

Russell W. Fischer Oral History

World War II in Carver County Oral History Project

November 3, 1999

Interviewer: Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson

Interview with Russell Fischer

Interviewed by Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson

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Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson SHW
Russell W. Fischer RF

SHW: This is the World War II Era in Carver County Oral History Project. It is November 3, 1999. I am the interviewer and my name is Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson. I'm a staff member at the Historical Society, and today I'm interviewing Russell Fischer. Why don't you give me your full name.

RWF: I am Russell W. Fischer.

SHW: Where and when were you born?

RWF: I was born in Waconia, Minnesota, October 3, 1919.

SHW: Did you grow up in Waconia?

RWF: Yes.

SHW: What were you doing in 1941? Were you in Waconia?

RWF: I was in Waconia. I was working for the telephone company here.

SHW: What were you doing?

RWF: I was a troubleshooter.

SHW: Were you aware of what was going on in Europe and Asia in the late '30s and early '40s?

RWF: Yes, very well.

SHW: Was it big in the media?

RWF: Yes, it was. The first thing I remember was when Italy invaded Ethiopia. Then I got real interested because people said it could spread from there because of the Fascist Mussolini. So from about 1936 on I was interested.

SHW: So really early on?

RWF: Yes.

SHW: From 1936 on you thought it could spread to the United States. That's very early. You were already in the service by December of 1941, correct?

RWF: December '41, yes.

SHW: When did you go in?

RWF: I went in February 26, 1941.

SHW: Which branch of the service did you go into?

RWF: First I went into the Quartermaster in Fort Warren, Wyoming. That was a Quartermaster's outfit that delivered supplies to the rest of the outfits. From there I went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. I was still in the same outfit. Then I went to Camp Blanding, Florida, and I was in the same outfit. Then I volunteered for the parachute troops. That was at Camp Blanding, and I went to Fort Benning, Georgia, and put in my month's parachute training and the five qualifying jumps. Then I went to Toccoa, Georgia, and there we did our tactical training—all the problems that we'd run into and we'd have to solve when we were in combat. Then, in March of '42 I went overseas.

SHW: Where did you go first?

RWF: I went to Casablanca, Africa.

SHW: Was that by troop ship?

RWF: Yes.

SHW: How long did that take? What was that like?

RWF: It took us about twenty days. We were in a convoy going awfully slow because there were a lot of submarines. So it took us about twenty-one days.

SHW: Was Casablanca currently held by the Allies in '42?

RWF: Yes.

SHW: Then what happened?

RWF: Then we went to a place called Oujda, and we set up a camp on the desert, and we did more training. That was in Algeria. Then we left Oran and Oujda and we went to Kairouan, Tunisia. There we kept on training. July 9, 1943, we took off from Kairouan, and parachuted into Sicily in the invasion of Sicily.

SHW: What was that like? How early in the invasion were you? Ahead of it?

RWF: We were probably a day ahead of the invasion, which we always were. It was pretty rough because we were getting a lot of flack, and the pilot had to drop down to about 350 feet, and that's where we jumped from.

SHW: Is that low for a jump?

RWF: Very low.

SHW: Was it at night or during the day?

RWF: At night.

SHW: Night jumps—that's scary.

RWF: Then I broke my jaw on both sides because I landed with my gun case underneath my jaw, which I should have pulled to the right, but I didn't have time. So then I couldn't even get my gun up to my jaws it was so big.

SHW: If you were a day ahead of the invasion, then was there a medic in your group?

RWF: We had medics—battalion medics and company medics.

SHW: At that point were you still able to continue what your mission was, or was that it for you?

RWF: I had no choice. There was no way to get out, and you had to fight, but you didn't want to lag behind because every German was around you and the Italians at that time.

SHW: So there were German troops on Sicily, too, not just the Italians?

RWF: Oh, they had a big fortress there.

SHW: What was the goal of your group?

RWF: We were to take all the crossroads, supply depots, and anything that interfered with the landing of the beach troops.

SHW: Was it hard to accomplish it? Did you meet a lot of resistance?

RWF: Very, very hard, because that jump they spread us all over Sicily. Even some of our guys landed close to Mount Etna.

SHW: Was that intentional, or was that a mistake?

RWF: That was pilot error. They wanted to get rid of us and get back to their base.

SHW: I would bet it's pretty nerve-racking to have people jumping out of your plane while they are shooting at you.

RWF: Well, yes, they wanted to get back. But still, they should have held their course and dropped us where they should have.

SHW: Definitely.

RWF: The next jumps they did because they were pretty well indoctrinated by the troopers themselves because of the bad experience.

SHW: I would bet once everyone got back they got a lot of heat for dropping people in the wrong place.

RWF: They did, very much.

SHW: Did things go according to plans, even though people were off target, or was it kind of chaotic?

RWF: In a way, it was better because when the Germans saw all these parachutists coming down . . . Like, I ran into a magazine in Naples where it says, "100,000 Paratroopers Dropping on Sicily," well at night and you're looking up and can see them, a battalion looks like a division. So they start taking off in all directions and then setting up as they went along, but they were pulling back. My outfit made 125 miles in five days—that's just walking and fighting. I was wounded early, and they took me back to Algiers.

