

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Orville Perhus
Narrator

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Interviewer

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PW: I'd like to ask you your name and where you grew up?

OP: Orville Perhus, grew up in Kindred.

PW: Can I ask how old you are?

OP: Ninety-two.

PW: What did you do prior to going into the military?

OP: Well I worked as a farm laborer here and there. After my brothers got old enough to take over farming with my dad, then I left the farm and I worked with. And then finally, I went on and worked for the railroad, until I went into service.

PW: What did you do on the railroad?

OP: Section – railroad maintenance.

PW: How did you enter the military?

OP: Drafted.

PW: And that was in what year?

OP: '41 or '42; '41, I think.

PW: Were you trained for specific duties when you went into the military?

OP: We were trained for combat.

PW: And what unit did you go into?

OP: Ninetieth Division.

PW: Where were you stationed with the Ninetieth?

OP: When we left, we trained in Camp Barkley, Texas, and we maneuvered in Louisiana. And we came back to Barkley and then from there on, after a while, we went to the desert in California. We trained there until we were shipped across the whole United States to Fort Dix, New Jersey, and we were there to get medical attention and furloughs. Everybody got furloughs. And when all that was over we were sent over to England. We were stationed in England and done some maneuvers there until they were ready to start the invasion.

One day in the afternoon we loaded aboard ship and headed out across the English Channel and got there. D-Day started early in the morning and we were parked. A lot of ships were parked, staggered from the waterfront and back until it was their turn. I went in on the evening of D-Day. We were lucky because of the troops that had gone in ahead of us, we got in pert near a mile before we encountered anything. And from there on, it was war.

PW: When you were there, how many battles were you in?

OP: I was in every battle there was.

PW: And what are some of your battle experiences?

OP: Physically, you mean?

PW: Was it – yes.

OP: Well I don't want to go into that.

PW: Did you have camps at each site?

OP: Oh no. When you went into battle you were out in the open all the time.

PW: You mean days?

OP: Yes. You were on the front line or reserved all the time.

PW: Did you have times when you went back to your station in England?

OP: No, during combat, it was 11 months I that was in combat, the whole war. And at certain times, maybe two or three weeks, they'd pull our division back a couple of miles and check for physical problems and to get a bath and maybe a change of clothes and some hot meals. And then when that was over we were shoved back to the front lines again.

PW: When you were at the front lines what were your meals?

OP: Oh, we had meals that were in – you know the size of Cracker Jack boxes? They were a little bit bigger there and your whole meal, one meal was in there.

PW: Was that like the K-rations they talk about?

OP: Yes.

PW: What countries were you in?

OP: Oh, I went in France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria and one more. And when the day the war was over, I was in Czechoslovakia. And when I went to school, I couldn't even spell it.

PW: Did you get any decorations from being in the war?

OP: Yes.

PW: What were some of them?

OP: I'd have to look over there. I can't, I can't name them.

PW: I see you've got some of these medals mounted on a board. Can you tell us about some of these?

OP: Well I can't tell you much about them because I don't not remember all this stuff. This one is for Germany.

PW: What was the Purple Star for?

OP: It's a Bronze Star. That's for being in a lot of battles, I guess. Yes.

PW: What was your rank when you were in the service?

OP: Sergeant, 90th Division is where I was inducted and we served under the 90th Division all that time. And when it came time to be discharged, we moved over to the engineers. So I was there for about a couple of months before we were shipped out for discharge. And this is a Combat Infantry Badge. The only people that get that are the people that were in the front lines. And each one was six months overseas. I was just about ready to get the fourth one. And this one here is for the length of service you've been in, and I don't remember what each stripe represents. Because I was in there near four years.

PW: Tell us about some of the people you met and have you kept in contact with any of them?

OP: We did for a while, but as things happen to people, they either passed away or moved so far away and wanted to put things in the background or whatever. And I did go to one company reunion, my wife and I many, many years ago. And there were about 20 guys from our company that came. And I was standing there talking and just as I came in and here another guy came in and he came over and he put his arms around me. "Hey fellows," he said, "this is the guy that went and got the ambulance when we were bombarded and saved my life," he said. We were ready to move out and we had just been shelled by artillery, and we lost a lieutenant and two other guys and about four wounded guys. And our medics, we only had one medic that was with them. And I knew we had to have an ambulance right away and the ambulances were congregated about a mile down and I knew that. So I told

them, I said, “I’m going to go down there and get the ambulance and bring it up here.” And that’s how that came about.

