

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview With

Thomas L. Stafford

11/20/09

Fairfax, Virginia

6th Combat Engineers

Landed on Omaha Beach D-Day

2nd Platoon, L Co., 347th I.R.

My name is Richard Misenhimer: Today is November 20, 2009. I am interviewing Mr. Thomas L. Stafford by telephone. His address is 11212 Bellmont Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030. His phone number is 703-273-4151. This interview is in support of the National Museum of Pacific War, Center for Pacific War Studies, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Tom, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview today and I want to thank you for your service to our country during World War II. The first thing I need to do is a little housekeeping here. The next thing I'd like to do is get an alternative contact. We find out that sometimes several years down the road we try to get back in contact with a veteran and he's moved or something. Do you have a son or daughter or some one who would know where you are in case we can't find you at this address?

Mr. Stafford:

Yes, I have a son.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What's his name?

Mr. Stafford:

His name is Thomas James Stafford.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Do you have an address and phone number for him?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, I don't have his address handy but his phone number is 703-799-2637.

Mr. Misenhimer:

OK, what town is that?

Mr. Stafford:

He lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the next thing I need to do is read to you this agreement with the Museum. When I do these in person I let the man read it, and sign it but since this is by phone let me read this to you and make sure it's OK with you. (Agreement read.) Is that OK with you?

Mr. Stafford:

OK

Mr. Misenhimer:

Very good. Thank you. Now, what is your birth date?

Mr. Stafford:

June 20, 1923.

Mr. Misenhimer:

OK, and where were you born?

Mr. Stafford:

Washington, D.C.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Stafford:

Yeah, one sister. She's passed on.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was she involved in any kind of war work during World War II?

Mr. Stafford:

No, she was too young.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you grew up during the Depression. How did the Depression affect you and your family?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, as far as I can remember my mother went to work, my dad, he owned and operated four farms. Three of them were contiguous to each other and the reason we considered them four separate is because there was four separate deeds. Three of them, like I say, were adjoined each other so we always, in the family, always considered them to be one farm. The other farm, the fourth one, was about a mile up the road. My mother had been born on a farm in Iowa and wanted no part of living on a farm so when my father, who she met in Washington, D.C., his family had moved from North Carolina up to right outside of Washington, D.C. and they were farming there. He had a brother living in Petersburg, Virginia, that owned a dairy and a laundry and an ice-making company so he decided to go down to Petersburg and when he got there he decided he was going to go into farming. So she said fine, you want to farm, that's good but we are going to live in town. And so he built a home there in Colonial Heights and he used to commute every day about four miles out to the farm. Go out in the morning with a brown bag for lunch and come back in the evening. She was a housewife until the Depression hit and then she went to work. As far as the Depression was concerned we always had plenty of food and as I remember our clothing was always good and my dad was able to hold on to all the farms and also the home which back in those days was one of the best houses in the town. Still is, I mean it's long since been sold out of the family but it's still there. I'd say I really know what the

Depression was all about. In fact we had a saying back during the days when Roosevelt put in some of his programs how to put people to work, I remember one time sitting out on the front porch of our house and looking across the street and there were a group of men cutting the grass and later on I heard some one tell a story about a woman who was doing the same. There were nine people and they had two lawnmowers and they were cutting the grass with those two lawnmowers and finally she got a little curious so she called over the one fella who looked like he was in charge and she said, "I want to know why you need nine people to cut the grass when you only got two lawnmowers." He said, "Well, ma'am, this is a WPA project and we have to have two to come and two to go, two to sit and two to mow." She said, "Well, that's only eight. What's the ninth person do?" He said, "That's me, I'm the supervisor." Things was rough, things was very tough. But so far as my own family was concerned and all my relatives, they made it through OK. They were all, you know, I'd say middle income, hard-working people and everybody worked that was able to.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have livestock on your farm?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, yeah. My dad raised hogs and raised cattle and raised tobacco and corn, the usual.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Probably had chickens for your eggs?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, yeah. But like I say, I myself never lived on the farm and to tell you the truth, my dad didn't require me to go out and do much work on the farm either. I went out occasionally with him but I was pretty much a town boy.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you all have milk cows?

Mr. Stafford:

I don't think we had any milk cows. He had tenants on the farm and they had milk cows but my mother was a believer in pasteurized milk so she had milk delivered to the house.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where did you go to high school?

Mr. Stafford:

Went to high school over in Petersburg, Virginia.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What year did you finish there?

Mr. Stafford:

1941.

Mr. Misenhimer:

May of 1941?

Mr. Stafford:

Yeah. I wanted to go to college, V.P.I. but my dad said well, you know it's a pretty expensive proposition but he said, I'll tell you what we'll do, if you will stay out and work a year and save enough money for your tuition and your room and board, etc. (I wanted to go to V.P.I.) put yourself through the first year and I'll see you through the next three years and you work in the summer time. So I stayed out of school, went to work for Brown and Williamson, worked a year, saved all my money, and then I went to V.P.I. in September of 1942. I got drafted out in March of 1943. I was in the ROTC there at V.P.I. Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, on December 7, 1941 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. You recall hearing about that?

Mr. Stafford:

You better believe it. In fact, I still remember it very vividly. I remember hearing about it and we went down to the Gulf Oil station and everyone was saying, "Well we'll whip those Japs' ass inside of a week." Damn fools.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How did you think that would affect you?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, at the time when it broke out, I had just graduated from high school and I was, I think, seventeen going on eighteen, and I don't think they were drafting anybody back in those days until you were, I think, in fact I don't think they were drafting anybody in my home town much under the age of nineteen or twenty.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Twenty-one was the draft age up until 1942.

Mr. Stafford:

OK, that figures then, because I got drafted when I was nineteen or just turned nineteen.

Mr. Misenhimer:

It was just in the paper the other day just about this time of year in 1942 Roosevelt signed the papers lowering the draft age to eighteen.

Mr. Stafford:

Well, anyway, to make a long story short, one of my cousins was in the 29th Infantry Division and they got called up and he went down to some camp right outside of Virginia Beach. We went

down there a couple of times to visit him. Bradley Stafford, he was in the 29th Infantry Division Artillery. I'll tell you a little story about that later on.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So that was in your freshman year that you were drafted then?