SHW: How long did it take you to recover?

RWF: I was back with the outfit in about three weeks.

SHW: With a broken jaw?

RWF: Broken jaws, and I got hit here and down in the ankle.

SHW: While you were coming down or on the ground?

RWF: No, on the ground.

SHW: In only three weeks they had you back . . . that's unbelievable!

RWF: Oh, yes.

SHW: Was that common, to put people back in after very little time?

RWF: Yes, we had guys come back that had two or three shots going through their stomach.

SHW: Oh, my goodness! I can't imagine. Was there any reluctance to get back on duty after that short of time, or was it just you had to?

RWF: No, it wasn't. I don't know, it's some kind of a phenomenon that you kind of wanted to get back and then you didn't. You had all your best friends up there fighting, and then you kind of felt like you were in the wrong position, you should be back up there with them.

SHW: After the Sicily jump, where were you going next?

RWF: From Sicily, we organized for the next jump, and that was the invasion of Italy—Salerno. So we jumped in Salerno Bay on the 13th of September of 1943. Mark Clark's Fifth Army was taking a big beating and they were about ready to be pushed off there, and then they threw us in. There again, it looked like a million paratroopers coming in and they didn't stop until they got ninety miles north to Naples. We took Naples on my birthday.

SHW: How old were you then?

RWF: I was twenty-two.

SHW: Did that invasion or that jump work better, or were you still dropped too low or dropped everywhere?

RWF: No, it worked real good. We jumped in as a reinforcement for Mark Clark.

SHW: What is it like jumping out of an airplane with people shooting at you?

RWF: You're really not paying much attention to the shooting. All you're trying to do is get down. Usually our jump was about 700-750 feet. When we came out of the door, the first thing is our chute would open, then we'd start climbing one riser up to the chute, and that would spill the air out of the chute. Then we'd free fall for up to about 100 feet from the ground, then let go of the riser and it would go up and stop you. That way you were a big moving target going down, and they couldn't very well hit you.

SHW: Was there any way to steer once you got the parachute full, or was it just wherever you were going to hit you were going to hit?

RWF: Oh, yes. If you pulled the two front risers, you'd go forward. If you pulled the two rear down, you'd go rear. If you pulled the right two, you'd go to the right; and left, you'd go to the left. If you wanted to come straight down, you'd pull the diagonal ones. Then you'd come down. That's to stop the oscillation if you pull those. If you hit when you're on an oscillation up like that, and the chute is on the ground, then you're in bad condition.

SHW: Did a lot of people break arms and legs and things?

RWF: Ten percent. We always went in ten percent over strength because of the injuries. So, two thousand five hundred guys, that would be 250.

SHW: Every time?

RWF: Usually every time.

SHW: Okay. What happened next after that one?

RWF: After Naples, we established a bridgehead across the Volturno River, just a little bit north of Naples. Then we got on a boat and we went to Oran, Africa, and we laid out there because there were a lot of German planes coming over. We laid in there for a few days. We didn't know where we'd be going, so we went out into the Atlantic Ocean, and then we found out we were going to Ireland.

SHW: Were you in Ireland for training?

RWF: We were going to go up there and train for Normandy.

SHW: Did you have a clue what was happening next, or was it just . . .

RWF: We had pretty good information. We always got good information because we had a lot of strategic things we had to do. Putting the things together and looking at the sand tables of the terrain, we pretty much knew where we were going to go.

SHW: So you had an edge on the people who were . . .

RWF: So we were in Ireland, and then we went to England to a place called Loughborough. That's north of London about a hundred miles. We did the rest of our training there. Then the night of June 5, 1943, we took off from England and we went over to Normandy. We jumped in Normandy around midnight. The beachhead came in at 6:30 in the morning, so we went in at Normandy. We took a place called Ste.-Mère-Eglise. It was the first town captured in occupied France. So we had to take that down because all the roads that went to the beach went through Ste.-Mère-Eglise. So we had to take those so the German's couldn't get through and supply them to go through.

SHW: Were you dropped on target there?

RWF: I was dropped very close. Our target was Ste.-Mère-Eglise, and I jumped just on the edge of town right over the cemetery. I landed on the other side of the cemetery. So we took our objectives, a lot of them were spread all over. A couple of the guys took three days to get back.

SHW: I can't imagine.

RWF: Which beach were the roads running to, both of them?

RWF: Omaha and Utah.

SHW: So it was crucial. Did you meet a lot of resistance from the Germans?

RWF: When we jumped, we didn't run into too much. They were shooting, but when we got on the ground and got organized, we went into Ste.-Mère-Eglise, and we were more or less fighting guys that were on leave and a couple of outfits. There weren't many Germans in there. And the workers that were working on the beach walls and that. So we took the town in a hurry, at 3 o'clock in the morning. We were in there maybe two hours and took the town. But then the next day is when we really hit it. They sent everything they could because they knew the beachhead was established, so they come in through us with everything they had. So we stopped. Five hundred of us in Ste.-Mère-Eglise had to defend that area.

