

Narrator: Gen John W Vessey, Jr

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.

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TS: Today is Tuesday, 8 May 2012. This is another interview of our ongoing cycle with General John W. Vessey, Jr., at the Vessey residence here in North Oaks, Minnesota.

General, let's pick up where we left off last time, which is the summer or autumn of 1944 following the liberation of Rome and the next 34th Division move to the liberation of Livorno, in July of 1944. There's continued movement for a long time. The action in Italy had been fairly static and now there's the movement to Rome and a relatively rapid movement to Livorno. What's the challenge here as the movement is so rapid over a broader space?

JV: I'm sure the challenge for the higher command is to try and destroy as much of the German force as they could. For the Germans the challenge was to maintain the force while slowing the advance of the Allies while they were preparing defensive positions farther north. The challenge for us on the ground was moving as fast as the commanders wanted us to move. We were basically a foot army, so the movement was principally by foot. We were able to advance quite rapidly, but it was tiring on the soldiers.

To give you an example of that, after we got through Rome our next objective was Civitavecchia, which is the seaport for Rome. It's west and somewhat north of Rome along the Mediterranean coast. I was with the lead company for a short period of time during that advance toward Civitavecchia. The Germans would put up rear guard posts to try and delay the advance, and generally they were along the principle roads.

TS: Are these mine fields, weapons or a combination?

JV: Mine fields and weapons, but principally small units that had a few anti-tank guns and machine guns and so forth. Their mission was to delay the Allied advance. In Italy there are many little, I wouldn't call them villages, but it's sort of a one family complex where the buildings straddle the road. They built buildings on either side of the road and usually belonged to the same family, with a farm house and a barn connected to it. The Germans used those frequently as delaying points.

As we were traveling toward Civitavecchia the troops were tired. They'd been going day and part of the night and so forth, and sleep was hard to come by. They came under some machine gun fire and the advance stopped. Clearly we needed to find out where the machine gun fire was coming from and neutralize it and get on with the attack. But in fact the troops fell asleep. *(chuckles)* The soldiers lay down on the ground and by and large most of them had fallen asleep. The division commander was a new division commander, Charlie Bolte. Came into the area.

TS: Unannounced?

JV: Unannounced, right. With his aide and his Jeep and driver, and stopped and the company commander and I both went out and saluted.

TS: You recognized him.

JV: Sure. He had two stars on his Jeep.

TS: Not too many guys running around with two stars on their Jeep. Okay. That was a dumb question. I'm sorry.

JV: He asked what the situation was. The company commander explained that we were temporarily pinned down by some machine gun fire. General Bolte said, "Where are the machine guns?" The company commander said, "We haven't exactly located them yet, Sir." General Bolte said, "Where is your map?" The company commander asked me for my map, and I gave him my map. General Bolte got out of the Jeep, and he was wearing sort of a faded Army trench coat that looked like it was almost white it was so faded. General Bolte walked down the road with the map in his hand and the machine guns opened up. General Bolte turned around and walked back and he took the map out and said, "One is here, and the other one is there," and handed us the map, got back in his Jeep and drove away.

I always remembered that as one of the great leadership lessons of all time. General Bolte knew those troops were dead tired. He didn't say to get off your butts and get moving. He just told us where the machine guns were and turned around and left. We got up, I took the machine guns under fire, and the war started and the Germans withdrew and we moved on. But you asked about what was the challenge for the troops.

TS: Very good example.

JV: Yes. Staying awake and moving.

TS: Physical exhaustion, it's not the first time you've mentioned that. How serious a problem was that during the war for soldiers?

JV: It's always a problem. I think it's probably a problem in Afghanistan today. Life is considerably different for those soldiers than it was for us, but I see video clips on the television of soldiers carrying enormous loads. A hundred pound load for the soldier today is not an uncommon load. I couldn't carry a hundred pounds on my back today no matter what you paid me. And certainly doing it for hours on end is wearying. And then being asked to engage in the sort of exertion that's required for an infantry attack. It's the pentathlon ten times over.

TS: No kidding. So the soldier of the 1940s was carrying around with him much less than the soldier of 2012?

JV: Exactly. Right. In the first place, the soldiers of 1940 were four or five inches shorter, probably forty pounds lighter, with lighter frames than the soldiers of today. And we probably weren't in as good shape as the soldiers of today are. But the soldiers of 1940 were pretty tough too.

TS: That example with the general and the machine guns you mentioned a few minutes ago, seventy years later you remember that example. How come?

JV: Because it's a great leadership example. I've seen, watched many commanders come up and...you know that General Bolte was under great pressure to keep moving. I can hear the corps commander urging him to get his forward elements moving and the army commander urging the corps commander to urge the division commanders.

TS: He was under his own pressure, wasn't he?

JV: Right. Right. Probably much greater pressure than we were but he knew, General Bolte knew, that the only way it was going to get done was not for him to do it but for those infantry soldiers who had probably had two or three hours of sleep in the last forty-eight hours, and for them to get moving. Certainly a fit of rage on his part wasn't going to make those soldiers any more energetic than they were. I thought it was a great leadership example.

TS: You are an officer yourself now by 1944, by this point in the war. How did you seek to inspire men that you commanded?

JV: At that particular time the only people I commanded were a driver and a radio operator so ... *(chuckles)*

TS: You had responsibilities for batteries of artillery though, right?

JV: Earlier, and in other circumstances, but not at that particular point. But certainly what I did was what I learned from people like Captain Reiser, Buck Smith, and people that recognized that this is a long war and the troops are going to do things that are dangerous and life threatening, but they need to understand that you, their commander, are going to do everything in your power to help them stay alive. Which you ought to do, because if they don't stay alive you don't have anybody for the next fight. But also that some sacrifices have to be made for them to accomplish the mission.

TS: The mission after Livorno, in a period of movement, the German defensive positions known as the Gothic Line¹ occupied Allied forces for quite some time in the last months of 1944. The Gothic Line fortifications – as a military man how would you describe these fortifications and why they were so effective?

¹ Gothic Line: series of German defensive fortifications, constructed 1944-45 along the summits of the northern part of the Apennine Mountains.

(14:20)

JV: Of course they were constructed on the same principals as the line at Cassino. And that whole delaying action during the summer of '44 was fought by the Germans to permit them to build the defenses along the so-called Gothic Line. I think the defenses at Cassino were better from the German point of view than the defenses of the Gothic Line, because by the time the Allies got to the Gothic Line the war in Italy, the [German] support for it was far weaker than it was when we got to Cassino. We had, for example in the artillery, there was no limitation on artillery ammunition that we could fire at Cassino. By the time we got to the Gothic Line, before the winter was over we had strict limitations on the amount of ammunition that we could fire. We were searching for innovative ways to damage the enemy during that last winter of the war.

TS: One might say ironically as the war goes on one can read about the output of American factories and the supply of war materiel and expect that there would be more ammunition, more available, and conversely you're telling me there was less.

JV: The high priority was the war in France and Germany, and not in Italy. But that summer, the summer leading up to that, was an interesting summer in Italy because there was movement. Actually it was a complete change from the war up until that time for us. We moved, as you say, in about a month from Rome to Livorno and then on up to the Arno River, and some drastic changes were made in the whole Allied Front. Some units were withdrawn for the attack in southern France. There was an invasion of southern France.² Divisions were withdrawn from Italy. There were introductions. The Brazilians were introduced into the war. That summer we had the advance team of the Brazilians come to the 34th Division, as a matter of fact. The first Brazilians were wounded on the day that Captain Reiser was wounded. The same operation when the Germans bombed our position.