Mr. Stafford:

Right.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now did the ROTC help you when you got in the service?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, not too much. When I got drafted it was in March of 1943 and I lived in Petersburg, Virginia. They shipped me down to Camp Lee, it was Camp Lee then, later Fort Lee and it was a Quartermaster Center but they had a basic training center there where they trained just like they did at all training centers. It was basic infantry training and everyone underwent the basic infantry training, just like you would at any other training center and then after you completed your basic training, then you were shipped off either to some division or if they wanted to send you to advanced course in the particular arm or branch that you had been assigned, that would be the next step and so when I finished my basic infantry training, I applied for OCS and I was told I was too young to lead troops in the Quartermaster Corps. But if I wanted to go to the Quartermaster Non-commissioned Officers School, they would accept me for that and when I got out I would then become a qualified Supply Technician, either a Supply Clerk or work myself up to be a Supply Sergeant. I said, "Sure." So I went in and took that course and it turned out that the NCO course was almost identical to the commissioned officers course, the basic OCS. So any way, I completed that and I guess it must have been about the latter part of October or the

first of November and then I got orders to go overseas. This was 1943. I was shipped up to Shenango, Pennsylvania, right outside of Youngstown, Ohio. Then from there shipped over to Camp Miles Standish that was outside of Boston. And then I boarded a ship to be shipped to England. I went over, I guess it was in early December on the Empress of Australia that was an old British cruise ship that was converted to a troop ship and we were in a convoy and I have forgotten exactly how many days, somewhere between twelve and eighteen days, it took us to cross. We landed in Liverpool, England, and then from there I went down to Birmingham to a place called, it was a reception center base, you waited for your assignment to a specific unit if you hadn't been shipped over with a unit, there at that reception center they would then get you assigned to a regular unit. This place became infamous and in fact the commander was later court-martialed for the horrible conditions that the people came into there had to undergo. His name was Killian and they called it Colonel Killian's Concentration Camp. But normally you were supposed to be there for several days, four or five days I guess at the most, and after about a week I hadn't gotten any orders, my buddy hadn't gotten the orders, we'd been shipped over as quartermaster replacements. So every day he and I'd go down and scan the bulletin boards and see if there were any announcements and quite frequently there would be announcements there of units looking for volunteers to fill out a unit. We saw this notice on the board for volunteers for a particular unit. It didn't say what kind of unit but, hell, we'd have done anything to get out of there. So we put our names in and we were told to load up everything in our duffle bags and be ready to move out early that evening and we got into two-and-a-half ton trucks and they pulled the tarp that covered the back of the truck down and off we went. It seemed like we drove all night long but anyway when they finally stopped and it was daylight and when they opened that damned tarp and I looked out I thought I was in Florida and so did my buddy. We were all

just absolutely flabbergasted—palm trees, tropical foliage and everything else. We wound up in Torquay, England, down in Devonshire, down on the tip of England, the southern tip of England and we found out later that the reason that all this tropical vegetation existed was because the Gulf Stream came up the east coast of America and went across the North Atlantic and it came in to the tip of England. That warm water helped the tropical vegetation grow. But anyway we found out that we had been assigned to the 6th Combat Engineer Amphibious Special Assault Brigade. It was a top-secret outfit. There were three brigades.

I found out later it had been organized and they were trying to keep it secret and as a result everyone was assigned to live in British homes. There was no barracks, no mess hall, no nothing. Everyone lived in private homes, two of us to a home and my buddy, a fellow by the name of Melvin Sadler from South Boston, Virginia, and I were assigned to live in the home of what they called a greengrocer. This guy owned a little grocery shop that specialized in vegetables and canned goods and that was it. Every day we'd go out, seven days a week, go out and assemble at different locations and we'd train and come back in the evening and repeat the same thing the next day. They'd generally have our food served out of containers. The food had been prepared somewhere, I don't know where, and brought to whichever location we were to report to each day and we'd get our breakfast and get our lunch and our dinner and go back to the home that we were billeted in. I remember one time in the evening we'd go down into the little town of Tortuay and I remember one time going to a dance and after the dance was over they played the "Star Spangled Banner" and everyone stood at ramrod attention and everyone sang if they knew the words of the "Star Spangled Banner" and then they broke into "My Country 'Tis of Thee".

Mr. Misenhimer:

”God Save The Queen”?

Mr. Stafford:

Let me tell you what happened. Everyone started to sing “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” and that started a fight because it was “God Save The King”. We didn’t know the difference, but we soon found out. The Brits took a very dim view of that. But from then on, when they played “God Save The King” then we all stood at ramrod attention. So we go off and we would train and we trained at a place called Slapton Sands. I think you mentioned you weren’t on the Internet but if you have a chance some time and you get to a computer just go in there to Google and type in “Slapton Sands 1945” and you’ll read the story of one of the greatest debacles of World War II where we were in there on maneuvers, you know, practicing our landing on Omaha and Utah and a German E-boat came in there and sunk a bunch of our ships, landing craft, some of the Navy ships and not only the E-boats but then the naval vessels that were with us, U.S. naval and British vessels that were with us, they opened fire and tried to hit the E-boat and they in turn sunk some of our ships. I have forgotten but I think we suffered about eight or nine hundred casualties.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were you involved in that?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You were there for that.

Mr. Stafford:

Right. We'd go out every day and we'd maneuver, train. We wouldn't go to Slapton Sands. We only went down there, I think if I remember, only about two or three times, but then it was late in May, about close to the end of May, we got orders to load up and we were moved to a containment center and it was actually a big field, tents there, etc. It was near Weymouth. We were there and everything was top secret, ultra top secret then. I mean, heck, the place was sealed off and then this was happening all up and down the coast. Like what they'd call a pre-embarkation area. We were there for about a week and then we were supposed to make the invasion on the morning of the 5th of June and we moved down to Weymouth which was our point of embarkation I guess it was, I think it was about the 3rd of June because I think we were on our landing craft for a day or two before we actually took off and we took off the night of the 4th and we were supposed to be among the first wave that went in and we got half-way across, the channel was so rough that they decided to turn around and come back and everyone figured that by this time the Germans would certainly know we were coming. We went back into Weymouth and took off again the night of the 5th and landed on the morning of the 6th.

We were supposed to land on Omaha and at a draw called Les Moulins and there was a little village, a small village, that couldn't have been more than, as I remember, eight or nine houses there, beach cottages mostly and that was about 1,000-1,200 yards, from our first objective which was a little village called Saint Laurent-Sur-Mer and that means "on the sea", "sur" is on and "mer" is sea. We were supposed to go in shortly after "H" hour which was 6:30 in the morning as I recall and as we approached the shore and just as the coxwain got ready to lower the ramp and, by the way, we were on a British made landing craft that was a small one. Wasn't very long as I recall, couldn't have been more than 100 feet. It was big enough to carry several deuce and a half trucks and some jeeps, couple of platoons of infantry and combat

engineers and as the guy got ready to drop the ramp, hell, the machine gun bullets were rattling off the ramp and it was a three-man crew, two sailors and a ensign from the Coast Guard. Crew was all U.S. Coast Guard and he decided he wasn't going to lower that ramp because we'd have been slaughtered getting off. What they do when they approach the beach, they throw an anchor attached to a cable so they can winch themselves back off the beach. He was able to winch us back off the beach and he decided he'd pull off and go on down a ways and then drop us. In getting off the beach, the tide caught it and instead of getting off at Les Moulins which was our landing spot, we wound up further on down the beach, close to a place called Vierville-Sur-Mer and there he was able to lower the ramp and we got off. I think if I recall that we waded about 100 yards or so through the surf onto the beach and all I remember is making a mad scramble getting up to a sea wall and on the other side of the sea wall there was a, seemed to me like there was a concrete road leading down to Vierville and then down horizontal to the beach and I crossed over that. As I got half-way across, I saw a body laying there, an American face down, and decided to try to pull him over to the side of the road and I just grabbed the back of his straps or something to pull him on over to the side of the road and when I got him over there and I turned him over and, Lord, half of the guy's face was shot off and I noticed very briefly that he was a Captain, a Ranger Captain, and that surprised me because the Rangers were supposed to land at Pointe DuHoc. I couldn't figure out why there would be Rangers there. Anyway I found out later, much later, after the War, that when the Rangers got to their particular, I think it was the 5th Ranger Battalion, they got waylaid and couldn't get off to go up Pointe DuHoc where most of them went, this particular company went off there at Vierville. I never did find out who that guy was but I made it up to the top, the military crest of the hill, you know what the military crest is?

