

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Patrick Morrissey
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

PM: Patrick Morrissey.

LJ: And Mr. Morrissey where were you born?

PM: Born in St. Paul, Minnesota.

LJ: And who were your parents?

PM: Sidney and Vivian Morrissey.

LJ: And what did they do for a living?

PM: At the time they got married, they both worked at the State Capitol in St. Paul.

LJ: What did they do?

PM: I'm not sure. But her maiden name was Morrissey; and so, I suppose that's one of the ways they became acquainted. They both had the same last name.

LJ: Interesting.

PM: Yes.

LJ: Where did you go to school?

PM: I went to school in Fargo through the fourth grade, then we moved to Langdon, North Dakota, graduated from high school there. Went to NDSU for – it was AC back then, SU for about a year and a half. Well I went to St. Thomas one year. And anyway, the war came and I went in the Army for three years, two months, and seven days.

LJ: Now were you drafted or did you enlist on your own?

PM: I tried to enlist in the Navy but my eyes weren't good enough and so I enlisted in the Army. And they called me in. Well first of all, they gave us various tests. And I scored well enough, apparently, to get into what they called Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). I went for about six months to Oklahoma State and they were going to make us engineers. But then the war took a turn, apparently, and they decided they needed soldiers more than they needed engineers. And so I went into the infantry in Camp Maxey, Texas, in 99th Infantry Division. We went overseas in ... let's see August of '44. And then the Bulge started in December 16th of '44. We were in the front lines when that happened.

LJ: What was that like?

PM: Well it was terrible. Our division got hit pretty hard. We were attacked by two different divisions of German soldiers and one rather huge Panzer group. There were two German armies that would attack in the Battle of the Bulge. In the north, it was the Sixth Army; and in the south, where Bastogne was, it was the Fifth Army. But, anyway, they started out their campaign was about a two-hour artillery barrage. We were in the woods in Belgium, and we were pretty well dug in.

Another guy and I had kind of a dugout. It was a foxhole with an earthen-wood cover over it. We were pretty well protected from aerial shrapnel and so on. So we survived that okay. But shortly thereafter, the Germans attacked the infantry. They pretty quickly overran our position, and a lot of our company. You know, one of the funny things about combat fighting was you only know what's going on in your little area. We didn't know that this was a rather large battle taking shape.

As it turned out, it was the largest pitched battle that the Army has ever fought in. There were about 700,000 troops involved in each side. Anyway, they overran our position. We survived the first day and then, the second day we pulled back about half a mile to battalion headquarters, what was left of our battalion. When this thing was over in about – anyway, we were behind the German lines by that time, because they had moved on.

LJ: How many in a battalion?

PM: About 1,200 and there was only – well, when we counted up after we finally got back to our own lines, there was only 67 left of us in our company .out of 193. Now some were wounded. Some were killed. Most of them captured. And there was, I don't know, out of our battalion there was – oh about I've

got the figure someplace but – no more than a couple hundred. We got hit pretty hard.

Anyway we joined up with another battalion that third morning. We tried to work our way out, which we finally did through a little town in Belgium, [unclear]. And I didn't know any of this because we were confused and tired and I don't think I slept much for those three days.

I was a radio operator and there was two of us radio operators and we had an SCR-300. But anyway, he got wounded, so he was evacuated that first day. So I carried that radio and that was one of the few radios that [unclear]. After radioing out, we went back out through the Second Division after some harrowing experiences.

Then we were put into position on place by Elsenborn in Belgium and it was on a ridge overlooking a little valley. On the other side of the valley, they were in a wooded area. And the Germans were in the wooded area and they attacked our position oh, six-seven times. But by that time, we had concentrated our artillery so that there was about 200 field artillery pieces that could fire on anyone, so they attacked us with infantry and tanks with that massive firepower. They just pulverized us. We were there for a little over a month in this position while we regrouped and the Bulge constituted about a 50 mile advance and about 50 or 60 miles from north to south. But the Germans penetrated our lines about 50 miles. And that's where the Bulge came from.

Bastogne made up a lot of the publicity. They were down in the south. And there is no reason they shouldn't get the publicity, but I think a lot of it was based on that answer that the general gave to the offer to surrender from the Germans. And he said "nuts" and that captured the imagination. Anyway the Germans went right around the 101st in Bastogne. They were surrounded and it was very, very difficult for them and they were relieved by Patton's army coming up from the south. Our "northern hinge," they called it, pretty much stopped the main advance so they had to detour south of us. And it upset their timetable by about four or five days. Anyway, it helped. That's about it. You read my little book, did you?

LJ: I'm working on it, yes.