By the time we got to the Arno River, there was to be a major shift in the Allied emphasis. The shift then would go over through Florence and up toward Bologna as the "easiest" route to the Po Valley from the Arno Valley. So although we were on the coast and moving along quite handily toward Livorno, the shift was going to take us over into the main effort up, I think it was Highway 65, from Florence to Bologna. So there were a lot of changes made that summer. For me, one of the interesting things that happened was my introduction to one of the benefits of being an officer rather than an enlisted soldier: I was able to go to the officers' rest camp for four days, which was at Sorrento.³

TS: Talk about what kind of amenities were made available to our officers.

JV: (*chuckles*) It was one of the benefits, going to the officers' rest camp. It didn't come very often. I don't know why my name came up. But the division artillery sent four at a time, I think it was. In theory one for each battalion, and then the headquarters people were stuck

² Operation Dragoon: the Allied invasion of southern France, on 15 August 1944.

³ Sorrento: small coastal town in southern Italy, near Naples.

in there and the battalion was shorted on one or more of the trips. Anyway, I went to Sorrento for four days. It was like going to San Diego in the wintertime from here or something like that. The food was good, the scenery was terrific, and the swimming was wonderful. It was a great experience.

Earlier when I talked about going toward Civitavecchia, we got into Civitavecchia and the Air Corps had bombed the railroads as the Germans were trying to withdraw their two 280 millimeter railroad guns, their big railroad guns. There were much publicized pictures of the troops crawling on the 280s at Civitavecchia. I'm sure my picture got taken with some of those, but I never was able to identify myself in any of the pictures.

TS: So you were climbing on these guns as well, in these pictures.

JV: Right. But the other thing I did at Civitavecchia is, I decided that I was going to take a bath in the Mediterranean Sea there. I stripped down to my underwear and ran out into the beach there, and foolishly ran through a bed of sea urchins. So my feet were about as sore as they could possibly be. I went to the medics and the doc took a coke bottle and pounded the spines into my feet and said that they will eventually disappear. The body will take care of them. But I had sore feet for a few days. And the thing about Sorrento is that there were no sea urchins on the beach there.

TS: Now Sorrento. You had been at the front for a long time. How difficult was that adjustment from being in a combat situation to suddenly being in a very, very different environment?

JV: It was delightful.

TS: How fast was the...did it take an adjustment time?

JV: Not really.

TS: How about going back the other way? I mean when you had to leave there.

JV: Well, you know, you would like to have delayed it, but you had to get back. And of course Sorrento was right around the Amalfi Drive, from where the invasion had taken place in September of the year before. As I remember the rest center had busses that would take you over the Amalfi Drive to the invasion beaches. I had no desire to do that. I'd rather stay at Sorrento.

TS: You had seen it once, hadn't you?

JV: Right. Of course the view at Sorrento, I would look out toward the Isle of Capri. The sun shone brilliantly. You could get a sunburn in a hurry.

TS: Sounds very relaxing, which is what it was supposed to be.

JV: Right. Food seemed superb. I'm sure it was resort food, but it was good.

TS: It probably compares favorably to what you had been eating.

JV: Right. Right.

TS: A little bit ago you mentioned the appearance of Brazilian troops in Italy. This introduction of our hemispheric allies into the war effort in a tangible way, as you looked at it then, was that more substance or more style as far as their contribution?

JV: It was some of each. The Brazilians that arrived were about as ready for war as we had been when we went to North Africa in late '42 and early '43 but again, as I mentioned earlier, by this time we had fought and been close to Moroccans, Algerians, Indians, New Zealanders, Brits from the United Kingdom, and Italians by this time of course. As I mentioned, the Italians were on our side.

During that summer we had the whole of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which was the Japanese American troops. The 2nd Battalion of the 133rd had been returned to the division. They had been the guard force at Allied Headquarters at Algiers up through the early part of the war. The 100th Battalion, which was a Japanese American battalion, had taken its place and the 100th Battalion then went to the 442nd and became a part of that regimental combat team. But the 34th had, I think we had five regiments at one time in the division as we went up toward Livorno. We had a regiment from the 88th Division, which was newly introduced in combat in Italy, and the whole of the 442nd plus our three organic regiments. And for a while even part of the Brazilian force was attached to the 34th.

(27:30)

TS: Were the Brazilians there throughout the rest of the war in Italy?

JV: Yes.

TS: And what kind of contact did you have with them?

JV: None really, other than when that first group of Brazilians came for their orientation. ... The liaison officer, the American liaison officer to the Brazilians, was Dick Walters, who was a legendary interpreter. I don't know how many languages Dick Walters knew. He was one of these guys who could be engaged in a conversation in a language that was not his own, that is he could be talking to Brazilians and overhear Frenchmen talking over here in French and remember what the Frenchmen said as well as carrying on a conversation in Portuguese with the Brazilians at the same time. So he was absolutely remarkable.

TS: A real gift for languages.

JV: Yes.

TS: Speaking of languages, being in Italy all this time, how's your Italian by this time?

JV: I could conjugate the verbs to have and to be I think (*chuckles*) and use the infinitive of most other verbs and got credit for speaking good Italian. The Italians are wonderful people and don't have the pride in the purity of their language that the French seem to have.

TS: So your attempts and use of phrases and words was well received?

JV: Yes, it seemed to be appreciated. I'm sure it was amusing for them, but the Italian people would help you.

TS: Now you've been stationed, or you would be stationed later if I can just project ahead, in a number of different places around the world: Korea, Viet Nam, you were in Laos or Thailand. You've been in Germany. How did you approach learning language in order to build bridges, in the future?

JV: I tried them all, and working with people that you want to cooperate with you I think it's important to do that. My German was good enough to give a short talk in German and not be laughed at. And Korean the same way. I worked harder on Korean than any other language I think, because the last time I was there I was the commander of the Korean forces as well as the American forces. It seemed important to make a real stab at the language. It was hard work, but well worth it.

TS: Was that something that you made clear to those under you at that time, whether in Germany or Korea or elsewhere, that you had certain expectations about learning a language for them as well?

JV: Yes.

TS: Did that set you apart from other commanders in those times or in these places who didn't make expectations, or were you simply keeping up with what everybody else did?

JV: I think particularly with the Koreans. In Germany we had a large force in Germany from the end of World War II, and we still have a sizeable force in Germany. And English has continued to become a more universal language as time has gone past. So perhaps it's not as important in Germany as it once was. It seemed important to me, and we lived in the German community and we had German neighbors and so forth. So it seemed important to dig out the old high school German textbooks and modernize them a bit and try and learn it.

Being in Korea when I was last there and commander of the forces there [in 1976-79], I made it a goal to, if you have 600,000 Korean troops under your command, you'd better be able to say something to them. So I set out a plan for myself. I asked for a Korean aide, Korean army aide, that had a good command of English and would be able to instruct me in the Korean language. So I met with him at five o'clock every morning and we went over the day's activities; most days I was involved in visiting Korean troops more than American troops. We went over the day's activities. We would go over Korean terms that

would come up associated with the units that we were to visit or the commanders that we were to see or whatever it was. I would rehearse with him things that I might say in Korean without embarrassing myself. Then the general rule was if we were back in Yongsan, where the headquarters was, at noon, and if I were to eat at home, [my wife] Avis and I had an agreement that we would use only Korean during the noon meal. And the help in the house was Korean, although they all spoke English. We had an agreement with them that we would speak Korean and they would speak Korean to us and so forth during the noon meal. Then for three nights a week I had an instructor from Yonsei University that would come and go over Korean grammar and literature and things like that with me. My goal was to be able to give a public speech in Korean in a year. I didn't make it in a year, but I did it in about a year and a half, and wasn't laughed off the stage.