Mr. Misenhimer:

No, what?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, if you can visualize the top of the hill where you can look over the top, the military crest is just below it. Where you can't look over the top but that's called the military crest where you can get up almost to the top and pause there before you go on further. We got up to the military crest and I looked back down at the beach and I'll tell you, it was just mayhem and bedlam. German artillery was coming in and mortars, etc., and I remember seeing one lone American 105 howitzer that had been able to get ashore. There were a lot of amphibious tanks that were supposed to get ashore but very few of them made it. This one howitzer, boy, I thought it was an automatic cannon. These guys were firing, it looked like they were firing 10-15 rounds a minute which was impossible but they were really firing. After the war was over, when I got back home, I mentioned to this cousin of mine that I mentioned a little earlier, Bradley Stafford, who I knew had been in the 29th Division Artillery because that was the 29th Infantry sector, where we went ashore. It was our mission to help get the 29th Infantry across. I said, "Bradley, were you able to make it ashore?" and he said, "Yeah." I said, "Let me tell you, I sat up there and watched this one howitzer just firing away." He said, "That was one of my guns." He got his two guns, the only section in his entire battery that was able to make it ashore. He survived the war, too, but he's long since passed on. By this time we were far enough down the beach from where we were supposed to go, which I mentioned was Saint Laurent, so we spent the night there, right at the top of the military crest. When we got up there was a sergeant in my unit. In fact, I still have the map I carried ashore at Omaha, top secret bigot. I pulled it out a while ago to look at it before you called and there was a Sergeant by the name of Joe Self and he was carrying the maps where

our battalion headquartered. I was in the headquarters and headquarters battalion. Joe had all the other maps and when we got up to the military crest and looked around and the battalion commander said "Where's Joe?" and I said, "I know he got off the landing craft. I saw him get off. I don't know what happened to him." He said "Well, Tom, we got to go back down there and find him because we need those maps." I said "Sir, there's no way I want to go back down to this damned beach." He said "Well, you just gotta go, so go." So I went back down and I found old Joe, he was in a foxhole and he was scared to death. He'd been a regular Army sergeant and I'll tell you, we were so happy to have old Joe because we figured if there was anyone who would get us through the damned war, it would be Joe. And here old Joe within the first five minutes he was suffering battle fatigue. He was cowering in this shell hole and I finally got him in a position where I thought he was ready to follow me and every time we would get up... You ever seen anyone back when you were kids come up behind somebody and hit them behind their knees and they would collapse? Well, every time a round would go off, a mortar round would go off or an artillery round would go off, old Joe would collapse but I finally got him up to the point where he was ready to go and up we went and we finally made it back up to the military crest and we spent the night there. Early the next morning then we finally made our way over to Saint Laurent but three days later, during an air raid, Joe fell into a foxhole and running to get into the foxhole, broke his leg and got evacuated. Then we supported the 29th, our mission was to help them get across the beach and support them as they moved further inland and our mission was fairly uneventful. Our mission was in the battalion headquarters and didn't see much action. I remember a couple of days after we got ashore, a British commando, believe it or not, showed up. He was separated from his unit that had landed way further up the beach, I guess on Gold or Juno Beach. He joined up with us and stayed with us for several days. Things became pretty

routine for us and then, I guess it was in October, we were told and it was strictly a rumor I'm sure, that once we got the 29th across and the beachhead was firmly established, our brigade would be pulled out and sent back to the States to participate in war bond tours. But that was a lot of crap. But anyway, to make a long story short, I was told that as some sort of a reward for having come ashore and lasting, I was going to be assigned to a POW stockade to guard prisoners. That's where I went. I stayed there for, I guess, must have been three weeks and I got fed up with that and I went in and told them I wanted to go back to a regular unit, either back to my old unit or some other unit, but I didn't want any more of that POW guard business. I was told, well if you want to go, fine, we'll certainly oblige you but you'll probably wind up in a regular infantry division. I said that's OK by me. I got put back into the replacement stream and must have been end of October, first of November, and I think I recall some time about the first or second week in December things were very, very static, nothing was hardly going on and I got to the replacement center and I was given a choice of two divisions, 87th Infantry Division or the 26th. I was told take your choice. The 26th I found out later had only come into combat I think some time about the middle of November or maybe a little later, down around Metz. They got pretty badly shot up but they needed replacements pretty badly and so I said well, I'll go to the 87th. I don't know exactly where we were at the time but I recall landing up in Luxembourg City to join the 87th and found out that the Bulge had just broken out and this must have been about the middle of December, the 14th or 15th. We were told we're going to hold you here in Luxembourg City in case the Germans break through and attack Luxembourg City. So stayed there until right after, I guess the early part of January anyway.

Mr. Misenhimer:

The whole 87th Division was kept there?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, no. The 87th in the meantime had been pulled out from where they had been down around Metz earlier, I understand, and they were part of the Third Army and they were shipped up to help stem the tide, right there west of Bastogne.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What outfit were you with there at Luxembourg?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, we were still in a reception center. We were told they were going to hold us there rather than send us to our units. So we stayed there and then finally I guess right after the first of the year that's when I went up and joined the 347th and I was assigned to L Company to the 2nd Platoon. When I arrived there I was a corporal, still a corporal, been a corporal ever since Omaha Beach. Things were pretty rough. Then we got pulled out of the position we were in, west of Bastogne, place called Pirenpre, couple of others I'm trying to recall and Bonnerue another one and then we were pulled out and shipped back down into Luxembourg along the Sauer River to be with the 4th Infantry Division. We stayed there seems to me about a week and then we went back up into the Bulge and near St. Vith and pushed on to a place called Houffalize and then we finally managed to drive the Germans back into Germany and I remember being in a little town, I think it was still in Belgium, but it was right on the border called Manderfeld and when I got to the 87th, 2nd Platoon, I don't think there were more than 20-25 men in the platoon. Normally the strength of a platoon is 41 men, one officer and 40 enlisted men. I don't remember many, many times when the strength ever got any higher than that, all through the war right up to the end. I told the fellow that had been with me since I got back in November to the replacement center, a fella by the name of Benjamin Goldberg, he and I had joined the 87th L Company and 2nd Platoon

together and I looked around and I told old Ben, "I tell you, we better look after ourselves because these guys are going to get our tails shot off." I think most of the non-commissioned officers that had originally come in with the company back when it was first introduced into combat, most of them had either been killed or wounded. Most of the guys had moved up. Some of them were replacements, like Ben and I were, but none of them had had any prior combat experience.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Why did you think they would get your tail shot off?

