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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN T. WATERS

FOR THE

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. John T. Waters in Deptford, New Jersey, on June 16, 2003, with Shaun Illingworth. Mr. Waters, thank you very much for having me here today. To begin, can you tell me a little bit about your father and his background?

John Waters: Well, my father was born in 1900, and he was raised in National Park, New Jersey, on the Delaware River, and he married my mother in 1920. I was born in 1921. He had various jobs. He was in the insurance business for awhile, and then, he was in the milk business, and, when I was twelve years old, why, he deserted my mother, my brother and I, so, I don't know too much more about my father.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother and her family?

JW: My mother was German. … Her father was the brewmaster of Schmidt's Brewery in Philadelphia, and she was born in 1896, and, like I say, she married my father in 1920, and I was born in '21, and, after my father deserted us, why, she raised my brother and I, and we lived in different apartments in North Woodbury, and she worked at different jobs to support us until my brother and I were able to get jobs and kind of let her take it easy the rest of her life.

SI: You had to go to work fairly early in your life.

JW: Well, I started when I was about twelve or thirteen, mowing lawns and doing garden work in the neighborhood and, from then on, I worked my way up. I worked in a service station for awhile, and then, right before World War II, I worked in the New York Shipyard, for almost a year before I was drafted.

SI: What type of job did you have at the New York Shipyard?

JW: I was in the tin shop. We worked on the battleship *Missouri* and two or three heavy cruisers, installing insulation and aluminum ductwork.

SI: Did you work there before or after Pearl Harbor?

JW: Oh, it was right after Pearl Harbor.

SI: How did the demands of the war affect the pace of your work? Were more shifts added?

JW: Oh, yes, they were very busy when I first went to the shipyard and I forget how many thousands of men were working there. They worked in three shifts. I worked shift work. I worked four to twelve on a twelve-day [schedule] and the money was pretty good. … I had three buddies that worked there with me and we all knew we were going in the service. One had already volunteered for the Navy, and he was waiting for [his] call up, and the other one … volunteered for the Air Force, and I was waiting for my number to come up, and I knew it would be up sometime in the spring of 1942.

SI: At the shipyard, were the workers going into the service being replaced by women and other untraditional workers?

JW: Yes. … My one friend worked in the paint shop and about … half the painters were women, and we didn't have too many in the tin shop, but, they had a lot of welders and various other jobs. There was quite a few women.

SI: How did the male and female workers get along?

JW: They got along quite well. I was really surprised at first. When I first went there, I thought, "They're going to give these girls a hard time," but, they really didn't. Everybody was pitching in for the war effort. It was an all-out effort, I would say.

SI: Do you recall if the managers or government representatives ever tried to motivate you to work harder by displaying posters or giving lectures?

JW: Well, there was quite a few posters around, "Loose lips sink ships," [laughter] and … stuff like that, but, we didn't really get any pep talks, because they were really busy, and they knew that we had the job, plus, the pay was pretty good, and a lot of the jobs, well, like the tin shop, everything was incentive work, … like piecework. The more you got done, the more you got paid, so, it really was an all-out effort.

SI: Was it a union shop?

JW: No, there wasn't … [a] union involved in that at that time.

SI: How did the Great Depression affect you and your family?

JW: Well, it was pretty tough, because that's about the [time] … my father deserted us. Why, things were really tough and my mother had to go on welfare. … It's not like the welfare today. [laughter] All you got then was food. … You'd go to the welfare board, and they'd give you coupons to get food, or … some welfares had the food right there, and they'd let you take it home, and, like I say, I was trying to help. I was selling papers and cutting lawns, and, I remember, when I first started into high school, I had one pair of trousers, [laughter] and we were going home one day, and I climbed over a fence, and I ripped the trousers, and that was a real heartache to me, and, luckily, my grandmother came to the rescue, and she bought me a new pair of trousers.

SI: How did you and your family feel about Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal?

JW: Oh, we were very much behind him. In fact, I don't think … anybody in my neighborhood was against Roosevelt. They all praised the work he did with the CCC and the WPA. Why, he was a lifesaver, really.

SI: In the 1930s, Woodbury was a rural, agriculture-based community.

JW: Yes, it was a small town. It was a county seat, but, Friday night was the big night. All the farmers came to town, and downtown was busy on a Friday night and Saturday, but, it was a nice

community to live in, because everybody pulled together, and there was a lot of harmony, which, today, you don't have. You have discontent. [laughter]

SI: In the 1930s, either in school or at home, did the topic of what was going on in Europe and Asia, Hitler and Germany's rise to power, for example, ever come up?

JW: Yes, we had discussions about it, and there were some people [who] were against the war, but, … nothing like the demonstrations we had today with the Iraq War, but, there was some discontent. Plus, then, you had the native Germans and the Italian people, and they were looked down upon, but, … I still consider them Americans, because they were here in this country, and I had a friend [who] was a German. He came over when he was, oh, ten or twelve years old, … but, he was a very smart fellow, and he progressed very well in high school, and he was a great athlete, so, they didn't give him too hard a time.

SI: Since your mother and her family had German roots, did they have any particular feelings about the situation?

JW: No, and my mother's family were really true Americans. They never had any problems at all.

SI: Were any of their relatives still living in Germany?

JW: Well, distant relatives, but, there were no communications or anything like that, so, we didn't know anything about them.

SI: Were you still in high school when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

JW: No, I graduated in 1939.

SI: Where were you when you learned that Pearl Harbor had been attacked?

JW: Well, it was funny, two of my friends were in the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, and they had already been activated, and they were up in an airfield … near Providence, Rhode Island, and it just so happened, the weekend of Pearl Harbor, two of my friends and I went up to see these fellows for the weekend, and we had a good time with them, and we were on our way home when we heard about Pearl Harbor.

SI: How did you react to the news?

JW: Well, we knew we were going to go, because everybody was *gung ho* to go by that time.

SI: Before Pearl Harbor, in 1940, a peacetime draft was instituted. Were you eligible for the draft? Was it a concern for you?

JW: No, it wasn't a concern for me. In fact, like I say, I had two friends that were in the National Guard in Pennsylvania, and I had four friends that were in the New Jersey National

Guard, and then, two more joined the New Jersey National Guard when they were mobilized in 1940, at the end of '40, almost '41. … I was thinking about joining the National Guard, but, then, I thought about my mother, and I thought I'd better wait and try to accumulate as much money for her [as possible], so [that] she could live while I would be in the service.

SI: When you began to think that military service would be inevitable, did you lean toward any particular branch of the service?

JW: … Before I went in, and when I was a kid, growing up, we used to go to the Philadelphia Navy Yard, on Navy Day, and so, I was a *gung ho* Navy man, but, after working in the shipyard and seeing how you had to live on those ships and all, [laughter] I wasn't that keen on it, so, I kind of leaned towards the Army when I went in the service.

SI: In the period between Pearl Harbor and your induction, how did you see the war affect the home front, in terms of rationing and so on?

JW: Oh, yes, it really got tough, especially the gasoline rationing and the food rationing. I know I had a 1940 Ford, and I used to do a lot of traveling, but, when the gas rationing was put into effect, why, it really curbed things, … but, everybody pitched in and were willing to put up with the hardships, to sacrifice, for the war effort. … You didn't want to be a slacker, [laughter] because you'd have been on the list then, I'll tell you.

SI: Was there a general sense of, "If you are not in the service, something is wrong with you?"

JW: There were some people that way, yes. I really didn't feel that way. The only ones I was against were the conscientious objectors that didn't want to serve at all. My opinion was, if you were a conscientious objector, you served in some non-combat [area] of service or something, but, you didn't desert and go to Canada, like they did during the Vietnam War. I didn't hear of too many that did that.

SI: Can you tell me about your experiences in joining the Army, getting your draft notice, being processed, and so on?

JW: Yes, … I was inducted in Camden, New Jersey, on the 17th of August, 1942, and they gave you two weeks to get your personal affairs in order, and then, … August the 31st, I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey, and was inducted into the service there.

SI: How did your family react to seeing you go into the service?

JW: Well, my mother was a little sad about the whole thing, but, they were glad that I was going, because all my friends had already been, or most of them, and they knew I was chafing at the bit to go.

SI: How difficult was it for you to make the transition from civilian life to the routines of military life?

