

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER NIKA

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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[Biographical Note: Peter Joseph Nika was born in Summit Hill, Pennsylvania, on May 24, 1920. Both his father, Joseph, and his mother, Mary, had emigrated to the United States from Poland.

Peter was drafted into the US Army on September 9, 1943, at the age of twenty-three. He completed his basic training at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi, and served with the 90th Infantry Division as a heavy weapons (mortars) man in the European Theater.

He was wounded on July 3, 1944, in France and later returned to duty with the 90th, serving through V-E Day and the occupation of Germany. He was honorably discharged in December 1945 as a private first class.]

Peter Nika: Okay.

John Muth: I have a few questions, but, you know, you just answer as best you can.

PN: Go ahead.

JM: Okay. Now, your full name is?

PN: Peter J. Nika.

JM: Peter J. Nika. What does the "J" stand for?

PN: Joseph.

JM: Joseph, okay, and what year were you born?

PN: 1920.

JM: Okay, 1920. Now, your parents, they weren't born in the country, were they?

PN: No, they were from Poland.

JM: Where from? Do you know where from [in] Poland?

PN: No.

JM: What were their names?

PN: My father's name was Joseph Nika. My mother's name was Mary Nika.

JM: Okay, and you have how many brothers and sisters?

PN: I have seven brothers and three sisters.

JM: How many of them were born here?

PN: I don't know. Three of them were born overseas. Mary, Joe and (Stu?) were born overseas in Poland.

JM: Okay. When did they come to America?

PN: ... [Those] records, I've got upstairs. I've got to look.

JM: It's just some general background information, to know who you are.

PN: I think around 1900.

JM: 1900, okay. I just wanted some background information from you. Now, we're going to shoot nineteen years into the future, okay. World War II started in 1939, yes, with the invasion of Poland. What were you doing when the war broke out?

PN: I was working for so many different companies. I was working for Goetze Gasket Company first. Then, we wanted a raise. We couldn't get a raise, so, seven guys quit. I was the youngest. They said, "If you quit, you're going to be in the service." I had three deferments. He said, "If you quit, you'll be in the service within a month," which I was. I quit June 26th. That was ...

JM: What year?

PN: 1939; no, 1940. So, then, I quit there and I got hired, on Codwise Avenue, for (Carol, Dunham Schmidt?), a pharmaceutical company, and I worked there as a maintenance man and, from there, I was called in the service.

JM: You got three deferments?

PN: Yes.

JM: For what?

PN: For working at the Goetze Gasket Company.

JM: So, since you were working, they didn't draft you.

PN: No. Yes, that's right. I was a machinist, so, they won't draft me.

JM: But, when you quit that, you kind of left yourself open to be drafted.

PN: Yes. Well, because I was too young. So, as soon as I quit, the plant super told me, "You'll be in service within a month," which I was. So, that was in September of '40 and ...

JM: You were drafted in September 1940.

PN: Yes, ended up in Fort Dix. From Fort Dix, I went into Camp Kilmer. [From] Camp Kilmer, I went right overseas.

JM: Okay, now, as a Polish-American, how did you feel about the invasion of Poland by the Germans? Did you have any comment or did you sort of ignore that stuff?

PN: I ignored that stuff.

JM: How did your parents feel? Did they have any comments on that?

PN: No, they didn't have any comments on that.

JM: So, there wasn't any concern about relatives over there or anything.

PN: No, there weren't. They were concerned about us seven boys, because, [in] May, I went in, my brother, Frank, went in; just the two of us went in. [Frank] didn't last long. Frank got killed right away.

JM: Did he? He was the oldest.

PN: Oh, no, Frank was only two years older than I was.

JM: So, by the time you were drafted, you're how old? You're about nineteen, twenty. You're almost twenty, right?

PN: I was twenty.

JM: It was September 1940, right?

PN: '40, yes.

JM: So, you're almost about twenty.

PN: That's the story there.

JM: And you were drafted, well, in September 1940. Your brother was also drafted around the same time.

PN: He was drafted before me a little bit.

JM: And you're the only two brothers that actually ...

PN: That's all, yes.

JM: And he died.

PN: He didn't make it.

JM: When you were drafted, how did you feel when you were drafted? Were you afraid? Were you angry?

PN: No, I expected it, so ...

JM: Okay, and you went to basic training in Fort Dix.