Mr. Stafford:

Cause they just didn't know how to lead. They just didn't know how to lead. I found that out in a hurry. We had a fairly good lieutenant but he didn't last too long. We had a platoon sergeant that I didn't have much respect for but he had been a squad leader. But anyway, I guess not too long after we pulled out of Manderfeld and I don't know whether I had been promoted to Buck Sergeant, I don't think I was Staff Sergeant by then. But anyway, the platoon sergeant, he got evacuated and the platoon leader got evacuated, I think he was wounded, and so the company commander, Captain Kidd, told me to take over the platoon as acting platoon leader.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Go back over some of that. You were made acting platoon leader. Then what happened?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, they made me acting platoon leader and I was also the platoon sergeant but I was acting as platoon leader also. I remained acting platoon leader until the end of the war. Got a battlefield commission right there at the end. But anyway, to make a long story short, I moved on up through the ranks, Staff Sergeant, Tech Sergeant, and we got into the Siegfried Line and took out

a couple of pillboxes, captured a number of Germans and I took a patrol in during the night to try to link up, there was a contact patrol we were trying to link up with, find the location of a battalion that was on our right flank and trying to find exactly where their positions were. I was always pretty good with a map but, hell, you can't read a map and lo and behold we found out we'd gotten in behind the German lines and managed to get back out of the lines without getting fired at. Finally found this company that was over on our right, they were in this little town, a little village, and I went in and talked to company commander, the battalion commander, or whoever was in charge and man, when we went in there, I went into this basement where they all were, the stench was overwhelming. All these poor guys had diarrhea and I think everybody had crapped in their britches. Anyway, got back out of there and got back to our lines and then next thing I remember is we got into Germany and we were approaching the Mosel River and I think we went across there at Coblenz. Then I remember, that wasn't my unit I don't think as I recall, got into much of a firefight until we got into a little village called Waldesch and then from there we moved down to the Rhine past a very historical point as I found out later. They called it the Koenigstuhl which meant the King's Throne, which was on the west bank of the Rhine and then we got to a little town called Brey and we crossed there. I think it was about March 25th I believe. Crossed into a town called Braubach and we had a hell of a firefight going across the river. We didn't think there was going to be any resistance going across. There was a big castle on the other side of the river overlooking Braubach. I remember it very vividly. We were told at the time not to fire on the castle because it was one of the few castles that hadn't been destroyed in all the wars the French and Germans fought. The castle was called Marksburg Castle. It had a reputation of having never been captured but we found out later that the Germans were using it

as an artillery observation post. They had a complete command of the river, a couple of miles either way up and down the river.

We encountered very little hostile fire after we seized the town of Brey and we kind of figured that when we made the assault crossing of the Rhine we probably wouldn't run into any resistance. Lord, we were having to take it because we crossed, I guess, right after midnight and as I remember in my company, L Company, I think we went across, I thought at one time we went across two platoons abreast, my platoon and the 3rd Platoon but I found out later that I think all three platoons had gone across almost, or tried to cross, simultaneously. But when we got halfway across the river, the Germans really opened up and they had really been concealed well. They were dug in right there on the banks of the river. They had dug trenches and covered them over with turf and bushes and there were machine gun nests in there and they had, as I said, this observation from the top. They had put 20 mm anti-aircraft guns on the hills overlooking the town and they had depressed those things and they were firing those at us. My platoon made it across, barely in fact. I don't recall having any of my men killed or wounded but a couple of the other platoons didn't fare as well. We lost one of our best platoon sergeants. I might say, too, at this time all four platoons in L Company with the exception of one were being led by the platoon sergeants. My platoon was being led by a platoon sergeant, 3rd platoon Sergeant John Kudronosky, the Weapons Platoon, Sergeant White. The 1st Platoon was led by Lieutenant Vallorani and Kudronosky was killed and three or four other men were killed in the 3rd and the 1st platoon. A number were wounded. We secured Braubach. One of our other companies that made the assault crossing, K Company, they managed to get up into Marksburg Castle and I, in the meantime, captured a couple of guys down in the little village of Braubach that were overlooking the Marksburg Castle overlook and convinced the German soldier to tell me where

the communications lines were and we were able to get the damned lines that these forward observers up in the castle were using for communication to the artillery and the ack-ack guns back up in the hills. Cut those.

In the meantime, K Company got up to the castle and they captured the Germans that were in there. Then from Braubach we moved to a little town called Bad Ems, then from Bad Ems I captured a German general there in Bottheims. He was actually in civilian clothes and when we got into this house I was very suspicious of this guy. We got to looking around and I found the guy's uniform. He admitted that it was his. I think he was home on leave or something. I made him put it on, marched him back up the damned road and turned him over to the company commander. In Bad Ems we moved to a town called Limburg and there we found a POW camp, had a bunch of American prisoners, British prisoners. In fact the guy who was in charge of the camp was a British Sergeant-Major. There was as I recall some civilians they were holding there and someone said one of them had been the president of one of the Baltic countries, I think Lithuania or Estonia. Anyway, after Limburg we moved out and we began to move pretty fast, going across Germany. I might add too that even though I had commanded my platoon as the acting platoon leader nearly four months, occasionally we would get in a Second Lieutenant replacement. Captain Kidd somehow managed to get these guys transferred to other companies. One fellow that I remember very vividly, a fellow by the name Ray Stender, was a young Second Lieutenant and he was gung ho. Captain Kidd decided that he would be of more use to Company K and he convinced the Company K commander to take him over. So Ray went over to K Company. I ran into Ray again later on when we approached the end of the war in Plauen. I'll tell you about that in a minute. But, anyway, it became pretty much of a merry chase once we left Limbourg. We got on the autobahns and that was one of the very few times I can remember

loading up in trucks, or on tanks and riding. I mean we went. Finally got to a place, Zella-Mehlis, I remember. Then we began to run into resistance at a place called Saalfeld. Lot of resistance there. By this time, it must have been pretty much, I'd say the first part of April because if I remember correctly, we crossed the river at Braubach on the 25th of March and by the time we got into position to attack Plauen. Plauen was the largest city my division went through from the time we got into Germany until the war was over. The other one was Coblenz. A little smaller, Coblenz was right on the Rhine River, right at the junction of the Rhine and the Mosel. Plauen was, I guess before the war, probably been somewhere in the neighborhood of 110,000. From Saalfeld the Germans were blowing up all the bridges. The Wehrmacht, most of the units we encountered were Wehrmacht, which was the German regular army and sometimes we'd run into SS I guess. Sometimes Volkssturm. You know what the Volkssturm were?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, it was the old folks, right?

