

The National Museum of the Pacific War

**Center for Pacific War Studies
Fredericksburg, Texas**

**Second interview with
Mr. George Zapalac
United States Army
Infantryman - 101st Airborne Division, 506th PIR
Date of Interview: 25 January 2007**

Second interview with
Mr. George Zapalac

The following interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

Mr. Zambrano: Today is January 25th, 2007. This is Mike Zambrano. I'm sitting here with Mr. George Zapalac in his home at 1601 Vicki Lynn Court in Pflugerville, Texas, and we'll start getting into the interview right now. Good morning, sir, how are you doing?

Mr. Zapalac: Good morning.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, let me just ask you, uh ... let me start off with some ... a few questions here. Now what's your full name?

Mr. Zapalac: George Cecil Zapalac.

Mr. Zambrano: And where were you born?

Mr. Zapalac: Pasadena, California.

Mr. Zambrano: California, huh? I'm a San Francisco native, so ... uh, about what year?

Mr. Zapalac: 1923.

Mr. Zambrano: And your birthday would be ...

Mr. Zapalac: April 27th, 1923.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay, and, uh ... what was life for you like growing up as a young boy? What was Pasadena like then?

Mr. Zapalac: Oh, it was great! The world was at peace. Neighborhoods were all normal and it was the textbook kind of life that you read about in fairy books.

Mr. Zambrano: Really? It was that great, huh?

Mr. Zapalac: It was great.

Mr. Zambrano: That's good to hear. Um ... I suppose you went to school out there?
Elementary school ...

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, I did.

Mr. Zambrano: ... and all the way through high school.

Mr. Zapalac: Ahh ... no. I went up through the grade schools and, uh ... and, uh ...
mother and dad moved around a good bit and they moved up to Louisiana.
And I went with them there and stayed for about a year, and then they
didn't know exactly what they were going to be doing, so they sent me back
to Austin, Texas here where they had family and they had me stay there
until they could get straightened out on what direction they were going to
go.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, about what year was that?

Mr. Zapalac: Only that would have been covering from about 1923 through 1930, '31.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. So, did you end up going to high school in Louisiana?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh ... no, I didn't stay in Louisiana long enough to go to school there. I
came back to Austin to stay with relatives and this is where I started going
to school.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay. Were you here when the war began?

Mr. Zapalac: Oh, yeah!

Mr. Zambrano: And do you recall what you were doing when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, I was in the army then and I was cleaning stables down at Fort Clark ... Fort Clark, Texas, there at Brackettville.

Mr. Zambrano: So how did you get in the army? I mean, what compelled you to go into the service?

Mr. Zapalac: I just didn't want to stay at home and the only way I could figure I could get out and be on my own was to go and get in the arm, which I did.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, before I forget, did you have any brothers or sisters?

Mr. Zapalac: No.

Mr. Zambrano: You were ...

Mr. Zapalac: You bet.

Mr. Zambrano: ... that you were the only child.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: What did your parents used to do?

Mr. Zapalac: My mother was a registered nurse. My father was a construction worker.

Mr. Zambrano: So, you wanted to get out and figured that getting in the service you would, um ... have an opportunity to get away from home ...

Mr. Zapalac: That's right.

Mr. Zambrano: ... and to grow up a little bit.

Mr. Zapalac: That was the sum purpose of the thing was to get away from the home.

Mr. Zambrano: So what did you ... what did you think of the service at first?

Mr. Zapalac: I think it's great.

Mr. Zambrano: And, um ... so you heard that Pearl Harbor was attacked and ... what were your initial thoughts? Did you, um ... did you ... well, how did you hear? Did someone just say 'the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor' or 'Pearl Harbor's been attacked'!

Mr. Zapalac: No, it was in the newspaper and I was on stable duty there at Fort Clark at Brackettville, Texas and, uh ... the, uh ... sergeant of the guard come up and said, "Zap, we've gone to war", and I said, "Fine. Let's go start a fight!" And I was just joking and then I find out later that he wasn't joking and we really were ... course everybody started looking for it and everything was leaning that way ...

Mr. Zambrano: Yeah.

Mr. Zapalac: So it didn't come as any shock.

Mr. Zambrano: Really? So did you think that something like that might happen?

Mr. Zapalac: Oh, yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. So, you enlisted, uh ... what rank were you at this point?

Mr. Zapalac: I was a private.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, before I forget, what year did you enlist?

Mr. Zapalac: That had been 19 ... 1940.

Mr. Zambrano: 1940. And that was the US Army, right?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh-huh.

Mr. Zambrano: Did ... so you, uh ... must have entered service here in Austin?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Basic training: do you recall where you went?

Mr. Zapalac: El Paso. Fort Bliss.

Mr. Zambrano: Fort Bliss. Okay. And what was that like?

Mr. Zapalac: New experience.

Mr. Zambrano: Was it, uh ...

Mr. Zapalac: It was very informative, very, uh ... interesting. It was a new world every morning when you woke up.

