Melvin W. Schmidt
Veteran

Interviewed on December 11, 2001
Darwin R. Barker Library Historical Museum
Fredonia, NY
Recorded by Michael and Christine Durgin Cordrado (@00:25 spelling?)

I: Today we have with us -
MS: Melvin W. Schmidt

I: Your birthday and current address?
MS: March 2, 1925. 3274 Turner Road, Jamestown New York

I: In what war did you serve, your branch of service, and your highest rank?
MS: World War 2, I was in the United States Army. PFC (Private First Class). The reason I made PFC was because all men overseas for eighteen months automatically got it. So I made it the hard way [Both laugh]

I: How did you get involved in World War 2, and at what age?
MS: I was seventeen years old in my senior year in high school in East Aurora, New York. In those days the war was going pretty strong in the Pacific Islands. They were taking our seniors right out of class and putting them in the Army wherever you wanted to go. A lot them didn't have a chance to finish high school. I'm glad to see now they are giving diplomas to some of the guys. The day before I turned eighteen, I went down to the Buffalo enlistment group, and enlisted in the United States Army. They swore me in and gave me all my shots. I just put on my application that I wanted to finish high school. I never heard anything until my last month in high school. I graduated from high school on the 24th of June and on the 29th of June I was in Fort Dix, New Jersey so I did not have too much time. All I did at Fort Dix was knock beetles into a jar of water for two weeks until they sent us down to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for Basic Artillery Training.

At Fort Bragg we trained like every other soldier does, all the calisthenics, firing range drills, all that kind of stuff. We went on maneuvers. One thing I remember about Fort Bragg was Sargent Cheetum (@3:02 spelling?) our instructor. He was a brutal man. Myself and my buddies all hated him. But when we got overseas, we loved him because he taught us a lot of important stuff. I was just an average American boy going into the service. Another thing I remember about Fort Bragg, I was probably in the Chaplain's office more than anywhere else because I went to visit him. I was brought up in a home where there were no alcoholic beverages so I did not miss that stuff. When we got a weekend pass, we would go to Fayetteville, North Carolina most of my friends went out drinking. I instead found refuge in a little youth service center in that town where I met fine people, a nice place to be. We slept on the couches, and had a real nice weekend there.

But while I was there, I have a story I tell about the cross I had and what the cross means to me (which is another story completely) but I will tell you about the first part of the story. I had a piece of leather that I brought around and laced up. Inside of it I made a plastic cross and

placed a picture of my mother and dad; my brother, who is in the Navy and his wife; and my first nephew. It was the perfect size to fit in my field jacket pocket. I carried that all through my Army career. During Christmas of 1943 we were still in the States waiting at Fort Dix, New Jersey when we got a pass to go to Washington, D.C. I was as homesick as everyone else. There we met three charming, very nice Air Force girls, and we all wound up at church together at midnight. We took them to their bus stop and said goodbye. They invited us to their air camp the next day for Christmas dinner. We went and had a nice time. Then we reported back to Fort Dix and were sent to Camp Shanks, New Jersey which was the point of embarkation. We sailed out of the New York harbor around January 2, 1944. We walked up the gangplank of the ship, they handed two cartons of cigarettes, a shaving kit and writing material. So all of us guys were up on deck, it was a Liberty ship just a little transport. It was an emergency ship made into a troop ship, and we all started to smoke. So the government got me smoking to begin with.

It took us fifteen days to get overseas in our convoy. I was sick twelve of those days. I would not have cared if they threw me over the side, that is how rough it was. We landed in Bristol, England. I'll never forget, it was evening when we pulled in. It was dark and there was a sentry walking the dock. We asked him “what's new, what is happening?” since nobody knew what was going on. He said “Nothing new, Churchill is back.” We did not know he was gone.[Both laugh] They took us by train down to Cardiff, South Wales. We went over as replacements, so they put us in a replacement depot right in town. We had it made there because we could sneak through the fence anytime and get fish and chips, or whatever we wanted. Next we were taken for training in the area where the movie “How Green Was My Valley” was filmed. They trained us as replacements, but we did not know what we were going to be. I was trained as an artillery mechanic in Basics, but once you go to France as a replacement, you can wind up as anything. You can be in Infantry or Engineers, wherever they need you.