Mr. Stafford:

Most of them were old men, when I say old, most of the guys had fought in World War I. The rest of them were 14- and 15-year-old boys. We called them Hitler's secret weapon. They were 14- and 15-year-olds armed with panzerfausts. You know what a panzerfaust is? A panzerfaust is the German version of the bazooka. I'm telling you those things were, they packed a whale of a lot bigger whallop than our old 2.36s which didn't do much damage when you used them against the tanks. What we used them for primarily was buildings and shooting at a tower, sometimes clock towers, where German forward observers might be located. But anyway, when we got to Saalfeld things began to get a little tougher again. We approached Plauen, I guess it was about the 25th of March, and my battalion, the Third Battalion, we were given the mission of leading

the regimental attack, 347th Infantry Regiment attack on Plauen. My Company L was given the mission of leading the way into Plauen and Lew Goad had been the platoon sergeant of the First Platoon that had been commanded by Lieutenant Valorani. Lew got a battlefield commission just before we got to Plauen so Val moved up and took over as executive officer and Lew was platoon leader of the First Platoon. His platoon led the way into Plauen.

We got about halfway into Plauen and Captain Kidd got a message from an artillery spotter plane, you know the little Piper Cubs that used by the artillery to serve as spotters. You're familiar with that? Well, we got a message that one of the spotter aircraft had noticed what appeared to be a platoon of Germans that were preparing to blow the one remaining, I think it was the only bridge across the river that split Plauen. Actually about two-thirds of the town was on our side and a river called Elster River that ran through Plauen and about maybe a quarter or third of Plauen was on the other side. As Captain Kidd got the message that the Germans were setting demolitions under the bridge, he called me on the radio and told me to move my platoon through Lew Goad's and to see if I couldn't keep the Germans from blowing up the bridge and when we went into Plauen we had a section of tanks, two tanks, attached to the company and they had been supporting Lew and I when I went through Lew then Kidd gave me the two tanks and I put a couple of squads right in front of the tanks and we moved on down and we ran into very little resistance by the way. We were really surprised because this town had a lot of factories and ordnance plants and in fact there was one factory that was manufacturing tanks and we were told there were a bunch of warehouses where the German army had stored weapons and equipment, food rations and war materiel, etc. We figured the Germans certainly would put up a fight to try to keep us from capturing that because that stuff was sorely needed by them. So when we got into Plauen we were surprised that we ran into very little resistance. In fact I don't recall

being shot at until we reached the river and even then when we reached the river, I could see the Germans on the other side. I took the tanks and put one of them on one side of the bridge and one on the other side and had them fire the machine guns and a couple rounds off to the sides of the Germans to try to scare them, scatter them so we could get across the bridge and keep them from blowing it. We were successful in doing that and got across and I cut the wires that were leading down to the demolitions that they had placed under the bridge. We found out later that old bridge had been built 250 years before Columbus discovered America. It was the oldest stone arch bridge north of Italy. Anyway, to make a long story short, we got across the river and I moved my platoon on up, sent the Germans we captured back across the river.

By this time Captain Kidd and the other platoons had come up on the bridge and Ray Stender told me later, the guy I mentioned earlier, he was in K Company, he later told me he come up at just about the same time. He was coming in a different direction. K Company when we moved into Plauen, they had been following us and they went off to our left to protect our flank or to move on around in case we ran into problems down at the bridge. We beat old K Company to the bridge. Went on there from Plauen we went to a little town I recall Theuma or something like that and then at this point I don't remember whether it was just before or right after Plauen but anyway, make a long story short, Buchenwald which wasn't too far from Plauen, I don't remember exactly, maybe 20-30 miles. Buchenwald had been captured I think on the 11th of April, if I remember correctly. General Eisenhower wanted every division that was close enough to Buchenwald to go there to be a witness to just what had happened there. So Captain Kidd let Lew and I take a jeep and we went up to Buchenwald and I tell you, that was one horrible, horrible sight. In fact we saw not only bodies stacked up, dead bodies, but there were still some German soldiers there so we must have gotten there three or four days or within a

week or so after the camp had been liberated. I don't think it was actually liberated. I think the German guards had probably flown the coop. I understand it was a patrol from one of their armored divisions actually moved them there, the first Americans in there. But everything you read about, all the pictures you see of Buchenwald, they were absolutely correct. The bodies stacked up, and I remember also while we were there seeing a bunch of German civilians from the town of Weirnar had been ordered into the camp to take a look at what the Nazis had done.

Then Lew and I went back to join our company and we wound up, I think we were told, put in a holding position. I guess it must have been about the, I don't know, it must have been about the 18th or 19th of April. We were told to hold up, not to move it any further, wait for the Russians. As I recall, we set there nearly a week, maybe it was longer, maybe ten days, I don't know. Finally we got the word right after the first of May to move out again and so L Company's objective was a town called Jaegersgrun and we moved into Jaegersgrun and captured that. Then right after we secured the town one of the Germans that we captured, a colonel, this must have been about the fifth or sixth of May, a German colonel told me if I would go with him to his division commander's command post he was certain his division commander would be willing to surrender the division to us.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I have your write-up that I got from the Internet on that. I've got all of that. I will attach it to the oral history.

Mr. Stafford:

Well, that's about the size of it then. I got something here that you might be interested in. It's a letter that I wrote home right after the war. You want me to read it to you?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Sure, if you would.

Mr. Stafford:

This was written on the 12th of May, 1945 and I say, "Dear Dad (My mother by the way had passed away when I was 13 years old. My dad had never remarried and never did til the day he died.) But anyway, the letter reads: "Dear Dad, Just a few lines to say hello and to let you know I'm well and OK and hope that you're fine and feeling all right these days, too. I've been planning to write for the last few days but honest, Dad, we're really keeping on the go. Since I wrote you last, lots has happened, hasn't it? Yes, what I've been praying for a long time finally made up its futile mind to happen. Now when you shoot a Kraut, they call it murder, which all goes to show just how nonsensical war really is. Just by signing a little piece of paper a man can change the life and destiny of millions and those who yesterday had the sole purpose of killing his fellow man can now laugh, joke, smoke and give food and shelter to those same people.