Mr. Zambrano: Hmm ... what else. Did you receive any other training other than basic training?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. I went into parachutes, uh ... parachute school.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, so then you were also infantry?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. Well, I was infantry, yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: That's right. Okay, and but at this point you weren't attached to any outfit.

Mr. Zapalac: What do you mean?

Mr. Zambrano: Well, uh ... I guess, uh ... because I know you go into the 101st later ...

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: ... but you went to basic training, you went to infantry training, and you went to parachute school.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you recall where you went to parachute school at?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, Fort Benning, Georgia.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay. The same place I went. Uh ...

Mr. Zapalac: Well, that was the only infantry school that they had at that time.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, Fort Benning for infantry school also?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Also, okay? Do you remember what kind of weapons you trained on?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. We had '03's and very shortly thereafter got the M1's and, uh ... that was about the crux of it as far as weaponry was concerned.

Mr. Zambrano: They didn't have like bazooka training or anything like that?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, they had bazookas, but that came along a little bit later. Course you had an ongoing training situation on something like that.

Mr. Zambrano: So what did you think of parachute training because it's usually very different from basic training?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, it's just faster and its, uh ... ego building. The parachute troops at that time were the elite of the army and to be selected for that and allowed to train in it, you'd be very proud of that, and, uh ... then after we were graduated from jump school we were assigned to regiments and divisions. They had two airborne divisions at that time and that was the 101st and the 82nd. And, uh ... so, uh ... that's where it went from there.

Mr. Zambrano: What attracted you to jump school or parachute school?

Mr. Zapalac: Primarily because that was the best that the army had to offer. They were the best troops, the best trained troops, the best educated troops, and the most likely place that you could go to get action immediately.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you recall how many jumps you made in parachute school?

Mr. Zapalac: Five.

Mr. Zambrano: Five. Well, it's still five. I'm surprised. And were they all out of DC-3's ...

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: ... or do you recall? All of them, huh?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, it was the only airplane that they were using then as a standard jump plane. The DC-3 was the workhorse of the army.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Mr. Zapalac: It was a troop carrier. It was a cargo carrier. A whole ball of wax.

Mr. Zambrano: Alright.

Mr. Zapalac: And they had a C-46 which is comparable to a DC-3, but it wasn't as flexible. It was a bigger airplane, harder to maintain. More prone to mechanical breakdowns, so the DC-3 was the workhorse of the army.

Mr. Zambrano: Did you ever do any glider training at all?

Mr. Zapalac: No.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Mr. Zapalac: I drew the line there.

Mr. Zambrano: What kind of qualifications did you get, for example, marksmanship, sharpshooter, expert, or, uh ... training ...

Mr. Zapalac: Well, that wasn't a requirement. Anyone that would say, "Yes, I'll out of an airplane" was about the extent of what was needed

Mr. Zambrano: Well, I guess I meant more ... more as far as, uh ... like in basic. You get the, uh ... you have the shooting ... shooting badge and they have different grades for it.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: And I remember that when I was in they had one for, uh ... I think it was for grenade throwing of all things.

Mr. Zapalac: For what?

Mr. Zambrano: For grenade throwing.

Mr. Zapalac: Oh, yeah!

Mr. Zambrano: So, I assume that you probably got some things like that?

Mr. Zapalac: No. We would ... just getting qualified on your weapons and the various things like a bazooka or how to set land mines or how to use grenades, things like that, and whatever, just the mark of your tools of the trade.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: And, uh ... you progressed on from that.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you have any particular memories of these first few years in the army before the war and, you know, do you remember any ... did you have a good friend? Did, uh ... you know, what kind of memories do you have?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, they were all good, because we were leading up to war at that time and that was the number one thing that was on your mind was, "how soon will I be going into action?" And, uh ... getting all the training that you could get, and, uh ... it was a privilege to be selected for an airborne unit, and, uh ... so other than that it was no more than just routine. The war itself was the ... was the end objective, because you knew that's where you were headed. It was working up all around us. The countries of Holland and Belgium and France and places like that were already being brought into it by the Germans just marching in and taking it over.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: So we knew what our destination was and everything worked towards that end, and, uh ... it happened very quickly.

Mr. Zambrano: So, uh ... you end up going to the 101st. Were they stationed in Kentucky then?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh ... yeah. It was ... it was organized in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and I was in jump school about that time [unclear]. On graduation I was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. And from Kentucky do you recall where you went?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, I went to the 101st Airborne Division and they were in Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, so you trained in Kentucky, but you ended up going to Fort Bragg?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, yeah. That was where the divisions were at.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay. Alright. And how long were you there?

Mr. Zapalac: It wasn't long. As a matter ... I guess less than ninety days.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. And then you shipped out?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, we were formed up into divisions then and regiments. The 101st consisted of the 501, 502, and the 505, were the regiments that were formed the 101st Airborne Division.

Mr. Zambrano: Which one were you in?

Mr. Zapalac: I was in the 506th.

Mr. Zambrano: Did you ship out to England straight from Fort Bragg?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, yeah. That was our base of operations.