The invasion came on June 6th, we sailed on June 8th [@8:15 Unclear] Plymouth, England on a British troop ship. The closer we got to France, the more we heard. I never saw so many ships, planes in the sky, flares and bombing. As we approached the coast, the English sailors started throwing their nets over both sides of the boat. That was for us to crawl down. We looked down and saw the little landing barge, they looked like little match boxes in the sea. Once you got halfway down, you know there is no turning back. It's just go. We went down about five or ten at a time. The boat and the landing barge are moving all the time. The guys that get down first hold the rope away from the ship so you don't get banged against it. One of our guys got tangled up in the ladder and caught upside down with the rope between his legs and his gun dangling off his shoulder. The English sailor crawled down to help but our man fell over backwards. On the landing barge were these two-by-four braces covered with canvas which broke his fall and we were able to catch him. By now our adrenaline is flowing pretty hard. We heard the noise, we know what is going on; but we don't know anything about war, we are green. The only time I was away from home my whole life was at Boy Scout camp.

But anyway, we started towards the beach. You have your rifle on your shoulder, your pack on your back, your trenching tool, mess kit, drinking water, grenades and gas mask. You are pretty well weighted down. My biggest fear is I cannot swim. If this landing barge does not get far enough, or gets caught on a reef, I am going to drown. By luck we went in, they put the landing barge down and the order was to go. The water was up to my chest. That is when my cross got its first baptism under fire you might say. That cross and I went through Normandy, through the hedgerows.

Why I was not hit, I don't know. For some reason I am still here today. It's not for me to say, only one guy knows and he is upstairs. For the first three months of that war we slept in a foxhole every night. If we were in holding position, you get to sleep two nights in it. If you were in a moving position, you dug one every day. Not only did we have to dig our own foxholes, I was assigned to a wiring group. We operated the forward switchboard, just a little field switchboard. We laid the wires from there to our forward observers for their main communications. They would rather use wire communications because the enemy could zero in on the radio communication. I have pictures of the foxholes in my book. It is a hole in the ground about six feet long and three feet deep. As long as you are below the ground when a shell hit near you, it did not knock you unconscious. The fragments blew over the top of you so you felt pretty safe in there. You can curl up with your helmet at night when we had a chance to sleep, but we were on the go twenty-four hours a day. You had one blanket for as long as it lasted, and one change of clothes. For the first three months in France, we had no change of clothes. What you had on your feet you wore. If I told you I did not take my shoes off for a month, would you believe me? People don't believe that but that was true, you peeled your socks off.

But we slept in holes and each night we dug two main holes for two guards. There were probably about twelve men in my battalion and we were accountable to each other for operating the switchboard, laying and fixing the wire if it got shot up. They had a lot of vehicles called “Weasels” which are Jeeps with tracks on them for amphibian use which were brought onto shore to get through the hedgerows. There were tanks, guns, shrapnel and the 88mm antiaircraft artillery guns which all tore up our communication lines. When they needed repair it was up to our guys on duty at that time, two or three hours at a time, to do it. You picked up the line from the switchboard and you start out with it in your hands. This could be at night and you better know the password or you are not going to make it back. We had a different password every night. We also had clickers [makes a motion with his thumb and finger]. It was a thing for invasions, the paratroopers had them. If you were challenged, you would click your clicker and they would know you were an American. But the German's caught onto that too after a while so we came up with passwords every night. So you pick up the line and you walk along the top of the ground with that line and if you got challenged by the Infantry boys or guards you better give the password and fast. When we did hit the end of the wire, and nothing else was there, you know you found a break. You then search around, knowing it can't be too far away. If you can't find the other end of that you just splice on a new line together. I had a little crank-up field phone to test if the line was still good or not, the kind you see on M.A.S.H. The phone clips onto the wires, you cranked it up and if the switchboard and the front answered, you knew you had them. So you would tie them both together and go back. Many times the shells would come in, you would dive for cover, you come back and find out the line was cut again. There was always that fear. The Weasels, the tank tracks, everything would cut these things up. They could not see them, the wire was fine like a thermostat wire. Back at the main switchboard, they would use a heavier wire which took more abuse. So that is the way we went through France.

My first duty when I went in as a replacement we went to a rendezvous area and dug in for the night. I had a buddy with me who was a teacher in Tallahassee, Florida Cecil Rose [@16:30 spelling?] he is gone now. Cecil was about ten years older than me so he was like a Dad as far as I was concerned, or an older brother. Flares were falling, they are dropping bombs. We were going to take out a hedgerow which took up about an acre of land. We were hacking away

at the brush all of a sudden, the German's dropped a flare which lit up the countryside like it was daylight. All of a sudden he lets out a scream and runs out of the hedgerow and I ran right out after him. When we got to another spot, we just dug a hole and got into it. It was a two-man foxhole.