JW: Well, it was a little tough at first. Of course, I'd been a camper all my life. I'd slept out; I even slept out in the backyard at night, just to camp out, but, the first month or so in the service, with the spit-and-polish, and making the beds, and all that kind of stuff, kind of got to me a little bit. Of course, I was a little overweight, too. I weighed 265 pounds when I went in the service, but, within a year's time, I was down to about around two hundred, 210, somewhere around there. So, I lost quite a bit of weight, so, that was a big help. [laughter]

SI: Many veterans describe the classification and assignment process at Fort Dix as being almost like a cattle drive. Was your experience there similar to that?

JW: Well, sort of, but, that didn't seem to bother me. … I was just glad to get through that basic training, get assigned somewhere. …

SI: Before the war, had you traveled much beyond the South Jersey/Philadelphia area?

JW: Not too extensively, but, about two months before I went in the service, the one buddy of mine was … going in the Air Corps, the other going into the Navy, we decided to take a trip to visit a friend … outside of Denver, Colorado. So, we all took off from work, because we knew we were going into the service and we didn't really care whether we got laid off, or fired, or not. … A little story, one of the fellows that went with us was a welder at the Navy yard in Philadelphia, and, when we came back and he went to his job, they told him he was either going in the service or being transferred to Pearl Harbor. So, he was transferred to the Pearl Harbor Navy Yard and he spent the rest of the war working in the Pearl Harbor Navy Yard.

SI: You took basic training at Fort Bragg.

JW: Yes, I took … field artillery training in Fort Bragg.

SI: How rigorous was your basic training course? Was it the same as infantry basic training?

JW: Practically the same, but, the first month was the toughest for me, because [of] being so much overweight, … the physical [duties], the marching, and the obstacle courses, and all came quite difficult [to me], but, … I managed to get through it.

SI: Do any of your drill instructors stand out in your memory?

JW: Yes, we had one sergeant who was a regular Army [sergeant] and they were the toughest, really. They really took it out on the draftees, and then, we had one lieutenant who was, … they called them ninety-day-wonders, and he thought he was the second General Patton or somebody, and he was … very disliked, but, outside of that, we got along pretty good with the rest of the cadre.

SI: Were the men in your training unit mostly from the Northeast or were they from all over the country?

JW: They were pretty much from the Northeast. We had a few from the Midwest, but, I would say the majority were from the Northeast.

SI: Were there any personality conflicts in the unit?

JW: Oh, yes, you run into that. We had some … [what] I call "smart-asses" [laughter] and there were some guys that didn't want to be in the service at all. You kind of felt sorry for them. … I always told everybody that my greatest asset, being in the service, was my sense of humor. If you didn't have a sense of humor in the service, you were in big trouble.

SI: How did you take to going out on maneuvers? You were an avid camper before the war.

JW: Yes, that part didn't bother me. In fact, … I was glad to get overseas, to get back in the pup tent again, because I enjoyed that life better than the spit-and-polish, like I said.

SI: Where were you ordered to after your training at Fort Bragg?

JW: I was sent to Camp Gordon, Georgia, and a tank destroyer outfit, and we were in Camp Gordon, Georgia, from December to the beginning of February, in fact, it was the end of January, and we were sent to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, to be sent overseas. …

SI: At Camp Gordon, you were assigned to a tank destroyer outfit.

JW: … I was in the tank destroyer battalion and the ironic part of it is, we learned to destroy tanks. We'd dig foxholes and be in the foxhole, then, they'd run the tanks over, so, we were supposed to put Molotov cocktails on the bottom of the tanks and blow them up. The ironic part about that [was], then, when I shipped overseas and landed in North Africa, … I joined the Second Armored Division in North Africa, and then, I was in a tank, after learning how to destroy them. [laughter]

SI: Were you serving as an infantryman in the tank destroyer battalion or were you a tank destroyer crew member?

JW: No, I was part of a platoon that had destroyers in them. I was a bazooka loader most of the time. You had the bazookas to knock out the tanks.

SI: Were you being trained as a unit or as replacements?

JW: More or less [as] replacements for other tank destroyer outfits.

SI: What was your opinion of the South, the local towns and cities you would visit on leave and so forth? This was probably your first trip to the South.

JW: It wasn't too bad. The people were very hospitable and the whole bit. I don't remember having any problems, except, at Fort Bragg, [where] we were stationed, and the airborne division was there, the paratroopers, and the paratroopers always had a chip on their shoulder anyway.

They thought they were better than the ground troops, so-to-speak. So, there was a couple of run-ins with the paratroopers on passes, but, outside of that, why, we got along pretty well.

SI: From Fort Gordon, you were sent to Camp Kilmer, and then, overseas.

JW: Yes, from Camp Kilmer, we went right over to North [Africa], Casablanca, and then, we were in Casablanca for two weeks. They had us unloading ships, supplies, and then, we went to Rabat, outside of Rabat, North Africa, in the cork forest, and that's where I joined the Second Armored Division, and I was assigned to H Company of the 67th Armored Regiment. What we were, we were replacements. They took members of the H Company, in the Third Battalion, and sent them up to Tunisia to be replacements for the First Armored Division, for personnel that were wounded or lost, and they were replacements. So, we took their place and that's how I ended up in the Second Armored Division.

SI: Was the North African campaign over at that point?

JW: No, they were still fighting. In fact, after we'd trained in the cork forests for a month or so, then, we went … up to Algiers and that's the first time I saw what we'd call action. We had a couple air raids. We were bivouacked in the mountains above the City of Algiers, and there was German Stuka dive-bombers, and that's the first time I ever heard of them. They had these sirens on them when they dove down; they'd scare you more than the bombs did. [laughter] … So, then, we took the training there in the mountains, and then, we moved down to the shore and started amphibious training for the invasion of Sicily.

SI: In light of your experiences later in the war, did you feel that the training you received in North Africa adequately prepared you for combat in an armored unit?

JW: Yes, they did a good job, considering, you know, that we were in an outfit that wasn't supposed to train recruits. … You were supposed to be trained when you got there and I know my captain, Nate Sumner, of my company, was very concerned that, here, I learned to be a tank destroyer, [laughter] and then, I'm in a tank company. So, he kind of took a liking to me and he did a lot for me. … In fact, after the invasion of Sicily, … [in] his tank, his gunner was wounded and, right away, he had me come on his tank as his gunner. That's the first [time] when I was assigned permanently to a tank, was the Captain's tank.

SI: As a replacement, what was it like for you to join a unit that had trained and fought together? It sounds as though this captain really helped you make the adjustment.

JW: Yes. Well, most of the fellows, they were glad to have replacements to begin with, and then, they kind of scrutinized us, and they knew the ones that would work out, and some of them didn't work out, … it's simple as that. … I know we had one incident; we were up in the mountains, like I say, training, and we were getting ready to load on the LSTs to take the training for the invasion, and we had this one fellow, and he was bitter about the service to begin with, and the officers had all their equipment loaded on this hill, ready to be loaded on a truck, and they assigned this fellow to bring the six-by-six truck down to pick up their baggage, and he came roaring down the hill, and he rode right over all their bags. [laughter] So, that was the end

of him. They took him away, the MPs took him, and we never did hear from him again, but, you ran into instances like that.

SI: While you were stationed in North Africa, did you have any opportunity to observe the native people and landscape?

JW: Oh, yes. … I had several passes to Rabat, North Africa, and we got to meet some of the people and went to the Medina, what they called the Medina, the walled section of the city, and then, when we were up in Tunis, training for the invasion, they took us, a couple of times, and we visited the ancient City of Carthage and the City of Tunis itself. So, I did get to see a little bit of North Africa.

SI: Having lived in New Jersey for your entire life, how did you react to this new environment?

JW: Well, it was quite a change. The weather was different. It is unbelievable how warm it would get in the daytime, and then, at nighttime, it'd get down in the low forties, sometimes into the thirties, it was unbelievable that way, and then, when we got up into Tunisia and saw the desert conditions up there, which I hadn't experienced before, I know, we were on … a road march, and we came across these grasshoppers, or I forget what they called them over there, but, we came over this rise, and it looked like a cloud coming, and, here, it's all these grasshoppers, millions of them. They were all over our equipment, all over the tanks, and everything. I never forgot that experience.

SI: What did you learn from the veterans in your unit before entering combat? Did they teach you anything that you had not learned in training?