Mr. Zambrano: And how long did that take to cross the Atlantic?

Mr. Zapalac: Took twelve days.

Mr. Zambrano: What was the ship like? Was it a civilian ship? Was it a military ship?

Mr. Zapalac: It was a civilian ship that was pressed into military operations for transporting troops ...

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: ... from the United States to the European marshalling areas which would have been England.

Mr. Zambrano: And what was your impression of England when you got there, I mean it's ...

Mr. Zapalac: Oh, it was interesting. Having never been anywhere before, everything was new, everything was a curiosity. Their habits, their ways, the way they did things that way they talked, the way they ate. Everything like that was a curiosity to us. Then with the war being so imminent we didn't dwell on that for long.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you have any particular memories of England? Anything that stands out for you?

Mr. Zapalac: No. Not really. They were an English speaking people so it wasn't too much of a transition from being here in the United States, based, to going to England, and the accent was the only thing that you had that would distinguish them.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. So, uh ... about what year are we at now? You're in England, you just got there.

Mr. Zapalac: That would have been about 1943.

Mr. Zambrano: So what did you spent ... what did your outfit spent its time doing in England?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, we were doing training exercises and then we went in to ... we didn't realize it ourselves, but they were training us for the mission that we were going to do which would have been the invasion of France. And, uh ... we were making a lot of jumps around the countryside and England in both daytime and nighttime and that kept us active and out of trouble.

Mr. Zambrano: Was the training pretty intense?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, it was, because we didn't have a lot of time, so we had to train people on ... primary working as teams and, uh ... it, uh ... was finding a niche in the organization of things where you could do your best job and in the infantry ... an infantry company or an infantry regiment consists of its basic unit of infantry and then you add to that, uh ... scouting activities and you added that, uh ... heavy weapons activities, which would've been primarily fifty caliber machine guns and then to move on up from that the anti-tank weapon that we had at that time was the thirty-seven millimeter weapons which was nothing.

Mr. Zambrano: It was nothing?

Mr. Zapalac: Not much of a weapon.

Mr. Zambrano: Was that that one that was on a ... was on a carriage? Two large wheels or was it something that you had to tow? Or was that ...

Mr. Zapalac: You could, yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Was there a version that you could carry?

Mr. Zapalac: No.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Mr. Zapalac: It would have been too heavy.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. So you did a lot of training, I imagine a lot more jumps overseas.

Mr. Zapalac: Oh, yeah. Well, you just kept yourself on edge, and, uh ... increased your proficiency in, uh ... for instance, we developed a leg pack that strapped on to your leg and you could put in that your extra ammunition, another weapon, numerous things like that that you needed to take with you and would need almost immediately after getting on the ground. And, uh ... so we worked with that quite a bit and, uh ... each unit would try to balance it out to where it would be self-sufficient up to the point that they could be.

Mr. Zambrano: For the time they would be on the ground?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. I can imagine that ... oh, I've seen movies and pictures where they're loading on to the DC-3's and they look just so weighed down with all this equipment.

Mr. Zapalac: Yes. Quite a bit. Probably between sixty-five and seventy-five pounds.

Mr. Zambrano: Did you actually have to help each other into the plane because it was ... it was just ...

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: ... you were just so loaded down? Because I've seen those packs that you're talking about.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. Yeah, they sure did.

Mr. Zambrano: Um ... so as the invasion is starting to get closer, is there, uh ... do you start having a sense that something is going on, that maybe its time?

Mr. Zapalac: Oh, we knew things were going on. There was no secret about that. We just didn't know when or where. Oh, we had a pretty good idea of where ...

Mr. Zambrano: Uh-huh.

Mr. Zapalac: ... but, uh ...

Mr. Zambrano: Really?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. Well, there was no place else to go. We were in England and the war going on in France.

Mr. Zambrano: So you knew generally that it would be in France?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay, but not that it would be Normandy or any other place along ... what, what area specifically?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, it could have been in Normandy or it could have been in southern France. Southern France developed after Normandy was already established, so it just followed in a natural course of events.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. So, uh ... from what I've read the troops would be marshaled down to, uh ... well, they were taken to marshalling areas in southern England ...

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: ... and you'd all would be kept in camps ...

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: ... until ... did that happen more than once to the point where you really weren't really sure if it was going to happen or not or was it just that one

time that y'all went down there, you were put in a camp, you said you weren't ...you were told you're not leaving and was that more than once or was that just that one time?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, I'm not really sure I understand what you're asking. We would be moved to the coast of England into an area where there was an airfield where our airplanes could be assembled and our supply train would be established because once we got into France, which was just only about forty miles across the English Channel ...

Mr. Zambrano: Uh-huh.

Mr. Zapalac: ... they would have to supply us from England, so our number one objective would be to capture an airfield and a support area where we could fly in the supplies that we were going to need and then we moved out from there, but, uh ... England was like a big warehouse to us.

Mr. Zambrano: Really.

Mr. Zapalac: Uh-huh.

Mr. Zambrano: It was stocked with everything ...