We went back to that spot the next day and he saw a dead German on the top of the hedgerow. Half of his head was blown away. It was enough to scare anybody. Our outfit did not pick us up until the next day. They came along in a Jeep and a trailer and gave us the job of picking up the dead bodies of both the German and American soldiers. You could not pick them up by their hands or feet because they were already deceased two or three days. You picked them up by their jacket cuffs or their pant legs. We put them on a stretcher, rolled them onto the Jeep. We had to stack them up like cord wood. I will never forget that as long as I live, it is something you just do not get out of your mind. From that point on, all across France, that is all you saw. Each station, guys that never made it were laid out like cord wood. You would go into a town, walk over dead Germans that were killed by machine guns, grenades or shells. Some of them were our guys too. It was hard to stomach.

Going back to when I went to Normandy, the paratroopers went in first. God Bless those guys, they did a heck of a job and went through hell. I have a story coming up about that. The airborne boys in the gliders, sometimes an airplane would pull two or three gliders over to France, would have to land those things after they were released, they did not know the territory. It's just like anything else once you started down in a glider, there is no turning back you are going to go down. Well the Germans were very smart, in every hedgerow they planted tree stumps about every twenty feet. They could not land the glider without busting it up. We saw gliders with broken pieces, some guys never got out of them. The ones that did were fortunate. In the gliders were small guns, 25- and 50-pound Howitzers and ammunition supply loads, but there were fighting men in there also.

Which brings me to a story. [unclear @20:36...Pierres?] one of the towns we went through to this day there is still a parachute with a dummy soldier hanging from one of the church steeple that they maintain as a memorial. I have pictures of that from a friend. I was laying wire one day and three German soldiers came out of a hedgerow and gave themselves up to me. I was all by myself and did not know what to do with these guys. So I started marching them back to the rear, I had a job to do but had to leave it because I could not trust these guys. Well, four paratroopers saw me and said they would take the prisoners back for me. I probably should not tell this story, but it has been on my mind for a long time. So they took the German soldiers and as they turned the hedgerow, I had gone back to my work, I heard a clucking sound. I know those guys never made it back there. But this was war, I feel responsible for those German soldiers because I did not take them all the way back. But what was I to do? I trust my soldier friends too, we were all buddies. They went through a hell of a lot, what they saw the first day. Probably it out matched everything we saw the whole time we were over there and I had eleven months combat duty. I knew in my mind the German soldiers never got back, but that is over with. I hated the Germans too.

To go back, one of the reasons I enlisted in the service was that Hitler [unclear@22:53] Poland, Germany, Czechoslovakia, France, then he was going after England. Who knows if the next target was the United States? I did not want my Mother and Dad to have anything to do with this war. But know they have dragged the war into our own country with the bombing of

the Towers (World Trade Center).
But I didn't want that to happen to my parents and that is why I enlisted. I hope you don't mind that I am going back in time. I played in my high school band for four years. In my senior year, I was asked to play in the New York State Army Guard Band, 55th Regiment in Buffalo. So I did. I couple of us went down and enlisted in the Regiment NY State Army Guard Band and played with them. We played for the parades and events. They gave me a discharge for that when I enlisted in the Army.

Back to France, there are quite a few battles that stick in your mind. One I recall is Hill 122. It was a good size elevation. It had trees and a lot of mud at that time of year. Our Infantry boys take the hill, then a counterattack happened, take it/lose it, take it/lose it. It was raining so much they couldn't get our airplanes up there, but finally they brought enough artillery that they took the hill. It was a beautiful observation point which is how they could tell everything we were doing. I'll never forget that because it was you were up to your knees in mud as you were trying to bring in the wires. Another battle I remember was called the Falaise Gap. [unclear @24:56 to 25:30] When they saw they were being cut off, they made a dash to get back to their own lines. I was with the 9th Division, our mission along with quite a few other Divisions was to cut off that gap of land. The enemy would not give up. So we brought airplanes over for about a day and a half and just peppered the heck out of them. Our artillery just lambasted them, about 1,000 shells a day. They demolished it. There were a lot of horse-drawn wagons and cannons. [unclear @26:43]. It was a terrible sight, nothing but dead soldiers and horses. There was nothing alive in that gap. Those that did get a chance to surrender were lucky. It was something you do not forget, the stench lingers in your nostrils for a long time.