TS: So you set a real tangible example for those soldiers right under you as well that this can be done.

JV: The other thing is that when I got there I had a meeting with the American staff, with the U.S. Forces Korea staff, and I asked a question. I said, "How many of you can ask your way to the restroom and understand the answer in Korean?" There were probably five or six hands out of two hundred and some odd people, two hundred and fifty people, which was clearly unacceptable. These five or six hands were civilian employees. Most of them were intelligence people who had been there a long time and were fluent Korean speakers. So what we did then was we set a goal that we would do better. Because we had a bad reputation for incidents between U.S. troops and Koreans and so forth.

TS: Prior to your arrival, you mean?

JV: Yes. Fights in bars and things like that. Usually involving women. Part of it was not understanding the culture and part of it was not understanding the language. So I asked the Defense Language Institute⁴ to set up an introductory Korean course that we could teach to new arrivals in the U.S. Forces in Korea. And they did that. Then I asked that more people coming to Korea go to the Defense Language Institute so that we'd have a good sprinkling of graduates that were products of the Defense Language Institute before they came. People that were going into specific jobs that would have them dealing with Korean forces rather than relying on translators or the Korean use of the English language.

The other thing we did is, for years we'd had Koreans going to American military schools in the United States. So I said, "How many Americans have we had in the Korean military schools?" Well we didn't have any. So we started a program to put American military officers into the Korean War College and things like that. So that at least changed the culture for a while. I don't know how well it has persisted in other years, but I know that it was carried on by at least three or four commanders that followed me.

(39:45)

TS: That's cross-cultural communication I think we call that.

⁴ Originating during World War II, Defense Language Institute provides language and culture training for the U.S. military. It's located at the Presidio of Monterey, California.

JV: Right.

TS: The way you describe it, there's an enthusiasm in your voice. I'm concluding that's important to you.

JV: It is. Right.

TS: Is that something that you practiced elsewhere, in Germany, Southeast Asia when possible?

JV: We did it also in Thailand with troops coming into U.S. Army Support Command Thailand, and I must say that David Ott, the fellow who preceded me, was the guy who started it. At least he got the program underway. I think the program actually started when I got there, but he had laid the groundwork for it and it was a combination of language and culture. Things that are common in our culture, but are offensive in [others]. Crossing your leg with your foot pointed at the ...

TS: Exactly. Things that culturally we're completely unaware of unless shown.

JV: Right. And most of the soldiers are happy to learn those things. Some, on the other hand, are happy to learn that this will offend somebody from the other culture so they will use it to offend them.

TS: Before I lose my train of thought about the Gothic Line, you're still working as a forward observer?

JV: I worked up through the time we got to Livorno. Then that summer the division went into a rest area on the beach along the Mediterranean Sea, a place called Rosignano Solvay.⁵ We were there for a couple weeks I think. By that time, as I mentioned earlier, some major changes in the forces in Italy had taken place.

For example, up until that time we had many light anti-aircraft battalions. Each division usually had a light anti-aircraft battalion attached to it. They were principally motorized twin forty millimeter guns, or quad fifty machine guns, four fifty caliber machine guns on a mount. Nearly all of those battalions were converted to infantry almost overnight, and they were given a few real infantrymen to help them be organized a bit. It was generally concluded that the Germans were unlikely to attack across the Arno and down the coast. They didn't have the forces in that part of Italy. So these battalions were along the Arno primarily, and the regular artillery was withdrawn and tank battalions were converted to artillery support for this amateur infantry. During the time we were in that rest area we had to provide forward observers for the converted anti-aircraft battalion, and I got caught up and had to take a turn in that. Of course it was amateur night really.

⁵ Rosignano is a town located approximately 12 miles southeast of Livorno.

TS: What do you mean by that?

JV: (*chuckles*) The infantry wasn't real infantry, and the artillery wasn't real artillery. The tanks could be used in that role, but first the cannon on the tank was meant to be fired in direct fire, as opposed to being fired as artillery. So it isn't very accurate to begin with when used that way. Has a much greater probably error than the Howitzers that were in the light artillery battalions. These tankers were perfectly willing to try and to do their best at it, but they weren't particularly good at it.

TS: This material that was being withdrawn, the artillery pieces, the anti-aircraft, where was it going?

JV: For the 34th Division it just went into a rest area and then later in the summer we were moved over on the south side of the Arno near Florence and eventually to go through Florence and through the British forces on up Highway 65. So it was just a little respite for the division before it took the next jump. Of course many of the Italian people that were around Rosignano Solvay were refugees from Pisa and the villages along the Arno, which had now become the front lines. I remember that on the beach there we were able to go swimming just about every day and the question from the Italians would be [asks question in Italian], or "How was the Tower of Pisa?" This one particular elderly woman that was frequently on the beach right where we were located always asked that question. She knew that I had gone for a week or so up to the front lines to be with the converted anti-aircraft battalion. So she asked how was the tower. She'd ask that same question when I came back. I foolishly and jokingly said that the Tower of Pisa was destroyed, that we had destroyed it. That we had to destroy it with our artillery. She had her umbrella and she came after me with that umbrella. (*chuckles*) I was glad I was twenty or thirty years younger than she and was able to escape.

TS: From the sounds of this artillery it wasn't likely to hit anything, the way you were describing it.

JV: It would have been very difficult to do any serious damage. I'm sure the tower, we didn't want to hit the Tower of Pisa for any reason.

(48:20)

TS: Although the cathedral right next door was damaged. In just visiting that in that last couple of years, you can see where it's been repaired and you can see the brick work that has been done to repair it, and it tells you what that's from. So some things were close.

JV: Yes.

TS: You also worked as an air observer. Was it at this time or was that later?

JV: I had done a little of it earlier and then later after we got up into the Gothic Line area I did spend a fair amount of time as an air observer.

TS: How is that different from working as a ground observer? What are the different skills that one needs, or is it essentially the same thing, from an airplane?

JV: It's essentially the same thing except you've been provided with a mobile hill. Of course you get a magnificent view of the battlefield. It's a lot easier adjusting fire from an airplane than it is from a ground position, where you really can't see the terrain that you're shooting at. You get only a small glimpse of it.

TS: What fear did you have at that point? What was the threat at that time of German aircraft, when you're up in the air?

JV: The Luftwaffe⁶ was on the ground for the most part. The U.S. Army Air Corps had complete control of the air by this time – we thought. Although there were a couple of times, earlier that summer on the way to Livorno, when the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe, came out and spent a day. We had gotten to the point where we were actually careless, where earlier in the war we wouldn't make any major moves in the daytime because of fear of attack by German aircraft. By the summer of '44 we just assumed that the Allies had complete air superiority, which they generally did, but there were a couple of days when the Luftwaffe came out and made life a little miserable for us. But the artillery observation planes were not great targets for German air. The danger to the artillery observation planes was from German anti-aircraft.

TS: Really, not from airplanes?

JV: Yes.

TS: So one would think because of the task being done by this observation plane that they would be a target for German planes.

JV: If the Germans were going to risk their airplanes, they were going to risk it for something much more lucrative than a low and slow Piper Cub.

TS: Which was what you were flying around in.

JV: Right.

TS: And it's just a two man aircraft?

JV: Right.

TS: So it was you and the pilot.

JV: Right.

⁶ German Air Force.

TS: And you were in radio communication with the ground then for immediate transfer of information.

