualties were far less than the infantry, it wasn't as difficult a problem but it's something you had to face.

TS: Did people cycle in and out of Headquarters Company too?

JV: There are two reasons, actually three reasons that you leave under those conditions. One is that you get hit or sick and you're evacuated through medical channels. The other is that you get promoted and moved on to take some job in another adjacent outfit. Or you could go absent without leave and desert. Fortunately we had almost none of the latter. But we had both of the other cases happen.

TS: Casualties and promotions?

JV: Right.

TS: Did you begin to feel at any time that because of your experience and your abilities that you were due a promotion?

JV: No.

TS: Didn't think about that?

JV: Didn't give it a thought.

TS: Because at this point with new people coming in, you've been around since the beginning.

JV: Yes, but I had more than enough to think about doing the job that I had.

TS: The way you've described it you were doing a lot.

JV: Yes.

TS: Anzio is a different kind of terrain than Cassino. It's a beachhead, as the accounts talk about. When you arrived there, what tactical situation presented itself?

(49:15)

JV: By this time the situation on the beachhead itself was generally a stalemate. The truly big German counterattacks had taken place before we got there, and the Allied forces had survived with great difficulty. By the time we got there the general tactical situation was a stalemate with plenty of exchanges of artillery, patrolling by both sides, particularly at night, air activity by both sides, by the Germans principally at night; the Germans were in the air about every night. I think we had discussed earlier the Germans had these 280 millimeter railroad guns that were out of range of anything that we had firing at the ground, so that made life uncomfortable. It made the shelters that we had constructed for ourselves look pretty flimsy.

TS: This being under fire, whether it's an air attack, or you've got artillery fire, large artillery fire. What's that feel like? This sort of daily...

JV: *(chuckles)* I think that for us in our position every day we spent some effort in improving the shelters that we had. The command post was dug into the banks of a small canal actually. I think that just about every day we worked and filled a few more sandbags and put a few more construction timbers to hold them up.

TS: When you talk about sandbags and timbers, for a lay person sort of describe what this facility looks like.

JV: It's dug into the banks of this canal, the bank that was on the side toward the front line. Then we had both six by six timbers and plenty of two by fours that were supporting the sandbags that we had put over the top. What they did was generally provide safety from fragmentation. If the shelter got hit by at least one of the German 150 shells or the 280, it disappeared. But if the shell landed outside the shelter you were protected from the fragments.

TS: So if it got hit it was going to be obliterated, but if it was a shell adjacent or next to it, the shrapnel, you'd be protected from that.

JV: Yes.

TS: Your own artillery here: what guns were most effective here? And what was the task for a 105 or a 155 in a beachhead situation like this?

JV: The Germans had about the same sort of protections in their defensive positions as we had in ours. To do anything you had to get out of the shelters of course. So the light artillery, the 105s, we had limited attacks by both sides while we were there. It was sort of trench warfare a la World War I almost.

TS: With lack of actual movement.

JV: Right. With patrolling by each side. So the light artillery was used to counter mortar fire, keep the German infantry heads down while our people tried to gain some advantage. The medium artillery was used to go after specific strong points. One of the things that we had mentioned earlier in our earlier conversations was that the air observation with our light airplanes which gave us a distinct advantage over the Germans, because Anzio is basically flat. It's in a flat plain. The Germans held high ground beyond the Anzio beachhead, where the heavy artillery was located. But most of the fighting forces on both sides were in flat ground. So our observation aircraft could undertake precision destruction fire against specific targets.

TS: By pinpointing exacting where those targets were?

JV: Right.

TS: Were you working as an observer or an air observer here?

JV: Not at the beginning. In fact not any time at Anzio did I work as an air observer.

TS: Ground observer?

JV: Yes. Before we got out I got commissioned and was a forward observer on the breakout from the Anzio beachhead.

TS: The everyday life you talk about: you're under shell fire. What was the most challenging thing for you as far as getting your job done every day?

JV: The main part of my job was making sure that the men and equipment of the battery was sheltered enough from enemy fire so that it had adequate protection and that we could do the various things that we had to do for our job. Communications in a stable position, much of it was telephonic rather than radio, because the Germans could intercept the radio communications. So if you could use the telephone it was better, but at the same time with ample artillery fire from the other side and aircraft bombings and so forth, telephone lines laid along the ground were particularly vulnerable. So the wiremen spent a lot of time repairing breaks in the telephone lines. Once we got into position the surveyors didn't have much to do, because we didn't move.

