

**Roger M Wells
Veteran**

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Interviewers**

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In Latham New York**

Q: Mr. Wells, what were you doing prior to world II?

RW: Well, I was working in a sort of a defense plant, Hudson Falls, wasn't it? And so, I was exempt from the draft. But after a while, all the young fellas had left, our forces were taking a beating and I got impatient and I tried to enlist in the navy but they said they got all the people they needed from the draft. So, I called the draft board and said if I quit my job will I be drafted and they said definitely. So, I said I'm quitting today and the next day I got my greetings.

Q: When was this?

RW: Well, I tried to enlist in the navy, right at the day of Pearl Harbor. This was a little while after that

Q: Ok, and you went to basic training where?

RW: At the 78th INF DIV in North Carolina

Q: Ok

RW: I was there for about a year and then when it came time to ship out, I was detached and sent to a replacement depot and then we did ship out and at that period, my life was divided into sort of monthly segments. We arrived in England a month before D day, we waded ashore on Utah beach a month after D day and I was assigned to 4th INF Div. and then I was wounded a month later.

Q: What was it like, your experience in basic training?

RW: Oh, there were parts that were pretty rough physically. And you had to learn to obey orders and so forth.

Q: And you were then you were assigned to a replacement center?

RW: After basic training?

Q: After basic training. What was it like being in a replacement as oppose to?

RW: It was pretty disappointing. I had trained with these guys for about a year. I had made some good friends. I thought I was part of crack combat unit. And then I had been shipped out. It was disappointing. But the replacement segment didn't last very long. Soon after I was sent to a replacement center, we shipped overseas, then assigned to 4th DIV

Q: You were assigned to the 4th div in England?

RW: Normandy

Q: Normandy ok, you came into Normandy about a month after?

RW: Yea just a month after D Day and a month after that I was wounded.

Q: So, you were in the boscaje, the field, and the wall fields?

RW: Oh yea, the hedgerows.

Q: Hedgerows. What was it like in the hedgerows?

RW: Terrible!

Q: Were you trained for the hedgerows?

RW: Well no, you didn't know anything about them till you got over there. But all that is says in that little statement that I made there. Most of the fields in that section of Normandy, Were divided into rectangles, by these earthen hedgerows. And the hedgerows, had many years of brush growing on the top of them. And this brush, perfectly concealed the German enemies. We couldn't see them as we were advancing towards them. And that made it pretty rough. My 100-man squad had 300 casualties in the month that I was there.

Q: So, you went in July?

RW: Yes

Q: How did your division approach dealing with the hedgerows was it a learning process? In how to attack a hedgerow?

RW: We tried to use them as a defense as much as we could. But the whole thing was, that we were trying to advance against the Germans and the Germans were invisible behind these hedgerows and we were advancing across open fields. So, our casualty rate was tremendous. Outside of one instance, I don't know of anybody in my outfit that had shot a German, they were invisible. On the other hand, we had 300% casualties.

Q: So you were a rifleman at the point?

RW: Yes, uh that's another little thing. I didn't get into the navy, and I was detached from the 78th DIV because I was near sighted. But the army in its infinite wisdom, made me a number 1 scout in its rifle squad so I guess they put me up front so could see better.

Q: What was the duties of the scout?

RW: Well in any advance, your number 1 man, you were out front, well there's several things about that. I don't know how much you want to go into detail but uh.

Q: Plenty of detail.

RW: Well one time we were advancing across a field, and it was tall I don't know if it was grass or crops or what it was but tall grass and I was number 1 scout so I was out in front. All of a sudden this German jumped out in front of me, but not more than 10 feet away. Scared the hell out of me but then he put up his hands comrade comrade! And so I wanted to know if there any other Germans around so I asked him [unclear] here?

That's what I thought was the right answer the right question. He said nix menin nix menin but later I found out I should asked about soldat because he had told me no mines. And another time we were advancing along a country road that had been cleared of Germans and we took a break near a French farm house. After a while, some of the farmers cautiously appeared. All of a sudden, they realized we were the first Americans they had seen. So there was a big shout went up and rest of the farmers came pouring out the farmhouse. And soon the bottles and glasses appeared. It was a hot thirsty day and drinks were in grave demand. SO being the first one in the column I got the first glass, I though it down appreciably. And we were use to a mild French cider but this was a Calvados and it exploded like a firebomb. I turned away so the guys couldn't see the expression on my face. I sat down to watch, and the reactions that I saw had me rolling on the ground.

Q: So, u were in a 10-man squad?

RW: I think there were 12.

Q: 12 man, ok so you didn't know these guys for long did you?