JV: Right.

TS: Did you like that work?

JV: Yes. I enjoyed it.

TS: This action at the Gothic Line took a number of months. The solving of the Gothic Line puzzle, how would describe what it was that enabled Allied forces finally to solve that?
(52:40)

JV: It was storing up enough ammunition and then a war of attrition with air power used to disrupt the German logistics, and the Allied commanders husbanding the logistic support for a major breakout effort. Through most of the winter of '44-'45 we were rationed strictly with artillery. There were weeks on end when the light artillery was five rounds per gun per day, and the medium artillery three rounds per gun per day.

TS: So you could save it or use it, but that's what you had.

JV: Save it or use it, right. So you used it sparingly, and much of it was used by the air observers. One of the things we had in Italy was wonderful photographic support from the Army Air Corps. Every day that the weather permitted, good photographs were taken of the front lines. The system that was better than any I had seen since then was able to produce photographs to the front line troops and to the artillery that had been interpreted. The photos were taken the day before and they were reproduced and interpreted by photo interpreters. There were targets marked on the photos. Camouflaged ammunition, for example, would be circled with the rough coordinates written down on the photograph so that for we that were air observers, we would be given photographs that came from our own fire direction center and told what the target was and where it was and how many rounds we had to hit it. Generally if you didn't hit it with the number of rounds that you had been allocated, that was the end – you didn't hit the target. So you were sort of scored on how well you did with the targets you were given for the day. Then of course you were obliged to observe what you could see on the front, and if anything was different than what was on the interpreted photo of course report that. If the Germans were undertaking some sort of a short attack or something to disrupt the Allies you were expected to find it and take it under fire. But generally for your day's mission you had a photograph with a marked target or two.

TS: This is real time information really for 1944. Really it's photographs developed, interpreted, copied, given to you up in the airplane. You have these photographs in front of you and you're looking around and you can see this stuff.

JV: Right. Right. Yesterday's photograph.

TS: So unless the Germans are moving these things almost every night...

JV: Yes. Of course wintertime is coming along, so these photos were intermittent. You didn't get a new set every day. But every day that was flyable you got a new set of photos.

TS: Was there with this rationing of ammunition, was there a sense from you in the artillery this stuff is being saved up for some kind of larger event?

JV: Yes. You had to figure that some was being put aside in case there were a German attack, because sometime late in the fall the Germans did attack. They overwhelmed the coast in the area where it was clear the Allied commanders did not expect an attack. But they attacked the 92nd Division, which was an all-Negro division with some white officers; [it] came to Italy and was put into that particular sector over near the Tyrrhenian Sea. The Germans, sensing a new division there, I guess, decided it might be a place to attack so they did attack the 92nd and made some progress and caused some disruption on the front. It wasn't as though you counted out five rounds of ammunition; it wasn't the total inventory that was all that was there, but that was all that the commander had decided we were able to shoot on a given day. So obviously, for example during that attack on the 92nd Division, a lot more ammunition was expended.

TS: But that was in a sense not allocated for, but not unexpected, so there were reserves that could be released.

JV: Yes.

TS: The winter fortifications: this is another winter in Italy for you. Is it any easier the second or third time around?

JV: It was the second winter in Italy, so certainly we were somewhat inured to it. I don't know how those two winters compare to the general long run weather in the mountains in Italy, but they both seemed like very cold winters to me. We had plenty of snow in the north Apennines, more than we had had around the Cassino area, and the same problems ensued. But the Germans had less artillery and probably less ammunition, and clearly were under about the same sort of restrictions that we were under. So one didn't worry as much about artillery fire as we had experienced around Cassino or Anzio.

TS: So there was a noticeable drop off in the amount of fire?

JV: Yes. We had better clothes in the last winter of the war than we'd had earlier, but the same general problems. The roads through the Apennines were north and south; there weren't many lateral roads going across the peninsula, so they were constructed by the engineers and when they were frozen they were okay. When they weren't, they were seas of mud. I remember just getting from where our headquarters was to the airstrip was a major problem across one of these roads. The airstrip was in the Adige River Valley, and it

was a place where if you had looked at it you would say there's no way in the world that you can have an airstrip there because it was in the mountains and difficult to climb out of this area and get to an altitude that would be safe to go over the front.

TS: What altitude was that?

JV: Generally it depended on where you were going and what the danger was of German anti-aircraft fire. You wanted to stay where you weren't going to get shot down, but still have a view of the battlefield. You were above the ground, about two or three thousand feet above the ground.

TS: That's not very far.

JV: But you were above sea level, close to ten thousand feet which was the operating upper altitude for the airplane that you had.

TS: Non-pressurized, of course.

JV: Yes.

TS: How often was German anti-aircraft fire something that you experienced?

JV: I experienced it on my very first flight as an air observer. I went with – I think he was a major then but eventually a lieutenant colonel – Stanley B. Williamson, who was one of the first light aviation pilots that flew against the Germans in North Africa in 1942-43. Stanley B. was a master at this. He was a wonderful aviator and a great soldier and a great prosecutor of the war. So he took me on my orientation ride as an air observer and warned me that we are likely to be shot at.

We flew out, and sure enough a German 88 round went off reasonably close to the airplane. Major Williamson said, "Did you see where it was fired from?" I said, "No, Sir, I did not." He said, "Well, we'll take a swing around there and you watch the ground and look for the flash and let's see if we can find where that gun is." So we went back out and sure enough, boom, another shot came at us. Stanley B. turned and went into a steep dive and again asked me if I saw where the shot came from. Again I said, "No I didn't." He said, "Well, we'll try once more." By this time I was so scared I could hardly see the ground. *(chuckles)* I thought, this crazy nut is going to get us killed for one 88 millimeter gun. Anyway, it was my introduction.

TS: On the third time around did you see the flash?

JV: I did not see it.

TS: Did he make a fourth run?

JV: No, we didn't make a fourth run.

TS: So this was something you experienced the first time, and I guess you know what it feels like and in the future you had it from time to time?

JV: Yes, from time to time. And if you got down low enough they had 20 millimeter guns that would fire.

TS: That's not very high from the ground, so 20 millimeter guns can reach at lower altitudes?

JV: Yes. But they were back from the front. Generally we stayed on our side of the front and looked. We didn't cross over into enemy held territory, because you became a lot more vulnerable then.

TS: Right, because then two or three thousand feet of altitude, if you're over American lines actually is further from the field of fire than that.

JV: Right. It was, if they took a shot at you it was at extreme range for them.

TS: During the time that the unit was dug in south of Bologna there, during winter 1944-45, of course the Germans do launch a fairly large scale offensive in the Ardennes Forest [in Belgium], in mid-December 1944. What news did you hear of that and what reaction did you have with that happening?

JV: It was reported in the *Stars and Stripes*, but the reporting in the *Stars and Stripes* didn't make it appear as dangerous as it really was to the Allied force. So it was only later that we really knew what happened.

TS: So at the time there were no rumors or reports from anybody else that said hey, listen, here's what's going on.

JV: No. No, for us the fighting in France and Germany was about the same as the fighting in New Guinea and Guadalcanal and the Philippines. It was a long way away and not part of our war.

TS: Is that saying that the soldier really is caught up in his own world?

JV: Right.

TS: And these other ancillary theaters, whether it's northwest Europe or France, in the case it's still Europe, are far away?