Mr. Zapalac: Everything you could imagine.

Mr. Zambrano: So ... okay, it's June the fifth and you get the word that the invasion is on and you start loading up in planes, um ... what was that like?

Mr. Zapalac: A lot of tension, a lot of anxiety. Some people show their feelings outwardly. Others don't, and, uh let me go see [unclear]
[Interruption]

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Alright, we're back now. So you were talking about ... we were talking about you getting on the airplane and said there was a lot of tension and so forth. Do you remember ... do you remember how many men it was per plane just about?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. About ten to twelve, because you take up a lot of room. We got your parachute on and you got your field pack that you've also got. And, uh ... then you have your cargo chutes that are in cargo packs under the bottom of the airplane or the belly of the airplane. They're things that are about almost fifteen inches square and maybe, uh ... four to five feet long and you have equipment and supplies packed in those and they go in para-racks on the bottom of the airplane, not in the belly, but under the bottom. They're carried externally.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Mr. Zapalac: And you could drop those. Pilot could trip a switch at the cockpit and drop them and they'd come down by parachute.

Mr. Zambrano: Hmm ... I never heard of those. Um ... so you're in your plane flying over the channel and then what happens.

Mr. Zapalac: Well, of course, you're flying to your drop areas and, uh ... as you approach the area where you're going to drop, you'll get a red light in the fuselage of the airplane, that this red light comes on that tells you to get ready, so you stand up, hook your parachute cable up to a cable that runs the length of the top of the airplane and you stand up, hook up, and then you start moving towards the door in single file. And as you get over the area, the

jumpmaster then will pick a designated spot that he has on a map where he wants to drop you, and the pilot will position he where he'll have a run of maybe six or eight ... six to eight to nine minutes where you start jumping just as fast as you can get them out of the airplane and that's to keep them from scattering all over the world.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: And, uh ... that's pretty much the existence of the jump itself.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, did it actually go that smoothly or was there a lot of flak or ...

Mr. Zapalac: Uh ... there was some, yeah, but you know, you're so ... you're so concentrated with your attention being on what you're doing getting you ready to jump, uh ... getting ready to get out of the airplane that you're not looking at flak or listening for it or anything like that and if you got hit, well, you were just hit and that was it. There was nothing you could do about that.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: So that part was just fairly routine.

Mr. Zambrano: I remember when I spoke to you a few years ago and you were telling me about, um ... the flight to France that you were supposed to go in another plane. Do you recall that?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Could you repeat that to me? What happened?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh ... well, it was just a problem in loading the airplane and so for us to be where we needed to be they had to have us get in the airplane where our ...

our material and stuff was in the para-racks of that airplane and not another one. But, uh ... it was a rather routine sort of a thing. It wasn't anything that was earth shaking.

Mr. Zambrano: Didn't that other plane get hit, though?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. It got hit.

Mr. Zambrano: I think you mentioned something about bandoleers on it that it was carrying or something like that?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, it had ammo and ... in some of the para-racks.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Mr. Zapalac: But bandoleers, there's nothing too dangerous about those, but now if you were carrying landmines or ... or any other type of mining equipment in the para-racks on your airplane, then yeah, that's pretty touchy. That can turn your airplane into a bomb in a hurry.

Mr. Zambrano: I can see. So you begin exiting your plane, uh ... there's some flak in the sky, then what?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, you're not concentrating about the flak. You're concentrating about getting out of the airplane, getting clear, getting your chute opened. Of course, it's opened by static line, but then every now and then sometimes you have a tendency to get tangled up, but that didn't happen too often or if you main chute came out streamer, in other words, it didn't fill out and open up, then you had to be aware enough of what your situation was that you could open your reserve chute before you hit the ground. Now you had a very short length of time to determine those things.

Mr. Zambrano: About how high were you jumping from?

Mr. Zapalac: Probably jumping from somewhere around seven hundred to eight hundred feet. Sometimes we like to jump as low as we can, which would be about five to six hundred feet.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. So did you practice it at about five to seven hundred?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, yeah, we did.

Mr. Zambrano: And how long would it take you ... for you to get to the ground?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, we dropped at about ... gosh, I don't know, but it was, uh ... if you jumped five, uh ... five to six hundred feet, you'd be on the ground then ... four or five minutes. And that was the idea, so you wouldn't be in the air any longer than you actually had to be, because at that time you're not serving nothing as a fighting force, but you're hanging there open view as a target.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: And you don't like that.

Mr. Zambrano: No. Now, did most of your squad or most of your outfit stay together? Seems that was a routine exit from the plane.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, but you could get scattered, uh ... some of the airplanes got separated from the formation and consequently scattered them. Now, you could get off course by a few degrees and then in a matter of four to five minutes you can be miles from where you're supposed to be and our ... almost none of us got on the drop zones that we were originally assigned to be on, but you could see firefights developing from the air and you tried to guide yourself

away from that so you'd have a fairly routine preparation to go into action once you got on the ground ...

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: ... without having somebody breathing down your neck, but, uh ... I think on the whole, it went pretty good.

