

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Moorhead, MN

Aubrey Thomas
Narrator

Stephanie Manesis
Interviewer

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SM: It is February 5, 2012. This is Stephanie Manesis, the interviewer; and I'm interviewing Mr. Aubrey Thomas of Moorhead, Minnesota, about his World War II experience. Mr. Thomas, can you first of all tell me a little bit about the day, what was the day and year that you were born?

AT: **November 12, 1921.**

SM: And where were you born and how big was your family?

AT: **In Clay County, there was five us kids.**

SM: And were you outside of Moorhead or what town were you born in?

AT: **It was at Clay County in Kragnes Township.**

SM: How many boys were in your family?

AT: **Four.**

SM: So you were born in 1921, you said?

AT: **Right.**

SM: When we joined the war in Pearl Harbor, you were 20 years old?

AT: **Right.**

SM: Can you tell me what were you doing after high school?

AT: It was only about a year after I graduated, I think.

SM: And what were you doing after you graduated from high school.

AT: Helping my dad farm.

SM: What kind of farming did your dad do?

AT: Grain and cattle, pigs.

SM: You said you had two brothers besides yourself?

AT: Three.

SM: There are three brothers.

AT: Yes.

SM: Do you remember the day of Pearl Harbor?

AT: Sure.

SM: Can you tell me about it, what you remember, where you were?

AT: I think there was a bunch of us guys out hunting by Kragnes out there, yes. And when we come back, they said we were at war. And we didn't know what was going on. But all of a sudden, we were.

SM: Once the United States declared war against Japan, did you decide to enlist or were you later drafted?

AT: I was drafted later, yes, about another year later.

SM: So would that have been in about December of 1942?

AT: No, it would have been in October of '42, I think.

SM: October '42, now were you the oldest son taking care of the farm?

AT: Yes.

SM: So even though you were the oldest son, they decided to draft you. They did not give you a deferral.

AT: I don't know if I tried for one. I think my dad was trying to keep me out but it didn't work. I didn't care. There were three more boys there. They were all younger but I didn't mind going. I told him that.

SM: So tell me about what happened after you were drafted.

AT: I went to Fort Knox for basic training, for armored force training, which is driving and everything from tanks down to jeeps. Your basic training there was 26 weeks. I did that and I was kept for Officers' Training School and was cadre there for two more terms, you know. When you cadre, you're instructing. You understand that?

SM: Now this is in the Army?

AT: Yes. Fort Knox is Army.

SM: Okay.

AT: Armored Force Training Center.

SM: So you were chosen as an officer and then you were doing some instructing?

AT: I didn't become an officer. I was up for going to Officers'. I had a high enough I.Q. for it and everything. After I'd been in the Army once, they kept me there for officers' training for two more periods which then I was cadre. I was instructing from then. After two more periods of 26 weeks – that second bunch that I was training, I liked those guys, and I told my company commander that I wanted to go with them. He said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yeah." And, "You're up for OCS." And I said, "I don't care." I said, "I want to get out of here." So, I went to North Africa at Casablanca.

SM: So what month and year was this then, approximately?

AT: Well, 26 weeks times two and then probably another month, and I was in Africa, Casablanca.

SM: Because the Germans surrendered in May of 1943 in North Africa, right?

AT: No, it was later than that, about '45.

SM: Forty-five, so you were in Casablanca in . . .

AT: Forty-three.

SM: In '43 approximately October-November of '43?

AT: **I suppose. And this is in the Army. My first trip on water was from Norfolk to Casablanca; and then I traveled from Casablanca to Bizerte. That's in Africa, too. It was by ship and rail, too, part of it.**

SM: Now is Bizerte in Algeria or is still in Morocco?

AT: **Well, it's farther.**

SM: In Tunisia?

AT: **No, I stayed all along the north of Africa, all the time. I didn't get down to the southern countries. I stayed along the north of Africa until I got to Bizerte. We were there a while and then I was joined up with an outfit that got ready to go to Europe. And I landed near Naples and started fighting from then on. The Germans were just ahead of us going across Africa. And I wasn't involved with that fighting yet, but we chased them out of Africa up at Bizerte.**

SM: When you were in North Africa, you were basically in pursuit of the Germans? You didn't have any actual combat or . . .