TS: That is a good point. People at Anzio – because we're talking thematically here too when we can – talk about some people at Anzio that you interacted with that from your perspective showed effective leadership. Identify some people that you can talk about.

JV: Up until the time of the breakout there weren't any particular signs, that is, the one effective leader that I had to deal with every day was Captain Lloyd Reiser, the battery commander, who continued to make it clear to me that my duty was to make sure that our soldiers and equipment were amply protected, well fed and that they got themselves cleaned up.

TS: So you're coordinating a lot of things.

JV: Yes.

TS: What made Reiser a good soldier?

JV: He was probably the oldest captain in the division artillery.

TS: When you say "old," what are we talking here?

JV: I would say that Lloyd Reiser was well into his thirties.

TS: Okay. And still a captain.

JV: Right. He was certainly not an athlete, but he was physically fit. He could walk the boot soles off any soldier. Never complained about his own circumstances, but always looked for the way to make things better for the soldiers that were in his outfit. He was very strict from the disciplinary and moral point of view.

TS: What do you mean by that?

JV: Strong Christian. Didn't tolerate any laxness of any kind. He expected the soldiers to be shaved and cleaned up. Just an all-around good man.

TS: It sounds like you respected the rank of course, but you also respected the man.

JV: Greatly. Greatly.

TS: Whatever happened to him?

JV: He stayed in the Regular Army after World War II. Was given a Regular Army commission in the Signal Corps. Shortly after World War II he was a full colonel in the Signal Corps. So his talents were recognized. He retired from the Army as a full colonel. Died about ten years ago I guess.

TS: Did you stay in touch with him after the war?

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: I want to, speaking of officers, come to your battlefield commission, because at Anzio is where this happened. And I don't know the details, so I'll ask you to describe the events as you remember them.

JV: Captain Reiser called me in and said, "You know you have been recommended for a commission." I said, "No, I don't."

TS: Was it true you didn't know?

JV: I didn't know that. (*chuckles*) He said, "Well, you have been." I said okay, but I think my immediate reaction was, "Who is going to take my job?" (*chuckles*) I thought I had, until the end of the war, locks on that job myself. But anyway, he encouraged me to accept the commission.

TS: Was it really something you could accept or not accept, or was it just a formality?

JV: I guess you could...you certainly had the opportunity to say no.

TS: Did it occur to you to say no?

JV: No. I thought about it but no, there's a war going on. At the same time you recognize that being a second lieutenant in the field artillery was going to be a lot more dangerous than being first sergeant.

TS: Did you know that?

JV: Oh, sure.

TS: What made it more dangerous?

JV: You were going to be a forward observer with an infantry company.

TS: You knew that?

JV: Yes. That was very apparent. On the other hand, we were at war. By this time I had watched us cycle through a lot of second lieutenants.

TS: How did that make you feel?

JV: I had survived that long. It didn't occur to me that there was anything that I couldn't handle.

TS: That brings up an interesting philosophical question about mortality. How did you think about your own mortality during that time?

JV: I don't think I thought about it much at all. Every once in a while, the fact that we were in a war with a considerably high casualty rate came home. I think I spoke about our chaplain, Holy Joe Walker, earlier. Holy Joe got reassigned to the infantry, and I think that the division had a policy where chaplains had to move from safer positions to more dangerous positions. Certainly being a chaplain of an infantry battalion felt more dangerous than being a chaplain to an artillery outfit. Anyway, Holy Joe got reassigned to an infantry battalion. It was while we were at Cassino. We had moved into this particular position, and in those days we used little coded signs to indicate where the turnoff of the main road to a given position was, and I was out pounding one of our signs into the ground signaling where the command post was and here comes Holy Joe Walker in a three-quarter ton truck.

So he stopped to pass the time of day with me. The sun had come out on this particular day. Holy Joe greeted me and said, "This is the day the Lord has made." (*chuckles*) He went on to point out that the sun was shining and what a great day it was. We just exchanged a wonderful bit of conversation here and I thought how delightful it was, because the guy that had replaced him was kind of a dud frankly.