SHW: What did they throw at you?

RWF: Everything—88s, 120 mortars, hand grenades and rifle grenades.

SHW: How long did it take before reinforcements arrived from the beaches?

RWF: About two and a half days.

SHW: So you were there facing everything the Germans had for two and a half days. How many of you were left at the end?

RWF: In Ste.-Mère-Eglise, probably two hundred.

SHW: So over half.

RWF: Oh, yes.

SHW: Were you wounded there?

RWF: No. I didn't get hit there. A lot of my best friends did.

SHW: I can't even imagine how hard it would be to have these people you spent so much time with either be wounded or dying. Is there any way to explain what it's like to people who've never seen it?

RWF: There wasn't much talk about it. In fact, when we went into combat and we had bad battles, a lot of guys killed, or a lot of Germans, I never heard one man talk about the Germans that were killed—who killed them, who did this. There was never any word I ever heard through the whole service of anyone talking about the Germans. But our guys, we've always had friends in other platoons or squads, the first things we'd do is try to find out about our friends—how they made out. Then, if they were killed, you'd kind of go into another dimension for a while, until we started problems again. Then it took your mind off of everything again, so you were ready for

another one. But it never left you. Then there was the chance, you know, all your friends were dwindling down and it was coming closer to you. You did a lot of thinking.

SHW: What was it like when they sent in new replacements, because they would reinforce you every time you had to go?

RWF: We weren't allowed to talk to the new replacements about our experiences. We weren't allowed to say anything, but we were allowed to teach them the different periods we had been through, you know. To train from those mistakes that had been made, and carry them on into the training and try to eliminate some of the bad mistakes that we made. This is how we worked out our problems.

SHW: Did it take a while for those guys to really become part of your unit, or was it just everyone was in it together?

RWF: The replacements?

SHW: Yes, especially the really young ones. Some of them must have been eighteen.

RWF: They had a lot of training before they come over. After one combat mission, they had enough experience right there, and they all made good soldiers.

SHW: Was there anyone else from Minnesota in your unit or your in your company?

RWF: I've got in my book here—this is the whole book on the 82nd—a lot of it written down here that might not be brought up. This is my parachute from Normandy.

SHW: You kept it.

RWF: Yes, I cut a piece out.

SHW: Oh, wow. That's silk, right?

RWF: That's nylon.

SHW: Oh, nylon. I didn't realize that. I also didn't realize they were camouflage.

RWF: Yes, that's camouflage.

SHW: I suppose that makes sense. Is that where it was hit?

RWF: Yes, it was hit. After I landed on the ground, a shell came in and went through it.

SHW: What would happen if it got hit while you were going down?

RWF: Like that wouldn't hurt much. It would spill a lot of air. You'd go maybe a little faster, but not much. If it blew a couple panels out, then you were in trouble.

SHW: That was it.

RWF: Because on the parachute, they call it the "puckered vent." On the top there was a vent with elastic around it. The higher the pressure would get; it would open up and kind of control the air pressure in the shoot. Otherwise the shoot would go back and forth. So this would just add a little more, and if it was coming out here, then that puckered vent would close because enough of it was coming out here. It kind of compensated for itself.

SHW: Did you pack your own parachute?

RWF: In jump school, yes. Never after that. It took me five hours to pack my chute the first jump.

SHW: You're kidding!

RWF: The last jump it took me twenty minutes. You'd see guys who would have it all nice and packed, and pretty soon they'd have it back on the table and they'd taken it all apart because they thought they'd forgotten something in doing something.

SHW: I don't think you'd want to forget anything.

RWF: Here's my general [shows picture].

SHW: Who was that?

RWF: General Gavin.

SHW: Did you have much contact with him?

RWF: Oh, yes. He was a soldier's man. He was a real soldier's man. He never sat in the back and gave orders. He was always up on line.

SHW: Did he jump with you guys?

RWF: Oh, yes. He was one of the first ones in all the time.

SHW: Wow, I didn't realize that.

RWF: Oh, yes. He was in. All his men, too—all his high officers—had to jump, too.

SHW: He looks pretty young, actually, to be a general.

RWF: He was thirty-six, the youngest general in the army. This is an older picture of him after he's up in years.

SHW: He still looks pretty young to be a general, actually.

RWF: These are all my friends that were killed [shows picture].

SHW: Oh, my goodness. That's a lot.

RWF: There were several of them from Minnesota.

SHW: Did you know any of them before the war, or were these all people you met?

RWF: Never knew anybody before the war.

SHW: The question marks are . . . oh, you don't know where they are from.

RWF: I didn't know where they were from. Here's their rank and name and what they were on. This guy was on the BAR—Browning Automatic Rifle, riflemen and mortarmen.

SHW: It looks like the Normandy had the longest list of them all.

RWF: Yes, Normandy and the Bulge.

SHW: Oh, that was another one that was pretty famous.