AT: **We couldn't catch up to them. I was still a newcomer over there. I joined an outfit after I got to, let's see ... I suppose that would have been North Africa, but probably Casablanca. I don't know. This was 60 years ago now.**

SM: That's okay, Mr. Thomas. Were you on a tank?

AT: **My company had tanks. I was on one to start with, yes. I wasn't in combat yet, but we chased the Germans out of there. And then we got up to Bizerte and took a ship again to up by Naples, Italy.**

SM: What rank were you at this point?

AT: **I don't know, private or private first class, I made corporal some place, but I don't know where it was.**

SM: So you arrived right nearby Naples?

AT: **Yes.**

SM: And were you engaged in combat with the Germans right off the bat?

AT: No, not there. I still wasn't up to the front. The front was up by Santa Maria, where we moved to after Naples. It was south of Rome quite a bit. It wasn't so far from Naples, but it was where the fighting was at that time.

SM: So this would have been in the winter of '44?

AT: They didn't have a very harsh winter, so I really couldn't tell you. We didn't have any calendars and still we knew what we were doing, you know, at the time.

SM: Did you know where Mount Casino was?

AT: Yes, I saw it many times.

SM: Now was Santa Maria near Mount Casino?

AT: Well, I suppose you could say that, yes. It wasn't near, like right alongside.

SM: Okay.

AT: I didn't get into action until I got out of Naples. And then I got sent up to Anzio and I was there – that was a beachhead. I was there quite a while. And we didn't move much, you know. It was all stalled. The Germans wouldn't let us go and we couldn't get past them. And I had a pretty easy time there. We got shelled every day practically. The Germans could look right down on us and blast us anytime.

SM: At Anzio?

AT: At Anzio, yes, that was a beachhead and I think one of our longest beachheads. You know, it was 60 years ago and I can't remember time that well.

SM: Now were you an infantry person at this point, or were you on a tank?

AT: I was on a tank, they called it "armored force." I was in the tank for quite a while; and then my company needed a welder. I knew how to weld because I'd taken a welding course over here at Fargo Central. And so I showed that I could weld. And they said, "You want to be the company welder?" And I said, "Yes." That was fine for me. I didn't like the tanks. They were very hot when I was in Africa when it was hot. And they were very cold when it was night and cold. Yes, I was very glad to get out of that. I went to weld for

quite a while; and that's probably why I'm here because I got that company work and stayed at headquarters all the time.

SM: How long were you in Italy before you became a company welder?

AT: **I don't know what time. I was there quite a while. I think I started welding back in Africa because I was glad to get out of them tanks.**

SM: Were they open turret tanks that you were in?

AT: **Some were ... tanks and half-tracks.**

SM: As a company welder you would be with the headquarters that would be behind all of the front line is that correct?

AT: **Well, yes, you might call it that. You were pretty available to the Germans. They could pop us, you know. I was always up in front. At Anzio we got shelled every night and daytimes, too. Planes come by, bombed at us – when you're 20 years old, you don't have enough brains to worry about anything. After you see your buddies get hit, stuff like that, why it perturbed you more. We were shelled all the time.**

When we were in Anzio, and you don't hear a shell coming in on you because it's traveling faster than sound and if it was over you, then you hear after it's gone by. You hear more then, so it seems like you're seeing more action than you are, because those close ones don't make any noise. They're on you before you can hear them. Anzio was tough, when we were coming out of there, because we went past a whole bunch of GIs that were killed along on the way.

I remember once there was two guys sitting with their back ... two Americans sitting with their back up against either a tree or a big rock or something. I can't remember how that was. They were both dead. One sat on the other one. They hadn't moved. I didn't see any blood around there but I was on the way, so I couldn't stop. They weren't alive so I didn't have to stop and help them or anything. But this one guy sitting with his back up against this big rock or a tree trunk, I don't know, and the other one was laying on him like this. They were both dead, but they laid – there was nothing there. I was alone in my jeep and traveling trying to catch up to somebody. See I ran, oh, messages to the line from the headquarters that I drove from, you know. And I can still remember the nice hair these guys had. They were GIs and we were all clipped short. I'll just never forget how nice their hair looked. And I couldn't see a spot of blood on them. I was still in my jeep going by. I don't think they were living, but then they never moved.