TS: A dud chaplain?

JV: He was a gloomy chaplain. (*chuckles*) If there was anything Holy Joe wasn't, he wasn't gloomy.

TS: Suffice it to say, this small bit of conversation you remember sixty years later.

JV: But the thing I remember then is Holy Joe got back in his three-quarter ton [truck] and he started out and I looked and I waved as he waved out the passenger's seat at me. And the back end is loaded with body bags. Holy Joe was on his way to the cemetery.

TS: And they are full body bags.

JV: Right. Full body bags. And I mean the back end of that three-quarter ton was loaded with dead soldiers. It's a day like that where you remember that there's a serious part to this war as well as maybe a great part.

TS: Here's another case. We see body bags and the question of mortality and your own: the old cliché of 'other guys get hit, it's not going to be me.' Are you thinking the same thing?

JV: Right. It had happened earlier. Our survey sergeant, his last name was Leghorn, was a fellow who transferred to us from the Canadian Army while we were in North Ireland. He had joined the Canadian Army earlier in the war and then this opportunity came for Americans that were either members of the British Army or the armies of the Commonwealth to transfer back to the United States Army. We got several guys back at that time including John Leghorn; he and I turned out to have a good friendship. He married a British ATS woman, counterpart to our WACS, from the Isle of Wight as a matter of fact, while we were in North Ireland. I was best man at his wedding. I went out one day to look for the survey section that was out surveying. It was near Cassino. Leghorn was out there at a road intersection with three of his people and I stopped to give him some directions.

One single German 150 round landed, and there were five of us there, and three of us out of the five were casualties including Leghorn, who had a chunk about the size of your recorder there [approximately wallet-sized] go through him and come out the other side. Leghorn was clearly severely wounded and we were working to staunch the flow of blood. An ambulance with some other casualties came by and I stopped him and he said he had room for Leghorn. So we put Leghorn in this ambulance, which was on the way to an evacuation hospital.

The next day I thought I should go hunt for Leghorn. So I went back to the evacuation hospital that was immediately behind our division, and Leghorn never arrived there. I was concerned that Leghorn would not survive, because the wound was so severe. Abdominal wound. I was torn between what to do. I knew that if he had died I should contact his wife. Then I thought no, let the official military channels contact his wife, because I don't know that he has died.

When I got commissioned at Anzio I had to go to Naples to take my commissioning physical at the General Hospital in Naples. On a hunch – I had a list of other names of people that had been wounded – I thought I would check on to see if they were okay, and I had Leghorn's name on my list. And Leghorn was there in the hospital. It turns out that the ambulance driver and the medic that was with him knew that Leghorn was in bad shape and they went past one of these mobile surgical hospitals, which was a small hospital. It

was supposed to support the evacuation hospital, but it was nearer to where Leghorn was picked up than the evacuation hospital. They stopped there and unloaded Leghorn there and those people saved his life. Leghorn eventually came back, he never came back to our outfit, but he became an air traffic controller, in fact in Naples. He did in fact survive the war. I remember that particular event where three of the five were casualties.

TS: And you weren't one of those.

JV: No, I was not. I had the feeling that okay, it wasn't meant for me.

TS: While you had been slightly wounded in North Africa.

JV: Right.

TS: Was there any other time during the war that you were even slightly wounded?

(1:15:20)

JV: At the breakout from Anzio beachhead an air burst shell fragment hit me in the [right] shoulder, and tore a hole in my field jacket. But it was a cold day and I had a wool undershirt, a wool shirt, and a lined tanker jacket on. By the time the fragment got to where there was flesh all it did was make a little scratch.

TS: So even as you're commissioned to second lieutenant and take on more dangerous duties, you do end up without injury. Did you ever find that sense of confidence, or of not worrying about that, go away or just something that stayed with you consistently?

JV: There were times when, even before I was commissioned, when the weather was bad and the food was bad and the war seemed interminable when you think well, maybe one of these million-dollar wounds¹⁵ wouldn't be so bad, so that you could get evacuated and sent home. Where you almost wound up wishing for a wound. But not really. I never wished for one enough to stick my foot out of the foxhole.

TS: There's a lot of talk about that. Guys talking about being pleased that they had this wound, but it had to be the right kind. Not too serious.