(1:09:00)

JV: Yes. There were a few things that were shockers. One of the things that we did later in the war, we rotated as duty officers in the fire direction center. The great limitations on the last winter of the war, when there wasn't much ammunition to be fired, there wasn't much

shooting that went on and at night a little bit of interdiction fire, but it was something that second lieutenants could take care of and so we were assigned as duty officers on a rotating basis in the CP at night. [The Germans introduced the V-1 rocket about this time.] Then the V-2⁷ came along, and I was on duty in the CP the night the reports of the first V-2s, and I remember what a shock that was to realize that the Germans had constructed this rocket that would fire into London.

TS: Essentially an ICBM of the first generation, right?

JV: Right.

TS: And in your understanding of weapons and technology of the time, how did you understand what this thing really was?

JV: It was something completely new. Something that was absolutely different than anything we had seen, and for me almost incomprehensible that the same enemy that we were facing, which was obviously beginning to show a lot of wear, was able to produce this while they were being bombed daily by hundreds and hundreds of airplanes that flew over Germany bombing German cities and industrial complexes. Sort of the message to me was hey, this war isn't over. That there's a determined enemy that are pulling out all the stops.

TS: Yes. I mean could one say, just to play Devil's advocate, here's an enemy that's, as you're saying here, is already showing wear and tear, and this the last gasp of a desperate enemy?

JV: Yes. It didn't have that appearance to me. The first reports of it sounded as though it might be a game changer.

TS: For real?

JV: Yes. The next question that came to my mind is, when will we see it here?

TS: Right. Because there was essentially no defense against the V-2, unless to stop it before it got launched.

JV: Right.

TS: By that time the Germans, as we knew later, couldn't produce enough of them to make it the game changer that theoretically it may have been.

JV: Right. The lesson was that numbers really do count, and the numbers were on our side by that time.

⁷ V-2: world's first long-range ballistic missile; initial use late 1944.

TS: Even if there was a limitation with the amount of artillery ammunition, it was still the overwhelming logistical balance was on the Allied side.

JV: Right.

(1:13:30)

TS: You know, as we get towards April here of 1945 there is going to be this final big push which ends the war in Italy, and on the eve of that, on April 12, 1945, news comes out that President Roosevelt has died. Do you remember what you were doing or where you were when you heard the news the president had died?

JV: I was at the airstrip, and we got the news that the president had died. It was another one of those...when you thought about it well, certainly Roosevelt was, for that time, was aging certainly, and certainly had been under great stress for a long period of time. But it was a shock I think to everyone that Roosevelt had died. Whether you liked his politics or not he was our leader and had held the country together through four long years of war and a lot of preceding difficulties with the Great Depression.

TS: Well put. Thinking of politics, you're twenty-two going on twenty-three years old, how closely did you pay attention at that time to politics and political leadership?

JV: It was of passing interest to me as a soldier in the war. It was difficult to see how any changes in political leadership in the United States would have anything to do with what was going on in the war.

TS: At this point in time, mid-April 1945.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you observe reactions around you of other people that were, shall we say, more emotional as far as the president's death?

JV: I think there was a general feeling of sadness certainly in the whole Army at that time. We had a memorial service for the president.

TS: One sees films, newsreel films, from the United States in April 1945 or from the president's funeral, and there's a genuine outpouring of grief. Large scale outpouring of grief. This wasn't the case where you were or this was?

JV: The war was going on. There wasn't any change. The Germans didn't stop. It was the same war the day after he died as it was the day before he died. So as I say, there was a real pang of sadness that the president had died, but it didn't change anything for us.

TS: That sort of corresponds to what you said a little bit ago about how the soldier's world, and your world by extension there, is the world right around you.

JV: Yes.

TS: And other things, whether it's the fighting in northwest Europe or political events in the United States are, like you said, far away.

JV: Yes.

TS: Okay. Good example. The [34th Division] unit history, in talking about the last several weeks of the war, again it's from a static situation to rapid movement again, and this has been the story in Italy already several times. Static combat, motion, static combat, now we have motion again. What's the artillery's role in this final several week offensive, which pushes the Germans all the way to Lake Como⁸?

(1:18:25)

JV: The fighting up to the time we got into Bologna and into the Po Valley was again difficult mountain fighting, with the Germans fighting a good delaying action up until then. Then once we got into the Po Valley things became a lot more mobile, in fact a lot more fluid even than after the breakout from Anzio and the capture of Rome in the preceding summer of '44. There were a lot of German units that were trapped in the mountains. We had perhaps the easiest terrain, and it was difficult getting out of there. Then there were another series of highways through the Apennines from where we were and on to the Adriatic and then on to the Tyrrhenian Sea on the western side of the peninsula. Generally we went, the division went on the south side of the Po River, with a few elements on the north side. The infantry units were trying to trap German units that had come out earlier, that were moving up toward the routes out of Italy through the Brenner Pass and so forth, trying to trap them. At the same time we had these other units that were still in the mountains. I wound up flying as an air observer during that entire period.

TS: On a pretty much daily basis?

JV: Oh, yes. There was one particular incident [with a] fellow that I flew with more often than any of the other pilots, a fellow named Joe Enos from Oklahoma City. Joe and I got sent – I've forgotten what the highway number was, I think it was 63, 62 or 63 – into the mountains to look for a particular German division that hadn't shown up in the Po Valley yet. We flew back along this mountain highway and soon we saw the German unit coming. There were vehicles and tanks and artillery as far as the eye could see.

We reported that and the division artillery moved one battery to be able to fire down that highway. The battery was in the Po Valley, so close to maximum range. We adjusted fire on sort of a small village area that looked like it could be used as a blocking position to keep the Germans from coming out, and reported that. Then a small ground force was sent up that highway toward the Germans. It must have been a platoon of armored cavalry that was sent up there.

The Germans reached this village before the Allied force did, and Joe and I took it under fire and each time the Germans would come up to a certain point we'd fire two or

⁸ Lake Como: located in far northern Italy, near the border with Switzerland.

three rounds from the battery. So it looked like a lot of artillery fire, and it was difficult for the Germans to do anything about that. So the Germans stopped generally.

It became clear to them that we were the fly in the ointment for them, so they brought up some anti-aircraft to try and drive us out of the area. Of course we just flew back farther and higher and stayed out of range of the anti-aircraft, and we could still see the place and still continue to adjust fire. But of course one of the problems that we faced is we had this little tiny American ground force moving up toward this huge German force.

TS: I heard you say the word platoon, and I also heard the description of the German force, which sounds lots bigger.

JV: Yes. It was a reinforced division coming out of there, as it turned out. We didn't have any communication with the ground force, and we reported through our channels what was happening. The S-3⁹ said, "Drop some messages to them." So we had message bags that were weighted bags with an orange streamer that you could write a message and put it inside and then throw it out. So we had a hard time getting the attention of the American force. I guess they hadn't seen any of these message bags before, because we dropped a couple of them close to the lead vehicle and they didn't pick them up.

Finally we got one picked up and the message was a very dire message that there is a force of about ten thousand or more Germans in this village that's up ahead of you. The Americans on the ground waved at us and continued on. By the time they got to the village the Germans had put ground forces into the village. Our force on the ground had two of the most modern new light tanks, I think it was the M24.¹⁰ At any rate, they drove that tank up into the village and the Germans jumped down on top of the tank – literally, and took it away from the Americans.

TS: You could see all this?

JV: Oh, yes. (*chuckles*) So it was the beginning of a new type of war right there. Fortunately by that time another artillery battery had been moved into position next to the one we had adjusted, so we were able to bring more fire on it. By this time we're about flying on fumes, so we had to leave the area and our replacement had not arrived. But it got there shortly after we left apparently. But we refueled, and came back and relieved our replacement. We continued to block this force and eventually a surrender was worked out where the entire German force did surrender.