Well, it's beyond me. I suppose the American Army and the rest of the Allies are and have become so powerful that they can afford to forget some of their original purposes but I know of a certain degree of this man's army that hasn't. After going through nearly eleven months of this hell made in Germany, what I very well feel to be a member of that degree. Every good deed you do a German, that brings the next war one day closer in my estimation and I don't mean to have any part of bringing about the next war. Dad, this may be a little hard to believe, but your son had two complete German infantry divisions surrender to him as well as a number of other assorted enemy organizations. I'd always wanted to see what the enemy really looked like, so the day before the peace was signed, my jeep driver and I took off and we wound up at a general staff meeting where one Lieutenant General surrendered his division and then we went on through the lines where another General surrendered also. (I might digress here just a minute. I

sort of got mixed up because the first General, he didn't surrender. He wanted to but he said he had to wait to get orders from his Corps commander. That was the second General. OK, I'm continuing to read.) By the time we had gotten back, we had been 45 miles in behind the German lines and had one hell of a time. Our brass said they didn't know whether to courts-martial me or commend us. I guess it won't be the courts-martial because I understand we've been recommended for something. (I might add here, those awards never did come through, but that's OK.) Dad, I've always thought of your advice and as far as that's concerned, the war hasn't changed me one bit. So without further fanfare, I come to you for some more of it. I don't know whether I mentioned it or not, but I've been put in for a battlefield commission. That's well and good but I also understand that officers don't count in the point system. As an enlisted man, I probably stand a good chance of staying away from the CBI (that's the Pacific Theater) and prospects for a discharge. If you were in my shoes, what would you do? I've just about made up my mind, but I'll wait to hear from you, what you think. So write soon. Lots of love, Tommy."

To make a long story short, the next day I went up and I said I wasn't about to leave my men, so I'd accept the commission, which I did. So that's about the size of it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Tell me about getting the battlefield commission. What would you go through, how did it work?

Mr. Stafford:

Your company commander put you in, recommended you if he thought that you had proven that you could lead troops as a platoon leader which I had been doing for four months, like Lew Goad and some of the other guys. But Lew and I were the only ones actually received a commission. Kudronosky, if he hadn't been killed, I'm sure he would have gotten one. I think Johnny White, our Weapons Platoon Leader, certainly should have gotten one. But, anyway, the

recommendation would have to be endorsed by the battalion commander and the regimental commander and then it would go on up to the division commander and that's where the final decision was made. I think the division commander had been given authority by the War Department to promote people to commissioned rank. I don't think it required a corps commander's approval. But then once the general order was cut promoting some one from the enlisted ranks to the commissioned ranks then you would go back to the division headquarters, which I did, and I had my bars pinned on by General McKee who was the assistant division commander. You know anything about the Virginia Military Institute?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Very little. I've heard about it. I don't know a lot about it, no.

Mr. Stafford:

They were arch rivals of V.P.I. General McKee had been a V.M.I. graduate. When he pinned the bars on me, he was kidding me. He said, "I never thought I'd see the day when I'd be giving anybody from V.P.I. anything." He chuckled and pinned the bars on me. So, if I hadn't gotten that commission or hadn't accepted it, I'm sure I wouldn't have stayed in the Army. I'd come on home. Are you familiar with the point system?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes. I am.

Mr. Stafford:

Well, then you know about that. If I'd not accepted the commission, I'm fairly certain I would have been discharged before the war was over in the Pacific. Some people were, I think.

Mr. Misenhimer:

As far as the point system, you might tell me on tape here, so some one listening to this tape in the future can understand what it's like. So how did the point system work?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, as I recall, you got points. I think you needed at least 85 points. You got points for the number of weeks and months you'd been on active duty. You got points for the number of days you'd been in combat, you got points if you'd gotten the Combat Infantry Badge, you got points if you got decorations like Bronze Star, Silver Star or Distinguished Service Cross, Congressional Medal of Honor,

Mr. Misenhimer:

Purple Heart also.

Mr. Stafford:

The Purple Heart also, yeah. I think that's pretty much covers it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then when you got to a certain number of points, as you say, 85 or whatever it was, then you could come home.

Mr. Stafford:

If I remember it was a minimum of 85 points. In order to get 85 points, you had to have a considerable amount of time in combat. You had to have several decorations and certainly that Combat Infantry Badge. I don't think too many people got that many points or lived to tell about it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, let me ask you a couple of questions. On this recognition, were you actually discharged as an enlisted man?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, yeah, you got discharged as an enlisted man and then commissioned right away. I mean, it was almost simultaneously. It was discharged and commissioned. Different serial number. My enlisted serial number was 33631364 and then I got another serial number as an officer, 02025479. I kept that serial number, that's the one that's still on my records. Both of them are for that matter. In fact, this map I was telling you about, I carried ashore on Omaha Beach, we were told before we left the point of embarkation enroute across the Channel, that in addition to our dogtags, to write our name, rank and serial number on slips of paper and put them in our pockets and jackets, etc. in case the dogtags got blown away, so you could be identified. I had written my name and my serial number on the back of this map and I might also add that I don't know whether you have heard about the D-Day Memorial down in Bedford, Virginia?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Go ahead and talk about it.

Mr. Stafford:

Well, there's a D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Virginia, and Bedford was the little town where almost the entire young men of that town were killed or wounded on Omaha Beach. They were in the 29th Infantry Division which was a National Guard outfit before the war and still is. They put up this beautiful memorial down there and it's a real sight to see, but I had a copy of my D-Day map made, the back and front of it, and I gave it to the memorial and it's on display there.

Right after the war was over and we got to the point to where we could pitch a pup tent and sleep in the pup tents, my platoon sergeant who was a fellow by the name of Howard Crawford who, by the way we called him before they left the States they called him Right Step Crawford, because he couldn't keep in step with himself. He was always out of step with all the

other men in the platoon. They wouldn't even take him on parades before they shipped overseas. Everyone figured old Howard would get his ass shot off the first day in combat. Well he turned out to be one of the best combat men in the regiment. When I got promoted to acting platoon leader, I made him, with Captain Kidd's OK, the acting platoon sergeant and when I got my battlefield commission he became the platoon sergeant. But anyway before I got the commission after the war was over on May 8 and we moved into a static position and were sleeping in pup tents, Howard and I bunked together in the same pup tent. When I went up to get the commission and I came back and I went down to my pup tent, all of Howard's stuff was moved out. I looked around and there was old Howard standing there grinning up a storm and I said, "Howard, where in the hell is all your stuff?" He said, "I'm not sleeping with no damned officer." So Howard had moved out.

In a lot of units, even in my unit, they had an SOP, Standard Operating Procedure, that if you got a battlefield commission they would generally transfer you out of the regiment that you were in to another regiment. They certainly wouldn't allow you to stay in the same company or even in the same battalion. I made one of the conditions when it was offered to me, I said, "Hell, I'm not going to leave these guys and if I can't stay with them as a commissioned officer after having led them for four months in combat, then keep the damned commission." So I was allowed to stay with my platoon and Lew Goad did the same. He stayed with his platoon.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What's the date you actually got your commission?

Mr. Stafford:

I think it was, I'm not sure, I think it was somewhere in the early part of June.

Mr. Misenhimer;

OK. So it was after the fighting was over?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, yeah. The fighting in Europe was over but the fighting was still going on in the Pacific.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I meant the people there that you were leading, the fighting was over, they weren't fighting any longer.

Mr. Stafford:

No, but we were pulled out. We were the first division pulled out of Europe in order to make the invasion of Honshu. In fact we were brought back to the States in July and we were given a 30-day leave and then we went down to Ft. Benning, Georgia to be re-outfitted and get replacements and get re-equipped and then we were going to move across the States to California and join in on the invasion of Honshu. In fact, in the story that I wrote up I even mentioned that.