Mr. Zambrano: Really ... so you get on the ground and you start kind of gathering yourself ...

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: ... and what happens next?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, we had these, what we call crickets. You mash it and then it makes a little popping ...

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: ... noise and that was identifying us from someone else without using a voice. And, uh ... so you would listen for those and you would move towards them and you'd organize into groups that you had no idea if these were people from your own unit or whether it was some other unit or whatever, but whatever equipment they had then you would organize them together with you to form up a fighting force and, uh ... we had a pretty good idea where our objectives were and what we wanted to do, but, uh ... in the excitement of things sometimes those things went awire, and you get on the ground and you play it by ear.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. What was your objective that night?

Mr. Zapalac: Our objectives was two bridges over the Carentan Canal which, uh ... our job was to either capture the bridges or to blow them up, one of the two. If we could hold them, we were to hold them. If it seemed like we couldn't hold them then we were to blow them up so that they couldn't use them.

Mr. Zambrano: So were you behind the lines of Omaha or Utah, because I remember ...?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, they were right side by side.

Mr. Zambrano: Right, but I ... I think I recall the 101st was a different landing area, it was supposed to be, then the 82nd.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. It was Omaha.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay ... so you're on the ground. You know your objectives, so did you find a number of other soldiers ...

Mr. Zapalac: Oh, yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: ... paratroopers from other units?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay ... and then what? You said that sometimes you have 'to play it by ear' when you hit the ground.

Mr. Zapalac: Well, you would try to organize into a unit. In others words, you'd find if there was a commissioned officer available you'd get him to rallying around him and if he had maps of what, uh ... of the objectives and things like that, so we could move out knowing where we were going and, uh ... that was the most difficult part, really, right there. And thing of it was that if you just moved you knew that the beach was behind you or would be west of you

anything, where you were headed east, you was headed towards the enemy or headed inland.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: And that was pretty much the limits that kept us going in the right direction.

Mr. Zambrano: So ... you're with these other soldiers, uh ... did you get wounded, did ... but what happens?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. We were moving out towards these two bridges that we were supposed to take and on the way to the bridges we were moving through an area of open ground where there was little cover and the Germans were in a wooded area. I guess primarily to the east and northeast of us, and they were pinning us down with machine gun fire and I was pinned to the ground in open ... open terrain and finally one of them caught me on the side with a slug and went in between my ribs and come out right here at the base of my neck and that pretty much ended it for me.

Mr. Zambrano: So it came in on your right side ...

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: ... and it popped out behind your neck?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh-huh. Well, up here right in my neck.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, right about here?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Right around the collarbone area.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: That must have been painful!

Mr. Zapalac: Well, there was so much going on and there was some much excitement that you really didn't recognize it. Uh ... you know ... for instance, if you were in an accident on a road and there was an imminent danger of an explosion, you might have a broken leg, but at that time you could run on that broken leg and not even realize it.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: And that's, more or less, the shock that we were in at that time. We did things that we weren't supposed to be doing because we wanted to get out of an area or into an area that was safe and, uh ... so you tried to get as many people together as a group as you could. The bigger the better.

Mr. Zambrano: Right ... so after you got hit you were still able to move?

Mr. Zapalac: Oh, yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: And ... and what did you ... run for cover? Did you ... what did you do?

Mr. Zapalac: I tried to move back towards the beach where I could get into a boat going back to England.

Mr. Zambrano: And what happened?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, we were just sitting in the rocks over there just off the beach, and of course, people were coming and going from the ships out in the bay. They were coming on to the beach and taking people off the beach and eventually a medical corpsman found me and he took me off the beach and put me on the ship and that got me back to England.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, now, before that happened, I remember you told me an interesting story last time about ... you made it an aid station at one point?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: And then the Germans came along?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh-huh.

Mr. Zambrano: And they basically captured everyone.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, well, actually, they were as confused and disoriented as we were. You see they had no idea that we would be dropping in there [unclear]. They didn't know what we were, where we come from, or anything else. And they were running around like a bunch of chickens with their heads chopped off and, uh ... so that was rather comical.

Mr. Zambrano: So they just showed up. I mean, what did you think? I mean, you're there, you're wounded?

Mr. Zapalac: I didn't pay any attention to them because the shape that I was in at that time, I didn't pay no mind to them at all.

Mr. Zambrano: Uh ... let me just stop here [unclear] so we don't run out.
[Tape flipped to Side B]

Mr. Zambrano: So you didn't pay any attention to them?

Mr. Zapalac: No, there was too many other things going on that was more important.

Mr. Zambrano: Was the aid station very big? I mean, were there ...?

Mr. Zapalac: No. It wasn't a big one. [unclear]. It was just a medical team. Probably out of one of the company's that happened to land close together. And, uh ... then they tried to draw in as many other people as they could. No, it was organized chaos.

Mr. Zambrano: So the Germans show up. Were they there very long or what?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, they just pass through looking at you and if you was laying down they could see that you was wounded there and they wouldn't stop and fool with you because they didn't have time to take care of you. They just moved on.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you recall just about how many there might have been?