RWF: See, these are just friends. We had 150 men in the company, and I knew the rest of them but they weren't immediate friends. You'd say hi and that, but all these guys I used to go out with to towns and that stuff, and we were all real good friends.

SHW: There's just so many of them.

RWF: Yes, forty-seven. A couple of them died after the war.

SHW: After Normandy what happened?

RWF: After Normandy, we went back to England, and we started training—doing our problems and training. Then September 19, 1943, we jumped at the Waal River at a place called Nijmegen in Holland. Our mission was to take the bridges over Nijmegen over the Waal River. That was on September 19, on a beautiful Sunday afternoon.

SHW: So you were jumping during the day?

RWF: Yes, this was a day jump—the only day jump. We came down and as soon as we were landing, the women from a town called Groesbeek all come running out with mattresses and

everything—sheets and everything for the guys that were hurt or wounded. They were putting them on there and then carrying them up to their houses.

SHW: There weren't any Germans around when you landed?

RWF: Oh, yes.

SHW: Oh, there were lots.

RWF: We landed right on the northern part of the Siegfried Line. You've heard of the Siegfried Line? We were going to take the bridges. Our mission was to take the bridges over the Wall at Nijmegen, and then go around the northern part of the Siegfried Line. Then we would have had a straight shot into Berlin. That was our goal, but we got stopped so bad up there by the Germans. The British got stopped and beat so bad, and the Polish parachute outfit got so . . . and the Nijmegen bridges were so hard to take. We wanted to take them intact, because they were blown. And as soon as we came in they would blow bridges, but our guys went in there so fast before the Germans could set off the charges. So we took that bridge intact.

SHW: So you were jumping behind the lines the whole time.

RWF: This was thirty-five miles behind the lines.

SHW: Was it Montgomery who didn't make it through in Holland?

RWF: It was Montgomery's operation.

SHW: If the British didn't make it through, what happened to you guys? Did the American army meet up with you or did you have to get out?

RWF: The American army did, but the British jumped in a place called Arnhem, that was the northernmost part. Their job was to take the bridges up there with a Polish brigade. They got beat up so bad up there, they couldn't hardly do anything. They were practically annihilated. We were south further about nine miles, so when the Germans did away with the British up there, they started coming down. But we were well organized and we had a lot of troops in there. They didn't even come close to getting through. So then we'd had such hard fighting across Nijmegen there that we couldn't go any further. They pulled us out then. Then we went to France. We reorganized and waited for our replacements, and trained them. Then December 19, 1944—it was the fourteenth when the Bulge broke out—we were just coming back and it was so weird. We were all wearing wooden shoes because our boots rotted off up in Holland. We wore wooden shoes, which was real warm. Anyway, they got us out of our bunks at two or three o'clock in the morning and they says, "We're going to make a tailgate jump."

SHW: What's a tailgate jump?

RWF: Jump out the rear of a truck.

SHW: Okay.

RWF: They took us up into the Bulge. Nobody knew where we were going. Every truck would let guys out along the way, and we would just keep going, jumping out of the trucks setting up defense in there because the Germans were moving so fast. So that's what started our Bulge.

SHW: So you were there from the beginning?

RWF: Not exactly from the beginning. A couple of outfits were in there and they were spread so far apart between men, and the Germans come through them and there was just no opposition. But we went up there within two days of when it broke out.

SHW: How long did the Battle of the Bulge last?

RWF: About a month and a half.

SHW: Were you there the whole time?

RWF: Yes. Our other parachute outfit, the 101st Airborne, took Bastogne. They kept perimeter around Bastogne. The Germans could never get at it, but they drew a lot of firepower away from us. We were advancing with Patton up east.

SHW: Okay.

RWF: We went to Cologne, Germany, and Bad Godesberg. We were in charge of closing the Ruhr pocket. The Americans were charging on all sides and it was a big pocket, and the Germans were advancing. So we set up a main line of defense along the Rhine River. The Germans were pulling back and they were trying to get across the Rhine River, and when they tried to come across then everybody started battling them.

SHW: At this point you're doing ground troops, you're acting as infantry?

RWF: Yes.

SHW: When you were advancing along, is it just constant fighting?

RWF: No. You may get in a pretty big fire fight, but if you take the ground they usually draw back maybe four or five miles and set up another MLR back there and wait for you to come up again. Then you have to knock them out, and they go back away, so you regroup, get more ammunition. It's just a put-and-take situation. We fought a company of Germans for about forty or fifty miles and they were all on bicycles. They'd get on bicycles and move, and by the time we got through fighting them, all our guys were on bicycles.

SHW: This was a fast march, though. You were covering a lot of ground each day, weren't you, when you weren't fighting?

RWF: Yes. When the attack was real successful, then we could go like heck if we didn't give them time to dig in and get stuff. Usually not. We'd go fast for as long as it took to get them out of the area, because you could never catch them. They were going pretty fast. Some days you'd take ground, you couldn't take any more for maybe three days, you'd be fighting in the one spot.