PM: Yes, okay, it explains some of that.

We then went on the attack and we drove to the Rhine River ... we and the other units, of course. We were relieved for a couple weeks. And we got recruits to build our strength back up, then we went back.

LJ: So you got R&R, is that what they call it?

PM: Yes, I had a pass to Paris, which was very nice.

LJ: How long a time were you there?

PM: Three days ... it was tough coming back, though, but it helped.

LJ: Yes.

PM: Helped relieve some of the tension and stuff like that.

Shortly after we got back they captured the bridge across the Rhine River at Remagen. So we immediately got our trucks and we moved down there. Our division was the first full division to cross the, cross the Rhine. Then we went up and swung up into what they call "the Ruhr pocket." The Germans were surrounded and eventually surrendered after a couple weeks, I suppose, about 300 and some thousand of them.

LJ: Three hundred thousand?

PM: Yes, but they had no place to go. It was kind of awesome seeing them moving back from – see we'd gone around from Remagen north and so this pocket was between the Rhine River and our troops advancing; and they were penned in. It was kind of awesome to see those several hundred thousand troops, German troops, and we didn't have time to relieve them of their weapons but they just were an endless stream of them going to concentration wherever they put them, I don't know. They had their weapons and tanks and – but they had surrendered, so that was the end of their war.

LJ: This was 1945?

PM: Yes, it was in 1945.

LJ: What month are we looking at? Was it that spring?

PM: Well, let's see. It was probably March going into April, yes, because the war was over in May. And after that Ruhr pocket was eliminated, we moved our division down to the Third Army, which was where Patton was. And he continued eastward after. We wound up in Austria when the war ended. We occupied a little town around Frankfurt, two little towns that we stayed in. And in August they dropped the first atomic bomb.

I had known enough about chemistry – I took chemistry when I was in St. Thomas. And I can remember quite vividly my professor saying that – I suppose he was talking about uranium, but he said that if it can be harnessed, a very small amount of that would be enough to blow up the state of Minnesota.

So I figured that the war was going to be over so I asked for a transfer back to the States. And normally that transfer meant that you would furlough and then go over to the circuit area. By the time I got to Le Havre, France, there was a storm in the English Channel so I didn't get to Southampton until too late to catch the troop transport. So I went back to Le Havre, and I was there until February of '45. I finally got back to the States and got discharged, and that was it.

LJ: So you actually left before the war was officially over then?

PM: No, we occupied from May until August. And the units were being disbanded by then, including our division.

LJ: Where were you disbanded to once you got back to the States?

PM: Well, by the time I got back to the States, I was just discharged. I landed in New York and went to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, and was discharged.

LJ: Did the paperwork and that?

PM: Yes, did the paperwork.

LJ: Did you have any injuries when you were fighting in the Battle of the Bulge?

PM: Not a scratch.

LJ: That's just awesome.

PM: Very, very fortunate.

LJ: How about some of the soldiers that you were working with, your buddies, any of them?

PM: That first day, the morning of the third day, we were trying to get out from behind the German lines. So we were forming up to move out some place and our Third Platoon was down the road a little bit further. They formed up on the road – it was really just a trail in the woods. And the Germans

jumped up on both sides of them and captured them. And later on in April, I think it was April, yes, we liberated a prisoner-of-war camp and practically our whole Third Platoon was there.

LJ: What kind of shape were they in?

PM: **They were in pretty good shape. They hadn't been there very long, but they were glad to see us.**

LJ: No doubt, yes. So you got discharged from Wisconsin and how did you resume your life?

PM: **That was in February and I stayed home. We were living in Cooperstown, North Dakota, the folks were there. And I was just – see I was 22 years old. And that fall, I went back to AC [NDSU] and finished up my degree in mechanical engineering and went to work.**

LJ: Where did you go to work?

PM: **Went to work at Minot for Truax-Traer Coal Company. And I took special training. I had an engineering degree and I took a little special correspondence course and some training. And I became what they called a “combustion engineer.” We sold lignite coal to power plants. Well we sold a lot of lignite coal to residential places back then. They still burned a lot of coal in homes, but also in power plants to generate electricity, which they still do. And I called on power plants in South Dakota and North Dakota and Minnesota for the coal company for about eight years.**

Then I went to work for an electrical manufacturing company. And I traveled North Dakota, Montana and part of Wyoming. I was with them for about eight years, and then I went to work for the Dakota Electric Supply Company in Fargo. And I was with them for 20 years and retired as the president of the company.

LJ: That's fantastic, terrific.

PM: Yes.

LJ: Do you have any final thoughts about what you went through during the time you served your country?