Mr. Zapalac: No.

Mr. Zambrano: Did they say anything?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, they could have said anything that they wanted to. I couldn't understand them.

Mr. Zambrano: And they just passed through and moved on.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: That's an interesting story. So from there this is where you eventually make it down to the beach?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Um ... and you said you got on a ship and then ...

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: ... back to England. Um ... what then? I mean, you get back to England and ...

Mr. Zapalac: You stayed in the hospital until you were able to go back to your unit. Which for me was about three months?

Mr. Zambrano: Three months. What did the bullet damage? I mean, it went in ... you described how it went in and out, but what did it hit?

Mr. Zapalac: It didn't hit any bones, but it did tear up a lot of nerves.

Mr. Zambrano: Hmm ... okay. So you said about three months. You ... but you went back to your unit after that?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh-huh.

Mr. Zambrano: And they were all back in France.

Mr. Zapalac: No, they were in England then.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh.

Mr. Zapalac: Getting ready to go to Holland.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay. So you go back with your unit, it's about September, October or so ... and then what?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, mainly, just stand around the replacement depots until you could get reassigned to a unit.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, so you didn't get back to your ...

Mr. Zapalac: Original unit, no.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay.

Mr. Zapalac: You could eventually wind up back there, but that didn't happen too often. They sent you wherever you were needed.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. So what unit did you end up with?

Mr. Zapalac: You know, I don't recall what unit I was with. I know it was in a replacement depot where we would be sent to units that needed personnel, but we weren't really assigned into a company or something like that. You were just a group and they would send you out as you were needed and I was in and out of the hospital because of this nerve situation. Blew the nerve center of this armpit away.

Mr. Zambrano: Your right.

Mr. Zapalac: Which made this arm mainly useless.

Mr. Zambrano: At the time or ... or ... in using your arm it seems normal.

Mr. Zapalac: It is now, because nerve tissue grows back at about a quarter of an inch, uh ... a year and, uh ... so it could take three or four years before nerve tissue grows back enough that you could get back to assemblance of the nerve organization that you had before and, uh ...

Mr. Zambrano: So, uh ... so while you're at the repo, repo depot, replacement depot ...

Mr. Zapalac: That's what they were.

Mr. Zambrano: You had this ongoing problem, so ...

Mr. Zapalac: Oh, yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: ... what finally happened? I mean, they must have noticed that you kept coming back for the same thing?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, I was ... I was more or less stayed in a hospital situation until they could, uh ... I never did get reassigned to my own unit.

Mr. Zambrano: With, uh ... when you said that you would get sent out with groups to different units, what did you do at that point? Um ... when you were with the replacement depot you said that you would be sent out with a ... as a group, um ... doing what? I don't think you went back to the front lines, right? At any point?

Mr. Zapalac: No. I eventually got back to the front, but I didn't stay very long. I got sent out again. Sent back to the hospital, because the nerve damage to this arm was that I couldn't use a weapon and, uh ... so they had to find something

for me to do so I just banged around from one place to the other without ever doing anything.

Mr. Zambrano: So ... how long was it before you finally made your way back to the states or better yet, what ... did you get back in '44 or did you get back in '45?

Mr. Zapalac: I got back to the states in 1945.

Mr. Zambrano: And the war was still going on then.

Mr. Zapalac: Um ... it was about over. It was over in ... in Europe, but still going in the south Pacific, but I was mustered out in September of 1945.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Did you get a lot of rehabilitation treatment for your arm?

Mr. Zapalac: No.

Mr. Zambrano: [unclear]. So do you recall where you were when you heard that the war was over in Europe?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, I was at, uh ... no, that was when it started. I, uh ... I don't recall.

Mr. Zambrano: So you get out in September of 1945 and then from there what do you do?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, I came back home and I worked for a little while and then I worked at the Post Office and I didn't want to follow that sort of thing for the rest of my life. I needed education so I went back to school and I finished up my high school work and I still had some G.I. time left then and I decided to use that for taking some college courses and ... so the wife and I decided that at that time after my G.I. assistance ran out that we could handle it on my own and I could go ahead and finish my degree, which I did.

Mr. Zambrano: Where did you finish it at?

Mr. Zapalac: University of Texas.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay. And what was it in?

Mr. Zapalac: Business degree with a major in transportation.

Mr. Zambrano: Were you married during the war or before or ...?

Mr. Zapalac: No. It was after the war.

Mr. Zambrano: So you went, you're a UT graduate, uh ... what did you do with your degree?

Mr. Zapalac: I went to work for an airline.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh.

Mr. Zapalac: Went to work for Pioneer Airlines and, uh ... that was in Houston. And then, uh ... it was no big deal. No excitement or anything like that. You had a job and was glad you had one.

Mr. Zambrano: Really?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. Jobs were hard to come by.

Mr. Zambrano: Really, after the war?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Why ... why was that?