PW: You talked about being in the Battle of the Bulge.

OP: Yes.

PW: And were you on the front lines there where I read some of them were not prepared for it at that time. They weren’t expecting Hitler to come through at that point. Do you want to talk about that?

OP: Well it’s kind of vague. You see, some of the times we were put in as a background support group, you know. So we weren’t always in the front line in those battles. But we had such a big – collection of Army around there that we just about had everybody surrounded all the time. And so these Germans were more or less bottled, bottled up and they were trying to fight their way out, which they weren’t able to do.

PW: What were the conditions like ... was it winter?

OP: Oh, I suppose. I don’t recall.

PW: I think they talked about going through the forest when the snow was so deep trying to...

OP: Oh yes. We went through – there was snow, snow and ice. And one time in Bastogne, we had a group of soldiers there that were surrounded by the Germans and headquarters called General Patton and told him what the situation was. “Well,” he says, “Give me the authority. I’ll take my division up there.” We were about a hundred miles away from there, and I think we got there in about four hours. And we got there and it was snow and ice and slippery. The tanks were going up the hills and were sliding off and we got up there. That general that was in there that was bottled up, the Germans had come up with white flags and wanted them to surrender. And he gave them a message. He said, “Nuts,” which puzzled the Germans. So they were embarrassed and found out what he meant. He wasn’t about, he wasn’t about to give up because he had some information that help was coming, see. So we got there and we pushed the Germans out and freed those guys. And, that was in the wintertime. It wasn’t too cold, but it was cold enough to snow and make the snow a little slushy. So, for a while, travel was kind of difficult for some of the big machinery. Well, anyway, we won that one.

PW: That was one of the two places I think that Hitler wanted to . . .

OP: Yeas. Bastogne was . . . They’d been bottled up there for several days; and they were starting to run out of supplies for food and so forth, you know. And “nuts.”

PW: Being in the military, did it define any of the outlook on your life after that the things that you saw and experienced?

OP: Oh, I suppose to some extent it would make you appreciate what you have got and to disagree to a point where you have a battle between countries is stupid. Is one of the things we came up with.

PW: Can you remember your worst military meal?

OP: Meal? No, because those rations were the same every day. When we had kitchens, they had different kinds of food, and some of them didn't like the food and some would just barely eat it because they didn't like it. Like one guy said, "I'll go back to K-rations."

PW: And I've always heard they weren't so great.

OP: Well it depends on what you like, you know. They had pretty good meat, but there was all this other side stuff that they had that some of them didn't want to eat

PW: Now when you were out on the lines, day in and day out, did you camp like in tents or something?

OP: Oh, no.

PW: How did you keep warm?

OP: We had winter clothing, of course, we'd carry. We each one carried a backpack, you know, with a half a tent in it and your blankets and stuff. What you'd do, open up that pack and roll out that tent part, you'd lay it right on the ground and put your blanket down and lay down on that and then pull the tarp over you. You never put up a tent because if you put up a tent and were in there and you had to get out in a hurry, you might not make it. So we never did. We always slept outside like that rain or snow.

PW: When you were discharged, what was your rank?

OP: Sergeant.

PW: What did you do after leaving the military? What occupation did you do after the military?

OP: I went back on the railroad for a while and, as time went on, then I dropped out of that. And I worked in a garage for a little while. And I went and invested in a livestock truck line, and done that for several years. And as time went on, I got a job on the rural mail routes with that, and so I was on the rural mail route for 20 years; and then I left the railroad; and now, I think I'm lost.

PW: How would you like to be remembered?

OP: I'd like to be remembered as a guy that was able to make up his own mind then, about a situation and then do it.

PW: Is there anything else you would like to share about your military years?