So I don't know if they were living or not. I'll never forget that sight. Here I had a camera along with me and I never took it. I'd a been a millionaire if I'd taken that picture of those guys laying there like that. I really wouldn't have been, but then I wished I had. Yes.

But it was good to get away from Anzio, finally ... probably where I stopped the longest. I think Anzio lasted at least six months from when it started to when we got there. We landed there.

Just made my 90th birthday last month.

SM: Happy birthday.

AT: Yes, so, it isn't easy thinking way back there now.

SM: It's a long time to remember things that far back.

AT: Yes.

SM: Do you remember where you went, Mr. Thomas, after Anzio?

AT: We went clear back down to – it was south of Naples, nearly down to the end of Italy, down there, and then we went up to southern France. And I think we landed near a town named Toulon.

SM: Toulon?

AT: Toulon, maybe that's it. No, I don't know. We landed from these landing craft. I had my jeep then.

SM: You were both the company welder, as well as running messages at the same time. You would do both of those jobs?

AT: Well, mostly driving.

SM: Okay.

AT: Yes, I was a country kid. When they found out that I could drive, well the officers were practically fighting who can have me. A lot of these guys came from Tennessee and there – hope you didn't. They could hardly drive. They hadn't driven much and I'd been driving since I was 14 years old on the farm and tractors and everything. So I had it made once they found that out.

Not at all?

SM: No. Okay, so you arrived near Toulon, France, and you were driving at that point? So you arrived there and then what happened?

AT: Oh, parts of my company had landed ahead of me. So I was trying to catch up to them and we kind of cut across France, headed kind of northeast from Toulon. We didn't really catch up to the line for a while. But when we caught up to it, it wasn't moving very fast. I was up within artillery range from then on. We didn't actually mix with the Germans but they could fire at us from wherever they were, all the time.

Some place in France I got wounded. This hole in my cheek is part of that wound. It was shrapnel wound from, I think, either a landmine or artillery shell. I don't know which it was. I was in the hospital. And we got way back to Paris in this hospital. So that was pretty great. When I was getting over that they said, "Where do you want to go?" I said, "I want to go back to my own outfit." And they said, "You sure?" "Yeah," You're not too smart, when your 21. So, I got back to my outfit. I think I was gone, if I remember, oh, five-six months, I'm sure, before I got over that.

I had this hole in my cheek. There's a broken jaw in back of that. I didn't know that and so I told the doctor – this is in France – I told the doctor; I said, "I can't open my mouth." "Didn't you know you had a broken jaw?" And I said, "No, they patched me up." And they said, "Well you had a broken jaw." And I said, "Okay, how did you patch it?" Usually they sew things up like that. I said, "How come you did it with a ...?" They got something like a Band-Aid that's got a narrow spot on it. And they pulled that over the hole and then pushed the other one up. I said, "That's an awful ugly mark I got from that." "Oh," he said, "you're going to brag about that." Are you kidding, you know. He said the doctors are pretty nice. They'd have fun with you and then I'd go along with them on that. But I was surprised to know that my jaw was broken. How do you break a top jaw? That's what they said. I got over that.

SM: Did you have other wounds, just the jaw?

AT: Well this hole in my cheek.

SM: Yes.

AT: Yes, that's the only time I was wounded.

SM: That must have been pretty scary when you were wounded?

AT: No, you aren't scared when you're hurting. When you're in a war, you can't let yourself get scared really because you wouldn't last there, I don't think. I don't know. I had a lot of wounded guys around me all the time, when I was in the hospital. But we could laugh and joke with them and some of them were pretty serious wounds. They had missing legs and everything. I thought I was lucky to be away from the front, too, when I was in the hospital. I was in the hospital when the Battle of the Bulge was going on. They didn't call it that when I was there. But when I got back to my outfit again, quite a few of my buddies were dead. They were gone, too, never saw them again. I don't know if they were dead or not, I guess.