PN: Fort Dix.

JM: And then, you transferred over to Camp Kilmer.

PN: That's when I was on [my] way over to overseas.

JM: That was sort of like a way station. [Editor's Note: Camp Kilmer in Piscataway, New Jersey, was a staging area, primarily for troops headed for the European Theater, for the New York Port of Embarkation.]

PN: Yes, yes.

JM: How long did your training take?

PN: Four months.

JM: Four months.

PN: That's all.

JM: Was it very difficult to do the basic training for you, at all?

PN: No.

JM: I've seen movies, you know, where they hit the men or make them do things. I mean, did you ...

PN: Well, you had to go do your duty and bivouac--you went out to bed, pitch your tent--and you had to do rifle practice, had to do all that stuff.

JM: And then, you were over at Camp Kilmer for how long?

PN: About a week; I guess that's all.

JM: So, after Camp Kilmer, you went right overseas, right?

PN: Right overseas.

JM: When did you finally board the boat for overseas?

PN: December (20th?), I guess about Tuesday of that week.

JM: What year?

PN: Maybe '42, I guess. When did the war break out?

JM: The war broke out for us in December 1941. So, you're saying that you were drafted in September '40.

PN: '41, then. That was '41, that was.

JM: Okay. So, you were actually drafted then in September of 1940, or 1941?

PN: [It] must have been '41.

JM: But, we were still at peace at that time.

PN: Oh, no, the war was wide open at that time.

JM: But, America didn't declare war yet.

PN: Not yet.

JM: But, you were in the Army before America declared war.

PN: Yes.

JM: Okay. So, after being a machinist, you went into this other job. The guy [the plant supervisor for Goetze Gasket Company] said that you wouldn't last for about a month and you wound up being drafted in September of 1941, okay, and then, you boarded the boat to go; at what year?

PN: '41, at the end of the year.

JM: At the end of the year. Do you remember what month?

PN: December.

JM: December '41?

PN: Yes.

JM: Okay. Do you remember what Army division or infantry unit you were attached to at the time?

PN: 90th Infantry Division. [Editor's Note: The 90th Infantry Division arrived in England on April 5, 1944.]

JM: Do you know who the overall commander was at that time?

PN: No.

JM: And, when you did go overseas, where did you go?

PN: [I] went to England.

JM: Did you have to worry about U-boat attacks or anything like that? You went over in a convoy with more than one ship, right?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: Did you have to worry about submarines and anything like that?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: Were there any attacks on you?

PN: No.

JM: So, you got through all right.

PN: Yes.

JM: Okay. Now, you hit England. Do you remember where you hit England at?

PN: I don't know.

JM: And this was what, you said December, about 1941, you say?

PN: Yes, '41.

JM: How long did you stay in England?

PN: Six months. I stayed there until D-Day.

JM: So, in other words, you didn't see any combat until D-Day.

PN: That's right.

JM: Okay, so, that was June ...

PN: I don't think anybody had seen any combat until D-Day.

JM: There was fighting in North Africa, but you never went in North Africa.

PN: No.

JM: You never went to Italy, either.

PN: No.

JM: So, basically, you were in England for six months, okay. You left America six months before you hit in D-Day. You left about December, January, so, that was actually late 1943-1944. Okay, I got you, and you remained with the 90th Infantry Division throughout the war.

PN: Throughout the whole war, was with the 90th.

JM: You never switched units or anything like that.

PN: No. I was in heavy weapons.

JM: Heavy weapons; what did you do?

PN: Heavy weapons, mortar platoon.

JM: Mortar?

PN: Yes.

JM: Is that related to artillery or were you considered infantry? You were artillery.

PN: No, that's infantry.

JM: That's infantry. Okay, that is interesting.

PN: Yes.

JM: So, your very first battle was Normandy Beach.

PN: That's right.

JM: You were in infantry, attached to the mortars.

PN: 90th Infantry Division. Now, see, I'll dip into the rest. D-Day, we got torpedoed. I was on the [USS] *Susan B. Anthony* [(AP-72)] in the [English] Channel there and we got torpedoed. We had to jump ship. [Editor's Note: The *Susan B. Anthony*, a US Navy attack transport, hit a mine early in the morning on June 7, 1944, and sunk in about two hours.]

JM: Did you see it?