Mr. Zapalac: Well, I don't know why it was. I just know that unless you ... unless you had a degree that ...that ... that you had a hard time finding a job, so my number one job was to go back and get my ... get my degree, which is what we did. And when I got out of school with my degree and then I went with an airline.

Mr. Zambrano: What year did you graduate?

Mr. Zapalac: Graduated in 194 ... 1945.

Mr. Zambrano: '45? And any particular reason why you chose business as a college pursuit?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh ... yeah. I was weak in math, so engineering would have been out for me, and architectural drawing was my next best, but with this arm in this shape I couldn't draw any longer, so I had to take a degree in a field where I could do the work which meant a business degree.

Mr. Zambrano: And how long did you work for this airline?

Mr. Zapalac: It was a combination of airlines. It was between Pioneer and Continental and National Airlines in that period of about five years.

Mr. Zambrano: Now what did you do exactly?

Mr. Zapalac: Sales.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay. And then after your stint with these airlines, then what?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh ... I don't remember what companies I went with after that. It was in sales oriented activity, but may or may not been with an airline. And, uh ... it's difficult to recall where you were and what you were doing fifty years ago.

Mr. Zambrano: I can imagine. So then you pretty much stayed in Austin for the rest of your life.

Mr. Zapalac: Well, yeah, pretty much so. We spent some time in San Antonio and, uh ... and then Houston.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Is there anything ...

Mr. Zapalac: Spent most of our work career in Houston.

Mr. Zambrano: So what brought you back to Austin? Work?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, but that was after I retired from the airline business and I came back here. I can't think of the company I came back here ... it was probably a warehousing company and, uh ... and I retired some time after that.

Mr. Zambrano: There's one question I forgot to ask you and, uh ... that was, do you remember your immediate commanding officer when you were in the 506th?

Mr. Zapalac: Hmm ... you know I can see his face, but I can't call his name. Uh ... our division commander was General Maxwell Taylor and who our brigade officers name was I don't recall.

Mr. Zambrano: But as far as platoon leader or company commander?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh ... platoon leader was Sergeant Jaffent and Sergeant George Rattan.

Mr. Zambrano: Rattan?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh-huh. He got killed in Holland.

Mr. Zambrano: But you didn't go to Holland though, right?

Mr. Zapalac: Uh ... no I was in the hospital while they were in Holland.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Mr. Zapalac: No. Matter of fact my military career and the things I did, places I went are mainly routine, lackluster, nothing exciting about them or earth shaking or did not move or shape events. Just pretty routine.

Mr. Zambrano: Really. Well, you took part in the ... a very famous event.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, but then at the time, you didn't realize that's what you were doing. You were in a unit, you were fighting a war and fighting the war whether you're in a parachute infantry or regular infantry or an artillery unit, it all comes out about the same. There not a whole lot you can say about it that

would be different from the other. Uh ... I guess I've just lived a rather non-descript life. I was always satisfied with my station in life and not overly interested about what the future was going to hold or anything like that. I was more concerned about the here and now and other than that there wasn't a whole lot to it as I've told you before. There's just not a whole lot to me.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, I think you're probably the second person that I've talked to that was involved with the D-Day landings ... that's just, uh ... it's a kind of a big event to have been part of.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, but that's because the whole picture was a big event, but as far as an individual is concerned, you're not a whole lot more different from anybody anywhere up and down the line. When I came ashore ... well, I didn't come ashore, I parachuted in, and that was about one o'clock in the morning, by noon of that day I had been hit. It was a group of about four or five of us that were all wounded that was trying to make our way back to the beach to an aid station which we finally did. And then we went back down to the beach and we were sitting there waiting for medical corpsmen to come ashore and take care of us or put us on a launch craft to take us back out to a ship which they eventually did. I was sitting there in the rocks there for about two days.

Mr. Zambrano: Two days?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah. But I was comfortable and warm. Pretty much out of it because every time someone come by they'd give me a shot of morphine in my neck. We had these vials of morphine strapped to the front of our helmets ...

Mr. Zambrano: Uh-huh.

Mr. Zapalac: ... and they'd come by and they'd give one of us a stick in the neck with it. So sometimes you were pretty much out of it.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, I was going to ask you, did you notice a lot of activity on the beach, but maybe ...

Mr. Zapalac: No. I slept through most of it.

Mr. Zambrano: Wow.

Mr. Zapalac: Activity on the beach doesn't stay there very long. It's moving inland.

Mr. Zambrano: Right, right. With all the off loading and ...

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Um ... do you remember the Mulberry Harbor?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Really!

Mr. Zapalac: As I was going out to a hospital ship we saw those being brought in by tugs, being floated in.

Mr. Zambrano: Now, did you wonder what they were?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, I did but I didn't know what they were. I didn't know what they were going to be used for.

Mr. Zambrano: I remember reading ...

Mr. Zapalac: But it was an artificial harbor is what it was.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. I remember reading that the Germans had spotted some of those before the invasion and didn't understand what they were either.

Mr. Zapalac: Uh-uh.

Mr. Zambrano: So I can imagine ...

