

**Veteran:** **BERGES, Herman**  
**Service Branch:** **ARMY**  
**Interviewer:** Sheldon, Jessica  
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**Highlights of Service:** **World War II; Stateside & Europe; Medic; Served under and received Silver Star from General McAuliffe**

Interviewer: My name is Jessica Sheldon. I am interviewing Herman H. Berges about his experiences in World War II. Today is April 4, 2002, and this interview is being conducted at Lee College. Are you aware that our conversation is being recorded, and this tape and transcript will be placed in the Lee College library? Do I have your permission to do that?

Veteran: Yes, you do.

Interviewer: Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

Veteran: I was drafted.

Interviewer: How old were you?

Veteran: I was just 18.

Interviewer: Were you in school at the time?

Veteran: I had finished one year of college, and then the draft called me in July 1943.

Interviewer: What were you studying?

Veteran: I was studying to be a chemist.

Interviewer: After the war, did you continue your studies?

Veteran: No, I went back to college the year after I got out of the Army, and I continued my work to become a chemist.

Interviewer: Would you like to tell me about your training? Your training for the war.

Veteran: Well, I had my basic training, and I trained as a medical aid man at Camp Barkley, Texas, just outside of town a-ways, and I received three months of basic training there training in first aid—also training in taking care of myself in the normal Army routines.

Interviewer: What kind of normal training did you have?

Veteran: Drilling, radar watch, how to follow commands. We learned how to survive in the hot sun.

Interviewer: How long did your basic training last?

Veteran: Basic training lasted three months.

Interviewer: Did you ever train overseas?

Veteran: Some. Mostly when we were overseas we were fighting a war. We had had some training on how to pitch tents and how to deal with the natives there, and then after the war we had training just to keep our skills up in the Army occupation.

Interviewer: When you trained overseas, where did you train?

Veteran: It was in the Austrian Alps, and then we came back into Germany and into France in the general area of Paris.

Interviewer: Did your training prepare you for what you had to do?

Veteran: Generally, it prepared us for what we had to do. I don't know if any training would prepare you for your first day of war and actually fighting the enemy.

Interviewer: When you were a medic in the war, what was it like?

Veteran: When we started off, I started off as a litter bearer. The litter bearer is the one that carries the stretcher for the wounded people, and I did that for awhile, and then the medical aid man got wounded, so I was assigned to be the medical aid man, so that made me one step up from my job, and that was to take care of the

wounded, and see that they got carried away by the litter bearers to get them back for better medical care.

Interviewer: Were you a medic on the front lines?

Veteran: Yes, I was on the front lines. I was in the heavy weapons company, which means that there are three rifle companies ahead of the heavy weapons company, so there were rifles in front of my company and we were right behind them. We were the ones that got more of the artillery shelling and that sort of thing, because the rifles were ahead of us.

Interviewer: Can you describe heavy weapons?

Veteran: Heavy weapons are machine guns and mortars. Our company not only carried their rifles and their automatic rifles, but they also carried machine guns and mortars, and these are the ones with the longer range.

Interviewer: How did you feel about America's role in the war?

Veteran: Well, I felt that it was the right thing to do. When the war broke out in 1939, I sensed I was going to be involved in it before it was over, and of course I was. But I was drafted in 1943, so it went on for four years before I was old enough to be drafted.

Interviewer: Which battles were you in?

Veteran: I was in the European Theatre, and I had to battle stars. One was the Battle of the Bosges Mountains—that was in Eastern France, Alsace Lorraine. We went across the Bosges Mountains, and this was the first modern army to have done that successfully. The second battle then, I guess, was the Battle of the Siegfried Line, where we finally got into Germany real \_\_\_\_\_. And then that also made it a part of the time when we just drove south from Germany into Austria, because the war was practically over, and the enemy was fleeing. We were capturing them in \_\_\_\_\_, some 550 miles or something like that.

Interviewer: Did you see any Germans captured?

Veteran: I was not involved in that. I did not see any of the troops that were captured. We traveled by foot the first part of our journey, and then when we started going south in Germany, I think we passed them on the trail by jeep. And I myself did not see the columns of prisoners that we caught. People that saw that were the people that were out ahead of us.

Interviewer: Did you carry any weapons over there?

Veteran: No, the medics in the European Theatre did not carry weapons. The only thing I carried was my first aid kit and my rations, and it wouldn't have made any difference, because I never did see any German soldiers to shoot at.

Interviewer: Were you scared during that time about having to go into combat?

Veteran: Well, I wasn't afraid of that, because they weren't supposed to shoot at medics. However, my helmet had a nice red cross painted on the front of it, and that made a pretty good target, but I never got hit—never got shot. I was fired at a few times, so they did sometimes fire at the medics.

Interviewer: When you saw a lot of wounded, were there any wounds that were fatal?