SHW: When all this is happening, do you get sleep, do you get regular meals? Is it just constant?

RWF: Oh, no. Sleep was always terrible. Sometimes it was three nights without sleep. Many a time I stood there and just fell down on my knees and fell asleep, just falling over. Then I'd have to get up again.

SHW: And keep on going.

RWF: Especially up in the Bulge. We didn't have any bedding or anything in the snow. We'd cover over with pine boughs. We'd chop pines down and then four or five of us would crawl under the snow and cover up with those pine boughs and we slept.

SHW: Then the fighting would just start again.

RWF: Yes.

SHW: How long did this go on, where you were just going and going and going with no rest and nothing else?

RWF: Well, in Sicily it was about three weeks that they kept on going before they got their ground. It was in Salerno we had to go ninety miles, and then the Germans pulled back up to Rome and cross the Volturno River. We didn't have to go very fast to get them out. But then in Normandy we fought every day for months, going real fast. But we go relieved by maybe another battalion, which would relieve us for a day, and then we'd go back. We'd alternate with the reserve battalions. So it wasn't one outfit pushing constantly; it was a couple days of rest and then back up again.

SHW: Did it seem sort of surreal while it was going on? How could you relate it to what your life had been before the war?

RWF: You couldn't. There is no possible way. It was more like a dream. You couldn't believe it was happening. When you got into a battle and then you dug in, and then you saw all the medics coming down carrying the wounded and the dead, you just wondered how long it was going to be for you, how long the war was going to go. Like your first day of combat, which was really frightening, then you would wonder and say to yourself, "Is this going to keep on? Am I going to have to go through this every day like this day?" It got so depressing.

SHW: Did it ever get easier as time went on?

RWF: No.

SHW: Was it just horrible every day?

RWF: Yes. You got to learn more to be able to take care of yourself. The more combat you're in, the more you learn every time. If a later battle, say a year later, you were battling, and if you only had the same experience as the first day you ever had combat, you would never have lived. That's why it was so important for these replacements coming in, so important for them to be trained right. You never get used to it.

SHW: How did you write home about what was going on? Could you say anything?

RWF: Nothing, really. They censored it. Everything that we wrote they censored.

SHW: So you could just say, "I'm doing all right."

RWF: You'd never say anything that would upset your mother or them, you know.

SHW: Were you married at this point?

RWF: No.

SHW: Did you have any brothers or sisters involved in the war?

RWF: My brother wasn't in the war.

SHW: He was back here on the farm?

RWF: No.

SHW: I forgot, your family owned the telephone company.

RWF: My brother owned the telephone company up north.

SHW: Was he older or younger?

RWF: He was four years older. But he had a family, so he didn't have to go.

SHW: What did your parents write you? What was that like getting letters from home? It must have been important to get them.

RWF: Oh, it was awful important to get letters. Oh, gosh. That was one of the main morale keepers was letters from home. There wasn't much that they'd say; they'd talk about the lake or where they went or something like that. The hardest part was when you went in you were writing to four or five girls, and one by one they quit writing. They got married or had steady boyfriends.

SHW: So how many girls were you writing to when you got started?

RWF: Five.

SHW: Were you still writing to any of them at the end?

RWF: I was writing to one at the end. Every one of them, they called them "Dear John" letters.

SHW: I bet that would be hard.

RWF: As long as you've got five, you can back up on . . .

SHW: I suppose as long as there is still one left at the end, it's not a total loss. After you were in Holland, you pushed into Germany. When did you switch from being infantry back to being a paratrooper?

RWF: We were always paratroopers. We had no more jump missions after Holland, except the 17th Airborne when it crossed the Rhine; that was their only parachute jump. From then we were what they called spearhead troops. We were the first troops leaving the offensive.

SHW: Where were you when Germany surrendered?

RWF: I was up in a place called Ludwigslust, north Germany, across the Elbe River. I was actually fighting on the Elbe River when the war ended, but then we went to Ludwigslust.

SHW: Did you meet up with the Russians?

RWF: Yes, we met up with the Russians.

SHW: What was that like? Did they really feel like Allies?

RWF: I didn't like any of them.

SHW: Why?

RWF: Because one of my jobs right after the war, we XXX a lot of people that were from Russia and Lithuania and all those countries that were in Germany as slaves. So we had hundreds of people. They gave me a truck with a driver and ten or twelve other trucks that I was in charge of, and I had to take these people up into the Russian territory and let them off. There was one Lithuanian girl; she was in there too. She was riding in our truck and she was so happy she was going back. When we got into the Russian territory the Russians stopped us. A Russian commander came out and everybody got out. This girl was a beautiful girl, and she started crying. She said she didn't want to go back now because . . . these gals you could see cuts on their backs where they'd been hit, they were raping and all this kind of stuff. So she didn't want to go back. So this Russian captain came up and he pointed to her. He said, "She come too, she come too." I said, "No, no, France—French." He said, "No." When she got on, he started for the truck. I might have been a damn fool for doing it, but four or five other Russians come up, so I

says, "No, she's not going back." Then he called the others. So I had a Tommy gun, so I pulled it up. I says, "She's not going back." He started laughing and said, "Okay, okay."