JV: Right.

TS: So mortality is one of those things, and also morale is one that as you're alluding to; there are times when one does feel down, whether it's conditions or exhaustion or et cetera. And I find interesting that even in the midst of a war you had to go in for a physical. It's like the regulations say that before you have to go for a physical, so you've got to go for one.

JV: Right.

¹⁵ U.S. military slang: a wound serious enough to result in evacuation, but neither fatal nor crippling.

TS: That's interesting. Staying in the same unit and yet now being an officer, how did that change how you related to other people and how they related to you?

JV: Once the bars were pinned on...

TS: Did you pin them on right away?

JV: We had a ceremony. After I took the physical and came back, passed the physical, then there was a ceremony in the bunker of the division artillery commander, Alfred C. Stanford. There were four of us that got commissioned on the same day. General Stanford gave us a drink of his whiskey and pinned the bars on us, and then told us how much better off we were than he was when he was commissioned a second lieutenant out of West Point.

He told a wonderful story. He said he was assigned at Fort McClellan, Alabama. So he traveled by train to Alabama. Got his bag. Got a ride to the gate of the post, but they wouldn't let the taxi in beyond the gate. So he walked carrying his bags. He said it was a very hot day. He said it was August or September of the year that he was commissioned. In Alabama. Walked to the post headquarters and reported in. He said the adjutant had him wait for a while and finally reported to the post commander, who was a full colonel. He said, "I went in and saluted and said, Second Lieutenant A. C. Stanford reporting, Sir." He said, "The old SOB looked at me and said, 'Stanford, what can you do?'" He said, "He had me there. I couldn't do a damn thing." (*chuckles*) Then Stanford went on to point out how much better off we were because we'd had a couple years of combat experience.

TS: How did Stanford's story make you feel there? Kind of boost your self-confidence or not so much?

JV: I thought it was worth a laugh.

TS: You've pinned these bars on and you're in the same unit, so you see the same people now, right?

JV: Right.

TS: How does this change how everyone relates to each other?

JV: Not much. My old NCO buddies got a little smile out of saluting me, but they all congratulated me. I've read a couple of accounts written by some of those people since then and they all thought it was a good thing. At least they wrote it...

TS: How do your duties now change? You're not a first sergeant anymore. What is Second Lieutenant Vessey doing?

JV: I was told immediately, You're going to stay with headquarters battery as the assistant communications officer, but you're also going to rotate duties as a forward observer. Since the breakout from the Anzio beachhead was only a couple of weeks beyond that I found

myself assigned to an infantry company for the breakout from the Anzio beachhead. By the time that occurred I'd spent some time clearing my mind with the duties of a forward observer and spent some time with Captain, by that time Major, Buck Smith, who wrote one of those articles that you gave me earlier, and he helped me a lot. He was a Regular Army officer, a West Point grad and a good artilleryman himself. He sort of took me under his wing.

TS: How did Smith help you?

JV: He particularly reviewed the conduct of fire, that is what the observer's role is in conducting a fire mission and reviewed the trigonometry and ballistic geometry of artillery fire and actually drilled me on how to do it. We'd practice conducting a fire mission.

TS: You had some previous experience as a forward observer, so this was not entirely new for you.

JV: Oh, no. Right. But Buck Smith wanted to make sure that I did it right.

TS: The way you talk about yourself as a soldier, you also liked to get things right.

JV: Yes.

TS: You've mentioned a number of times how you studied things and you made sure that you understood the procedure and the policies. So it sounds like you're saying this is another example of how you worked as a soldier.

JV: Yes.

TS: The breakout from the Anzio beachhead, I want to look at maps and I'm going to pause for just a moment.

(pause to review map – see below)

So the breakout from the Anzio beachhead in May 1944 follows weeks and weeks of this stalemate that we have been talking about, of essentially static positions with some patrols and battery and counterbattery fire. The breakout in May 1944, in a big picture sense, why was that possible when it happened, when it hadn't happened for weeks and weeks?