Okay, we went through Reims, France which is south of Paris when our troops went through Paris so we did not see any of that. Now we are getting into the countryside, and farm yards. We had to decide where we wanted to sleep. If you were in a position where you did not want to dig a foxhole, you went into a hayloft in a barn. If the town was empty, we went into a basement. Any place where you could get out of the elements and tried to get some sleep. You had to pull your two-hour guard duty every single night like everybody else did. When we got to Verdun, it was raining very hard. We were getting ready to assault the Meuse River. It was the rainy season, and I got caught sleeping in the rain and developed a very bad case of pneumonia. My friends carried me over to an aid station, put in an ambulance and taken back to a field hospital, which was a tent hospital. I was there for three days and received penicillin shots every three hours to try and get my fever down. They finally took us in meat wagons (ambulances) again and out to an air strip to Commando planes which were made right here in Buffalo, New York. They were troop transports and were to take us to a hospital ship and started us back to Cherbourg, which was a long way from the front. We were looking forward to it. But the rain was so bad, they grounded us in Paris. We went back onto the ambulance, into a hospital until the next day; then back onto an ambulance, on stretchers to the hospital ship and back to Cherbourg (this is in Verdun, France). I was there about two weeks, making it about a month and a half that I was gone from the outfit. It probably saved my life, I will tell you why.

They put us on forty-and-eight boxcars, French trains. That meant it could hold forty men, or eight horses. They threw some hay on the floor for you to use as your bed for two days as you

headed towards the front. We got outside of Paris, near Reims, and went to a base villa there while the troops were up in the Verdun area which was quite away off. We had tents there and received new rifles and equipment. We had to go to the rifle range and on the way back it started to rain heavily. I got soaked again. I went back to my tent and laid on the floor, we had blankets but no cots. The rain was running right under the tent. I was wheezing pretty bad by 2:00 in the morning. The guys carried me over to the aid station. They got the doctor out of bed, he put me in an ambulance and sent me back to a hospital in Paris for another two weeks. That probably saved my life. Also, back in Normandy for three months, all we had to eat was K-rations. It was a box of goodies the size of a Cracker-Jacks box. They had little cans of ham and eggs, corned beef hash, some of them we didn't even know what it was. There was a chocolate bar that tasted like Ex-lax so that was the reason for that. A few small dry cookies, which today they call Melba toast. And a pack that had five cigarettes in it. They kept us smoking all the time we were there [laughs].

Once we did get back to France we got C-rations which was nicer stuff. That can of hash was good hot or cold. The rest of the food we scrounged for on the farmland. It was getting towards fall now, and we began to look for better places to sleep. Most of the farms had what were called potato bunkers out in the field. A potato bunker is dug out of the ground with logs arched over the top with grass and hay over it. It had a trap door, it was a nice haven. We had about five guys in one of these places with a little patrol stove. Once the trap door was closed and we sealed it up good, no one could see the light of the stove. We cooked up a nice potato soup with a bouillon cube and water. That was good eating! That was the cream of the crop. It was the way we survived.

When I finally got back to my outfit at the front, we were all worried because that was the time of the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium. They were taking air corps guys, all kinds of men to the Infantry in Belgium. My buddy and I said if we don't get back to our outfit we better go AWOL (Absent Without Official Leave) we better go and find our outfit because we knew those guys. I finally did get back to my outfit the day before Christmas in 1945. Since I left, they were in a holding position. They had made it across the Meuse River. The Germans blew up all the dams. Five of my buddies had drowned in that river trying to lay wire across it. They weren't there when I got back. I had some new guys to get acquainted with again. But that is war, you pass it off, you keep going. So, Christmas dinner was nice. We were in a farm house, there was a guy in the outfit named “Desperate” who was from Kentucky, a real hillbilly. We weren't supposed to kill chickens, but he showed us how. He would skin them in a way that all that was left was the meat. We found a frying pan and some lard and we had fried chicken. Then we played poker, if you won a hand you got a piece of fried chicken. That was our Christmas Eve. [both laugh]