SHW: My grandparents are Polish, and my grandmother was in a German labor camp right after the war. I've heard the stories about the Russians not being much better than the Germans.

RWF: They were bad, oh, they were bad. Up there we run into a concentration camp out of Wobbelin. That was horrible. I've never been in a place that was so bad.

SHW: Had they told you about them, or was it just a total surprise?

RWF: It was a surprise when we went in there. All the pictures are in the book here.

SHW: I'd love to see anything you have to show me. Was this a death camp or a labor camp?

RWF: It was labor and death camp.

SHW: So it had the ovens and everything?

RWF: [shows pictures and memorabilia] I marked some of these so I could get at them easy. That's casualties. Concentration camp is right up here. There is the concentration camp Wobbelin.

SHW: Oh, boy.

RWF: What we did is, we went into town and got all the people, every one of them. We told them if they didn't come out, we would shoot them. So all the people came out and we paraded all of them—see all the bodies in here—we paraded every one of them to take a look at the graves. Then we had the people from their dig the graves.

SHW: This was in Germany?

RWF: This was north Germany. [shows picture] See here they've got the shovels and they're digging the graves.

SHW: What did the Germans say when you brought them to the concentration camp?

RWF: Some of them didn't want to look, but we made them. There were no Nazis, because no one in Germany was a Nazi when the Americans got in there. We'd go through the houses looking for weapons. You could see on the wall where a picture had just been taken down. You know it was Adolph Hitler, but there were no Nazis.

SHW: Were the guards gone by the time you got there? Was it just the prisoners?

RWF: The guards were gone. But they didn't get any place. They caught them as they were going out. [shows picture] A kid like that—thirteen years old. I went in the first room and I got

so sick I had to come out. I couldn't stand it. I didn't go in any more no matter what anybody told me. I was not going to go back in there. You couldn't feed them because that would have killed them. They had to bring them back . . .

SHW: We were talking about the concentration camp.

RWF: I forget how many were in there. It says in here how many, but I forget.

SHW: And how many were alive at the end?

RWF: Not very many.

SHW: Did the Red Cross come fairly quickly?

RWF: Yes. Red Cross came in from all over the countries.

SHW: Were most of the people in the camp German at that point, or were they Poles and Romanians? Could you speak to them? Did anybody speak English?

RWF: Oh, yes. A lot of Germans spoke English.

SHW: I just meant the people in the concentration camp.

RWF: Oh, yes. We didn't find any Americans in there, but our general said, "If you find any Americans, you know what to do."

SHW: Were there any French or English?

RWF: French, English, Poles, Lithuanians, Czechs . . . everybody. Every country that the Germans invaded they took labor.

SHW: Was it all Jews, or was it a mixture of everybody?

RWF: Oh, no. I imagine it was probably half Jews. Everybody thinks it was all Jews. No way. It was even Germans that were in there.

SHW: Anybody who spoke out against the Reich.

RWF: Anybody who spoke out against them or anything they thought was kind of funny, they would go after. They were pretty efficient.

SHW: And they didn't destroy their records, which was an act of extreme stupidity actually.

RWF: Yes, and they left a lot of records. They were great at keeping records.

SHW: Were your officers very intent on preserving the records and keeping them when you came across them and captured them, or did that just not come up?

RWF: You mean when we captured German soldiers? If they captured headquarters, yes. But the German GI's didn't have much on them.

SHW: What did you do with the German prisoners? How did you handle them?

RWF: It was hard. Like in Normandy, we didn't know what to do with them because we had no place to put them. A lot of them disappeared.

SHW: Disappeared as in "wandered off," or just disappeared as in "nothing could happen to them"?

RWF: Well, nobody knew what happened to them. Where we were fighting, where we had continuity with the rear echelon people, then we could pass a flow of Germans on back. But where we were surrounded and didn't know when anybody was going to come in to reach us, you couldn't do anything because you could get sabotaged from the inside.

SHW: You couldn't spare the people to guard them when you've got everything coming at you.

RWF: But then again, the German combat troops, a lot of them wouldn't give up to us. There was bad word out about the paratroopers, what they were doing, and they wouldn't give up. But in the last of the war, across the Elbe River, 125,000 Germans gave up to us. A whole German army at one time, and we didn't know what to do with them. [end of side 1] I don't think there's anything, really. You can ask me anything you want.

SHW: You gave a wonderful oral history.

RWF: I wrote down a lot of stuff that I was probably going to go over with you.

SHW: If you want me to, I can also include that with the transcription if you want me to, for the library.

RWF: Sure, you can take it along, if you can read it. You'll probably have to write it over.

SHW: Trust me . . . I teach school sometimes, and nothing is as bad as a sixth grader's handwriting.

RWF: At my age, it's good I can write that good yet.

SHW: It's very legible. I wouldn't worry about it.