JV: First, the effort hadn't been put into it for a long time. That is, the last real major effort was in our attack at Cassino coupled with the amphibious invasion at Anzio-Nettuno. Back to the attack at Cassino. One of the things we did infrequently was, we fired propaganda shells at the Germans. Usually we got to see one of the leaflets with perhaps the English translation of what we were telling the Germans. At Cassino, when the Anzio landing took place, we fired a propaganda shell that had a map that said, 'You are surrounded. These are the facts.' And then pointed out that the supply road to their front at Cassino was going to be cut off by our landing at Anzio, that they better abandon their positions because soon

they'd be out of ammunition and so forth. At least that was the inference to be drawn from the propaganda shell. I think it was maybe ten days later, when the Anzio beachhead was hanging on by its fingernails, the Germans fired propaganda shells at us.

TS: Also with leaflets inside?

(1:28:00)

JV: Yes. (*chuckles*) I remember picking up one of the leaflets and it said, 'Who is surrounded? These are the facts.' And it pointed out that the Anzio beachhead was under severe attack by heavy armored forces and was likely to be pushed into the sea. So that was kind of the last main effort to coordinate the Anzio landing with the attacks on Cassino. And this was a new effort in May. It involved elaborate preparations. For example, many of the infantry outfits that were involved in the breakout from the Anzio beachhead were put in armored sleds that were towed behind tanks. You'd have an infantry squad in a sled that had been made in the ordnance shops out of armor plate. The infantrymen were prone in this sled and low to the ground and somewhat protected, but not much. But it was that sort of elaborate preparation. Stockpiling of ammunition, bringing more artillery into Anzio.

TS: So was it clear from your perspective that something was going to happen?

JV: Oh, sure. We rehearsed with the infantry being towed with these sleds and so forth. And there was a lot of air support for the breakout.

TS: What was the role to be played by artillery, the 105s and the 155s, that you were involved with?

JV: It was mainly attacks of the positions that our infantry was trying to assault.

TS: And were you a forward observer here?

JV: I was a forward observer. We were...you can see on this map the one arrow up through Lanuvio.

TS: Around this area here?

JV: Right. And it shows the railroad here. The railroad was in a deep cut. It had only a few crossings. In this front here where we were you needed a bridge to get across the railroad cut, for any vehicles. One of the crossings was protected by a large Italian farm called Villa Crocetta was the name of the place, and it's mentioned in a number of the history books. Anyway, I was there with one of the companies attacking Villa Crocetta.

TS: Talk about that, what you remember.

JV: We took the Villa Crocetta, but were counterattacked almost immediately. I've forgotten the number of German prisoners that we captured there, but a sizeable number. They were being disarmed and sent to the rear, and we were trying to organize defenses because we expected an immediate counterattack by the Germans. We were supported by

three [self-propelled] M-10 tank destroyers, which was lightly armored; it looked like a tank but it wasn't a tank. Didn't have the heavy armor that a tank has, but it had a high velocity 76 millimeter gun on it, which was quite effective.

But anyway, I came around the corner of the main building at Villa Crocetta and could suddenly see the German counterattack force coming, what looked like probably two or three hundred very businesslike looking Germans with their helmets and fixed bayonets and three Mark VI Tiger tanks coming. We were outnumbered considerably by the attacking German infantry, and our supporting armor was outgunned even more so by the Mark VI Tigers.

The first shot from one of the Tigers blew the turret off one of the M-10s and the other two M-10s turned around to depart, and the next shot by one of the Mark VIs got the M-10 in the engine compartment and it blew up. So we went back to the position from which we had assaulted Villa Crocetta immediately.

TS: Now that's something you haven't described before, where you've actually seen counterattacking or attacking Germans. I mean literally you look out and there they are.

JV: Right.

TS: How did you react to that situation, which is a new one?

JV: I needed to get all the fire I could on the attacking German force, and that I did. By radio. Gene Surdyk, who was from the Surdyk liquor store family here in Minneapolis, was the S-3¹⁶ in the battalion. We used to joke about Gene Surdyk. He was a wonderful officer and a great artilleryman. But the joke among the forward observers and liaison officers was that Gene Surdyk treated every cannonball as though he'd paid for it out of his own pocket.

TS: An artillery tightwad?