PN: Oh, yes. I was on a ship that was hit.

JM: Did you feel the hit?

PN: Oh, yes, took forty-five minutes. We had to get off that ship, and that ship would break down.

JM: Did you go on the amphibious craft to land on the beaches?

PN: Yes, the amphibious craft, that is what saved the lives, because ... we were all there in a bunch. We were being bombed and everything else on that day.

JM: Were you on the top deck or below deck when the torpedo hit?

PN: We were having breakfast.

JM: You were having breakfast when they attacked.

PN: Yes, because we were ready to unload and go on [the] big ship, do our fighting.

JM: What beachhead were you going to hit?

PN: Normandy.

JM: Was it Omaha or Utah?

PN: Omaha.

JM: Was it Omaha? Was there a lot of fighting?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: So, your ship is sinking, you're climbing down. Did they have to throw the nets off or did you have to jump over the side?

PN: Just jump over.

JM: You jumped over this. How did you keep from drowning with all that equipment on you? Do you have any equipment?

PN: Well, there were a lot of people there to help you.

JM: So, here, you're all jumping off the ship and people have to pull you on amphibious craft, and then, after you get through that ordeal, they take you to the beach and drop you there.

PN: That's right.

JM: Was your assault vehicle fired on as you were headed in?

PN: No.

JM: Oh, you were lucky then; you weren't hit by any.

PN: Just the ship was knocked off.

JM: Okay. Did you watch the ship sink as you hit the beach?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: Did you have any friends on that ship when it sank?

PN: Well, my whole company was on it, because we were all ready to unload and ready to hit the beach.

JM: How many of them survived? Did most of them get out?

PN: I'd say so, yes.

JM: But, you didn't have any heavy equipment anymore then, right? You didn't have any weapons or anything.

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: You were actually armed when you jumped off the ship.

PN: Well, no, we [weren't armed then]. ... I don't know how they got the equipment to us, but we had equipment when we hit the beach.

JM: Now, when you jumped over the ship, were you just in regular clothes? You didn't have any pack on you or helmet or anything like that. You just had to get out as soon as possible.

PN: We had our helmets on, but I don't know about anything else.

JM: You didn't have any weapons. In other words, what I'm asking you is, did you have time to suit up completely when you jumped over the ship?

PN: No. Well, we were dressed because we were having breakfast at that time.

JM: Right, but I'm saying you weren't ready for an assault just at that time.

PN: Oh, no, nobody was.

JM: So, in other words, once you hit the beach, you were basically unarmed. You didn't have anything to fight with and they just found weapons for you when you hit the beach.

PN: Yes. I had my pistol with me because I think that some had the pistols, [but] some had nothing until we got out of the beach. Don't forget, all these other companies were right there, [but], as I say, it was D-Day. Everybody was all lined up to hit the beach, so, there was, I think, a lot of people doing that.

JM: So, eventually, other people found you weapons, and then, you fought.

PN: Yes.

JM: Did you ever get mortars or anything like that or did you have to fight with the rifle at this time? Do you remember?

PN: Well, we got our mortars right away.

JM: Oh, you had your mortars right away, okay, and what did they do, just have you set up, or did you have to follow the infantry in?

PN: When we hit the beach, we had to set up and fire the mortars, because, for them to proceed, keep going on, we had to give cover.

JM: Now, at Normandy, did you ever see any of the enemy?

PN: No, but I [had] seen a lot of dead people.

JM: Did you see a lot of dead Germans, too?

PN: Everything.

JM: That's very interesting. See, you told me about the ship when I was younger, but I never really learned the absolute details of what you were saying. That's what makes this very interesting. Okay, so, here you are, you are kind of infantry, but you are in the mortar brigade or platoon and you're helping give cover to the guys that are going out across the land.

PN: Yes. Well, I was at the headquarters platoon, where I used to go out with the radio on my back. That would be the first one that was shot at.

JM: This wasn't in Normandy, was it?

PN: Yes, right through the whole thing.

JM: So, you are not only handling the mortar, but you are also carrying the radio at the same time.

PN: Oh, yes. We used to call in and tell them where to fire, so far right, left so far.

JM: So, in other words, you were kind of signaling for the mortars to fire then; was that it? That is what your job was.

PN: That's right. I was with the lieutenant.

JM: Okay. What was your rank at that time?