RWF: [shows pictures] That's England. We had good times over there, too—wonderful, wonderful times. Our 504 parachutists fought in Anzio all through the winter. They had a terrible

job—Anzio, Italy. They didn't come up to Normandy. We got another group to jump with us in Normandy. They lost just about all their men.

SHW: Oh, my goodness.

RWF: There are things in here I'd like to find, but I can't find them.

SHW: I understand. It's hard to find exactly what you're looking for at that moment.

RWF: There's the gear we're loading up in Africa for Sicily. I'm in here someplace because I remember the guy taking the picture. That's a good friend of mine—Colber from Montana. Here's me.

SHW: You look very, very young.

RWF: I was very young. Can you tell it was me by the picture?

SHW: Yes, I can see it.

RWF: That wasn't taken in combat.

SHW: That was in training?

RWF: That was in training. I had just come off of guard duty and they had a photographer there, and they asked if the group that was on guard duty would get their stuff on and have pictures taken for the book.

SHW: That's what the inside of the planes looked like?

RWF: It's a glider. There we are—that's stand up and hook up [shows picture]

SHW: The hook is what pulls the parachute out?

RWF: This is what pulls the parachute out. You come up to line up at the door, and you give it a shove and then you go out the door.

SHW: What made you want to be a paratrooper? Jumping out of an airplane always struck me as a very scary thing to do.

RWF: When I first got in, I was in a Gold Brick outfit—the Quartermasters. There is no more Gold Brick in that outfit.

SHW: You always hear stories about the Quartermasters.

RWF: And I hated it. I stayed with them, and I hated it so much. Oh, I didn't tell you, I was in the 57th Signal Battalion. I transferred from the Quartermaster to the Signal Corps, and went to

Camp Devans, Massachusetts. I had had so much basic training, and I got in and what did they do? They took us up to Fort Devans, and they start putting us through basic training again.

SHW: And you had been in for almost a year at that point.

RWF: Yes. I said, "I'm getting out of this outfit, too." So I went up to talk to the company commander and asked him different questions. He said, "You'll never get out of this outfit because this is a crack outfit, Signal Corps. I said, "I will." I went down to headquarters and I got a blank for volunteering for the parachute troops. So I signed that and brought it back to the company commander. I said, "See, that's my way out." He said, "Yup, I can't stop you." So I went down to Fort Benning.

SHW: So it just sounded interesting, or it was just a way out of Signal Corps?

RWF: Like all young fellows, I wanted to get in on the action. They got this big macho thing. I'm going to go and make myself a big hero.

SHW: It's just about the most macho thing you can do, to jump out of airplanes.

RWF: That's the way a young soldier is. He's just got to get into something where the action is. The greatest month I think I spent was parachute training in Fort Benning. It was terribly rough; I mean, you were with men that you could call men. What was left after the washouts, you could really call yourself a paratrooper. Maybe out of 150 men, you'd probably get 45 that would make the training.

SHW: I didn't realize it was that hard. What was training like?

RWF: Training was all bayonet training, knife fighting, and obstacle courses—terrible obstacle courses. We went over walls, crawled through dead cows with guts all over the place, and running seven miles every morning with full field pack, calisthenics all morning, and stuff like that. But then in the afternoon, it was all parachute training. You packed your chute, you learned all about your chute, and different things like that. The last week you had to make your five parachute jumps.

SHW: Did you like that part?

RWF: Not right away. By the time I made the five, then I was real happy with it. I was always queasy, but you kind of have kind of fun games when you're dropping down. If you've got a lot of experience jumping, you jump on the other guy's shoot and you open up the pucker vent on top and holler at him, "Hey, I'm up here!" The guy, if he's new, he'd just about go out of his head to see you standing on his shoot, and stuff like that. We had to carry a lot of equipment. What I'd do is, halfway down I'd get rid of my heavy equipment. I'd drop it. My helmet I'd drop, and all this. I'd tell the officers, "Well, I had a hard opening. It just tore everything off." So there was nothing they could do. So I'd be walking along with no equipment while the other guys would be humping along.

SHW: It probably doesn't do a lot for a helmet or equipment to be dropped from about 500 feet.

RWF: It didn't hurt it because we were only jumping at 1,000 feet. So we'd get halfway down, about 500 feet or so. We didn't throw away everything. My third jump I had what they call a brassiere. It's when the cords go over the parachute and form like a brassiere on the top. I had kind of a premonition that something was going to go wrong. It just bothered me because I thought my main chute wasn't going to open. So I went out, and you're not supposed to put your hand on your handle that pulls the ripcord out on the second chute. But I was so tense and leery, I grabbed that handle, and when I went out, the propeller wash hit me with a blast in my arm, and it pulled out that second chute. So my chute opened and the other one came out and went straight down. It just went down, and all of a sudden we picked up air, came up and it went into my face and wound around my feet, and went up to the main chute and went across that and formed that, and I came down real fast. There was an ambulance down there waiting. They saw what was happening, so they came up and said, "Are you hurt?" I said, "I don't know. I don't think so." I got up and they saw I was all right. So what they did, they brought out the stretcher and they put both of my parachutes in the stretcher, put it in the ambulance and took off, and let me walk in, because they were going to inspect that chute. They inspected everything when you had a malfunction.