JW: Oh, yes, quite a bit, because being in a tank was altogether new to us, and they were very willing, … because they knew that you had to depend on one another, so, you'd better [be] … trained, and so, they went out of their way to train us and show us everything. …

SI: Did you always serve as gunner on your first tank?

JW: Well, you start out as a loader, radio operator/loader, and then, from experience of what the gunners had showed you and everything, [you learned], … but, then, after the invasion of Sicily, when we got to England and got all new equipment and all, then, we really went through some training in range firing and stuff like that, that I hadn't experienced before. …

SI: Which tank model were you assigned?

JW: Shermans, with a .75 mm gun, which wasn't all that great, because the German Tiger tanks had the .88 mm gun, and we used to say, "The .88s are breaking up that old gang of mine." [laughter] … I've seen them .88 shells go right through the front of our tanks, and some of that … front cowling on our tanks was almost two-foot thick of steel, and that .88 armor-piercing [shell would] go right through them, unbelievable.

SI: Your first combat experience was when you were attacked by a Stuka dive-bomber. What was going through your mind at the time? Did you all of a sudden realize that this was for real?

JW: Yes, and … "Take cover," you got to take cover. [laughter] That was one good thing about being in a tank; you could either get in the tank or dive underneath the tank and you did have some protection, but, like I say, when those .88s started at you, there wasn't no protection then.

SI: Was it difficult to maintain your equipment in North Africa's desert environment?

JW: Yes, because of the windstorms and that sort of thing. … You constantly were cleaning your weapons and your equipment.

SI: Most of the European Theater veterans I have interviewed were in combat later on, when the German Air Force was virtually defeated.

JW: Oh, depleted, yes.

SI: However, in this early period, the *Luftwaffe* posed a real threat.

JW: Yes, same way in Sicily, when we made the invasion of Sicily. I'll never forget it. We landed on the beaches, and the paratroopers were supposed to back us up, and the C-47s started, but, before they did, the Germans had come over and bombed the harbor. … They didn't hit anything on land, that I can remember, but, they hit an ammunition ship out in the bay, and that was the greatest fireworks display I ever saw in my life, when that thing went up. … They no sooner left, then, here comes the paratroopers coming in, and our antiaircraft, the Navy and the land [forces], were shooting at them. In fact, it's been written up in many articles, and I can still hear them paratroopers screaming and hollering, and a couple of planes went down not too far from us, but, that was a sad situation. … This was at night and, the next morning, there were paratroopers all over the place, … you know, disorganized. We picked up two or three of them in our group, and they went along with us for a couple of days, until they finally got word where they were supposed to gather, but, it was sad. …

SI: Did that incident demoralize you as you headed into your first combat action?

JW: Not really. It made you realize what could happen and, after the initial landing, really, it wasn't all that bad in Sicily, because, well, I know, in the northern part, … they met more German resistance, but, we met mostly Italian resistance, and that's when the Italian Army started to fall apart. … They gave up by the hundreds. I can still see, we're running up the road and here they come, marching down the road, fifty or sixty at a time, with their hands raised up. … It was very dramatic how they all quit at … one time.

SI: Can you describe the process of preparing for the invasion, and then, actually hitting the beach?

JW: Well, we had practiced the landings. We were on LSTs for almost three or four weeks before the invasion, and we practiced landings, and so, we were pretty well trained and familiar

with what happened, and then, the beaches in Sicily were nice and gradual, and I know, when they pulled the LSTs up, we were only in a little bit of water before we were on land, but, when we went in, I landed in France D +4, and that was a sight, compared to Sicily.

SI: In Sicily, did your unit suffer heavy casualties?

JW: No, … our sector, like I say, we were in the southern sector of Sicily; up around Messina and that way, where the Germans put up more of a fight, there was [casualties], but, we had very few. I guess, my company, maybe, had a half a dozen wounded. In fact, that's how I got on the Captain's tank. Like I say, the gunner was wounded. He happened to be outside the tank when … artillery shells landed, and he was hit by shrapnel, but, … the company lost two tanks on the invasion of Sicily, and the battalion, altogether, lost five tanks.

SI: There were no direct tank-to-tank confrontations.

JW: No.

SI: At that point in the war, how did you feel about the Germans as the enemy?

JW: Well, they were … tough soldiers, they really were, but, we knew that they were the enemy, and they were crafty, and you had to watch out for their booby traps and that sort of thing, … but, they were real soldiers, especially in Sicily and North Africa, and, when we got to France and after D-Day, the initial group of troops, Germans, there were tough, but, after that, why, you got kids, young kids, and, in fact, we shot up a German column in France, and, I'll never forget, we went to see the column, after we shot them up, and there was one truck there, and there was four German WACs, and they were still sitting in the truck, like they were alive, and they were all dead, killed by shrapnel, but, that was very upsetting, to see those girls sitting in that truck.

SI: What was a typical day in the field like in Sicily?

JW: In Sicily? Well, the weather in Sicily was great, it was beautiful weather, and, after the combat, we were … bivouacked in an olive grove, not too far from the Mediterranean, and we used to go on swimming trips. They'd take a couple trucks of us down to the beach, and we'd swim, and we'd go over your equipment and stuff like that, and then, twice, we had passes, four-hour passes, to go into the City of Palermo, which was about twenty some miles away, and we did get a tour of Palermo. The Red Cross provided guides and gave us a guided tour of Palermo. … Palermo was bombed a couple of times, so, there was some damage in Palermo, and then, oh, about a month or so before we were to leave Sicily, we turned in all our equipment, and they gave us scout cars, and we patrolled the southern end of … Sicily, and so, we got to see some of the bigger cities, Castelvetrano, Marsala. So, that was an experience, and then, in November, why, we loaded all in a troopship, and we didn't know where we were going, but, we had an idea. We weren't going home. So, that's when we ended up in England and we landed in Greenock, Scotland.

SI: There must have been a number of rumors circulating about your next move. Do you remember any rumors?

JW: Oh, yes. Oh, well, we were going to go to the Pacific, and we were going home and reorganize, and then, come back to Europe, … but, most of us figured we were going to go to England.

SI: While in Sicily, were you able to interact with any locals or POWs?

JW: We got to know a few of the local people. We had two cooks in our company that were Italian, and they used to go down to the docks, and they'd get the sardines and the fresh seafood and bring it back, and they got friendly with a couple of people, and I know, one time, one of the cooks and I were pretty friendly, and him, and another fellow, and myself were invited to this Sicilian farmer's house for dinner, and they had the fried smelts and all the wine we could drink, and so, that was a pretty neat deal.

SI: In comparison with later campaigns, Sicily was a relatively short campaign.

JW: Yes.

SI: While you were in the field, were you able to get adequate supplies of fuel and food?

JW: Yes, we had very good supplies of everything in Sicily. We didn't hurt for a thing. It was very good. Then, they had a couple of good USO shows. We saw Bob Hope and Francis Langford, Jerry Colona, one time, and so, yes, it was very good.

SI: What is your most vivid memory of the Sicily campaign?

JW: I guess that paratrooper incident stayed in my mind the longest. Like I say, over the years, you forget. … This is why I always said the sense of humor helped, because you always thought of the funny things, or the good times you had, and you forget about the horrors of war, so-to-speak, and, once in awhile, … they come back to you, but, the whole picture isn't clear, like, the fun stuff that I had, I remember.

SI: Did you know of anybody who had trouble coping with the stress of battle in Sicily?

JW: Oh, battle fatigue they called it. Yes, we had two fellows in our outfit that [had that]. In fact, one of them, they say, I don't know for sure, but, they say he was in the same tent when Patton struck the fellow, but, I'm not sure of that. … The only time we saw Patton in Sicily, we were going up this mountain road, and he came roaring by in his command car, and he stopped the command car, and he hollered to us, "Go get those bastards." [laughter] He went like that, and that's the only time I saw him in Sicily, but, he did give us a speech in North Africa, in the cork forest, right before we were going to go to Algeria to get ready for the Sicilian invasion. He was, then, the corps commander. Originally, he was the commander of the Second Armored Division in the States. He started the Second Armored Division. So, he was very close to the Second Armored Division, and, one incident I'll never forget, when he was giving this speech, it was mostly about being taken prisoner, and he always advocated it was a sin to be taken prisoner, and your one objective when you were taken prisoner was escape. "Escape, escape;

that's all you thought about." Well, the ironic part of it is, our battalion commander happened to be Colonel Waters, which is my [name, too], [laughter] but, he was Patton's son-in-law. Well, I never met or saw Colonel Waters, because, before we got to the Second Armored, he was one of the ones that was sent up to Tunisia to be a replacement for a battalion commander that was wounded, and, unfortunately, he got taken prisoner, and he was a prisoner during the whole war in Austria, until they liberated Austria. So, it was kind of ironic that there's Patton giving us a speech about trying to escape and his own son-in-law was a prisoner, but, we often talked about that. …

SI: What did you and your buddies think of Patton?