The day after Christmas they loaded us up on the weapons carriers and Jeeps and headed for Belgium to relieve the troops. It was the coldest ride I ever had in my life. You are on the top of a vehicle with no protection, it was quite a ride. It wasn't snowing when we left Verdun, but it was in Belgium. We were lucky enough to have stopped the Germans, and pushed them back. The sights you saw up there, how they butchered our guys. Men frozen to death in trenches. We lost more guys in Belgium from trench foot (the freezing of the feet and hands), pneumonia and that kind of stuff, than as casualties of being shot. Well, we got through that, then we got through the Maginot Line, which was the French Line, then we crossed the Meuse River again. Where there was a river from there on, we crossed it, the Danube, Mannheim, the Rhine, we had to cross them all in pontoon boats. We got up as far as the Rhine River, there

were so many troops waiting to cross the Rhine since the bridges were blown up. We had to wait for the engineers to get bridges built across but every time they would get them half way across the river, the planes flew by they would blow them up again. Finally they brought up so much antiaircraft artillery it was impossible for any plane to fly through it. So the engineers got the bridge across. We were in a position one night alongside the Rhine River and found a wine cellar. Of course you know find in a wine cellar, I wound up with two bottles of champagne inside my jacket. All the guys had two bottles, then we found a hay barn and we were feeling pretty good. I made up for the non-drinking part of my early days in the service. I went outside to do a little job, but I don't remember because I must have fallen asleep out there. The next day we had to cross the Rhine River so good thing the guys found me. We started across the Rhine in our pontoons. The Germans flew by at a real high altitude and dropped what they called “anti-personnel” mini-bombs. They made a whistling sound and you could see them hit the water but we did get across.

In Germany we went through a lot of towns, there was fighting. I remember the first time I saw General George Patton, we were in a convoy. For some reason our convoy stopped and when that happens your antiaircraft guns immediately pull off into a field and set up. Well Patton came down the road with his two ivory-grip pistols at his side, standing up in his Jeep (just like you picture him on tv) cursing away- I won't say it “Get these……trucks moving, what the hell do you think this is a picnic!” and all that kind of stuff. That was the first and last time I ever saw him. He was a good soldier, I don't think he cared very much about his men. All he wanted to do was win battles no matter what the price of manpower it was. But maybe that is what a war is, you have to sacrifice to win your objective. I don't know, I was not an officer, so I can't tell you.

Okay, now we are going across the Siegfried Line in Germany. That was something else, it was filled with what they called Dragon Teeth (I have pictures of that too.) They are pyramid shaped cement blocks spaced every four feet and the entrance ways were made of steel bars so our tanks could not get through. It would knock off their tracks, so our engineers had to blast our way through those. Those engineer boys are just like our infantry boys, when they had a job to do, they did it. I salute them all.
We slept in the German's pillboxes that night because that was a good place to be [Laughs] The concrete was about four feet thick, I would have liked to stay there for the rest of the war. But I had to go back to the rear to get some wire. On the way back I was alone on the weapon carrier and there were shells all over the road. I had four flats at the same time. I knew there was some wire on the road that we had already laid, so I tapped my field phone into it and they sent me four new tires and fixed me right there and I got back to my outfit.

From there on in, Germany was hit-and-move, hit-and-move. One night we were moving so fast we passed a whole German Panzer division holed up in the woods. Nobody knew about it, that's how fast we moved that night. Our headquarters, with all our Generals and Colonels were camped at the edge of those woods not knowing about the German's position. Well the enemy came out that night trying to get back to their lines and all hell broke loose. Our antiaircraft guns were firing directly onto their tanks and stopped them. So, different things happened as we moved through Germany.

Next we crossed into Czechoslovakia, across the Danube River, the war was just about at its end. This is where we had pushed the Germans back into the hills, they got their message that the war had come to an end and they were ready to give up. I have pictures of that German

Army coming into town to surrender. They were all lined up, more old men than young, there were so many of them we could not handle them all. Their officers told them to lay down their guns and ammunition down in the field and take off for home. They stacked them up and walked across Germany back to their homes. We could not transport them. The various German people took them in, the war was over. That was also when President Roosevelt died. Many of the troops went into mourning, but we were dancing in the street. The Czechoslovakian people put on their native costumes, got their musical instruments out of their attics and played concerts in the town as we danced in the streets. They fed us well, we had it made.

After two days, the Russians joined us in that town and pulled us right out and we gave the town to them. They pulled us back to a town called Bacshutte,(@43:40 spelling) Germany. It was a little country town, it had a big steel factory and it was not touched. There was a big displaced person camp there. By the way, our division liberated some of the Jewish concentration camps along the way. There was a DP camp there, which means Displaced Persons which had Czechoslovakians and Polish people they used for manpower in the factory, both men and women. They all slept in one big barrack room, and there were about twenty barracks.