Veteran: Two wounds that I saw, one was where a man had been in a tree burst. He was wearing his helmet, but the shrapnel came right down through his helmet and down through his head—and we considered that fatal...no hope for him. And some others I saw were machine-gunned, so they fell.

Interviewer: What was a tree burst.

Veteran: Tree burst is an artillery shell that bursts in the trees, and so it shatters shrapnel all over. It doesn't just land on the ground. It injured a lot of people when it exploded like that. Sort of like an anti-personnel mine. An anti-personnel mine was the one which sprang open the ground and let about sixty five inch \_\_\_\_\_ shrapnel around, so that would hit a lot of people, also.

Interviewer: What other kind of weapons did you encounter?

Veteran: One time there was a German weapon, and it was a machine that shot a lot of rockets at one time. You see some of them of TV now. They shot a bunch of rockets, and I heard them going off. I was going back to my headquarters with a message I'd just taken, and I heard it behind me. I could tell it was coming behind me. The first one landed about thirty yards behind me, and the second one landed about twenty yards behind, and the third one landed about ten yards behind, and I decided it was time to get out of the way. So I moved, and the next one landed where I was, and then they went on ahead of me from there. So that was a devil \_\_\_\_\_ worker(?). They also had German 88-millimeter anti-aircraft guns, which were also artillery pieces. They fired very rapidly. When you heard one go off, you had about one second to duck if it was coming your way. They were very fast and very deadly. We were quite concerned about them. They were very, very dangerous.

Interviewer: How did you feel about Germans?

Veteran: Well, I'm from German extraction. My grandparents came from Germany, and perhaps for that reason, I had a little different feeling. I think I liked the German people better than I liked the French people. I hate to say that, but it's true. And Germany itself seemed to be a little not cleaner, but maybe greener, perhaps because it was in the spring, I don't know. But the German people, I was able to talk to them a little bit more, and overall they were pretty nice people. German soldiers, of course, since I didn't see but a couple of them, I don't know about them, but the German people were fine where we were staying. They were all very nice people. While we were an army of occupation, a couple of my buddies and I used to visit this little German kid, a little boy, and we used to kind of just play with him, you know. Be friends to him. And they taught us a nice little German love song, and I still remember it to this day. I have a granddaughter who studied German in college, and so I sent her a copy of that love song. It was called "O-mar-i-aka" {phonetically spelled}, which means "Oh, Maryann." When I talked to the German sailors the last couple of years, I asked one of them if they knew that song, and he remember the song, and said it was common.

Interviewer: Did you have any problem with the Japanese?

Veteran: Well, I called them “Japs” just like everybody else. I didn’t know any Japanese people, so I didn’t have any knowledge, personally. All I knew was what I had read about what they were doing to people over in Asia. They were pretty mean.

Interviewer: {Unable to understand question.}

Veteran: The Germans, they committed a lot of atrocities, too, and I couldn’t imagine an individual that would do that on his own. But they were very mean and committed a lot of terror, actual terror, against the Russian people there. And of course, when the Russians came back, why they did the same thing against Germans. And of course they treated the Jewish people very badly, and on our way back during the army of occupation, we were stationed at Dachau in Germany for a week or two, and we went out and visited the concentration camp there, and we saw what they had done. They had gas chambers, and we saw the places where they had the machine guns with the dogs, and I saw the furnaces where they cremated their victims. And there were a number of Jewish refugees there who had been in the concentration camp, and they told us about the things that had gone on. And so the Germans were very mean to the Jewish people and to a lot of others who were not Germans.

Interviewer: Did you live at Dachau or did you help...?

Veteran: I visited Dachau. We were stationed in the town, not in the concentration camp. We just spent the day there and went around to see what was going on.

Interviewer: When you were on the front line, did you ever have any break time?

Veteran: We had been in battle on the front lines for ten days or two weeks or so, and then when we came back, we’d be in reserve or sort of rest for a few days. During that time, we got ourselves showered and shaved and got cleaned up and just rested.

Interviewer: Did you have hot showers, or what were the showers like?

Veteran: Some places we had warm showers, but they’re not the kind of showers we have in homes now. And there was one place we rested in France, because I guess there would be bidets—that’s a little shower that comes up from the floor.

Interviewer: Whenever you ate, was the food acceptable?

Veteran: I guess I was always hungry. On the front lines, we had K-rations. They're little rations that come about the size of a Cracker Jacks box. One for morning, one for noon, and one for evening. And the morning ones would have some kind of eggs and things like that. At lunchtime we'd have sometimes Spam, and all the guys would hate Spam, but I still like it. I enjoyed all of it, because all we had was three a day, but that just about kept us going. We also had one other ration, which we didn't use very much, called an E-ration. It was like a heavy chocolate candy bar that came in three pieces—one for each meal. It was like the semi-sweet chocolate you get nowadays, a little bar. And so you had one piece for breakfast, one for lunch, and one for supper, and that was supposed to sustain you through the day. We did pretty well. And after the war, we'd do some ration bartering so we could get some things like a dozen eggs. I traded some B-rations once for a harmonica, which would have cost \$5 back here in the states, so I got a good deal on that.