Mr. Misenhimer;

Yes, that's in the story, right.

Mr. Stafford:

Yeah, I stayed with the division until it was inactivated and I think it was late September or October of 1945 and then I went to the 4th Infantry Division at Camp Butner in North Carolina.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Let me ask you some questions here. When you got the official word that Germany had surrendered, did you all hear any kind of a celebration?

Mr. Stafford:

No. We were pretty well damned glad because by this time all these Germans had surrendered to me had started coming into line. We had our hands full taking care of all these German prisoners.

No, as far as I know there was no celebration. I do remember one thing that the company commander, Captain Kidd, gave Lew and I permission to take a truck and go into Czechoslovakia and find a brewery and I had a bunch of German marks one of my men had picked up out of a German bank I think in Plauen and we went into Czechoslovakia and got three or four kegs of beer and I gave the brewmaster a whole wad of German reichmarks.

That reminds me of another story. After we were pulled out of Germany and we were enroute to France we went to a camp called Lucky Strike. I don't know if you ever heard of it or not. Several reception camps there that were set up to handle the guys that were going to go back to the States and I was at the Lucky Strike and I was sitting in the tent one morning after we got there and somebody came running in said, "Man, would you believe there's some silly ass Air Force officer here buying up German reichmarks?" Hell, we were using the damned things to light cigarettes with and everything. The old deal about taking a dollar bill and setting it on fire to light your cigarettes. We were using reichmarks to do that. Some one said, "What's he paying?" He said "Would you believe this jackass is, I think, giving a dollar for every hundred reichmarks that you want to give him?" Hell, I had a whole wad of them and I was going to bring them home for souvenirs. I think I gave him some. I don't know whether I did or not.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you say when you went back to Germany how much were the reichmarks?

Mr. Stafford:

I think when I went back to Germany in 1947 if you wanted to go on the German economy and buy anything in one of the local shops, say a beer or anything, you had to use reichmarks. You couldn't use military scrip. So you'd go down to the finance office and you'd give them a dollar or military scrip and they'd give you ten German reichmarks. I think that was the exchange so

this silly Air Force officer wasn't so dumb after all. He must have wound up as a millionaire. In fact I think that if my memory serves me right, they didn't convert to the deutchmark until I think I recall it was some time around 1949 or 1950.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I'm not sure on that but I know it was after the war for a while. Now when you went up to, they call them the cigarette camps. I think there was Old Gold, Chesterfield, Lucky Strike, whatever.

Mr. Stafford:

Pall Mall, that's another one.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now they processed you to send you home, right?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, the whole division.

Mr. Misenhimer:

But that was the purpose there, to process?

Mr. Stafford:

Yeah, and I remember when we got into Lucky Strike all the officers were given a couple of liters of Johnny Walker Red Label. In fact, we had a gay old time and speaking of gay old times then, it burns my ass that that good word has gone down the tubes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I'm with you, right.

Mr. Stafford:

You don't call anybody to have a gay old time these days, do you? Any way, to make a long story short, we got a pass to go into Paris and we all went. I remember I think it was a day pass

and we got there in the morning and came back that evening. Didn't stay overnight. We were lucky, they shipped us back on what had been the U.S.S. America. America's best cruise ship before the war that they converted to a troop carrier. When I went over in 1943 I was on the Empress of Australia and I was lucky I got to sleep in a life preserver rack. Coming back there were four of us in each stateroom. On the America the officers. The enlisted men I have forgotten whether they had, I am sure that they had probably knocked out the walls in some of the staterooms and made them larger compartments.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you went overseas about what date was that?

Mr. Stafford:

Well we left, I'm not sure, out of Boston. It was some time in the early part of December and I got into Liverpool I think it was right at the end of December.

Mr. Misenhimer:

In the wintertime was what I was getting at.

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was that trip over? What were the accommodations like on that Empress of Australia?

Mr. Stafford:

Like I say, I was lucky I got, hell I think there must have been 35-40-50 men in the compartments, all in hammocks and I was appointed to be the compartment mess sergeant which meant that I would take a container up to the galley and I would get the meal for that particular breakfast, lunch or dinner and bring it back to the compartment and dish it out to guys in their

mess kits. I vividly remember one meal. I never will forget it. I went through the line and the first thing they did was (they were all British cooks) and the ship was manned by British sailors, merchant marine, and they'd throw in, the first thing they threw in was cabbage. Then they threw in on top of that boiled potatoes and then on top of that corned beef and then on top of that believe it or not, Dakota figs and on top of that some concoction that was supposed to be like whipped cream but it was just a creamy sauce. I got back down to the compartment and by this time most of guys in the compartment were seasick anyway because it was a very rough crossing and very few guys wanted to eat, particularly when they looked at that stuff. I didn't get seasick one moment all the way across and I think I must have put on three or four pounds. We always had plenty to eat.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I understand that North Atlantic is awful rough that time of year.

Mr. Stafford:

It was. As I recall we lost a couple of ships in the convoy. It was a big convoy.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were you attacked by German submarines at all on the way over?

Mr. Stafford:

I think so but I'm not sure. I heard later that the convoy had been attacked and a couple of ships had been lost but I can't verify that and I never have been able to verify.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now this unit you joined, the Sixth Combat Engineers? Tell me again what was the name of that unit.

Mr. Stafford:

Sixth, Number Six, Combat Engineer, Amphibious Special Assault Brigade. There were three of them. There was the Fifth and the Sixth and the First. The Fifth put the First Infantry Division across on Omaha Beach and they were on the left flank of Omaha and my brigade put the 29th across and then the First Brigade put the 4th across on Utah Beach. The thought was that Utah Beach would run into the most resistance. That would be the one that would really get shot up but it turned out it was probably of the two beaches a little easier than Omaha was. Omaha got hung with slogan "Bloody Omaha".

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now how many men was in the Sixth Brigade? How big a unit was that?

Mr. Stafford:

I don't know but I would imagine it must have been, I'll pick a wild guess and say six or seven thousand.

Mr. Misenhimer:

OK. And you said you put them over there. What did you do to get them over there? Like the 29th?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, the Brigade was primarily in a combat engineers position to blow, to clear the minefields, breach the barbed wire, help in the assault on the pillboxes, Bangalore torpedoes, flamethrowers, demolitions, clearing minefields, clearing roads, bulldozing breaches on the beach to push dunes away to lay down landing mats, things of that nature.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I just wanted to clarify exactly how that worked there.