JW: … Everybody liked Patton. Yes, he was an idol, really.

SI: Since the Second Armored was Patton's old unit, did you ever feel as though he was perhaps putting you on-the-line or in the thick of battle more often than other units?

JW: Well, some of them thought that, but, I don't think so. I think he didn't have that much say about it. He'd give down the orders, and then, it was up to the regimental commander and them, … but, some of the guys didn't like him. They called him "Blood and Guts" and that kind of stuff, but, I always thought he was a real soldier, and he was a soldier's soldier, … but, he was a personality. He was an actor. He could have been a movie actor, because he … never wore a steel helmet, he always wore that polished helmet liner, and the pearl-handled six guns, and the boots, … but, we had a couple officers that imitated him. Our regimental colonel, ID White, … he tried to be like Patton. He wore the boots and the whole bit. He had a horse in Sicily. He used to ride his horse around the area. …

SI: Patton was known for enforcing spit-and-polish regulations, like always wearing a tie. Were you subject to those kinds of regulations?

JW: Not really, no. We didn't have to go through much of that, especially when you're in the field. You didn't have the wherewithal to get the tie and the stuff out. We wore coveralls most of the time, but, I guess if we had been in the back areas or, … you know, where he was, around his headquarters, why, he might have … [been stricter with us].

SI: As an enlisted man, how well did you interact with your officers and non-coms?

JW: Oh, very well. We had really great officers. …

----------END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE----------

JW: They didn't wear the bars on the helmets, the snipers went for them first, but, no, they were regular guys, and we didn't have any, we called them ninety-day-wonders, and a couple of them were regular Army, but, most of them had been drafted, just like us. So, we got along very well with our officers.

SI: I have the impression that the relationship between crew members in a tank and on a bomber were quite similar.

JW: (Family?), yes. You depended on one another; everything you did, [you did] together. The rations, I know, when they come out, they called them five-in-one rations. They were made for a tank crew. There was five rations for each tank for a day. … I didn't drink much coffee when I was in the service. I never drank coffee until I went in the service, and I didn't drink much, and when they came out with that five-in-one ration, there was a code on the thing. You could tell which ones had coffee and which ones had cocoa. So, they'd send me for the rations, … this was in Sicily, we were in the olive grove, I'd come back with the rations for the day, and the sergeant, he'd open up the box and he'd [say], "Darn it, we got cocoa again. How come I'm always getting cocoa?" [laughter] Finally, they caught on that I knew the code and I was bringing all the cocoa.

SI: Did you make any modifications to your tank?

JW: A little bit, but, not too much, but, one modification we did make, after the invasion and after D-Day, when we were in the hedgerows, the hedgerows were terrible for tanks, and we had a maintenance sergeant in our company, and him and a maintenance sergeant from another company got the idea to get those railroad tracks, and they cut them … on an angle, to make them sharp, and they welded them to the front of our tank, the nose of the tank, and, that way, you could plow right through the [hedgerows], and they both got medals for that. So, that really helped, going through the hedgerows with them. We'd have one tank in each platoon that'd have the bars on them, crow's feet, we called them, and, man, they'd go right through that, and then, they'd make the path. Then, the rest of us could go through, but, the hedgerows were tough, because you didn't know who was on the other side of the hedgerows. It was unbelievable.

SI: That is a famous example of how the average American soldier frequently devised solutions to problems in the field and implemented them basically on their own.

JW: Yes, Yankee ingenuity at its finest, yes.

SI: Do you remember any other examples of Yankee ingenuity?

JW: Yes. … The maintenance sergeant, he was on the ball with that kind of stuff. He did a couple of modifications to the half-tracks, and then, we had the waterproofing bit when we made the invasions, and, originally, how they had that, it was a big stack thing, it went up on the back, see, the engines were aircraft engines on our tank, and you had to have air circulation. They had these big tube things up [there], and he made a couple of modifications to them, because they had trouble with them, but, no, there was always somebody coming up with something to make things easier.

SI: I should have asked this question earlier, but, what can you tell me about your voyage to North Africa?

JW: [laughter] Well, we were on the *Athlone Castle*, which was a British cruise ship before the war, but, I don't know the exact count of troops on that ship, but, it was really overloaded. … They had hammocks strung between rafters. We all slept in hammocks, but, the thing that got me the most, I ate candy bars most of the time because of the British cooking. They used to serve you Brussels sprouts for breakfast. [laughter] I'll never forget that. I often tell people, "Man, I couldn't look a Brussels sprout in the eye for years," but, outside of that, … it was a hectic voyage, because we were in a convoy, and some of the guys that we were in basic with were on another troopship, and that troopship was torpedoed, but, it wasn't sunk, and they towed it into Bermuda. I found this out from a friend of a friend who wrote to one another and these guys were in Bermuda for almost a month, [laughter] living the good life. … That was the only incident on the crossover that I can remember, it was that one night, and the ship was pretty well behind us, so, we didn't see it.

SI: Were there any U-boat alerts?

JW: Yes, they had two or three of those. They'd run down and lock down the hatches and all and prepare us for abandoning ship. …

SI: What do you remember about your voyage to England?

JW: Oh, that was a cruise. That was on the USS *Thurston*, which is a Navy troopship, and they treated us like gold, boy. We landed in the Firth of Clyde, in Scotland, on Thanksgiving Day and they had a big turkey dinner for us and the whole bit, which was really great. … It was almost two weeks on that ship and … that was heaven, [laughter] same way on the LST when we went to the invasion of Sicily. The morning before the invasion, they served us steak and eggs, [laughter] gave you a big breakfast, a big send off. …

SI: In Sicily, aside from the friendly-fire incident with the paratroopers, how well do you think the invasion went? For example, how well did the Army and the Navy cooperate?

JW: Oh, yes, everything was very well coordinated, except that one incident. Yes, they were very happy with the whole … invasion of Sicily, and then, like I say, they were having trouble taking the City of Messina. They were waiting for the British. They had the northern part of the island, … Patton got mad at Montgomery and went against the orders, and he took, I don't know whether it was two or three battalions of tanks, and they just roared up to Messina, and they got to Messina before the British, and Montgomery was very, very upset about that, but, no, Montgomery and Patton never saw eye-to-eye to begin with.

SI: Were you aware of the rivalry between them?

JW: Yes, it came down. It started in North Africa and it never stopped.

SI: Did your unit ever work alongside any other Allied forces?

JW: In North Africa, there was British, but, that's the last of the foreign troops we ever worked with, but, … in fact, a couple of times, we were bivouacked right next to a British [unit].

SI: By the time you arrived in England, was there already a heavy American presence or was it just beginning to build?

JW: Oh, yes. There was one already there when we got there. Yes, wherever you looked in England, there was Yanks.

SI: How did you and the other men in your unit get along with the British civilians?

JW: Oh, very well. Yes, we didn't have any problems with the British. They were very, very good to us.

SI: Where were you bivouacked in England?

JW: We were at Tidworth Barracks, which is the old … British Army post. So, we were very fortunate. A lot of the outfits were camping out in the fields, but, we had barracks and the whole bit was very, very, very efficient. It was old, but, … we were all in barracks, we all had cots to sleep in. …

SI: What kind of training did you do during this period?

JW: Well, like I say, after we first got there, they issued us all brand-new equipment. As soon as we got the equipment in order, then, we started training. First, we trained on the Plains of Salisbury. Tidworth is between Salisbury and another big city in England, Devonshire, and so, we trained every day. They had a firing range and the whole bit, and then, we went on a five or six-day training mission to the moors of Wales, to get you in the terrain. The terrain wasn't like France, but, it was similar, so, we did training there and bivouacked out and that whole bit. …

SI: Was this training much different from what you had experienced earlier in the States and in combat or was it more of a refresher course?

JW: Well, it was a little bit of a refresher and some of it was new, because the tanks were a little more up-to-date. They had things on them that the old tanks didn't have. …

SI: Did they have the same gun?