Interviewer: Do you still have that harmonica?

Veteran: Not that particular one—no. I used to have one like it.

Interviewer: Did you have rations every day?

Veteran: Every day we were on a march, we had our own rations, and then later on we were in Camp \_\_\_\_\_ and Keats, and so then we had other rations. These were all in boxes, and later on we had canned rations, but they would be there to serve maybe three or four people, and they were the ones that you had to heat up. So that's something you couldn't do while we were marching.

Interviewer: What were your sleeping arrangements like?

Veteran: Wherever you could. When we were marching, we'd march about fifty or fifty-five minutes, and then rest for another five or ten minutes, and then move on. A lot of us learned how to sleep standing up during those five minutes. Other times, I slept on a pile of coal, I slept on a pile of potatoes, I slept out in the open in the rain, and of course the best thing was once in awhile you'd get into a house and

actually get to sleep in a bed. One time I slept in a hayloft, and hay was very nice and warm.

Interviewer: When you heard that the war ended, where were you?

Veteran: We were in a jeep in the Austrian Alps driving down towards Confederate Pass, which is the border of Austria and Italy, when we heard about the end of the war. This was in April or early May, and it was still very cold there. Our jeep did not have heaters like our cars do these days. We had a lantern in the jeep with us that we had turned on, and we had open sides. This was during the night or very early morning when we heard the news. And of course we were very glad.

Interviewer: Did you receive mail from home?

Veteran: Yes, regularly. As regular as can be expected when you're in battle. Generally, I guess from the time we can back from the reserve for a rest, that's when we got our mail. Sometimes we'd get two or three pieces at a time.

Interviewer: {Can't understand question.}

Veteran: Grew up \_\_\_\_\_ with my parents and my brothers and sister and two friends. That was about it.

Interviewer: Did you write them back?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: What would you write about? Did you write about the war?

Veteran: Well, I wrote as much about it as I could. Our mail was censored to keep from giving away your location from where you were, because that would be information the enemy could use. So I couldn't tell them exactly what we were doing. We went on a raid one night, and all I could tell my parents was that we had a little party with our friends. That's the way I put it. I don't know if they understood that or not. Our 'friends' were the Germans, and the 'party' was the raid.



Interviewer: When you came back to the states, how were you treated?

Veteran: We were treated like princes. First of all, when we got into New York Harbor, we got to see the Statue of Liberty, and the captain said, “Generally, we don’t like people to stand only on one side of the boat, because it could tilt the boat, but I don’t care. Go ahead and do it.” And so we all went out and saw that Great Lady. When we got into New York Harbor, there were fireboats down river, and they would toot their horns. There were people on the docks waving at us and cheering us. Then we went to Camden, New Jersey, I think it was, very quickly, and there we had the same reception, and we had steaks and ice cream and cake and stuff. They treated us royally.

Interviewer: How long after you heard that the war ended did you stay overseas?

Veteran: The war ended in May, and we came home in late September, so we spent that time during those months doing occupation, and then we went from one camp to another camp—relocation camp. Some of us were assigned to other units, and we assumed, because of our status, that we would be coming home rather than go over to the Japanese Theatre. By the time we got home, the Japanese war was over.

Interviewer: Did you have any problems getting back into civilian life?

Veteran: Well, I didn’t think that I did. I didn’t live with my parents and my brothers and sister, but it wasn’t because I had some problems. I considered myself grown up when I got home, and there were some things that I did miss kind of. Before I went, I used to spend Sunday afternoons sitting by the radio and listening to a symphony orchestra. When I got home, I’d do the same thing, except I’d fall asleep a lot, and so my sister would go over and try to turn to another station, and somehow I knew it and I woke up angry. But I think I slipped into civilian life pretty easily. I didn’t have any problems—any feelings of guilt, or any nightmares, or anything like that. I guess there were times when I would hear a loud noise or somewhat listening would sound like an artillery shell coming, I would kind of cower a little bit, but that’s sort of a natural reaction because I was still used to hearing those shells coming in, and when that happened why you tried to get under something to get out of the way.

Interviewer: Did many of your friends go into the war?

Veteran: Many of them did, yes. I had one good friend who fought in northern Germany. He was with the infantry, I believe, and he was up close to Holland and Belgium. I think maybe he got back a little before I did, because I remember his family was there at the station when I came home. Oh, there was also one of my friends who became a fighter pilot. I always thought that would be neat, but my eyes were so poor that they initially told me I wouldn't even go overseas.