(1:28:00)

TS: When you're in the air as an air observer, how long was a typical flight?

JV: Basically you had about two hours of operational fuel. That is you had two hours over the target area, and enough fuel to get back down again.

⁹ S-3: operations officer.

¹⁰ M24: U.S. light tank, first introduced 1944.

TS: You could see an awful lot of changes while you were up there.

JV: Yes.

TS: You mentioned before this was work you enjoyed doing, this air observer.

JV: Yes. And I would say that Enos and I were called to the division headquarters to explain what we had seen to General Bolte, our division commander. He patted us on the back and gave us a drink of his whiskey and told us that we'd get Silver Stars.¹¹ Well, we never got the Silver Stars, but we did get a drink of his whiskey.

TS: You dropped the messages like you were supposed to, right?

JV: Right.

TS: Were your observations part of helping to negotiate the surrender of the German unit then?

JV: All we were doing was giving reports of what the situation was. But this took a couple of days, another day and a half I think before that German unit surrendered. But we had them blocked there. What we did is we made it impossible for them to get out into the Po Valley.

TS: So that is substantial. You blocked their way forward by spotting the artillery.

JV: Yes. They could walk out and walk around, but leaving their equipment wasn't a very practical thing.

TS: So the negotiated settlement was that they all surrendered eventually.

JV: Yes.

TS: But those last couple weeks the histories of the period speak sometimes of a disintegration of German forces. Is that a fair assessment, or would you choose some other way?

JV: The overall command obviously had collapsed by that time. They couldn't control whatever they wanted to do. But the German units were still well disciplined. A good example would be, there was a town on the north side of the Po that had an old Italian airfield. A good, big Italian airfield. The 1st Armored Division Artillery Aviation Section flew in there and made a base there. We were going to go to the same place. In fact we went there a little later. But what happened to the 1st Armored Division Artillery Aviation Section was an example of the chaotic conditions that existed in the Po Valley at that time.

¹¹ Silver Star: in the U.S. armed forces, the third highest decoration for valor.

German units were traveling down the highway adjacent to this airfield that had been bombed. The airfield itself had been bombed extensively, but incidentally the Germans still had about forty operational Me-109s in the farmland adjacent to that airfield. They had made a different arrangement for the airfield. But anyway, the commander of the aviation detachment for the 1st Armored Division Artillery watched trucks going by that looked to be German units being guarded by partisans.

As we went north in Italy, particularly as we got into the Po Valley, there were a lot of Italian partisan units and they were mostly Communist inspired units that were anti-fascist. But anyway, he saw these convoys going past and it appeared as though they were being guarded by partisans, but the Germans seemed to have their arms with them. He thought that was strange, so he got out in front of one of them and stopped one of the vehicles. It turned out that what the Germans had done was they had captured the partisans and made the partisans appear to be guarding the German vehicles, but the Germans were still in charge with their arms. Of course when he stopped the vehicle they took him under fire and the remainder of the 1st Armored Division Aviation Section, many of whom escaped by diving into a canal that was alongside the road, with the Germans continuing on with their phony partisan guards while the Germans maintained their arms and ammunition and so forth. But the Germans didn't have much of any place to go either by this time.

TS: This is part of the story, isn't it, really, that the Germans are running out of space.

JV: They were running out of options. Of course along with this Mussolini¹² is killed [on 28 April 1945]. Mussolini and his mistress [Clara Petacci] were killed in Milan, and strung up on the street corner.

TS: April 30, Hitler kills himself. News comes out several days later. Do you remember hearing that news that Hitler was finally dead as well?

JV: We were so embroiled in the news of trying to keep track of what was going on in the Po Valley that I don't remember seeing a new *Stars and Stripes*. While we were in static positions the *Stars and Stripes* would arrive maybe a day after it was printed or something like that. We would see the news of the outside world. But once we were in that breakout in the Po Valley, we were so busy trying to figure out what was going on in the Po Valley that I don't remember hearing anything from the outside world, to tell you the truth.

TS: And that's consistent with what you've said. The surrender of the German Army in Italy on May 2. How did you experience that?

JV: By this time, on May 2 we were flying up near Lago di Como, and there were some German units moving up there and we took them under fire and there were some ground units trying to capture German units that were ready to surrender. By this time when you'd see a German unit from the air taken under fire, many times they'd wave a white flag

¹² Benito Mussolini (1883-1945); Italian fascist dictator.

and wait for some ground unit to show up and surrender to them. I came back from a late mission that afternoon and had a message to go to the headquarters. I went to the command post and got the word there that the war in Italy was over. At the same time I got the word from the S-1, the personnel officer, that my name had come up on the lottery for home leave.

TS: The same day you get both pieces of news?

JV: The same day, and it was within minutes of each other that the war was over and I was due for home leave.

TS: How were you feeling about that moment?

JV: I had long since thought I was overdue for the home leave. (*chuckles*) But yet at the same time there's this feeling of elation that the war is over, you sort of wanted to stay around and see how it all turned out. But I was told that the truck leaves for the division rear echelon, which was in Livorno, a long way away. The route they took to Livorno was the same route that we took to get to the Po Valley. You went back to Highway 65 and over the mountains to Firenze and then down the Arno River Valley.

TS: The scenic route, shall we say?

JV: Yes. So it was more than an all-night ride in the back of a two and a half ton truck.

TS: The end result is good.

JV: Yes. The end result was good.

(1:39:00)

TS: So how did you feel about that? In a sense the war is over and you're leaving it, so whatever happens next is going to be a change for you.

JV: The change is, the war is over. But for me, I'm going on leave and expecting to come back.

TS: How long was your leave for?

JV: Forty-five days. So I'm going on what I figured was a well-earned forty-five day leave, and then I would be back in Italy, with my outfit of course. Of course that was sort of naïve thinking.

TS: But you really thought that when you left.

JV: That's what my orders said. I left stuff. I didn't take everything that I owned. I was going on forty-five days leave, and I was coming back.

TS: Right. If you were kind of “moving out,” you would have taken all your stuff, but you weren’t.

JV: Yes, but I wasn’t. They pinned a Bronze Star medal¹³ on me at the headquarters that night and sent me on my way. So I was on my way and I got to the division rear at Livorno and was told that I was going to be assigned as the officer in charge taking a boatload of [German] prisoners from Livorno to Naples.

TS: That must have been the fine print in those orders. I don’t think you said that.

JV: No, that wasn’t in the orders. (*chuckles*) The impact of this was a little strange, and it didn’t really dawn on me until I read that wonderful book of yours¹⁴ about the hell ships taking the Japanese prisoners [of war] to Japan. When I read that I thought the Germans must have looked on me as the Americans looked on the Japanese that were taking their prisoners, because I had a squad of military police I guess and a couple thousand German soldiers on this...well, it wasn’t a big ship.

TS: Cargo ship of some kind?

JV: Yes, it was a cargo ship, and the Germans were in the cargo spaces just as the [men captured by the] Japanese were on the hell ships. It wasn’t a cruise for them. But we did have toilet facilities and we did have food.

TS: What was that trip like for you?

JV: It was kind of strange, to tell you the truth. I talked to one of the German officers on the trip. His idea was well, the war is over; we ought to all be going home. And I agreed with him – I thought that we ought to all be going home. I’m sure it took a lot longer for him to get home than it did for me, but before I was out of Naples I was wondering whether he would be home before I was.

TS: So the conditions on board the ship, did you see where the Germans were actually being held?

JV: No, no. I had the duty to make sure they got there alive and in good shape and were as well treated as we could treat them.