RW: No actually I can only remember one person's name that was a sergeant that was there when we got there. He was a veteran and that's the only one I remember. But I remember him quite well. He was friend to the GIs. He backed up the recruits when we were having problems but he was a good soldier. Later on we found him with combat fatigue. He was dead to the world. That really after a while it really got to me. I understand that combat fatigue is considered worse than wounds because that sometimes never completely heals and this guy had it. That's the only, SGT O'Brien, is the only name that I remember. Because, well, see 300 replacements in a 100 man squad. You didn't see anybody very long. And, well, I didn't remember any other guy's names.

Q: What kind of equipment were you carrying? You're armed with what as a scout?

RW: Well at first, they gave me a carbon. But then they gave me, well part of the time I had M1 then part of time I had a BAR. As I said, nobody that I know of, had shot a German while I was there. And they were invisible. But there was one instance where, a patrol from the squad had been captured. Everybody killed except one GI they let him go. Trying psychology to frighten us or something. The result was exactly the opposite. Later on a German was captured. And this young GI identified him as the one who had pulled the helmet down over a well-known SGT from our outfit and shot him thru the helmet. Then another veteran in the squad who was a close friend to this SGT, volunteered to take him back to headquarters, a couple minutes later we heard a shot and SGT returned to squad. Nobody said anything but everybody knew what had happened. That's the only German that we know of that got killed.

Q: what did u think of the German as an opponent? Were they good soldiers?

RW: I guess I don't really have any basic opinions about that. I just knew that they were there and we had to get them before they got us if we could.

Q: When you're moving through the hedgerows, how did you maneuver through the hedgerows when you try to capture hedgerows?

RW: The only way you could do it is you get behind one hedgerow and stay there for the night. Then the next day you had to get up and go over the hedgerow and walk across this open field towards the next hedgerow and that was murder.

Q: Any supporting arms? Any armor?

RW: Well the system was that if we advance to a point where we found, we ran into Germans, we withdrew with our dead and wounded, and called for artillery, artillery reduced that position. And then when that was done, the whole process was repeated over and over and over. That's what I say in my little speech. That The GIs who repeatedly advanced against an invisible enemy. They were as heroic as anybody else.

Q: What was the circumstances of your wounding?

RW: Well, I don't know how much of story you want to get into but this one night the squad was positioned behind a forward hedgerow, with no friendly forces on either side. So consequently, guards had to be posted on both side hedgerows to prevent surprise flanking attack. So, it became obvious, well at the right hand of the forward hedgerow where we were positioned. There was opening to allow passage of farm wagons. Now during the night the German machine gun had been firing off and on with no effect due to the darkness. And it became obvious, when it became daylight, the two right flank guards posted near that opening would become clearly visible and easy targets. I was one of those guards. I was aware of our situation and my companion was pretty sure was but neither one mentioned it. We held our positions. The right gunner, spotted the target and opened fired. My friend was hit in the arm, I was hit in both legs.

Q: Were you immediately evacuated?

RW: Yes, they carried me over to an ambulance. I had a night long ride over shell torn road in the black out ambulance. It was a little uneasy this one German fighter plane came over looking for something to shoot up. Then we were evacuated to England and the transport which ran off the runway to some uncreditable language from the stretchers then later on we were on the hospital train in England. Stopped at stations where passengers were waiting on the platform and the windows were open and the cars, and u could hear people say oh what a pity those poor brave boys. But then two sexy girls walk by and the whistles. After whistles and shouting died down, the apparent attitude on the platform changed. They were saying Oh those blasted bloody yanks they whistled at the women like they dead

Q: So your care was pretty good?

RW: Oh yes, in the army hospital for most the winter months. I remember during the Battle of the Bulge, we could hear the radio broadcasting that about the GIs were freezing and dying there. I almost felt guilty laying on the clean white sheets and warm comfortable bed. Sorry

Q: It's ok

Q: You were in the hospital for about how long?

RW: For most the winter months.

Q: When you recovered, what was your next assignment?

RW: Well I was on what they call limited duty, new order infantry. So, I was sent back to England. Assigned to 457TH anti-aircraft artillery. And that was a picnic.

Q: What type of weapons were they using?

RW: Well we had 44 ml cannons and quad mounted that's four barrel 50 Cal machine guns

Q: And you were stationed in England?

RW: No, no this was back in Europe going toward to Germany.

Q: So, you were in basically support?

RW: Well yes, well I did capture some Germans though.

Q: Tell us about that.

RW: So we were so far behind the front, and the country so peaceful. There was this rule that anyone leaving gun position wear a helmet and carry a rifle. However, were so far behind the lines that this rule wasn't really rigorously enforced. So, one day I'm walking along a path in the woods and I see these grey blankets lying on the ground, here's these three soldiers lying there asleep with their rifles beside them. I didn't have any weapons so I carefully turned around and tip toed out of there. Went down to the road and found a MP an armed MP and we went back and captured the Germans. The two younger ones were glad it was over and really willing to cooperate. But the veteran non-commissioned he looked at his men with contempt and so forth. It was a souvenir time I pulled an epilate out but the non-commissioned I don't know what happened to it, my hand slipped and hit him in the jaw and I'll never forget that glare I got

Q: So you were in this anti-aircraft unit for about how long?

