

Henry Dinder
Narrator

Nick Bergeckel
Dave Bohl
Madeline Addo
Ashley Wells
Kristen Zells
Laura Rojiack
Interviewers

Interviewed on April 13, 2005
Orchard Park High School
Orchard Park, New York

Henry Dinder HD
School Teacher ST
Nick Bergeckel NB
Dave Bohl DB
Madeline Addo MA
Ashley Wells AW
Kristen Zells KZ
Laura Rojiack LR

HD: My name is Henry Dinder, I am in my eighties. I'm a world war two veteran and this about my outfit and what I did. Would you like to hear it?

All: yes we would

HD: You have to go back to 1942-43; I was with the 299th combat engineers. The 299th combat engineers are a relatively old outfit and variable in combat participation. Theirs is a record that can boast many stellar accomplishments. Originally a part of the 355th engineer central service regiment, the 299th was activated at Camp White, Oregon on March 4th 1933. After extensive maneuvers with the parent outfit, the 299th was made up with mostly upstate New Yorkers. Most of the personal came from Fort Niagara, New York and joined the unit in July 1943. The battalion participated in Oregon maneuvers. When the regiment was activated, Major Milton Duel commanded it and was shortly replaced by Major George Moony with Major Jewett acting as executive officer. The outfit was moved multiple times from Oregon to Fort Louise in Washington down to Fort Pearce Florida for amphibious underwater demolition training; then at Camp Picket

Virginia for infantry field work. The regiment was then moved to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey and then to the port of embarkation overseas. The battalion sailed on the morning of April sixth 1944. On the sixteenth of April, the ship dropped anchor in the harbor of Cardiff, Wales. After an eventful crossing of the Atlantic, unit training and combat briefing took place aboard the ship. The 229th was placed upon arrival to the united kingdom first army and went through extensive underwater demolition training and tactics. On June first 1944, the outfit moved out of the embarkation area at the Port of Walleth. On the morning of June sixth, D-day, the 299th was in the first wave of troops that hit Omaha and Utah beach ; in fact part of the regiment were on the beach before any other American soldier. The 299th was the only engineer outfit to land on both Utah and Omaha at H hour plus two minutes. Six gaps were breached in the forward defense wall fifty yards wide including Belgian fortified elements of C-gates as well as submerged mine fields.

HD: Would you like me to continue reading? There are eight pages and I am on page two.

MA: We have twenty-five minutes so we should do some questions if that's alright?

HD: Okay not a problem.

DB: We just need to hear more personal experiences.

All: [discussing how the interview should continue]

HD: I'll leave this book here for you guys. It details what we did in the war from the Normandy invasion to central Europe to the Auckland's to the Battle of the Bulge to the invasion of Germany and the end of the war.

[Prepares for interviewers questions]

LR: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

HD: I was drafted. Prior to being drafted, when I was fifteen, Matt Seilick and I lied about our age and signed up with the 106th field artillery in Buffalo. We went to camp twice and when the National Guard was federalized they were sending us to Alabama. Matt went but I didn't go because my mother was nervous. So one of the commanders called me into his office and asked me how old I was so from there I knew the jig was up and I walked out of the office. Then later on, of course, I was drafted.

KZ: Why did you join the army?

HD: I think I joined because all of my friends were going. It was a national emergency so the drafted was started and my group was picked, group H. but being drafted didn't mean you were enlisted right away, you had to pass a physical before you were sworn into service.

AW: What was your training camp experience like?

HD: it consisted of going to Fort Niagara, you were processed, you were tested and afterwards you were sent to wherever you were needed. Our group, a bunch of guys from upstate New York, was sent cross country on trains to Camp White in Oregon for basic training. We trained in field maneuvers and it was just like boot camp that you have

probably heard about. There were a lot of marches and calisthenics. We were primarily a construction battalion. We mainly built bridges and put up communication lines. I had an ankle injury so they put me on temporary duty in the kitchen since I couldn't go on marches. After my stint in the kitchen they asked me if I wanted a job; so I became a cook. So I stayed with that assignment all through the war.

MA: You said you joined with some friends; did you stay with them most of the time throughout the war?

HD: Some people stayed that I knew from civilian life and others I grew up and went to school with. A lot of guys from the western New York area so it was a close knit group of guys. Once you're placed with your guys at basic you become close and you stick together through the war similar to high school classes. You guys start out as freshman together and then continue together until graduation. You're close like family even though you aren't. I think that is the whole idea for the military no matter what branch; keep each other close like family.

MA: After the war was over did you stay in contact with those people?

HD: We'll get to that part later I'm still in basic training!

All: [laughs]

HD: After basic training we got involved with demolition work. We were taught how to destroy obstacles that we knew the enemy was going to use against us. There were obstacles in the shore line, the C-gates, so somebody had to go in a blow those obstacles up to make room for allied troops to follow. This was all under enemy fire. We were down low on the shore [motion low with hand] and the enemy was up high [motions high with other hand] so you could imagine it was like shooting fish in a barrel. We lost a lot of men and many more were wounded. It was a very sad event for me. [Slightly emotional] it still bothers me to this day. I'm sure any combat veteran would tell you the same thing, you never forget. It is an experience that stays with you for the rest of your life. Not because of the action of what happened or how it affected you but it is the people you knew and lived together with. It was family. The battalion was composed of A B and C batteries and the battery was broken up into platoons and the platoons were broken up into squads. Each company had its own leader or commander and they were assigned certain duties because you didn't go in together you were spread out over the beach. The initial assault on the beaches was composed of different groups with different objectives in the landing crafts. Each group had an assignment and needed to complete it in about three minutes because there was a lot of traffic coming in behind them that had to do their job as well. Some of your friends made it through ok but you really remember the ones that didn't. it affects a lot of people emotionally including me. You dream about it sometimes and the funny thing is, the friends you lost there never get old in the dreams. They're just like you remember them back in the forties. Why that is I don't know.