PM: **Well it was kind of interesting and, again, it's in that [unclear] story. But I got a call about, I suppose, about 10 years ago now. Whenever it was, from**

one of the guys from our company – I was in Company C. And he informed me that we had annual reunions of our division; and he said, “Why don’t you come to one of them?” So I went to my first one in Dallas.

And it was fascinating because at these reunions of the military, a division is about 17,500 troops; and with replacements we were probably twenty three, four, five thousand. So there were as a lot them that came to these reunions.

Now as years go by, there’s fewer and fewer, of course, the numbers. But it was fascinating because Company C had their own entertainment group. There were division-wide meetings and events and banquets and stuff like that but for the everyday conversations you met in little groups like we did. And they had little contests to see ... One of the interesting things in Dallas ...

I’ll have to go back a ways. When we got through our own lines, it was middle of the night. It was raining and it was just miserable. It was cold and we finally got through – oh, we got shelled by our own artillery.

LJ: Oh no.

PM: Yes, it was a son of a gun. Anyway, we finally got out, and exhausted and hungry ... well, I wasn’t hungry, just exhausted. These are real small towns – 200 people. There was a bar in there, so some of us went up in the loft and went to sleep. And shortly thereafter, a guy come up and started yelling at us that there was some wounded back where we had been and he needed some volunteers. Nobody said a word, and he says come on you SOBs, he says, those are your comrades out there.

So I was one of some of us that went back, and we came on one of our guys from my company. Pitch dark and still raining and it was miserable. And he was screaming. We put him on the stretcher; and, of course, we were just whipped. We had to climb a ditch to get up on this little road. And we’d get part way up and one of us would slip and then he’d start screaming [unclear]. We finally got him up on the road. We turned him over to the Second Division.

Anyway when I was in Dallas at this first reunion, I was telling this story and there was a little guy there and he says, “Yeah,” he said, “I was right next to him.” I said, “Right next to who?” He said, “The guy that you picked up [unclear].” “Well, I,” he said, “I was wounded, too.” I said, “My god, why didn’t you say something?” “Well,” he said, “You guys were busy.” I said, “What happened?” He said he was wounded and he couldn’t walk. He said he woke up the next morning when it was daylight and he said there was

kind of a half-ass shelter. And he said there was water, of course, and he said “I guess I had some rations.” So he said, “I was there for a couple days.” And he said one time he woke up and there were Germans there, so they took him to a hospital and he was in the hospital until the war was over. And he was repatriated and it was kind of interesting.

Anyway I went to that reunion in Dallas, then I went to one in – let’s see – San Francisco and Denver and Kansas City and Detroit. Anyway, I went to about six of them since then.

LJ: That’s wonderful. That’s great.

PM: Yes and they’ve been meeting every year and I think this one this year is going to be at Pittsburgh. I’m not going to it. It’s kind of sad to see because I’m 78 years old and I was one of the young ones. And the ones that do make it – and there is fewer every year, of course – they’re old and they’re beat up and they’re crippled and some of them are in wheelchairs and so on, but it’s kind of nice to see them.

LJ: Aside from the reunions, have you kept in contact with any special buddies throughout the years?

PM: Yes, I have. At this Dallas and subsequent meetings, there were four or five guys that I – one in particular lives in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and we correspond somewhat.

And then that guy that called me from Dallas, he was a sergeant in our company and he was quite active. In fact he was a 99th Division Association president one year, so he was active in the alumni association, if you want to call it that. But he died, oh, about a year and half ago and that was too bad, because he’d call frequently and just visit. He was from Athens, Georgia. He had a real southern brogue.

Then in 1994, I found out later that they’d had what they call “battlefield tours,” but this was kind of a special one because it was 50 years after the Bulge and there was a battlefield tour that was in, I think was in October. And so I went along.

The guy that was kind of in charge of it, was a Belgium native but he grew up and was educated in England, and he made pretty much life work out of studying World War II and the battles around Belgium where he was born and raised – or partially raised, I suppose. He is an expert on our division and what happened to us. There were three busloads of us and it was comprised of veterans, family and friends. And he took us to some of these

places. That's where I found out what happened when we were surrounded and . . .

LJ: And what was it like to go back there 50 years afterward?

PM: I got some pictures. It was fascinating. As a matter of fact, like I said, when that battle started, we were in the forests of Belgium. Matter of fact, we had just crossed the international highway. We were in Germany, but just barely. There were these forests and in Belgium, these forests are pretty much reserved for nature [unclear] and so on. But they're pretty much untouched. They harvest the trees periodically for [unclear]. We went back to where we were attacked. And this other friend of mine, we prevailed on some of these Belgium people to take us where we were. And I found my old foxhole. It was just a depression in the ground by then, but it was there.