JW: Yes, but, then, when I lost my first tank in France, we were issued a new tank and that had the modified .76 mm, instead of the .75, and it had a muzzle shield on the front of the gun. When you fired the .75, you got such a muzzle blast that when you're looking through the periscope, you couldn't see nothing for about five minutes, until everything [settled]. The only guy who could see anything was the tank commander, but, the gun was a little more efficient, but, it still wasn't an .88.

SI: Did you go through any amphibious training in preparation for D-Day?

JW: No, not really any. In fact, … our company and another company in the battalion, we went across on landing craft, tank, which is a small [craft], I think it was four tanks on each landing craft, and they were all manned by the British Navy, but, the rest of our battalion went on an LST, and, when we made the invasion, … the LCTs could go right up, we went right up, where they had cleared a lot of debris from the beach, and we were hardly in any water at all, but, the LST that the rest of our battalion was on, that hit a mine on the way into the beach. … They thought they'd had all the mines cleared, and, here, this is D +4, and there's still mines, and the LST hit the mine, and they had a hell of a time unloading it. It didn't sink it, but, … it hurt part of the mechanism where they lowered the front of it, the float, down, and they had trouble with that, and then, they had to transport the equipment onto the smaller craft to get them ashore. … They were about two days getting the rest of the battalion off. By that time, we had moved inland. We're in the hedgerows.

SI: Before discussing the Normandy campaign, I would just like to ask a few more questions about England. Were you able to go on leave at all?

JW: Yes, … we had a three-day pass to Manchester, England. Five of us took the pass to Manchester. The people in Manchester were … nice to us, too. The Salvation Army was very good. They had tours for us and the whole bit. Then, I had a day pass, two day passes, to London.

SI: Were you able to see the effect of the war on the British people, the rationing, the bombing, and so forth?

JW: Yes. … Parts of London really took a beating. It was a sin the way … some of that place was destroyed. Manchester wasn't too bad, a little bit, but, nothing like London, but, the people, you had to give them a lot of credit. They were really brave people. They put up with a lot, but, they grinned and bared it.

SI: Was there any discord between either the various Allied forces or the civilian population and the military?

JW: Not really. They got along pretty well together. There was a little bit of animosity, but, nothing much. … I'll [never] forget one incident, we were in a pub in Salisbury, and we had this one little Italian in our company, he was one of those loudmouthed guys, and there was a bunch of the Scottish Brigade, with their kilts, in the pub, and he got [to] mouthing off to this one Scottish sergeant, [laughter] and this guy … decked him so quick, it wasn't funny, but, the barmaid, behind the bar, she took it out on the Scottish sergeant. She hit him over the head with a bottle, [laughter] but, that was the only incident I got involved in, … but, it was our own guy's fault that started that. He was making fun of the guys wearing skirts and, you know, "What's underneath there?" [laughter]

SI: Were you given any instructions on how to interact with the British?

JW: They gave us a little bit, yes, you know, that you should treat them as friends and all that, not be loudmouthed Americans, like some had the reputation for, and some of them deserved it; they really did.

SI: Did you witness any air raids while you were in England?

JW: They had two alerts, but, we didn't see any aircraft or anything. … When we were in France, one night, we had these buzz bombs that went over, and that's the first time we had ever seen or heard of the buzz bombs. They were like rockets, and they were not that high in the sky, and there was about three or four of them that one night, whenever that was, something different, and we didn't know what they were at first, and it came down from headquarters that those are the buzz bombs.

SI: Were there any special preparations for the Normandy invasion? When did you know where you were going? Were you locked down before the invasion?

JW: Yes, we were locked down for, oh, I guess a week or so, but, we didn't have any idea where we were going. There was nothing put out as far as what we were supposed to do or anything, and that was all up to the last minute, and we loaded on the 10th, and I guess it only took us maybe two hours to load, and then, going across, I guess, it must have been about two-and-a-half or three hours to get across with these LCTs. I know we had lunch on the LCT, and they gave us the British rations, and that's the first time we ever saw them, but, they had this gadget with the soup. You twisted this thing and let the chemical [out], and the soup got hot, and we didn't have nothing like that. All we had was the five-in-one rations and the K rations for an emergency. So, everybody got a big kick out of that, how they got that soup hot.

SI: Can you tell me about your first combat experience in Normandy?

JW: Well, it was in the hedgerows, and we didn't lose any tanks at … that initial battle, … and then, the night after that is the last we had any connection with the German Air Force, but, they sent bombers over, and they dropped the five hundred-pound bomb, and it landed about twenty-five feet from my tank and the tank next to us, and this was at night, and, in the morning, when we looked out there and saw that crater, you could put about three tanks in that crater. [laughter] So, if that thing had ever hit us, that'd be [the end], but, it didn't. That was the last we ever heard of any airpower, as far as Germany goes.

SI: I get the impression that fighting in the hedgerows caught everyone by surprise. The Allies did not expect to encounter such difficult terrain.

JW: Yes, they weren't prepared for that at all, so, that held up things, and then, on [the] St. Lo breakthrough, that's when [we broke out].

SI: How did your unit operate in the hedgerows? Did you clear them out one-by-one?

JW: Yes, move ahead, and then, we'd, like, skip or hop-jump the company behind us, or the battalions behind us, or the platoons, whatever. They'd go around this hedgerow and move in

the next one up above, and then, advance like that, because you never knew where [the enemy was], and then, after the St. Lo breakthrough, which was on July 26th, we went [out]. That's when they made it. Well, they leveled [it]. I never saw so many aircraft in the sky at one time in my life. … They just leveled that city, St. Lo, and we went through right after, because they were moving columns and columns of tanks and all. … Then, we went in one direction and most of our battalion all went in another direction, but, where they had us pinpointed, we didn't realize it at the time, but, the next morning, we realized it. We were surrounded by Germans, but, they weren't shooting at us, but, we put a call in for the Air Force, because there's a road alongside of us, and, here, they had four or five armored vehicles, and then, two Tiger tanks come up this road, and we had the outlooks, and we saw them coming, and they called for the Air Force, and those fighters came in, the P-51, and, boy, they knocked the hell out of them. That saved us, really, because they hadn't got to us, but, there were snipers all around us, and that's the closest I ever came to [getting killed]. I was sitting in the turret of the tank, and it felt … like somebody took a straw and blew it across my neck, and, here, it was a sniper somewhere, and I didn't realize it, but, it hit a water can on the back of the tank. … Well, you never saw anybody duck down there so quick, [laughter] but, that was a close one, but, we did have two guys that were hit by snipers while we were there. One guy was out of the tank completely. … I don't know where he was going, but, they got him in the leg.

SI: How did your unit adjust to losing men who were either wounded or killed?

JW: They took it pretty hard, especially if the guy was real likable. We lost the first, like I said, and then, we lost our driver. Like I say, that .88 came right through the front of that tank and took his whole leg and his whole side off and he was a big guy. He wore a size sixteen shoe. I remember, when we first got to England, they went to the supply [depot] and the supply sergeant put in an order and got him three pairs of shoes, because they were hard to get, you know. So, we used to kid him, … that took up half of his barracks bag, [laughter] three pairs of [size] sixteen shoes. They looked like gunboats, but, no, we lost good, old Beban.

SI: The resistance you encountered in Normandy was much stiffer than in Sicily.

JW: … Yes. We were in the war there, really.

SI: It sounds as though you could call for air support when you needed it.

JW: Yes, they saved us two or three times. They were so close that one time, … I thought they were shooting at us. [laughter] I thought they may have made a mistake, because they'd start firing behind you, but, that's how close the enemy was, and we didn't realize it, we just couldn't see them.

SI: Did medics travel with your unit?

JW: Yes. Well, the battalion had a medical company, and then, they assigned so many medics to each company, and they were in the headquarters platoon, rather.

SI: During this phase of the war, were you working with the infantry or were you engaged in strictly armored operations?

JW: Most of the time, it was strictly armored. We didn't have too much of the infantry riding on our tanks or anything like that, very, very rarely. Only in one instance I can remember, in Belgium, when we were moving along pretty fast, and they wanted to get the infantry up, too, so, they'd ride on our tanks, but, most of the time, it was independent, and a couple times, … like that one instance I was telling you about, the five hundred-pound bomb, that's how they knew where we are in the hedgerows. They were using us as artillery and we were firing sight unseen. They'd give us the coordinates, and we just fired the guns, and … that's how they must have pinpointed where we were, and that night, that's when they sent the bombers in, because they bombed that whole area where we were. There were three platoons and two platoons from another company all in this one area and they were using us as artillery.