Mr. Stafford:

Then the brigade also had in addition to the combat engineer battalions, three of them, there were other assorted outfits, joint assault signal company was one and there was guys that were responsible for off-loading the ducks that were bringing supplies ashore and transportation duck companies to transport stuff back and forth between transports and the beach. Lot of different units in the brigade.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what weapon did you carry in that brigade?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, when we got down to Weymouth, the battalion commander, or just before we got to Weymouth, he decided that he wanted more firepower. I had a carbine and I was given a Thompson sub-machinegun. I had never fired a damn Thompson sub so I got my first chance to fire it was after we got into the channel. I had an ammunition bag that, I've forgotten exactly, but I think it had long clips, you didn't use the cylinder container like they used to do in the old John Dillinger, Al Capone days. It had a clip that held a 45-caliber bullet. I think, if I remember, somewhere 20 or 30 bullets in a clip. We carried extra clips in a bag, a canvas bag, and you can imagine the weight of that damn bag. I tell you when I got ashore, I got rid of the damn machinegun within the first 24 hours and got myself an M-1 rifle.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You mentioned you were on POW guard duty for a couple of weeks or so. How were those German prisoners? Were they pretty onery, hard to handle?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, no. My memory was that they were all docile and in fact one German painted me a picture. I think I gave him a chocolate bar or something and he painted me a picture and I lost it somewhere. He painted it on a piece of wood. A picture of a German fraulein milking a cow or something as I remember. No, and as I remember there were no attempts to escape and the POW cage or camp was right near the beach, right near where we had landed during the initial assault. There was also an airstrip there as I remember, between St. Laurent and Vierville. The airstrip was built by the engineers shortly after we landed.

Mr. Misenhimer:

On Omaha Beach did you go in the first wave or before the first wave?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, no, we were supposed to go in, I think, the first wave went in at 6:30 and we were supposed to go in, I think it was about 7:30 or somewhere along there and by the time we actually got ashore it must have been 9:00 or maybe a little later and by this time the Germans were fully awake and getting a lot of our artillery fire. That beach, by the way, was not cleared until late on the second day. There were still Germans in some of the pillboxes and they had a lot of communication trenches that were covered over. I remember when I went back to get old Joe Self, man, machinegun bullets were kicking up all around us. Well, listen, I hope I haven't talked your ear off.

Mr. Misenhimer:

No, no, I've got more questions if you've got time.

Mr. Stafford:

Yeah, I'm getting a little tired. Make them quick and short.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you get home from World War II with any souvenirs?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, yeah, still got a bunch of them. I brought back about eight pistols. In fact, I'll tell you what. I came back with a duffle bag full of German war materiel and that was it. I brought back swords, daggers, pistols, a German flag, German helmet, German gas-operated rifle that I still have that was sort of a German version of our Garand gas-operated M-1. Most German soldiers used Mausers, bolt-action Mausers. This thing had a clip that's gas-operated and in fact, I understand that some of these daggers, I gave away quite a bit of stuff, I gave my cousin Bradley and my cousin Woody who lost his eyesight going across the Remagen Bridge, I gave them a pistol and gave another cousin a pistol and I had a bunch of daggers and swords and I think I left them with my dad during the time I was on active duty and I think some people came in there one time and took a couple of them but I was looking through a site the other day and I see where some of these damn daggers I still have are worth \$800 apiece. I got three swords and I think about six or eight daggers. One police dagger, Air Force ceremonial daggers, Wehrmacht daggers and one SS dagger and I think these Gauleiter, Germans that wore the brown suits, you know, the politicians in the Nazi party, I got one of those and I have several Lugers and P38s and a Czech revolver and the pistol that I got from the German general that surrendered to me.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what ribbons and medals did you get in World War II?

Mr. Stafford:

You mean decorations?

Mr. Misenhimer:

From World War II, right.

Mr. Stafford:

Well, two Silver Stars, two Bronze Stars with V for Valor. Then after the war I got, well, a couple of Army commendation ribbons, medals. All the service medals, European Theater, American Theater and the United Nations and the Korean and the Pacific. All the other stuff, you know, what they call service awards. Good Conduct Medal as an enlisted man.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you get the Combat Infantryman's Badge?

Mr. Stafford:

And the Combat Infantryman's Badge obviously and I understand I'm qualified if I want to apply for it, for a Purple Heart. For having been 70 percent disabled with trench foot and frostbite during the Bulge. But I never applied for it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How many battle stars did you get?

Mr. Stafford:

Five plus the Arrowhead, amphibious assault on Omaha Beach.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever hear Axis Sally on the radio?

Mr. Stafford:

I never heard her. I don't recall, I may have, but it doesn't stick in my mind. I probably did. Broadcasting from Germany when we were in England. Broadcasting in Lord Haw Haw. I guess, does that name ring a bell with you?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, right.

Mr. Stafford:

It just doesn't stick in my mind but I'm sure I did.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were you ever under friendly fire?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, yeah. A number of times.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What were some of those that happened?

Mr. Stafford:

Well, you know. You had demarcation lines that were supposed to separate the battalions and the companies and the regiments and sometimes when you were moving out sometimes people would confuse you with the Germans. I can remember one time a bunch of guys from the 17th Airborne during the Bulge crossed out in front of us, I guess they didn't realize it but they crossed out into our zone and the uniforms that they had, the baggy jumpsuits and all, they looked like Germans and the helmets, the parachute helmets were a little different, and hell, we opened up on them. I don't think we killed any of them, hopefully, but also got bombed a couple of times.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have any experience with the Red Cross in World War II?

Mr. Stafford:

Oh, yeah, primarily after the war. Very favorable.. Listen, old buddy, I think I've just about talked out here.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well, I want to thank you, Tom, for doing this today.

Mr. Stafford:

I hope I gave you something. I could have been more specific but hell, you know you start talking about specific actions and I don't know whether you've been watching this World War II on the Discovery Channel?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, I have. Well, on the History Channel?

Mr. Stafford:

Yeah. Well the History Channel, I'm sorry. Last night I was listening to this one guy and I'm telling you, he's so full of crap. This guy, Rocky Blunt, you remember him?

Mr. Misenhimer:

I remember the name.

Mr. Stafford:

He was talking about being in a foxhole and he woke up or something and he found that his feet were in a block of ice and his buddies had to chip the ice away to get him out and then they take him to an aid station or back to a hospital the way he described it and the docs were telling him they were going to have to amputate his feet and he was pleading with them not to amputate his feet and so they decided not to. Then he says three days later he was back with his outfit. If he had trench foot and frostbite that was bad enough for some doctor to tell him they were debating

whether to amputate his feet, you can bet your bottom he wouldn't have been with his outfit in three days.

Mr. Misenhimer:

That's right.

Mr. Stafford:

Then he talked again about some Germans who they came upon and took out his pistol and hit the guy over his head. Hell, the guy had a helmet on I'm sure and knocked him out and then he cut his throat. I found out later that this guy, I went into Google and found out this guy was in an anti-tank platoon. I think he was a minesweeper or something and hell, full of prunes. That's why I don't like to get too specific about combat stories because there's always somebody gonna to say that guy's full of bullshit. Know what I mean.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Thanks again Tom.

Mr. Stafford:

I think you're doing a very noble job and obviously you've done a lot of it. So I'd like to say bless your heart.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Thank you.

End of Interview

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