OP: Yes, I would like to share, might be a little comical. Anyway, we got a replacement lieutenant one time and in our platoon. And “Say Sarge, I’ve been seeing your actions,” he said. “I’ve seen you move from one place to another; and when the place that you left, something happened,” he said. He says, “How do you do that?” he said. I said, “Intuition.” “Feeling ... boy, I hope I can develop that,” he says.

PW: Were you married when you went in?

OP: No. That’s another thing, as time went on we’d get furloughs even when we were training in the states. And some of the guys would get married. And I’d come back from a furlough and they’d say, “Did you get married?” “No. I didn’t get married,” I said. “I know I’m going into combat and I don’t want anything back [unclear] on my mind because I’m going to do my job with the training I’ve had and I want to come back.

PW: And here you are.

OP: Yes.

PW: Thank you.

OP: They were so grateful for our Army to come over there and help them out, you know. Some of them had been in concentration camps and they didn’t have a lot of food, so life was kind of day-to-day for them for survival. . .

PW: And this was the French people.

OP: Yes, this was the French people and the young ladies were glad to see us, of course.

PW: So you felt appreciated in the countries that you went to?

OP: Yes.

PW: Any other locals that you met ... any citizens in either country?

OP: No, not specifically. There was one little incident when we got into Germany. We stopped there for the night and this German couple, we could tell right away that they weren’t glad that we were there. She said something to the effect that, “You could leave us alone. Why come over here and butt into our business.” I mean, she didn’t say it that way but that was the impression. And I didn’t answer her. The guy that was with me, “I had an answer, but being you didn’t say anything, I wasn’t going to say anything either.”

PW: Did you generally feel, though, that the people wanted your support?

OP: Yes.

PW: Of the allies?

OP: Yes some of the Germans did. Because they didn’t want to put up with the restrictions on war, food and everything that they wanted was just about

impossible for them to get much of. So I had the impression that part of the German population did not agree with Hitler's way of doing things. But if they did voice an opinion, why they were prosecuted.

PW: Did any of your children go into military service?

OP: No.

PW: Any of your grandkids?

OP: Yes, I have a grandson.

PW: And he is serving where?

OP: He was in Iraq for a year. He came back now and he's back in the Army Reserve again. So he's cruising around Fargo looking for a job.

PW: Did you use any of the GI benefits for health benefits or purchase a home, or go to school?

OP: No, I didn't apply for any help at all.

PW: Do you use the Veterans at all for your health care?

OP: I went to the Veterans many, many years ago because of my hearing, and he said, "Well in six or eight months you can be able to come in and see a doctor." I said, "What ... six or eight months?" I said, "and I'm here now with a problem, and you want me to wait that long?" I said. I as much as said, "What in the world is going on around here?" Because I'd heard this before, see? People were just being put off. I said, "Just forget about it," I said. And I said, "Remember you could have been in a situation like this. Would you accept this here?" Well I really rode him over and he just sat there and took it in.

PW: Now you said you contribute some of your hearing loss to the battles that you, the explosions and that.

OP: Yes, right.

PW: So it's pretty loud stuff that you were . . .

OP: Oh yes. That can be pretty bad. I tell you one time they started shelling us, and I was walking along there and there was some foxholes that the Germans had dug. And my buddy, just as they started, he jumped into the foxhole and it was a pretty deep foxhole. And the rest of them were full and he said, "Jump in on top of me," he said. So I jumped in on top of him, and there was a shell that landed ... I don't know how close it was, but you could just feel it lift you up.

PW: So you experienced danger every day.

OP: Yes, every day.

PW: Over the years have you been able to kind of separate that danger and your experiences and kind of meld back into life in the United States?

OP: Oh, yes. It finally got to a point where you could put it in the background, you know. And the only time it will come back, like for right now when we're talking about it, or if some of the veterans will talk about it. But if two veterans talk about it, they kind of forget it pretty quickly because they were talking to a comrade. When you don't forget about it right away, is when you talk to people that have never been to war and tell them something that happened, you might remember as you walk away for several days, you know.)

PW: Does anything else come to mind that you would like to share with this project?

OP: No, not that I can think of, right now.

PW: Well thank you for showing us your medals and your experiences. I appreciate it.

OP: Thank you.