SI: It seems as though a tank could get trapped very easily in the hedgerows. Was that the case?

JW: Yes. … Like I say, you didn't know where you were or how far ahead the enemy was. … That was very perilous, I'll tell you. [laughter] In fact, we had one instance, which I'm not proud of, one of the sergeants in my company; we were in this hedgerow, in one opening. All of a sudden, somebody hollered, "Germans," and these German prisoners came walking in with their hands over their heads. Well, this one sergeant, he snuck up along the hedgerow; as the one guy came around, he shot him, and I thought, "Oh, my God." They were going to prefer charges, … but, he was a regular Army man. He was an old hillbilly, I called him. He wasn't very well liked in the company, … but, that was one instance I wasn't proud to be an American soldier.

SI: Did your unit handle many POWs?

JW: Not too many, not really, more in Sicily than anywhere, but, … in France, we didn't.

SI: Did you have any concerns or fears about being taken prisoner? You mentioned the talk that Patton gave you.

JW: Not really. We never gave it too much thought, but, … like I say, the ones we replaced in North Africa, a couple of them were prisoners, along with Colonel Waters, and they weren't released until they … overran this prison camp in Austria, and that's when the one [man], it was a relative of one of the sergeants in our company, and he finally got word that he'd been released from the prisoner of war camp.

SI: After the St. Lo breakout, the armored forces moved across France very rapidly.

JW: Yes. We took off to the north and Patton had the Third Army then. We weren't with the Third Army, but, they're the ones that went towards Paris. In fact, they ran out of gas. They couldn't go any farther, … that story about him stopping the convoy and stealing the gas, … but, we went north of Paris and across the Seine River, oh, I guess about thirty miles north of Paris. This was the end of August. … Then, we went into Belgium and the people in Belgium, in this

one little town, they were lining the streets, waving and giving us flowers, and bottles of wine, and the whole bit.

SI: How did the French react to your arrival?

JW: Well, we didn't really get [to meet them]. Like I say, once we crossed the Seine River, and then, we were in Belgium, but, we didn't really see … too many French civilians while we were in the hedgerows, … because they had all cleared out of there.

SI: During the race across France to Belgium, what was a typical day like for you? Did you face any resistance?

JW: There was some resistance, but, nothing [serious]; they were just on the move, like I say. September the 2nd, after we crossed the Seine River, we knocked out 121 German tanks, trucks and mobile guns at a crossroads near (Vered?), France, [Tournai, Belgium?], and that's right before you go into Belgium, and they took a lot of prisoners. We didn't see too many of them. By the time they're all settled down, they'd taken all the prisoners. They were all gone, and then, I know they took, I guess, about four or five of the gunners from the different tanks in jeeps over to see this column, and that's when we saw those WACs in their truck.

SI: Was your supply train able to keep up with you and keep you well supplied?

JW: Yes, pretty much so. We had the headquarters platoon, that was the kitchen. … When we were moving along, about every two or three days, they'd catch up to us and set up a kitchen, and we'd get maybe a hot meal or some kind of meal, but, most of the time, we're eating the rations. …

SI: You crossed the Seine River. Had you crossed any rivers before that?

JW: No, that was the first river crossing we made, was the Seine.

SI: Was that a complicated operation or was there a bridge in place?

JW: No, the Army Engineers had the portable bridges and we just went right across.

SI: Did the Germans put up any kind of defense at the Seine?

JW: No. They had already been cleared out by the time we got there, or they'd already ran, or whatever.

SI: What was the biggest threat put forth by the Germans in France, tanks, infantry assaults, or harassment tactics, like mines or snipers?

JW: I would say the armor, the tanks, and some artillery, but, it was mostly the tanks, the way they had them distributed … at the critical points. … If you didn't knock out the tanks, you were in big trouble.

SI: When did you first encounter a German armored unit?

JW: I guess after the St. Lo breakthrough, when we got cut off and surrounded, that was the closest we came, … and then, after that, when I lost my first tank. They weren't hedgerows, really, they were similar to hedgerows, but, a lot more spread out and a lot more sporadic, and we were … in this, it was similar to a hedgerow, because it was a row, and we couldn't see what was ahead, and that's where the German Tiger tank was, and that's when we got it, but, we only lost the one tank there. … What I remember was, [it was] similar to a hedgerow, when we got out of the tank, and there was the hedgerow on this side, like, and there was an opening, and that's the opening that we came through to get into this place, but, by the time we got over there, [to] that opening, … the Germans had a machine-gun set up somewhere, because they had it zeroed in on that opening, and my loader, he went across first, and he dove across, and, boy, the old bullets, you could see them hitting the dirt. So, I was next, and the damned kid who was our assistant driver, he's behind me, and he got all excited, and he pushed me. [laughter] Well, I just made one dive over across there, … and then, they opened up again, but, we all got by there, but, that was close.

SI: Was this during the MARKET-GARDEN operation?

JW: The what?

SI: Operation MARKET-GARDEN, the combined ground and airborne assault in Holland that the book *A Bridge Too Far* was based on. Were you part of that operation?

JW: Yes, I would say it was part of that operation. … August the 2nd was when it was.

SI: Okay. You wrote on your pre-interview survey that you were wounded in September at Maastricht, Holland.

JW: Oh, yes. … That was a month later, when I lost my second tank, more than a month later.

SI: What happened after you lost your first tank? Did you ride along in another tank?

JW: Well, we went to the rear echelon, and they issued us a new tank, and then, I think we took about a day or two to get familiar with it, and then, there were two other tanks, … our battalion lost three tanks that day, and the three of us, they gave us an escort, and we caught up with our company the next day.

SI: Once you entered Belgium, did the pace of the fighting slow down?

JW: … Yes, very much so. From September the 6th, when we entered Belgium, we just kept moving and made a couple of stops to regroup, and the only incident I remember there [was] around a farmhouse that had been a German corps headquarters, and the Germans had all left there, and our cooks were going to set up a temporary kitchen, and they went through there, and one of our cooks came across this chest, and he opened it up, and it was full of invasion money.

You know, they issued a special invasion money, and it was over thirty thousand dollars in invasion money in there, and he kept it, [laughter] and I never heard about this until my sergeant wrote to me after I was wounded, and it was in the base post office, and we got [to] writing, because I was trying to get back to my company, but, that didn't work out. … He told me about Corporal (Eiken?), the guy's name was, took this money, and what he did [was], he split it up in the company and gave these guys his address. … You could send so much money home a month and these guys were all mailing the money home to his wife. [laughter] … I don't know how much he ever got home, but, that was the talk of the company; what he was going to do with that money, but, he figured out something. … Then, … we entered Holland on September the 17th, and we went through the City of Maastricht, Holland, and we were on the outskirts, and they noticed there was artillery fire ahead and everything. … Our platoon of tanks pulled off to the left-hand side of the road and another platoon pulled off to the right-hand side of the road. Well, the four tanks in our platoon, … I was in the command tank with the sergeant, in the first tank, as we pulled off and up, we took the first hit, and I found out later what it was, they had an .88 fieldpiece in a haystack. So, we didn't even see it, and he knocked all four tanks out before they finally got it. … My tank, they hit it, and the loader got out, and I got out, and the driver and the assistant driver got out, but, then, when I was on top of the tank, they hit it again, and, … when I got the letter from my sergeant, he said, "If we had been in that tank, we would have been gone," because that was the (AP?), and it hit the turret, and he says, "It just went around inside that tank, just like that," and that's when it shook the tank and threw me off, and that's when I fouled my knee up, and then, on the ground, the small arms fire, and then, they were firing, I don't know what they were, but, there was shrapnel, and I got shrapnel in the leg, and my loader, he got shrapnel, I didn't know it at the time, but, I met him in the hospital in Paris afterwards, and a piece of shrapnel went right through his legs and took the skin off his testicles. He was walking around like a duck; he was lucky, I guess.

SI: Can you describe the process of getting medical treatment after you were wounded?