SHW: So if you were okay, they were going to check the chutes out.

RWF: They left me to walk in because that's what we had to do from the field. When you went out, you'd try to steer as close as you could to the hangars, so you didn't have so far to walk.

SHW: Amazing.

RWF: It didn't seem like a lot of fun at the time, but as you got through it . . . You see, we went up to Toccoa and we trained Survival 1 parachute troops. There were only thirteen of us as a cadre. The rest were all non-jumpers. They started putting the guys into tactical training before they made their jumps. So we had to train those guys to do that. Then they walked them down to Fort Benning, Georgia, 150 miles on a walk. But we always received a lot of respect and that from the non-jumpers, because what they were after were the boots and the wings. Even if you're a private, you got so much respect.

SHW: That was something I forgot to ask. What was your rank? Were you a private?

RWF: I was a private first class. None of us would take rank.

SHW: Why?

RWF: We just didn't want the responsibility.

SHW: I suppose that makes sense.

RWF: And when you take rank, you have to do things against your friends that you don't want to. You have to give them certain orders. All the guys I knew were afraid of losing their friends

and afraid of going over and living in another barracks when they're good friends, and all this kind of stuff. Then again, the turnover in sergeants and second lieutenants was so big. You had a lot of officers come in that you never got to know.

SHW: Because they died so quickly?

RWF: Yes. I was going to show you the casualties if you have time.

SHW: Sure.

RWF: Here was our casualties. We had a complement of 9,000 parachuters and glidermen.

SHW: What were the gliders? I'm not entirely familiar with those.

RWF: The gliders were attached on to C-47 planes, our jump planes. When we went in, we had our combat men in the plane—the parachutists. In the back we towed a big glider full of infantry. So then we'd jump, and then they'd release the glider and come down in the same area.

SHW: I understand now.

RWF: A total of 9,000—some men we had in the outfit when we went over. We had 1,535 missing in action; wounded in action, not returned, 8,024; 4,580 returned; not returned 1,689; killed in action, 2,665. But that was revised to this, so we had Sicily, Italy, Normandy, Holland, Ardennes, and Europe, we had a total of 3,228 men killed out of 9,000.

SHW: Over a third.

RWF: So that was quite a few.

SHW: That is an unbelievable number.

RWF: For the entire war, the total casualties—killed and wounded—19,586, doubled. That's how many replacements came in, too. It's about 20,000 out of 9,000 originals. So that was quite a bit. [shows picture] This guy got a Congressional Medal of Honor. Our outfit was the 82nd Airborne. In World War I it was the 82nd Infantry Division. That was the one where Sergeant York was in. When this war started out, they converted the 82nd Infantry to the 82nd Airborne, and then trained paratroopers and gliders. In a funny coincidence—I didn't know it until after he died—my uncle Byron down in Minneapolis, I ran across his little diary he kept, and god darnit if he wasn't in the 82nd during World War I. And I didn't even know it.

SHW: That's a pretty amazing coincidence, actually.

RWF: Yes, it is. After the war . . . This is New York [shows picture]. They had the parade. All these guys came back from Berlin. They were the Honor Guard, the 82nd for Berlin. Myself and all high-point men got sent home. Then, when they came home, they had this big parade in New York. It was a big thing. [shows pictures] Here are some wounded guys from the 82nd watching

the parade in there. That's General Gavin. That's the whole outfit coming through. This is down the Avenue. Here's Gavin again leading the group. This is through the Arch de Triumph in France.

SHW: Were you there for that?

RWF: No.

SHW: Already back in England training for the next then?

RWF: No. This was at the end of the war. But I was down Lucky Strike already, waiting to go home. You've got this off, don't you [the tape recorder]?

SHW: I can turn it off.

RWF: I was just going to tell you a little story, but you don't have to have it on.

SHW: Okay. I can turn it off. Do you not want it on the tape?

RWF: It don't make any difference. We made a practice jump in France, and what's-her-name—the German actress . . .

SHW: Marlene Dietrich?

RWF: Marlene Dietrich was out there to watch the jump. One of the guys landed real close to her and he hurt himself. He was holding his knee and laying in pain. She came over and grabbed him around the neck and gave him a great big kiss. It was about thirty guys that landed around, and everyone was pulling his knee up, holding his knee up and screaming. [laughter]

SHW: Did she give everybody a kiss?

RWF: No, but she laughed. We had met quite a few celebrities—Bob Hope, Francis Langford, if you remember her, she was a singer, and quite a few others. Have you got any other questions? Just ask.

SHW: I asked most of mine. You really gave a great interview. You really told me a lot, and I think it's going to be really useful.

RWF: I'm happy for it if it helps somebody.

SHW: I think it definitely will.

RWF: Because at my age, I don't have long to give many interviews anymore.

SHW: I think you definitely said a lot of important things. Thank you very much for doing it.
[end of interview]