SM: Did your company fight in the Battle of the Bulge?

AT: We were there, yes. We weren't really fighters. We were cleaning mines and stuff. That is part of the battle all right. Once I got my jeep I was happy with that ... I didn't have to go look for any mines. It's a mine clearing company and we'd have to go out and find the mine field. Then we'd have to go out and dig the mines out, which was quite dangerous and careful how you did it. And some guys did get wounded and killed out there. But when I got my jeep, well then I didn't get much of that anymore. I just carried wounded back and I ran messages up to the front to the guys. It's a pretty good job to get the jeep if it wasn't so doggone dangerous there always. Everybody is in danger out there.

SM: Was your company considered to be a reconnaissance company?

AT: No, we were the 6638 Engineer Mine Clearance Company. That's all it was.

SM: Okay.

AT: I got to see how I bring this up now. I got a Silver Star up there when I had a 10-ton wrecker, a big one; and a tank was knocked out ... disabled. I had to go up with my wrecker and pull them off the line. The mechanics and I went up and I think they fixed that tank. And then I helped move it off the line and back. That's what I got the Star from. I didn't think it was especially brave but two officers came down and pinned it on me. And well, "Thank you." You know, I never heard about it again. And I got a citation for that and I suppose that's what brought it out.

And it was nice, that jeep driver; I had that job for I'd say probably seven-eight weeks, probably more. But by then, the officers all knew me and they knew they could count on me. I was a dumb farm kid from Minnesota. And

so, they looked out for me pretty good from then on. I was very, very lucky at times. Not like when you're young, you can't feel scared all the time. And I never worried about it too much. It's so long ago.

When we moved into France, my company didn't all come at once. So I'd go back to the shore, back to the south there and bring them up, a tank at a time or a couple trucks at a time. I'd bring them back up to the line. Be there a while and they'd say, "There's some more. Can you go down there and get them?" I'd get somebody else and bring them up. I had an awful lot of driving. But I enjoyed it, you know. You're 21 years old, you don't mind driving. At least I liked it and the jeep was a pretty nice vehicle to drive. Wasn't any protection on it but you could get through about anything.

Most of the roads in Italy were pretty good shape. I think I slid off into the ditch one time with my jeep and I figured, well it was a four-wheeled drive so I can pull out of there. I couldn't pull out. One of the tanks had to come up and hook onto me and pull me out. I was around that heavy equipment all the time. And I could help them whenever they needed an extra hand or something when somebody was stuck in the mud or something. It rains a lot there. Holy smokes, they had a lot of water.

SM: In Italy it rained a lot?

AT: Yes, not so much in Africa, although we did have more than they'd seen for a long time. But the war will do that and I was in the Army for three years and six days. Now it doesn't seem like very long.

SM: It doesn't?

AT: No way. Well, I can't remember so much anymore.

SM: You said you were in the hospital about five months?

AT: No.

SM: Oh, how long were you in the hospital?

AT: About five weeks, I think.

SM: Five weeks?

AT: Yes.

SM: And what do you remember the most about the hospital?

AT: Well some of the guys were wounded pretty badly. But they could joke about it, and we could joke right along, and it's unique. I don't remember hurting so much until the guy told me I had a broken jaw and I said, "That's news to me." They shuffle you through the hospitals' operating rooms so fast, they got to get them all in. And they don't tell you anything and you get out.

This guy was checking me afterwards and asking where I wanted to go. I said, "I want to go back to my outfit." "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yeah." He wasn't about to send me home, you know, which I think I would have jumped at that chance. "No," I said, "I didn't want to start over because I really had some good officers in my company that I was in."

One of my best friends was a second lieutenant. He came from Heber City, Utah. I drove jeep for him. He rode with me all the time and he'd keep me. The company commander wanted me to drive and I said, "I don't want to drive for him," He said, "Well, you can stay with me then." I said, "Fine."