PN: PFC [private first class].

JM: Private first class, okay. Did you ever engage in a fire fight with the enemy, no hand-to-hand?

PN: Not me. I had a pistol, I had a carbine, I had an M-1 [Garand rifle], but I never fired any one of them, but I brought three beautiful pistols home from the service. I gave it to your grandfather, [Vincent Pagano]. What he did with them, I don't know.

JM: You listened to a lot of propaganda at that time, you know, a lot of anti-Nazi stuff on the radios and stuff like that. Did you feel any kind of real hatred for the Germans for fighting against us?

PN: I never did.

JM: No?

PN: No.

JM: Okay. Their thinking that Poles were inferior people and the like, that never really made you hate them or anything like that.

PN: No.

JM: Okay, that's interesting. So, this battle, were you ever wounded at that time, in this battle?

PN: Yes, just right up my arms, a shrapnel wound.

JM: You were wounded in Normandy.

PN: Yes.

JM: Tell me about that.

PN: Well, we were [calling] for firing and they are firing back [at us], and shrapnel got me right in the arm.

JM: So, it was a shell from the Germans that hit you.

PN: Yes. So, then, I got dragged back to England. So, I missed a lot, because I was out [for] about three months.

JM: So, you were wounded actually on your first day.

PN: Not the first day, no.

JM: How many days were you fighting in Normandy?

PN: Oh, my, I don't know.

JM: Would you say it was a couple of weeks?

PN: A couple of weeks or so.

JM: So, you were moving inland with everybody.

PN: Yes, yes. Each brigade had its own section, [in] which we had this section, they had that section, and they were thick, because, like, my nephew was there. I met him Sunday when we were going to church.

JM: Which nephew?

PN: (Joe Schubert?). You didn't know him, and, by that time, I met him that Sunday, and, by the next week, he was dead. The same thing with my brother; I met him and he didn't last long, either.

JM: Oh, you met Uncle Tony [Anthony Pagano, Peter's brother-in-law and John Muth's great-uncle]? When did you meet him?

PN: The exact day, I don't know. ...

JM: You met him in England, or did you meet him in France?

PN: France.

JM: Was this before you were wounded, or after?

PN: Before I was wounded. [Editor's Note: It was probably after he was wounded.]

JM: All right. Would you say you were wounded within a month after Normandy? You first landed in June.

PN: About that.

JM: Okay, so, probably, maybe, wounded somewhere in late June, maybe July.

PN: It was nice, yes, about July.

JM: Were you still in Normandy at that time or were you heading toward Paris?

PN: Oh, no, we were way in already.

JM: Did you take Paris by that time?

PN: We didn't go to Paris. We ended up in Czechoslovakia.

JM: That's not just yet. I'm just trying to establish exactly when you were wounded.

PN: Oh, I don't know.

JM: Was it before or after Paris was taken?

PN: I don't remember that.

JM: Okay. So, you were wounded in the arm, probably sometime within the first month you were fighting, and then, they shipped you back to England.

PN: For three months.

JM: Now, you met Uncle Tony before you were wounded. How did you come to meet him?

PN: They were going up to the lines as we were pulling back. ... Our battalion would take it one day, one week; the next battalion'd take it next week. You fall back for rest.

JM: Was he in the same infantry division as you?

PN: Oh, no.

JM: Do you remember which one he was in?

PN: I don't know which one.

JM: So, that was the only time you actually saw him.

PN: Yes.

JM: Did you ever see your brother during the fighting, too?

PN: No.

JM: You lost quite a few relatives in that war, then. You lost your brother, you lost your nephew, and you lost your brother-in-law.

PN: Yes.

JM: When did you hear he [Anthony Pagano, his brother-in-law] was killed, because he was killed in around February 1945? When did you hear? Were you in the field when you heard?

PN: I was out in the field, yes.

JM: Did you receive a decoration for being wounded? You received the Purple Heart, right?

PN: Yes.

JM: Anything else?

PN: That's all.

JM: Okay, I just want to backtrack. Okay, you are in Normandy in June. You cross over. You are fighting for about a month. You are doing the mortar. You belong to a mortar platoon, right?

PN: Yes, mortar platoon, that's what you call it.