TS: Given the small numbers of MPs and a lot of Germans, was there any fear that you felt?

¹³ Bronze Star: in the U.S. armed forces, fourth-highest individual military award.

¹⁴ *Long Hard Road: American POWs during World War II* (2007)

JV: No. The Germans knew the war was over. I think you had the feeling that they had that this was kind of the last insult of this terrible war for us, but it's over with. We're not being shot at.

TS: Yes. That's true too. Could you empathize with those men?

JV: Yes. Right. Yes, you couldn't help but wonder what's going to happen to them then.

TS: What did happen to them?

JV: Eventually they went back to Germany.

TS: So your job was to deliver them to MPs in Naples.

JV: Yes. My job was to deliver them to the, there was a command in charge of German prisoners.

TS: Where did you exactly get the news about V-E Day, that the war in Europe was over?

JV: It was over by the time I got to Naples.

TS: So between May 2 and May 8 a lot has happened here.

JV: Yes.

TS: You've got the orders. You go to Livorno; take charge of the ship which takes a couple days of your time. How did you react to that news, that the European war was over now?

JV: Then of course the question comes, Am I really coming back?

TS: That was my follow up question. Did you start to think oh, hang on a minute?

JV: Yes, right. That was clearly a possibility. On the other hand, the urgent possibility was to get out of Naples and get home. That was the urgent need for everyone that was there. I was sent to a camp outside Naples, up near where the General Hospital was. I've forgotten what the exact location was called. It had been a replacement camp for bringing replacements into Italy during the war. Now its purpose was flipped and it was processing people to go home. There weren't many rides, and a lot of people wanted them. And I think I was there at least two weeks. Maybe three weeks.

TS: Waiting for a ride out?

JV: Waiting for a ride out. There were ships and airplanes. I finally found out that the way to get on an airplane on the way out was to volunteer to be a courier. So I volunteered to be a courier. Became a courier to take a package of something to a port in New York.

TS: You took a plane all the way from Italy to New York.

JV: Right.

TS: What kind of plane was that?

JV: That was a C-54.¹⁵ It was the first four engine Douglas.

TS: That's a long grind of a trip.

JV: Yes. Well, we stopped for refueling in Morocco. We stopped for refueling in Brazil.

TS: Oh, you went that way.

JV: Yes. I think that was the last. We stopped once more in the United States, and then into New York where I was relieved of my package.

TS: And then you're free to go with what's left of your leave, right?

JV: Yes. My leave didn't start until I got to New York.

TS: I was going to ask about the time in Naples. In a sense, you're really killing time not knowing when you're going to get out of there. I was going to ask about the frustration you felt there.

JV: But I was still in the theater of war, so it didn't count.

TS: How did you notify your family at home and everyone that you had this leave and they could expect you sometime soon?

JV: V-mail. I'm on the way. Expect me when you see me.

TS: That's about what it turned out to be, isn't it? Gosh.

JV: Yes.

TS: At what point did it start to occur to you that the end to the war in Europe might mean that you might see the war in the Pacific?

JV: That went through my mind, but I kept relying on the orders I had in my hand to return to the 34th Division in Italy, and I put a lot of faith in those orders and tried to insist that I must follow my orders.

¹⁵ The Douglas C-54 was a four-engine transport aircraft, introduced 1942 and used throughout the war.

TS: All right. This is the Army – let’s tell the truth now. Orders can be really flexible things, right?

JV: It didn’t really come home to me until the end of my leave. I was to report to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, at the end of my leave.

TS: This has got to be July sometime, right? August maybe? Because you were in Naples a while.

JV: Yes. I don’t remember what date I got home. Anyway, I was home [in Minnesota] for most of the month of June. And reported to Fort Sam Houston late in June, I think it was. And that was the first message I got is that hey, these orders are no longer effective. So I was told that first you need to get a physical exam, and I had to get my teeth fixed I remember. And then was told that you will be going to the Pacific as a replacement.

TS: Does that mean your 34th Division is going, or you’re going with a new unit.

JV: Oh, no, no. I’m going as a replacement. Then some kind soul discovered, oh you’re a battlefield commission. So they said, “You can’t go to the Pacific until you go to a course of instruction at the artillery school. It’s specifically designed for battlefield commissions, to prepare them.” So I said, “Fine. I’ll happily do that.”

TS: And where was this going to send you?

JV: Fort Sill in Oklahoma. But in the meantime my buddy and I had decided, or at least she had decided, that we’re going to get married.

(1:52:00)

TS: So Mrs. Vessey suggested this to you?

JV: (*chuckles*) Well, it was more than a suggestion. I had told her that perhaps we ought to wait, because I was going to the Pacific and we ought to wait to make sure that I got home. She said, “Maybe I won’t be here when you come back.” (*chuckles*) So it was then that “we” decided that we’d get married. So I wrangled another two weeks of leave on my way to the course at Fort Sill. It just happens that the timing of the course at Fort Sill permitted that two weeks of leave. So we set a wedding date and I came home to Minnesota again and we got married on 18 July [1945].

TS: Talk about the logistics of planning and getting married in such a compressed period of time.

JV: I don’t think it was a problem. I think doing things, you know, we lived in an age where the United States produced 100,000 airplanes in a year. We produced a ship a week out of a shipbuilding yard. We produced hundreds of thousands of cannons and tanks and what have you. You ought to be able to get married in a hurry.

TS: What do you remember about July 18, 1945?

JV: It was a great day. Avis had done most of the preparations. We got married at the chapel at Fort Snelling,¹⁶ and a bunch of my buddies who had come home earlier and by this time were out of the Army for some reason or other – some were still in – came to the wedding. A bunch of school mates of both of us that were around. But we got a lot of support from my old scout troop, Troop 21, [which] provided enough gas ration coupons, and Betty Johnson's father, who was the chairman of the troop committee – and Betty Johnson was and still is a good friend of Avis's and a college classmate of hers – provided a car and a cabin for us to go to for our honeymoon. It was a great day, other than it was hotter than blazes. (*chuckles*)

(1:56:00)

TS: On your honeymoon, was it possible to feel that the war really was far away now?

JV: Everything was far away. We went up to this cabin of the Johnson's, which didn't have electricity. It had kerosene lanterns. The weather was terrific. It was on a small lake with nobody else around. We swam without benefits of bathing suits.

TS: This must have felt pretty good to get away from all this.

JV: Right. Right. It was a different world.

TS: After what you've been through for several years, must have felt pretty good.

JV: Yes, it was. Completely, a new world. Completely.

TS: And yet at the same time, the war was still on, and your orders for the Pacific still stood.

JV: Right. That was sort of a cloud over our heads, that we knew it was coming.

TS: You had been involved with your war in Italy, but the basic outlines of the war in Japan and the Japanese as an opponent were known to you.

JV: Yes.

TS: When you thought about having to do it all over again in a sense?

JV: There was a little fear and trepidation I'd say, but on the other hand, I'd made it through two and a half years of war in one piece. It was just something that had to be done.

TS: Is that what you thought at the time as well?

¹⁶ Ft Snelling: military fortification in Hennepin County, Minnesota, built 1819. During World War II it was used as a language school and for processing of soldiers. Decommissioned 1946.

JV: Yes.

TS: That's a pretty philosophical reaction to having to go do it all over again.

JV: And the prospect of going to the artillery school and being trained as a real artillery officer rather than Christmas help that had been mobilized. (*chuckles*)

TS: Were you made to feel that way sometimes, as a battlefield commission?