I know I wouldn't have been as busy as I was but he was kind of a fixer. I was the welder yet. So we made stuff for the company, you know. We made tanks and tools, worked on trucks. See the mine clearance things – hook two booms on a tank, put a shaft across it, and put log chains to run. And you had another motor sitting on the back of the tank and that's what ran the flails. I did awful lot of welding when I was helping build those and repairing that. They didn't work that great but they kept us at it, so I didn't care.

SM: Now was most of your welding done in Italy or did you do welding in France, as well?

AT: Yes, through Africa and Italy, I didn't do so much once I got to France. I was making stuff for these minesweepers. And when the line moved faster, then I didn't get so much of that anymore.

We got two good welders in after that and they took over. And I was glad for that because we'd weld nearly all night and day. It's hard to weld and protect your eyes, especially if you're welding at night. Because you know your eyes lenses are pretty wide open when it's dark out. And you are a flash a welder, well that hurts if you haven't got your goggles on. That's hard to get everything down all the time when you're working like that. And I'd walk around with sore eyes, you know, because you can't remember to pull that helmet down all the time. The more you weld the better you get. There

was just that heavy armored plate and stuff like that ... it was easy to weld but if it's so much of it that you – “ish.”

SM: So when you started driving in France, you were no longer welding?

AT: **I was one of the company welders until we got the other two guys. They were better than I was by a long ways. So I kind of got out of it then.**

SM: Was that in France, do you remember where you were?

AT: **I suppose that would be – I don't know, because I welded for a quite a while.**

SM: When you got out of the hospital, where did you go to join your company? Was that in Germany or were they still in France?

AT: **Still in France.**

SM: After the Battle of the Bulge?

AT: **Yes, I suppose.**

SM: Do you remember where your company went after that?

AT: **We ended up near Darmstadt when the war was over. I was in the Army for three years and six days. It seems like it wasn't very long now when I look back at it, but you forget so much stuff that it's terrible.**

SM: It's easy to forget after 60 years.

AT: **Yes.**

SM: So Darmstadt was in Germany?

AT: **Yes, that would be in Germany.**

SM: And do you know how many months you were in Germany before May of 1945? Were you in Germany just for a month or two?

AT: **Oh, no. Well Europe, see you don't know whether you're in Germany or France or anything. You just fight and drive and go and sleep and awake. I think I remember when I crossed the Rhine. But ...**

I've had a thing called Parkinson's. Just came on me a year or two ago and it's been very hard on my memory.

SM: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

AT: **And my balance when I want to walk, I got to think about every step I take, you know and that.**

SM: I'm sorry to hear that. That must be hard for you?

AT: **Well I've only fallen once. But boy when you fall, you fall hard. I went way down to my head because I stepped into something when I was out in the street or something. Come down, boy, so I think about every step I've taken for the last couple of years now.**

SM: Good for you.

AT: **Yes, so you can never get up and run anymore. You got to think and think, you know, think and keep your balance. You can lose your balance awful easy and you swing your head when you're trying to walk why you'll go down. I never did, but I felt dang dizzy once in a while. And I don't know why I caught that. I think that's an old man's disease or something. I don't know what it is. I don't think it was from my Army because I didn't use to do that when I got out. I never had it in the hospital.**

SM: Do you remember the day that you heard that Hitler died or when the Germans surrendered? Do you remember that at all?

AT: **I heard when the war was over, but I didn't know anything about Hitler then. It did come down to us after a while. But it was over before I knew what happened to him. Because that story kind of came later.**

SM: Do you remember anything about when Germany surrendered? Where you were or what you guys did?

AT: **Well you didn't believe it the first. And then, all of a sudden there was an awful lot of shooting going on. We was sure the war was soon going to be over pretty soon, pretty quick because we'd been chasing them right, right and left. We didn't know it right away. But boy, when we finally heard about it, the "ack-ack" was shooting all the time, you know. We had fireworks night and day. "Ack-ack" that's antiaircraft fire. They weren't shooting at anything. They were just celebrating.**

SM: The Germans were celebrating, you mean?

AT: No, we were.

SM: You were celebrating.