Mr. Zapalac: Well, I could say, 'Welcome to the club', we didn't know either.

Mr. Zambrano: Was the channel pretty clogged with ships out there?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, as I remember it, it was, uh ... well, on the English coast, on the English Channel, you had a heavy concentration of craft and they were moving back and forth across the Channel ferrying units into position and other than that, that's about all they did, just act as sea going taxis.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. Well, gosh, I think that pretty much should wrap it up.

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah, uh ... I, uh ... I can't think of anything that could be anything more than just the routine sort of thing.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, you know, even the routine, as you say, it's ... because it happened so long ago, it's still of interest because, well, obviously people like I will never see that and it just ...

Mr. Zapalac: Well, I hope you never do.

Mr. Zambrano: Me, too. And my son. But what I mean, I guess what I mean is, uh ... it was such a different point in time of different ideas and different values and people have different reasons for what they did and the world was a different place. I guess some people could say that it was a very dangerous place and even, you know, I know that you say it was routine, but I personally kind of see it as you were a part of something bigger than, though

you say at the time, yeah, you didn't know how it was going to turn out or what it might seem in history, but now, as you know D-Day is just synonymous with Normandy.

Mr. Zapalac: Well, it was Normandy. I guess the most interesting thing for me was the people that I met when I got to England ... to England and then to France, uh ... people that I, civilians that I met, friends that I made, uh ... that was interesting. Some of those people we've kept in touch with over the years. Right now we're not in touch anymore, well, most of them are all dead. And, uh ... for me, uh ... I remember this family that I spent some time with and we had Christmas come up so I went by the mess hall and told the sergeant that I was going to have a meal with these people so he give me a whole ham.

Mr. Zambrano: Wow!

Mr. Zapalac: And I took that ham over there and Kitty's jaw like to hit the floor when I walked in. She really didn't know what to do with it. And that was an interesting thing, to see their reaction, because they were so limited on food. I mean down to ounces, then I walk in there with an eight pound ham of which was completely unheard of.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Mr. Zapalac: I don't think they're eating ham over there anymore since then. Took them so long to eat that one.

Mr. Zambrano: Any other memories like that?

Mr. Zapalac: Naw that would be about it.

Mr. Zambrano: Have you ever gone back to visit?

Mr. Zapalac: No. No, that's out of the question now.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, anything else, once again, that you'd like to add?

Mr. Zapalac: Not that I can think of.

Mr. Zambrano: Alright, well, I certainly appreciate that you sat down with me again after all these years.

Mr. Zapalac: Well, I'm glad that we finally got to do it. I don't know what it was worth or anything like that, uh ... it seems like something like that you do, uh ... things you did, things you encountered, events happened and then they fall into history and become insignificant. You don't think about it anymore.

Excuse me a minute.

[Tape interrupted]

Mr. Zambrano: Okay, so, uh ... one more time anything else you'd like to add or say.

Mr. Zapalac: Only one thing. This family I was staying with, Kitty Blake was one of the ladies and she had ... oh, we went into Normandy on, I think, a Thursday and I was over her house on a Tuesday or a Wednesday and, uh ... she was a piano player and a music teacher and she was sitting there playing the piano and she said, "George I think that ... I felt like you're going to be going away for a while", she says, "I've got something that I'd like you go have." And she went into her upstairs and come back down and she had this jade boomerang. She says, "This belonged to my husband. It was given to him by his sister when he was a young man." And she says, "I don't know

but maybe it will bring you luck.” She gave that to me in 19 ... 44, I guess, yeah. And it’s been around my neck ever since.

Mr. Zambrano: Wow.

Mr. Zapalac: And I think it did bring me luck.

Mr. Zambrano: I think last time we talked, you said that you stayed in touch with her over the years?

Mr. Zapalac: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay. That’s great.

Mr. Zapalac: It was interesting. She called us one year long distance from England on a Sunday and, uh ... that was the last contact I had with her. She was an elderly woman then, she was in her ... in her eighties. And, uh ... it’s interesting sometimes to realize when you go into a place like that where you’re a stranger and everybody’s strange to you and you make a contact that you keep over the years but, uh ... it was quite an interesting thing in my life to have had their acquaintance.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, I think if ... do you ... do you have any other stories or anything?

Mr. Zapalac: Gosh, I don’t know. I don’t keep up with stories. I just walk on from one day into the next one.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay, well, I think we can pretty much wrap it up. We’ve got, uh ... oh, about an hour and a half I think.

Mr. Zapalac: Okay. Well, if it was any use to you I’m glad.

Mr. Zambrano: I think so. It was, sir.

Mr. Zapalac: It was an experience in life, one which I enjoyed and valued very much, but one which I would never care to repeat.

Mr. Zambrano: I would understand that. Okay, well, let me just set the tape right here.

Mr. Zapalac: Okay.

Mr. Zambrano: Thanks very much for your time.

Mr. Zapalac: You're welcome.

Transcribed by:

Mike Zambrano, Jr.

Round Rock, Texas

8 March 2007