JM: Okay. Within the first month, probably, you are wounded. You are shipped back to England for three months, okay. So, we're talking late in 1944, you are ready to return back to the field, correct? Maybe it was in October, maybe November; it was very cold, wasn't it, or was it getting there? It was autumn.

PN: Yes, it wasn't that cold.

JM: Okay, here it is, the last two months, maybe third month, or third to last month of 1944, and you are back, and then, what were you doing then? Are you still in France? You are still in France.

PN: No, no, not at the end. We were in Czechoslovakia about then, ready to work. That's when the war ended already.

JM: Did you participate in the Battle of the Bulge?

PN: No.

JM: So, what were you doing? You didn't hit Czechoslovakia until around late April, early May, of 1945.

PN: You're right.

JM: So, what were you doing between October '44 and April '45? Do you remember?

PN: No.

JM: All right. Was there ever a time during battle when you thought your number was up, pretty much?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: Did this happen a lot?

PN: Quite a bit. As I say, I'd always carry the radio and that's the first guy that they shoot at.

JM: You were very, very close the frontlines then.

PN: Well, as close as you could get, so, they always shoot at you. You just happened to be lucky, adept or whatever [if] you got out of it.

JM: Did you have to worry about snipers as well?

PN: Oh, yes. Well, that's what you worry about. When they see that radio, they know you're calling in to shoot at them. So, they shoot you first.

JM: Were you in Germany ever?

PN: Oh, yes. I came home from Germany. I was in Sulzbach, Germany, ... from May of '45 until December of '45.

JM: What was the army you were attached to at that time? Do you remember which army?

PN: I don't know.

PN: Did you ever meet any famous military people or see them? Did you ever see any of these big people, even from a distance?

PN: No.

JM: How did you feel about the French civilians? Did you interact well with them when you were in France?

PN: Yes, we had no trouble.

JM: Were they friendly and everything?

PN: Some were friendly, some weren't bad. Czechoslovakians were very nice.

JM: We'll get to that in a second. I just want to concentrate a little bit on France before we go on to Czechoslovakia. Were you in Germany during the war, if you remember?

PN: I don't remember.

JM: You don't remember, okay. Did anything impress you about German prisoners of war? Did you ever see a lot of German prisoners of war being marched back from the frontlines?

PN: No.

JM: Did you see a lot of destruction in France as you were going through the towns and cities?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: There was a lot.

PN: We used to sit on the mountains and watch them being bombarded. We knew they were being bombed. We watched them being bombed and everything else.

JM: Is there any particular place that sticks in your mind? I mean, you were around Normandy, but did you go to any famous cities that you remember in France?

PN: No.

JM: Did you ever make any extra money during the war? I know a lot of soldiers were very enterprising people. If you don't want to discuss that, that's fine with me, but, if you're willing to.

PN: I only made money once [when we were] occupied with R&R [rest and recreation], where there's recreation, back in France. The one outfit [had] come in with the platoon, come in from their week's rest. ... They told me [to] take all the PX [post exchange] cards with me, "We can make it work." So, I had the whole platoon [who] know me, so, I got it all when we got there.

JM: They gave PX cards. What are PX cards?

PN: Your rations.

JM: Oh, so, when you were going on R&R, everybody in the platoon gave you a ration card?

PN: Yes.

JM: For what?

PN: So, I go over there, we buy cigarettes and everything else, and they gave me one dollar on every ration card. So, the kids that gave me the ration cards, I bought a case of cognac to bring back for them, and I used to sell cigarettes and everything else.

JM: Yes. You dealt with the black market at the time.

PN: It wasn't a black market; everybody was doing it. They were willing to pay, we were willing to give it to them.

JM: So, what you do is, when you went on R&R, you take their ration cards and you would basically buy the stuff for them.

PN: Yes. You can buy, we can buy them right there, and then, sell them right there, or you could walk out of the PX and they were standing right there and you'd just sell it to them.

JM: So, you would buy stuff from these guys, and then, you would give it back to the other guys who gave you the cards.

PN: No, no, just the cognac. The other thing I sold ...

JM: So, you skim a little off the top and you sell at a profit. Okay, that's interesting. Now, you said you were in Czechoslovakia. Did you go through Southern Germany? You were traveling through Southern Germany to get to Czechoslovakia.

PN: That, I don't remember.

JM: You don't remember. So, you ended the war in Czechoslovakia, right?

PN: Yes. That was May 1945.