Interviewer: Did you have any problems going back to college?

Veteran: No. They treated us very well. While we were in the Army, while the war was on the Congress passed the G.I. Bill of Rights. I had gone to school earlier. After I got home I wanted to finish my college, and by then I had the G.I. Bill of Rights, so the government paid for my tuition and my books, and they gave me \$65 a month to live on. And so that's the way it was for the rest of my college years.

Interviewer: How long were you in college after you came back?

Veteran: Three years after I came back. That money helped. It didn't make me rich or anything, but I had \$30 a month for rent, and that left \$35 a month for food and other things, and that means a dollar a day. Back in those days, of course, you could get a breakfast for a quarter. I'd get my lunch for maybe fifty or seventy-five cents. I don't remember what I did for supper. I usually spent a lot of time studying.

Interviewer: Were there any changes in the United States that you noticed when you came back?

Veteran: Yes, there were changes. There were more soldiers going to college, and they had a lot of soldiers who were getting married, so they had a special dormitory for married people. They were Quonset huts. Quonset huts were as around about as much as it was long. And they would divide them into quarters for fifty families to a Quonset hut. And they were in one particular part of the college

area. Others, like me, lived off campus. But there was a lot more former soldiers at the college.

Interviewer: Did ya'll hear about the internment of Japanese Americans who were in camps in the United States? Did you know about that while you were in the war?

Veteran: We heard that they were in internment camps. We also heard about some, what they called the Nisei—Japanese Americans who fought in Europe. They were crack outfits. They were experts, and of course they were very much into fighting the Germans, because they wanted to prove that they were not traitors or enemies of the United States, but they were loyal citizens.

Interviewer: How did you feel about the internment camps?

Veteran: I really didn't have any feelings back in those days, but now I would consider it something to think about a little bit more. I wouldn't have a problem with one, but back in those days the emphasis was that Japanese could be spies, and the Japanese people, you know like some other races and nationalities, it's hard to tell one from another unless you know them.

Interviewer: Are there any other experiences that you wish to share?

Veteran: I can remember one day—a couple of days in fact—we had our last big push starting the middle of March, and were pushing the Germans back then. I was kind of behind, for some reason, when I started getting called by somebody was calling "Medic," and I saw them in kind of a curved line, a little space there, and what they had was mine netting, and so they called me. And so I started going straight over to them, and they hollered, "No, no, there's mines here." So I came back and they moved away. And our other captain, he himself, this is when I became a medic man, so he pulled me back and I stayed with the other {can't understand rest of statement}. Then the next day we were in another place, and the Germans started shelling us pretty heavy and we had found some bunkers and they were pretty nice and solid and safe there. And so I decided that that would be a pretty good place for me to stay, but almost about the time I got in, I heard somebody holler for 'medic,' {END OF SIDE A}

{BEGINNING OF SIDE B}

**{Unable to understand beginning of Side B. Transcription picks up at first distinguishable point in recording.}**

Veteran: ...calling for a medic, and the medics job was to come and help, and that's what we did, so I went out and took care of two or three people, and got them safely back where they could get better medical treatment. By then it had quieted down, and rather than go back to the bunker, by that time \_\_\_\_\_, so I didn't get to stay in that bunker very long. But that was quite an experience—I didn't really care for it very much when it occurred. One night one of the officers just wrote it up and I wound up getting the Silver Star, which is the third highest medal in the Army. The person who pinned that medal on me was General Anthony McAuliffe. He was the general who said "Nuts" to the Germans at the Battle of Bastogne. He came and became our division commander, and improved things greatly because he was a fighting \_\_\_\_\_. We moved all our supporting artillery \_\_\_\_\_, so we really loved General McAuliffe. He was the one who pinned the medal on me, and he {can't understand rest of this statement—voice muffled}, and he stepped back and he was going to salute, and what happened was he stepped back after he put the medal on me, and raised his arm to salute me, and this just didn't happen. He was a great man. He had a job in chemistry after the war, too. And I wrote a letter to him one time—about November I guess it was—and mentioned what had happened, and I told him I was \_\_\_\_\_, and he wrote back and said it was nice to hear from one of his old soldiers.

Interviewer: {Can't understand any of this question.}

Veteran: No. {Can't understand the majority of response—muffled} They all called me Doc. They thought I was a medical doctor. ...They thought I was dead, and I could tell from their reaction that they were surprised to see me.

Interviewer: Is that all that you want to say?

Veteran: That's all I can think about at the moment.

Interviewer: Would you care if I called you for another interview if there's something else I can think of to ask you?

Veteran: Sure.

Interviewer: I have a release form for you to sign.

{END OF INTERVIEW}