JW: Yes, we got back [to] where we could have cover. … I guess, out of the four tank crews, I guess there was about six of them wounded, and, about that time, after they'd knocked out the .88, then, the medics came, and … they had ambulances, and they took, I guess it was four or five of us, in one ambulance back to a field hospital on the other side of Maastricht, and that's when I lost contact with all the guys, except the loader I met in the hospital, but, I don't know where they went. They were in different tents or something, but, I was in that field hospital for five days, and then, they flew us in C-47s to the 203rd Base Hospital in Paris. That's the first time I'd ever flown in an airplane. They circled the City of Paris, so [that] we could see the city from there, which was impressive. …

SI: What was going through your mind at that time? Were you worried at all?

JW: No, … I knew my knee was in bad shape, but, when I saw some of these other guys, I thank my lucky stars, … because some of them were in very bad shape. … That's the first time I ever got any familiarity with battle fatigue, because we were in this field hospital, and next to the field hospital, it was this great, big field, all fenced in. … There must have been a couple hundred guys sitting around out there. They were smoking and everything, but, they were, you know, enclosed, and I said to the one orderly, "What's with all those guys out there?" He said, "Oh,

they're all suffering from battle fatigue." So, I said, "Well, what are they going to do with them?" He said, "Well, they all have to be evaluated. They evaluate them, psychiatrists and all those," he said, "and then, they must reassign them, or," he said, "they'll send some of them home, the worst cases." So, then, I never ran across any of these guys again, until I was assigned to this base post office. … What they did [was], they set us at tables, and we sorted all the mail that was being directed, redirected, and we had this one guy, he was from Chicago, and, … every once in awhile, he'd blow his top and everything, and I came to find out he was one of these battle fatigue guys. … I shouldn't have done it, I guess, but, I used to give him a hard time. He hated the Army; … always, everything was bad. … I'd say to him, "You never had it so good." "You get a hole in your socks, you take them and they give you a new pair," and he'd start screaming. [laughter]

SI: How long were you in the hospital in Paris?

JW: I was in the hospital for just about a month, and then, they put us on what they called the hospital train, one-day train ride to a base hospital in Carentan, Normandy. I was there until October the 13th, and then, … that's when they loaded us on the forty-and-eights and we went back to a repo depot, which is outside of Paris. I was there for a month, and then, I was assigned to the base post office in Fontainebleau, France, where Napoleon's castle was, and they had the post office set up in the stables of the castle.

SI: Did you try to get back to your unit?

JW: Yes. See, they marked me "limited service," and I wrote to my company commander, our captain, and I wrote to my tank commander, my sergeant, Juliano, and I went to the headquarters of the repo depot, and the one lieutenant, he was very accommodating, but, the other guy said, "You ain't got a chance in hell." [laughter] So, I never got back to my company.

SI: Were you stationed in Fontainebleau until the end of the war?

JW: No, we moved from Fontainebleau to a little town called (Villabe?) and it was an old French paper factory, and they called it Camp Marlboro. There must have been close to two hundred and fifty to three hundred GIs working in this post office. It's about twenty miles from Paris.

----------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO----------

SI: This continues an interview with Mr. John T. Waters in Deptford, New Jersey, on June 16, 2003, with Shaun Illingworth. Was it a cigarette camp?

JW: Yes, Camp Marlboro.

SI: What was a typical day in the post office like for you?

JW: Like I say, … they'd bring in all this mail, and it had to be rerouted, and we'd separate it, and they gave us a list of where it was going, we had to readdress it, and there was packages that

came, they had to be repackaged, some of them. … So, we did that pretty much the whole time I was there, but, I did have two or three passes to Paris, and then, we got friendly with some of the French people in the town. … They treated us very well, and we would go for dinners and visits, and, twenty-five years after the war, [my] buddy, Joe Rossi, that I met in the repo depot and his wife and I and my wife took a trip to Europe, and we toured Italy and Sicily and ended up in Paris, and we went to the little town of (Villabe?), and went to a saloon where we used to hang out, and met these French people, and they recognized us, after twenty-five years, which was [amazing], [laughter] and they gave us a big party and had a big dinner. It was quite heart rendering. [laughter] I still correspond with the French people today. I get Christmas cards from the grandchildren and the nieces and nephews.

SI: Could you tell that the French had gone through desperate times?

JW: When we first got there, yes, they didn't have any[thing]. In fact, that's how we met some of the [French people]. This buddy of mine, Joe Rossi, we worked at the same table in the post office, he used to gather all the cigarette butts, and he'd field strip them, and put them in cans, and take them to this old Frenchman, the old grandfather, and he used to smoke them in his pipe. [laughter] … We used to take them rations from the PX and the whole bit. So, yes, they were in pretty dire straits when we first met them.

SI: Were you aware of any black market activity within the US Army?

JW: Some. When I was in the repo depot, this friend, Joe Rossi, that I met, and myself, and another GI, we took off one day and went to Paris, hitchhiked to Paris, which was only, probably, fifteen miles, and, on our way in, there was … an ammunition train, and, somehow, it blew up, [laughter] and we thought we were back in the war again. … We finally got to the suburb of Paris, and we got to the metro, the subway, and we went into the center of Paris, and that's where we noticed all these GIs were on the corner selling cigarettes, cartons of cigarettes. … Then, after we got to the base post office, we had one guy in the base post office, he'd go to Paris, and he'd take cartons of cigarettes, but, he'd take the cigarettes out, and he'd take toilet paper, and wet it down, and put them in the cartons, and he would sell them to the French people as cartons of cigarettes. We were always hoping he'd get caught, but, he never got caught. [laughter] There were some pretty bad apples in the service.

SI: When you were assigned to this rear echelon position, were you glad, upset, or indifferent?

JW: Well, at first, I was very upset. Like I said, [I] tried to get back to my company, because … I really missed the guys, and I was a little upset that I couldn't get back and get the job finished, but, then, when I got in the post office, and I met all these nice people in France and all, why, it kind of soothed things over a little bit.

SI: When you joined your combat unit as a replacement, you made the transition rather easily, but, after you were a veteran, how did you and your buddies take to replacements?

JW: Oh, the same way. … Like I say, that loader of mine was wounded; he'd only been with our company, oh, less than a month, I guess. He was a replacement. … See, what happens [is],

when a tank gets knocked out and … say you lose a loader and you lose a gunner, or you lose a driver, then, they've got to split that crew up and put replacements in, … like, I was in … four different tanks, … but, if the gunner got wounded in one tank and they had a full crew, … they'd take me and replace [him], shift around to make up the crews. So, no, we took them under our wing right away, because, you know, the loader, we needed him, but, he had previous training. That was the advantage that most of the replacements that we got in France [had], they had already been trained in the armor, not like [me]. I was a tank destroyer, and then, hopped in a tank, but, they had that pretty well straightened out by the time [we were in France].

SI: Were there any superstitions in combat, carrying rabbits' feet, doing things a certain way, and so on?

JW: A few, but, not too many. There weren't too many superstitions. We had a couple of guys that had to do everything the right way and all that, but, there weren't many of them that way.

SI: During the operation in Holland where you were wounded, were you informed about the MARKET-GARDEN operation?

JW: Not really. That might have been in the wind, but, boy, we didn't know it. In fact, we were only eight or twelve miles from the Siegfried Line when we were hit. That's how close Maastricht is to Germany, but, then, see, after that, when I got in the post office, then, the Battle of the Bulge and all that started. I'd hear, once in awhile, from my tank commander, a sergeant, Pat Juliano. We kept in touch pretty well, but, then, he was wounded after the Battle of the Bulge, and I didn't hear from him again until we were back to civilian life. … I did have letters that I kept [from] when he was in the service, that one I was telling you about, … if we'd have been in the tank, we'd have had it. I still have that letter that he sent me, but, since then, he's passed on. In fact, the only friend that I have from the service is the one in Connecticut that I met in the repo depot, Joe Rossi, and, ironically, he was in the Second Armored Division in this country, and he transferred from the Second Armored, in this country, to teach motorcycling … in Maryland, … and, after that, … I can't remember how he ended up overseas, but, he wasn't with the Second Armored, but, he was a dispatch rider with the motorcycle.

SI: Were you still at Camp Marlboro at the end of the war?

JW: Yes, the ETO War, V-E Day, June 14th.

SI: Were you sent back earlier?

JW: Yes, … the war was over in June. I had eighty-five points, and I left [in] August, left the base post office, and went to Camp Prince Albert in Marseilles, and I was there almost a month, and then, I boarded a (Norwegian?) freighter for the sentimental journey home. I landed in Hampton Roads, Virginia, on October the 12th and I got my discharge October the 17th.