JM: Did you see any fighting in Czechoslovakia?

PN: Oh, yes. I lived with a family in Czechoslovakia.

JM: You lived with a family.

PN: Oh, yes, we took the whole house over.

JM: Really?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: You don't remember the name of this town.

PN: No.

JM: How were the Czechs?

PN: They were [very] friendly, very nice.

JM: How long were you there?

PN: I was there about two months, I guess.

JM: Two months, okay. Did you meet any Russians there as well?

PN: No.

JM: No, okay, because the Americans only had a little chunk, but, then, they were forced to pull back, and then, the Russians took over everything. Did you ever come across any prisoner of war camps or concentration camps, anything like that?

PN: No.

JM: So, after you pull away from Czechoslovakia, they stationed you in Germany after the war.

PN: Yes, Sulzbach, [a town in Bavaria, Southern Germany].

JM: Sulzbach, okay, and how long did you stay there?

PN: From May to December.

JM: Of 1945, and then, you come home. Were you sick at any time during the combat, I mean, any bad illness?

PN: Only when I got hurt with this arm.

JM: You were discharged a private first class.

PN: Yes.

JM: Okay. What did you do in those six or seven months you were in Germany?

PN: Well, that was the headquarters platoon; we played cards. I sat there and ... a guy made my bust, ... one German soldier.

JM: A German soldier made a bust of you.

PN: Oh, yes, beautiful. My wife [Carmella Nika, great-aunt to John Muth] dropped it; it broke. When she'd seen it looked so much like me, she broke it. ...

JM: You mean, when Aunt Millie [Carmella] got it back, she dropped it and broke it. [laughter]

PN: Yes, after me sitting there for about a month-and-a-half to get it done.

JM: How did you find the Germans to be?

PN: Very sociable.

JM: There wasn't any bitterness on your part for World War II or anything like that.

PN: No. After the war, they treated us very good. Anyway, I did. I had no trouble there.

JM: So, there were no problems or anything like that during that time. Everything went fine.

PN: No, no.

JM: Did you like Germany?

PN: I liked Germany. In fact, we went back; when Millie and I were over there, we were at Hamburg, Germany.

JM: Did you see a lot of ruins around Germany, too?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: Very bad?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: Did you do any traveling when you were in the Army around that area?

PN: Well, for six months, when you got your R&R, you got around and [could] do whatever you wanted to do.

JM: Did you go anywhere in particular that you remember?

PN: No.

JM: But, you did see a lot of destruction.

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: Was there a lot of starvation among the German civilians and stuff like that, too?

PN: No.

JM: No? So, when did you finally get home? When did you finally touch back? Did you have to go back to England, and then, back to America, or did you just go right from Germany on to America?

PN: From Germany right to America.

JM: What year? Do you remember when that was?

PN: '45.

JM: By December 1945, you were back.

PN: [By] December 15th, I think, to be exact.

JM: When did you marry Aunt Millie? What year?

PN: '41.

JM: 1941. So, this is right before you went to overseas, you married Aunt Millie. Grandma and Grandpa did the same thing, didn't they, just before he went off to war?

PN: Something like that.

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JM: Now, while you're over fighting, what was Aunt Millie doing?

PN: She worked for Universal Plastics.

JM: With Grandmom, right? Wasn't Grandma [Margaret Pagano, John Muth's grandmother] and Granny [Mary Pagano, his great-grandmother] working in Universal Plastics as well, if I remember?

PN: I think your [grand]mother worked there.

JM: And they were making what?

PN: I think they were making bullets, shells and everything like that.

JM: Yes, that's what I heard, too, from Grandma. I remember talking to her about that. Okay, so, she's in the factory while you're out fighting. Anything else you can remember that stands

out in your mind? I know it's been a long time, but anything else you want to say? I mean, some guys, they like to collect German stuff, you know, medals and stuff like that. Did you ever do anything like that, souvenirs?

PN: Oh, yes. I have a few downstairs someplace, but I'd have to go through the whole cellar to find them.

JM: Did a lot of guys like to do that kind of stuff, collecting the stuff?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: What did you do with it?

PN: Like I told you, I had three pistols. I brought them home, gave them to your [grand]father.

JM: German?

PN: Yes.

JM: Lugers?

PN: I had a .32, I had a Luger and another, ... and I gave it to your grandfather, [Vincent Pagano]. What he did with them, I don't know.