LJ: That's amazing.

PM: Yes and that's kind of another sideline. There's a group of young, oh middle-aged people, [unclear] in their 40s, I guess. They call them "the diggers" but they've made a hobby, if you will, of digging for artifacts on all these battlefields in Belgium.

There was an article in the Fargo Forum, about a year and half ago, probably that they found three soldiers that they'd been searching for with the help of some of our veterans ... one of them was from Valley City. And these diggers are the ones that found him. And they find dog tags and all kinds of paraphernalia associated with the soldiers. But they have found a number of missing that we know of.

LJ: That's terrific, amazing. Did you ever see the movie *Saving Private Ryan*?

PM: Yes.

LJ: Having been through the Battle of the Bulge, how did you feel how Hollywood portrayed that?

PM: Well it was interesting. There was another one of my friends that I worked with a Dakota Electric Supply Company, his name is Jim Rosendahl. And he was wounded in World War II, quite severely. He was in the hospital for a couple of years. But, anyway, he was in the 69th Division. And he went with me on that battlefield tour in 1994.

We found out that the 69th Division was a newer division. They relieved us in February. And then he was wounded about two weeks after that. So, unbeknownst to us, of course, because we didn't even know each other back then, he and I were in the same area because his unit relieved our unit.

He and I have gone to a couple. He's come to our division reunion although he was in a different division because he got to be pretty good friends with some of our people. But we were in Kansas City and staying at the Crown Center. Crown Center it's a complex put up by Hallmark and their headquarters are there. They've got a theater right in there and we saw *Saving Private Ryan* while we were at this Army reunion, which was [unclear].

LJ: Terrific.

PM: So, yes. It was wrenching because I wasn't there on D-Day and that starts out on D-Day, pretty much. Because it portrayed it – that's just the way it was. I tell you another one *Band of Brothers*.

LJ: I haven't seen that one, yet.

PM: That's a ten-episode and that's a 101st Division, that I talked about earlier. And, of course, they had scenes in there from the Battle of the Bulge. And it was just the way it was.

LJ: I was totally overwhelmed by it. I don't how they could have made it more real.

PM: No, that . . .

LJ: But I've never experienced war. That's why I like to ask.

PM: Yes, war is a – it's not nice.

LJ: No.

PM: God is good to us. He only lets us remember those things that are amusing or glosses over the bad things, because there's a lot of them. It's not, of course like my friend says, "Gettin' old is not for sissies either."

LJ: How did you feel that the war affected your life?

PM: Oh, it took three years out of it. I think it allowed me time to grow up. I don't think I suffered any adverse effects.

LJ: That's good.

PM: As a matter of fact, one of the great things I think that came out of the war, World War II, was the GI Bill. You know this Tom Brokaw has published a couple of books on The Greatest Generation and – but The Greatest Generation was generated largely because of the GI Bill. It allowed millions of veterans the opportunity for an education.

We'd just come out of a bad depression. I'll bet there was 80% of the college graduates after the war that couldn't have graduated. They would've had to take other jobs. It pushed our whole country into a whole new arena. I think it's responsible for everything that we've accomplished since then.

LJ: Great.

PM: I don't think the Vietnam War accomplished much of anything...just killed a lot of them.

LJ: Very unfortunate war.

PM: Yes, although I don't agree with the war protestors, either.

LJ: How do you feel about the war that we're fighting now in Afghanistan?

PM: Well, I think we have to do something. We're under attack. It's impossible to ignore it. There's a lot of political play going on. About who's to blame. Which is unfortunate, because . . .

LJ: Who knew what and when?

PM: Yes, that's just happened today. But I would hope that both of our major political parties could put those things aside and get this finished. Because we have to do something and it's also unfortunate that, well, people can't be together. But that's the way things are.

LJ: World peace would really be a beautiful thing.

PM: Yes, it would, but elusive.

LJ: Mr. Morrissey, how would you like to be remembered?

PM: Oh, I don't know. I suppose I accomplished a few things. Got two lovely daughters and grandchildren and I think I contributed something. I'm rich myself to some degree, which is fine; but nothing special.

LJ: You're too modest.

PM: Oh no.

LJ: You served your country.

PM: Yes, proud of that.

LJ: During the most popular, greatest war.

PM: Yes.

LJ: Part of the greatest generation.

PM: Yes, and that's fine and I'm proud of that.

LJ: Thank you, Mr. Morrissey.

PM: You're welcome.