SI: You were in Europe for V-E Day.

JW: Yes.

SI: What do you remember about V-E Day?

JW: We went to the little, not the pub, the café, [laughter] in the little town of (Villabe?) and everybody wanted to buy us drinks, you know. We were the heroes, the war was over, "(*Vive le Américains*?)." [laughter] So, we had quite a time, but, the people in the café were very good to us, and … a mother and father, and the two daughters, and their husbands ran this café. Well, the one husband of the one daughter, he was a prisoner of war the whole time, so, we never met him, but, then, when we went back, twenty-five years later, we met him in the café.

SI: When you were being discharged at Fort Dix, were you given a pitch about joining the Reserves or was that not an option because of your wound?

JW: No, … I didn't have any of that. In fact, it was ironic, the captain that was signing all the discharge papers at Fort Dix, he was [in] the … Pennsylvania National Guard, he was a sergeant when we went to Rhode Island to visit our friends before [Pearl Harbor], and, as soon as I said I was from Woodbury, New Jersey, he knew my friend Russy. … Of course, they were buddies in the Air Corps. He said, "Do you know Russy Dan?" and that's when I told him the story. So, he kind of broke it through and got me through the discharge bit pretty quick.

SI: What were your first few days of being back in civilian life like?

JW: Well, they were pretty dramatic. [laughter] Well, actually, I was one of the first ones home. My real good buddy, Dave McMahon, he was home before me. He had joined the New Jersey National Guard, so, he had a lot more time than I did, but, the ironic part [was], he was a real soldier, and he always wanted to be in action, and he ended up in the Aleutian Islands, and he never saw any action. So, about, oh, six or eight months before the war ended, he volunteered for the paratroopers, and he was just finished basic training at Fort Benning in paratroopers, he had two or three jumps, and that's when the war ended, and he got his discharge right away. So, he beat me home, but, not by much. … So, then, we had to do a lot of celebrating, [laughter] and we palled around together and did a lot together, and then, what happened [was], there was a Southern automobile dealer from Birmingham, Alabama, come up to Woodbury, and he was buying secondhand cars and shipping them to Alabama, because cars were very tight after the war, and my brother used my '40 Ford while I was in the service, but, he had an order in for a new Ford. So, I sold my Ford to the Southern dealer, and two of my buddies and I got the job of driving the cars down to Birmingham, Alabama, and, from Birmingham, they were going to give us bus fare home, and I said to these two buddies of mine, "While we're down here, we might as well go to Florida, enjoy ourselves a little." So, the one guy was going to Tallahassee, Florida, with some of the cars, so, he said, "Well, you guys could drive with me down to Tallahassee," and I said, "Okay." So, we rode with him to Tallahassee, then, we hitchhiked from Tallahassee to Jacksonville, then, from Jacksonville, we hitchhiked to Miami, and we spent a week or so in Miami, but, it was ironic, because every GI and his brother was in Miami after the war. [laughter] We went in a YMCA to get a room, and the only place you could stay in the YMCA was in the lobby, and there was guys sleeping all over the floor in the lobby. It was unbelievable. So, we ended up on Miami Beach, sleeping under a lifeguard booth, but, we had quite a trip. … Then, I came back, and this one buddy of mine, his father was an electrical

contractor, and he wanted to get his son back to work, so, he offered us both jobs. So, that's how I got into the electrical business. I was an apprentice electrician and stayed at it for thirty years.

SI: Did you stay with the same company?

JW: No, … I worked twenty years for the same company, and then, ten years for … another electrical contractor.

SI: I recently read a book about veterans returning home in which the author described a condition he called being "nervous out of the service," where some men had problems, not serious problems, in most cases, adjusting to civilian life. Did you have any problems like that?

JW: A little bit, not too much. No, I adjusted quite handily, I thought. … I had a few friends that had … little problems, but, … well, even my wife said, after we were married, I did have nightmares once in awhile, but, I guess that was natural. Everybody had them, but, I … fought the war several times. … I did get malaria in Sicily, and that knocked me down for a month or so, but, then, I recovered from that quite well, but, then, oh, it must have been a year or so after I was out of the service, I got malaria again, and they said, "It's in your system, once it's in there," but, that's the only … time I've ever had it since then.

SI: When did you join the VFW and the DAV?

JW: My mother was the one that got me into the VFW. She signed me up while I was overseas, and then, she got into the auxiliary, and she was very active in the auxiliary, but, I didn't get into the Disabled Veterans until I was in the veterans hospital in 1977. My knee really went bad, and I went in the VA hospital to have an operation on my knee, and it went bad, and I got a bad infection, and then, they were going to amputate, but, then, they saved it, and I was in the hospital for six months, and the whole time I was in the hospital, … this DAV representative for the hospital was so very good to me and he did so much for me, so, I signed up with them right after I got out of the hospital. … They did very well with me for my VA … pension and the whole bit, … but, I've never been active in either one of them. I know the VFW, after we got out of the service, this buddy of mine I was telling you about, the paratrooper, we decided to go to a VFW meeting, and, when we got there, … you had to salute the commander and salute this guy; [laughter] right after being in the service, that didn't go over too big, so, we didn't go to any more meetings. I'm sorry I didn't keep up with it, but, it's one of them things, because they do do good work and I'm a big contributor today, as far as monetary goes. …

SI: In general, how do you think people accepted you as a veteran?

JW: Very well. I'm very happy [with] the way I was treated. I was a little upset with the poor Vietnamese veterans and the Korean veterans, they were forgotten, but, no, the World War II [veterans], I think we were treated very well.

SI: Did you ever consider using the GI Bill?

JW: Yes, a couple of times, but, then, when we went with the electrical bit, well, I decided against it.

SI: What about the GI Mortgage?

JW: No, I've never used any of the GI Bill. The two buddies of mine, they did use the GI Bill. They took dancing lessons with Arthur Murray. [laughter] I thought that was the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of. … Then, there was another friend of mine, he took a bartending course with the GI Bill, … which panned out for him, because he ended up owning a very lucrative café business and bars.

SI: How would you characterize your experiences with the VA?

JW: Well, after my experience in the VA hospital and everything, I've never used the VA since. I have friends, to this day, they get their hearing aids, and their glasses, and everything [through the VA], but, once I went through that bit with the VA hospital, I didn't want to do anything with the VA again. … Well, I shouldn't be so rough on them, because they do do good work, but, … in my case, it was a little shoddy. So, what they did [was], they had a surgeon operate on my knee, but, I never realized that they had two students that were doing all the work, and he was just showing them what to do. So, there could have been a little something there that caused the knee to be infected, but, you can't prove an infection. I had a good lawyer friend, he said, "You're barking up the wrong tree if you try to sue Uncle Sam about an infection in a hospital." So, I never had any more thoughts about it.

SI: How did you meet Mrs. Waters?

JW: Well, my wonderful wife, Rose, she's a hometown girl, and, when I was a little kid, I went to the barbershop, and her father was the barber, [laughter] so, we've known each other quite awhile, before we were married. We never had romantic thoughts or anything until after I got out of the service, and then, my two buddies started dating her sisters, so, then, I got involved. So, then, it ended up that all three of us married the sisters. [laughter] She comes from a beautiful family. She's the oldest of ten. … She did have seven sisters, one just passed away last year, and she has two brothers, and I'm the oldest of the family now, so, they all look up to me, I hope, and I'm very proud of them, … very devoted family.

SI: During the war, how important was corresponding with your family to you?

JW: Well, it was pretty important to get a letter from home. I corresponded almost twice a week or more with my mother, and then, some of my buddies in the service, but, outside of that, I didn't have any romantic ties at home, so, I was fat, free, and dumb, and happy that way. … So, I didn't feel obligated, which helped a lot, because I know a lot … of my married friends in the service and the ones with romantics, they suffered more than I did. [laughter]

SI: Would you like to add anything to the tape? Was there anything that I missed?

JW: No, I think we covered it all pretty well. Like I said, I was glad I went through it, but, I wouldn't want to go through it again, but, it was an experience, and I just feel sorry for these young kids today that have to go through [it], but, it's an all new ballgame today, modern warfare. When I look at them tanks they have today, it's unbelievable. You just sit there and push a button and it does everything for you. [laughter]

SI: Thank you very much.

JW: Well, thank you very much.

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

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 8/4/03
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 8/11/03
Reviewed by John T. Waters 8/03