JV: Not really. Not really. I think I was pretty well respected. There were a lot of things that I didn't know how to do but...we mentioned Gene Surdyk several times. Buck Smith, one of the fellows who wrote one of those pieces you gave me, Captain Reiser, people who, maybe they wanted me to succeed to vindicate their own judgment in having recommended me for commission but whatever it was, they gave me a lot of help and wanted me to do things successfully. When I was doing it wrong, they let me know. Told me how to do it right and to do it right.

TS: Where were you then, at Fort Sill, when you got word that the Japanese had surrendered?

(2:00:00)

JV: Yes. We got married, as I say, and I went down to Fort Sill and looked for a place for us to live. Avis had to have some dental work done. She had that done and came down on the Rock Island Rocket¹⁷ and joined me a week or so later I guess. By that time there were 34th Division vets that were there at Fort Sill. Tom Young, who was a captain at that time, he had been one of the artillery liaison officers with the 135th Infantry Regiment and was a fellow that I had known during the war and admired greatly. He was there with his new bride. Kenny Goodell, the warrant officer that had been our motor officer, was there with his wife. Bob Kelsey, who was one of my NCO friends earlier, showed up not too long after that.

TS: So people that are familiar to you.

JV: Yes. So they were there. Tom and Margaret Young were a little older than we, and sort of helped us a lot. And the Goodells were a lot older than we, and helped us even more.

TS: You're only twenty-three years old now.

JV: But I was a little on the cocky side too, I'll have to admit.

TS: Do you think you were?

¹⁷ One of a series of streamlined, diesel-electric passenger train operating on Midwestern routes.

JV: I jokingly say that this officer special basic course was to teach us how to use the right utensils in the officers' mess. How to keep from smelling up the officers' latrines.

TS: The practical things of life, shall we say?

JV: Right. But there was a lot of technical artillery know how, and it was actually the basic artillery officers course that had been taught to OCS candidates and to new graduates of the Military Academy, except it was condensed. It was a much shorter; I think it was six weeks or something like that. I learned a few new things that were technically related to artillery, but also learned that I had been taught well by my mentors in the 34th Division.

TS: That must have felt good too.

JV: Yes. And I was number one in the class. So as I say, I was a little cocky.

TS: You're twenty-three. You finish first in your class. Battlefield commission.

JV: Yes.

TS: The news that the war in the Pacific was over, meant that the war was over.

JV: The war was over and that was certainly a great relief. I didn't really want to go to the Pacific but I knew that ...

TS: You weren't alone in not wanting to go to the Pacific at that time. The invasion of Japan was rumored and later sketched out. It was not going to be a pleasant thing.

JV: Yes.

TS: With the war over though, it's a chapter closing in a sense, that what you've done for three, four years is now going to transition to something else.

JV: Yes. Five years. '41 through the end of '45 there.

TS: With the war over, what do you think the war meant for you personally, at that time?

JV: I'm sure I didn't think of it at that time, but looking back on it you could say it was boyhood to manhood. It was a graduate education in military operations and being in the Army. But it also meant, I'm sure, it was a triumph for America. It was clear that we had done something significant for the world. We had defeated two of the greatest military powers that had ever been assembled, with the help of a whole lot of other people in this world. But clearly the United States had a lot to do with the successful end of the war. I think there was a sense in the country that we had done something great for humanity.

TS: Did you feel that at the time too?

JV: Yes. I thought that; I certainly felt that I was a part of it. Certainly not a big part of it, but nevertheless a part along with the other fifteen million Americans that had taken part with the armed forces. And of course once you got home you also realized that not only was it the fifteen million people in the armed forces, it was the other hundred million people that were here producing the arms and ammunition and the boats and the ships and submarines and aircraft carriers and airplanes and whatever it was that was needed.

TS: And the numbers are truly staggering that you mentioned a moment ago.

JV: Yes.

TS: How do you feel that the John Vessey that emerges from the end of that war was qualitatively different than the John Vessey who went into it?

JV: When we went in, when we were mobilized as the Minnesota National Guard, everything was a learning experience, a complete learning experience. It was like picking up a math book, picking up a calculus book right after you'd finished first algebra or something like that. You were jumping into something that was beyond your knowledge. Hey, I'm supposed to do this and I don't even know where to start. Of course by four or five years later, I knew all those things. I knew how to do those things. I knew how to get along in the Army. I knew how to deal with soldiers. I understood the technical business of the artillery, which always seemed a little bit mysterious to me when we were first mobilized. I understood enough about ballistics and the mathematics of artillery, so I had a lot more confidence in what I was doing or what I would be asked to do, and was perfectly willing to take on tasks that I knew I didn't know all about, but I knew I could learn what needed to be learned and do the job.

TS: So this developing sense of strong self-confidence.

JV: Yes.

TS: Something that you would say you had less of or didn't have before you went into service?

JV: When I went into service I wasn't afraid of trying things that I hadn't tried. I remember when I made sergeant, for example, Bill Martin was our battery commander then; he was a police officer in Minneapolis and was sort of a devil may care sort of guy. He was a good horseman and would come out and inspect the training on his horse and so forth and do sort of crazy things. One Saturday morning we had a training inspection and the fellow who was the chief of the wire section in the communications platoon was asked a question by the inspecting officer and he gave a dumb answer, which was an unusual thing. We had two types of telephones in the Army in those days. We had the EE-5 and the EE-8. The 5 used a flat nine volt battery that had two terminals on top of the battery, and the test for whether the battery was good enough to use was to stick your tongue on the two terminals.

If you got a good stinging result, the battery was good enough. Stick it in and make it go. The EE-8 telephone used two flashlight batteries in series. Of course there was no such tasting test for C batteries.

Anyway, our sergeant was asked by the inspecting officer, "How you test the battery for this telephone?" He said, "You put your tongue on the terminals and test it." The inspecting officer said, "Why don't you do that for me?" I shall leave this guy nameless, because he was a good guy. But anyway he took the C battery out and ridiculously tried to do something with it. About thirty minutes after the training inspection was finished, Captain Martin had fired him from this job.

At that time I was a surveyor and I was called into the orderly room. Captain Martin said, "What do you know about wire communication?" I told him, "I don't know much. I know how to hook up a telephone and I think I can hook up the switchboard, but I really don't know much." So he threw me a field manual. I remember it was FM 24-5. He said, "You read this over the weekend and on Monday I will give you a test. I want you to be able to do the wire splices that are in here. I want you to be able to do all the wire ties. I want you to be able to hook up a simplex circuit and a phantom circuit and I want you to be able to climb a thirty foot telephone pole with a set of climbers." He said, "If you can do all of that, you'll be a sergeant Monday night. If you can't, you're going to be a private." I was a corporal at this particular time. So I decided that I needed to go to work.

TS: This is the ultimate carrot and stick, isn't it?

JV: Yes. Got a friend of mine who knew something about it and who gave me some help, and after learning the wire ties and how to splice the wire and so forth, on Monday Captain Martin gave me the test and by Monday night I was sewing sergeant's stripes on my shirt. Now of course the Army today would be appalled at something like that.

TS: Yes. But like you said it was a different time, different Army. But the self-confidence to do something was there.

JV: Right.

TS: The next time we talk, I think we can pick up what happens really after, from Fort Sill, and kind of move forward from there which is a brand new chapter.

JV: Yes. Of course and the world is changing around us. Not only the world around America, the general world. But the world was changing for me and for Avis.

TS: There's these interlocking and yet separate spheres. These things are together and yet they're not.

JV: Right.

TS: For today then let me turn this off.

END OF INTERVIEW