JM: He probably sold them or something like that.

PN: He probably did. I didn't want them around. ...

JM: How about uniforms? Did you ever take any of that stuff, too?

PN: I got my uniform upstairs.

JM: I mean German stuff, you know. Did you ship it home, or did you trade it and sell stuff?

PN: No, I don't. I didn't go for that.

JM: Oh. There were a lot of guys that did that kind of stuff.

PN: Oh, yes. They'd find a dead man, they'd go through his pockets and all that. A lot of people did that. I didn't go for that. That's the story there.

JM: So, you can say you never saw the enemy face-to-face, even from a distance.

PN: No, no.

JM: Most of your contact, though, was with snipers trying to kill you or just shells being thrown over at you.

PN: Yes, because, being heavy weapons, you're back, about five miles back.

JM: You still had snipers, though, trying to get at you.

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: Behind the lines, they'd try.

PN: I did see some German prisoners we've taken in.

JM: Did you?

PN: Yes.

JM: How did they look? Were they young guys?

PN: Young, yes, young guys, but they never bothered anybody. When they're marching them in, they are stripped. They've got nothing but their suits on, that's all.

JM: Because a lot of people say that, you know, toward the end of the war, they were starting to use young boys and stuff like that. Were you seeing any of that?

PN: No.

JM: All right. Did you witness anybody, any friends of yours, ever getting killed?

PN: No. As I say, we were always with the telephone, we were always back. We'd be behind something where you [were] just calling in and telling them which way to fire, "Right. To your left so many degrees. Forward so many degrees." You've got to set up the mortar, which way it goes. By the time we'd get there, everything was cleaned up.

JM: How did you feel as a soldier, an American soldier? I mean, did you think that what you were doing was right, it was a good thing to do?

PN: No. I was there to do a job and I did it.

JM: You really were not that, like, *gung ho*, patriotic, democracy and all that.

PN: No.

JM: You were just like, "I'm here, I've got to do this, I want to go home as soon as possible."

PN: That's right. I wasn't one of these *gung ho* guys. I was there to do a job, I did it and that's it.

JM: How did you figure your reception would be when you came home? Did you figure a lot of people were very enthusiastic about you being a soldier? In other words, was there a lot of back slapping and all, "Great job," you know, like a hero? Were you hailed as a hero, or was it like, "Oh, hi, nice to see you after so long?"

PN: No, none of that.

JM: So, basically, people were just happy the war was over and that was it.

PN: That's right.

JM: What did you do? Do you remember celebrating when Germany finally surrendered? Do you remember doing any of that?

PN: I was sitting in the gutter, sitting in a ditch. Our whole platoon, we were going out to fight, and then, the news came through that the war was over, and we were sitting in the gutter.

JM: Oh, yes, they were still fighting in Czechoslovakia when the Germans surrendered.

PN: We were just sitting there, waiting to move on, and then, the news come through the wire that the war was over.

JM: Were you happy?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: Was there cheering, drinking and screwing around?

PN: Not in our platoon.

JM: No? All right, yes, that was one of the last areas to actually continue fighting at the time. How did you feel about the Russians? Did you like the Russians, or just the idea of them? Did you hate them for being Communists?

PN: Hell no, I didn't hate anybody. It's part of life that you do what you're supposed to do.

JM: How did you feel when you heard Hitler was dead? Was there a big cheer, everybody was so happy, when he blew his brain out, or was it just the war was still going on, so, who cares?

PN: I don't even remember that.

JM: How about when you heard that Japan had surrendered? Was there a lot of celebration then, too?

PN: Oh, yes.

JM: You were still in Germany at the time, but were you doing a lot of heavy celebration?

PN: I guess regular [celebration]. You know, when you're in the service, ... I was in headquarters platoon, and the thing that we'd do, [when] nothing [is] going on, we'd get together, play cards, gamble and do things like that. During the day, you went out, do your exercise and keep going.

JM: Okay, anything else you want to tell us?

PN: No, that's about it, that I remember.

JM: Okay. I think that's just about it. Thanks, I mean, that's really what I wanted to do and thanks for telling me all the stuff. Okay, I think we're done.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Jessie Doyle 1/27/09

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 5/27/09

Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 5/28/09

Reviewed by John Muth 6/15/09