RW: Oh..... well, its history I guess... I don't know

Q: Till the end of the war?

RW: I was there till the end, till the peacetime yea.

Q: And this unit was stationed where??

RW: We were gradually advancing, but it was nothing like the infantry is. The big trucks. You're just lying on top of the canvas enjoying the scenery. It was a picnic.

Q: What army were you with at that point, what division?

RW: I think I was, oh that was 4/57th anti-aircraft artillery brigade I think it was. I guess were all part of the 3rd army.

Q: Patton

RW: Patton yea

Q: What did you think of him?

RW: I thought he was sort of a lucky bastard. He went barreling across the country. His supply lines could've been cut off at any time but he was lucky.

Q What did you think of most of your officers?

RW: Some were fine, some wonderful guys some were not so good. I remember one time in the anti-aircraft while we were in there the first German jet planes came into being. And Once in a while they would come over us, one day one dropped some bombs in our area. And a battery SGT running for cover tripped over an ammunition box and fell scratching his arm. Later I heard him say to the battery commander some of the fellas think I should get a purple heart but I don't think so, do you sir? But the officer, I went to the officer complains saying purple heart is meant for wounds suffered by enemy's actions. But the officer apparently liked the idea of having be medaling numbers of his unit. The GI got the Purple Heart. Whatever the SGT got his purple heart. But that's... I don't know whether this is going to come out of the tape but when a person or a unit is chicken shit there's no other word for it.

Q: It's ok. Where were you when the war in Europe ended?

RW: Well we were in Germany. Actually, as I remember it. It was a nice area had swimming pools and all that stuff. And what I remember most about that is that I felt like everybody else did. The world had gone through such hell now that this is over, if the different governments didn't make sure that didn't happen again, they had better but they didn't. They started arguing right away between the governments. And I don't know that was pretty disgusting.

Q: Was there any rumor about once war in Europe was over that you end up going to Japan?

RW: Well yes. When the war ended in Europe I was still in this anti-aircraft unit. And one day I met some fellas from the 4th INF DIV and they said they were going being shipped back to the states and then to Asia, Japan, the other war. And there was a provision where you can apply for transfer to your old unit. So applied because I figured it got to the states and back to the Pacific the war would be over there. But turns out I was too late they were already moving on and I was rejected so I had to stay with them.

Q: Did you get to go on leave very much?

RW: Yea I went to Hitler's Burgess garden, went to Paris, Poland. In passing went to England and Scotland. Scotland was beautiful but I live in Lake George and I think Lake George is more beautiful.

Q: A little plug there but that's ok. Did you interact much with the German civilians towards the end?

RW: They seemed very pleasant and congenial. I got that feeling they didn't realize that the task tactics that Hitler's people had used on the Jews and the fact that they were trying to take over the world. I kind of discussed this with them. I asked them how come you people followed Hitler the way you did? Some of them would say, well before he came into power the country was in such terrible shape and he improved it so much we had to be loyal. And I said well what about his idea about taking over the world. They said well we don't know too much about that. And they didn't know anything about the concentration camps and the gas ovens and so forth. They didn't believe that. And I

understand they were taken on tours of those camps later to show them. Oh, and when we were going through the country with anti-aircraft we ran across a lot of prison struck guys lying beside the road half dead wondering if these other people have seen them.

Q Do you have any, do you have a single most, single memory that you take away from your experience?

RW: No not a single one I guess. There are different types. Some are fairly good memories and some are not so good. I don't remember...I don't think I have anything. Just recently, if you read that little speech I wrote up, I can't really understand how people can change the way they did. Like Myself and millions of other American citizens whose main pursuit was comfort and luxury. All sudden their aggressive combatants going into battle regardless of life and injury without hesitation. And this something ill quite never understand. Combat was not talked about or even thought about for many years after the war. We wanted to forget it. Lately it seems to have resurfaced. After more than 50 years were now going to have a memorial. But what transforms a person from something the exact opposite of what he used to be is not understandable I guess I'll completely never understand that.

Q: Do you believe it was worthwhile, the American...

RW: Oh yea it had to be world war one and two. We had no choice if we wanted to stay free. But the ones after that, is the big question. I guess I'm a little isolationist. But I think, were involved with where our military people are boys, it doesn't make sense.

Q: Do u have any other things you would like to share with us?

RW: I'll probably think of something later but uh

Q: You can always jot them down and mail them off to me

RW: Well I think it probably pretty well covered in that little paper I wrote.

Q: That's great. Mr. Wells, thank you very much this was a very good interview

RW: How do I, my family?

Q: A copy? It's going to take a while... (recording cut out)

Interview Over