DB: where did you travel in the service?

HD: Started in Niagara, then to Oregon. From Oregon to Fort Louise, Washington because we were scheduled to go into the pacific but our outfit and sister outfit were

withdrawn and sent to Florida for amphibious training were we realized that our assignment was in Europe and not the pacific. So from the U.K. we went to Normandy and then onto Belgium. Next was Belgium to Luxemburg and then to Germany and the end of the war; May eight 1945.

HD: That was a fast trip!

All: [laughs]

MA: Did you get homesick when you were in combat?

HD: Oh yes, I was lucky enough to get home while we were in the states between camps which are called a furlough. You got fourteen days and it is always nice to get home but it was always nice to get back with the guys they were family too. But after the war ended we were sent to Marsalis, in the south of France. While there we were being issued jungle equipment which meant the war in Japan was still on. But within a couple of days the bombs fell and of course the war over there was over. So we stayed in Marsalis, which was a staging area to send guys home. A points system was created to decide who went home first. The people who spent the most time had more points and went home first. So from Marsalis I went on a ship headed for New Jersey to Camp Picket. From there I went to New York by train and by train again to Buffalo into the arms of my family ending my military service. After the military I had the GI bill coming to me which would pay for four years of my education so I took advantage of that. I got an associate degree in metallurgical technology and was offered a job by republic steel. I changed my mind because I didn't particularly care for the work environment. So I went to the Westinghouse where I worked for thirty plus years and retired in 1982.

HD: So 1982 until now is?

All: 23 years

HD: [laughing] oh dear I've been retired that long?

All: [laughs]

HD: I was a senior designer, I worked on the ac/dc part where we built engines and motors of various sizes and after that I retired and enjoyed every minute of it.

DB: do you have any specific photographs of things that went on?

HD: There are some in here [the book on the table] the photos are kind of dark but they are of all the places that we went. But are you asking if I have any photos that I took?

DB: or just any photos in general.

HD: It was kind of hard to take photos in combat but somebody managed to take some for this book. The pictures in the book are of some of the stuff we built some of the places we went to but I don't like to talk about me as much as I do the group.

LR: when you guys were traveling, how did you stay entertained?

HD: We didn't do too much; the people who would come and perform for the troops were too scared to get near the enemy lines so they kept more towards the rear. The only time someone came and preformed for us was in Belgium. During war time you didn't always have the luxury of taking a shower or a bath so you smelt pretty ripe sometimes.

All: [laughs]

HD: they way we showered were through the shower outfits. These guys had the job of coming in and setting up showers for us. They brought the trucks in that had the heating elements on them. So when we finally got to shower in the hot water there was nothing like it, I'll never forget it.

All: [laughs]

HD: the entertainment that we found in Europe after the war was Dean Martin and Hughie Lewis in France for a USO show. They were the two that stuck in my mind but there were other troops who performed by putting on acts or doing comedy.

AW: Did you guys play any games with cards or something like that?

HD: Yes, we did crap shooting with dice aboard the ship because there really wasn't much else to do on the ship. They weren't cruise ships or luxury liners but you had a place to sleep. It was tight and crowded but there were thousands of people aboard the ship. If someone had a record you could listen to that but it would be the same songs day after day after day.

All: [laugh]

HD: I'll never forget that song Marie Lana, I cringe every time I hear it.

All: [laugh]

HD: usually in combat outfits there isn't much room for entertainment. If you had some free time and someone had a baseball you would throw it at each other but it wasn't all shooting all the time. Sometimes we would be a support unit for another division and build bridges so they could advance. Behind the first guys we sent through were the light arms and then the field artillery. We also built the bridges that could handle the weight of the artillery pieces. Some of the pictures in the book show the bridges we constructed. We built saw mills to help gather wood for other projects. When we went into the Rhine with the 9th armored division we stopped the Germans from blowing up a famous railroad bridge called the Remagen Bridge. We salvaged what was left of the bridge and got some troops of ours over the Rhine. A few days afterwards the bridge collapsed and we had to build pontoon bridges across it. The trouble with the pontoon bridge was how vulnerable it was. The German air force would strafe through and shoot the pontoons flat. But as time went on more and more troops came through and went further into Germany. We moved forward to a place called Bastogne in the Arden forest where the Germans had a counter attack. This was called the Battle of the Bulge. It was the first time we had experienced a setback so it was disheartening. The counter attack was so quick that it surprised us and everyone was scattered so we couldn't get a concentrated effort to fight back. So we were pushed back and I ended up in the back of a truck at a place called St. Vith. We regrouped with the 3rd army there and had a phalanx coming up from Italy towards us. Fortunately we gathered up enough soldiers to attack the Germans and it was over really quick. But those are some of the surprises of war, you could be winning and out of nowhere you're losing by surprise.

ST: so you were in the Battle of the Bulge?

HD: yes and I'm still fighting it! [pats his stomach and laughs]

All: [laughs]

[The Interview finishes with a group photo]