JV: Right. And transported it overseas on his own back. He rationed the artillery fire to us somewhat reluctantly, it seemed to us, but I'm sure it was wisely according to him. One of the great Surdyk lines of the war was in his conversation with me when I asked for repeat fire for effect for probably the fourth or fifth time on the German force that had reacted by Villa Crocetta, and Surdyk got on the radio himself and said, "Why are you asking for this fire?" I explained the situation to him and he said, "How many enemy do you see right now?" I said, "They've taken cover because of the artillery fire. It's difficult to estimate the number that are there, but I'm sure there are several hundred there that I saw at the beginning." He said, "Count those that you can see right now." I obeyed his orders and counted and I said, "I see seven." I counted seven helmets. And he said, "Lieutenant, do you or do you not have a seven shot automatic pistol at your side?"

TS: I want to think he was kidding, but he wasn't. Or maybe he was?

¹⁶ In the U.S. Army, the S-3 officer plans and coordinates operations.

JV: (*chuckles*) He was getting the point across to me that hey, this ammunition doesn't come free. It was a good point, but I thought it was one of the great lines of the war as far as I was concerned.

TS: Maybe one that you laughed at after the fact?

JV: Yes. But he did continue to fire.

TS: Okay. The attack shifted in the days after this breakout, and when we talk about the attack shifting, what does that concept mean? What's really happening here with the Allied forces?

JV: The weight of the main effort went a bit farther to the north and onto the main road into Rome, principally along Highway 6. I'm sure all the commanders were eager to be the first into Rome. I don't have any idea who was first into Rome, but there were a lot of people that were close to being the first into Rome. We went up through Lanuvio and then went along up near the Pope's summer home¹⁷ on Lago di Albano, and went into Rome along that route.

TS: After a beachhead and a stalemate for several months and a lot of ground covered very quickly in a short period of time, thinking as an artillery man, what are the challenges in moving suddenly fairly long distances fairly quickly?

JV: For the artillery it's keeping up, moving the gun positions fast enough to keep up with the infantry so that if the infantry needs artillery fire... But at this stage, being with the infantry, it wasn't my worry at that time.

TS: So you were with the infantry for this period.

JV: Yes.

TS: What did the war look like from the infantry's perspective, which is your perspective now?

JV: Once the German line broke, the movement into Rome was, I'm sure from the German point of view it was chaotic, with the commanders trying to stem the tide here before we got to Rome. But I suspect that the German commanders by that time had recognized that Rome was going to fall and fall very quickly. So the resistance was very sporadic – a few German units that either hadn't got the word to withdraw or were fighting a rear guard action for the German forces.

TS: So what infantry unit were you attached to?

¹⁷ Known as Castel Gandolfo, it is located 15 miles southeast of Rome.

JV: The 168th Regiment at that time.

TS: So this unit made fairly steady progress?

JV: Bold leaps.

TS: Bold leaps. Okay. It's even faster it sounds like.

JV: Right.

TS: To the north and northeast of Rome. Is that correct?

JV: Yes.

TS: We already talked about kind of your descriptions of going through Rome. We're now at about the first week of June, June 6-7. As a place to close today, when did you hear about the invasion of Normandy? How do you remember hearing that news?

JV: It was on the Armed Forces Radio. It was in the *Stars and Stripes* and so forth. It was clear that we had the headlines for a day, but it was overshadowed very quickly by this enormous invasion at Normandy.

TS: Among the people you're with, what's the conversation about when the subject of Normandy comes up? How are people talking about that?

JV: This is a major move toward ending the war. I must say for me the joy of going through Rome and the ease with which we were moving forward... We moved right through Rome and then on up toward Civitavecchia, which is the seaport for Rome, and we moved almost unopposed. Then hearing the news of the landing at Normandy, you had the feeling that hey, in a week this war is going to be over. (*chuckles*)

TS: Was there talk, loose talk, with that kind of optimism that hey, this could really be over pretty soon?

JV: Yes. I don't think my feeling was an isolated feeling. I think it was something that I shared with the people around me at the time that hey, this is a great day.

TS: Christmas '44, maybe back at home?

JV: Right.

TS: Well, we know how that story turns out.

JV: Right.

TS: I'm anxious to talk with you about it next time. With your permission I'll close here. Let me ask if there's anything about Anzio, Cassino or Rome that you want to add, since we're on that topic.

JV: No, I don't think so. I think we've covered it.

TS: Very good. Then with your permission I'll turn this off today.

END OF INTERVIEW

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