AT: Yes, gee. No. Well towards the end of it, the German soldiers were walking down the road to surrender. And we'd see these German officers and men, you know, coming. You were scared of them at first, but finally you just let them go, that's all. It was so different once that happened. I'm sure they were glad it was over, too, because we had been beating the hell out them for the last few weeks there.

SM: So when did you get out of the war?

AT: October of '45.

SM: So were you in Germany up until October of 1945?

AT: Oh, yes.

SM: Do you remember where in Germany you were?

AT: I think the name Darmstadt means something to me. I don't know where it is, though. I think that was in Germany. I think that was about my last thing in the war, I came into Germany up in the north. I think it was up by Poland where I came across then. I remember I was down to Manheim and that was probably the last town. I don't know. I just remember the name Manheim and ...

SM: And then the last couple of months in Germany, did your company move into like a village and take over some of the German homes and stay in the homes, or where were you staying the last couple of months?

AT: I was moving so much I did. This officer and I towards the end of the war, we'd move into somebody's house, you know. And probably the old man and wife were the only ones there. They'd put us up for the night.

The old guy would come out to our room. I was still with the lieutenant and he'd say, "kommen." This German would and he said, "kommen." And here he had kind of game. You used dice and then you move them around the game; you get a piece of cardboard and you lay it out and the game is a whole bunch of steps all around in there. And you move so far, pending what

you threw the dice for. You've done it, I know, here in this town. But he would come and say, "kommen." Couldn't hardly speak with us at all but we'd understand each other.

I remember one time we was playing with him and his wife, the two of us; and if you landed on somebody else's checker, you'd have to go back and start over. And I was up there and this old gal took and landed on me. And so I had to go way back again. I said, "Gosh darn." "Was ist das 'gosh darn'?" She said something like that I remember. I'll never forget the words "was ist das." We could hardly talk to each other. And these are just an old couple out on some farm someplace. I think the war was over by then, but we still hadn't got out of there. We were still in Germany.

SM: So what do you remember the most about World War II?

AT: I just figured that I was pretty lucky to see what I saw and come through it, you know. I was only wounded once; and I was in the hospital during the Battle of the Bulge, so I even got out of that.

SM: Did you lose a lot of men in your company?

AT: Oh, yes, I think we had about 265 and oh, I suppose there was 30-40 of them killed.

SM: Were any of them good friends of yours?

AT: A couple of them were. No, I was kind of a loner because I had to drive all the time. Boy, you don't get anybody doing that, do you? You're driving, bringing some officers someplace, or going after supplies or messages, and back and forth. I was happy at it. I didn't mind it. I kind of liked having a job. It was better than being infantry or anyplace that you couldn't go. I could get out. I couldn't go sightseeing but I saw so much because I was always on the go. When I was in up in France, sometimes I'd to go way back to Marseilles or some place and pick up somebody or some [unclear] back there. But boy, I was working. And I enjoyed it that way.

SM: So you were in France when you got wounded?

AT: Yes, I think I was – I don't know. I think that they said I was wounded near Pubergot (sp?). I don't know how you would say it now. It's something like P-u-b-e-r-g-o-t. But you'd probably know more how to say that more than I did.

SM: Pubergot or something, I don't know. I don't know this town. Was it during the day or at night that you were wounded?

AT: **It was daytime.**

SM: Were you in your jeep?

AT: **Yes, come through the window. And I was peppered with broken glass all over my face. And then there were little shards stuck in my eyes, too. I didn't get any big hurt from that. It hurt a lot until they got the little chunks of glass out. And you can't do anything but get them out with a sharp scalpel. You can dig behind it and "ping" it would go each time.**

SM: Did it take very long for a medic to get to you?

AT: **The medics ... well, I don't know. I had to leave the jeep there. I suppose they picked me up and put me in an ambulance to get up there. Maybe the medics carried me. I was kind of knocked out there. So they got me back to the hospital, I remember; this evac hospital. And then I went back to a general hospital and I think that was in Paris. I'm not too sure.**

SM: So is there anything else about World War II that you want to tell me?

AT: **I can't think of it. I told you all that I know now. I know I've known a lot more than that but . . .**

SM: Mr. Thomas, thank you very much for talking to me..

AT: **Wished I could think of more but . . .**