We got back to the town of Bacshutte (@44:14 spelling) where the older guys (we were 20 years old compared to the new recruits) looked for the good jobs[unclear @44:35]. We set up in a big schoolhouse where we had beds, it was great. There was a switchboard operator position who handled all the call. My good friend Rocky Werner Strauss (@45:15 spelling) from New York City, a Jewish boy. We trained together, served in same battalion in France, the same winter outfit, and we came home together-that's how close we were. That is a tie you don't break. He could talk fluent German because he was originally from Germany. Well, they gave him a Jeep, told him to pick a driver and we had to go to the displacement camp every day to interrogate these people. They had to provide their name, where they were from, etc. so we had a good deal made. When that ran out, they needed a bugler for retreat break. That is when all the soldiers line up and parade around, salute and get inspected. It is a review of the troops by the officers, and impresses the people in town. This happened every night, so they needed a bugler. I learned never to volunteer for anything, but this was one time I did. I used to play the bugle as a Boy Scout so I said “Yeah, I can play the bugle.”[Mel raises his hand] So they gave me a trumpet and sent me off to the woods for five days and a bugle book to learn all the calls and I became the bugler. I had it made, I was the first one in the chow line in the morning, I called the troops in and out for noon lunch hour, from work detail, and retreat break each night at 6:00 which is when you do the flag colors and all that stuff. At night when it was time for taps I would go to the corner and blow taps, I had it made. It was one of the gravy jobs in the Army, so I can't say I did not have one of those.

Then it was time to come home after four months of occupation. During those four months, in the first month especially, they got us up at five o'clock in the morning. They put us on trucks and sent us to some town within twenty or forty miles and we would pull a raid on that town. We were looking for S.S. Troopers (Schutzstaffel literally means Protection Squadron) The town's Burgermeister (Mayor) would come out and shout out the orders of the day. The people had to turn in items such as their cameras, guns, binoculars. I already had a Luger that I confiscated, but that is another story I can tell you about. The people would line up and we would go through their houses. It sounds a little barbaric, but it had to be done.

So, getting back to the war. A woman called me into her house one day, I believe it was in France. I was doing roadblock work where your troops move and you put road guards out. There were two of us. She pulled on my shirt to come into the house. I finally went in, though I should not have. I had my gun with me, I was ready for anything. She took me up into the attic and was crying because her father had committed suicide. He had hung himself. All I could do was cut the rope and take him down [Unclear @49:28] and then I got out of there. I did tell the medics about him. Another time I went in to search a house and opened a bedroom door. There were two people laying in there, they were dead. This was an S.S. Officer's house. Lying on a nice chair, very neatly, was his dress uniform, dress sword, dress hats – his whole outfit was laid out there. He apparently took his Luger and shot his wife or girlfriend then himself. I picked up and kept that Luger. So, you see things that you do not see every day. I never used to be able to talk about these things and I will tell you how that came about.

I got sent back home on what was then called a Liberty Ship, which is now called a Victory Ship. A Victory Ship seals up the cargo holds of a freighter, with canvas and wood. Below in the holds are bunks stacked about five high. That was where you slept, your home, during the fourteen days coming back. There was a big storm that we had to ride out. But I did not care if I fell overboard, I was so sick. If the guy on top was sick, you got sick too! If you made it to the mess hall, you had to eat out of your ration can standing up. The boat would roll one way and your cans would roll with it. We ate hard boiled eggs and boiled ham for fourteen days.

We pulled into [Unclear @51:41] in Boston, Massachusetts which was nice. The band came out next to our boat and played American songs, girls sang, they welcomed us back home which is more than they did for the Vietnam boys. We took trains down to Fort Dix, New Jersey. I was discharged on December 5, 1945. Of those three years I was in the service, the only time I got home was a week and a half traveling time from Fort Bragg, N.C. to Fort Dix, N.J. That gave me about four days at home, there was no airplane traveling in those days, we had to use trains. That was the only time I saw my family in those three years. What is home? I'm ashamed to say that in that particular time in my life, home didn't mean much anymore. Just another place to go. But once I got there and saw my Dad, it became a different story. Okay, my first day home I set off to the corner drug store which had a soda fountain where I used to work when I was a young guy, I sat down with the owner, Lefty. He was a nice guy and helped me a lot. I asked Lefty who the pretty girl was who waited on us. He said that is Louise Numberger (@53:15 spelling?) I asked him to introduce us and I went back there every day. [Laughter] This was my girl. She was in her last year in high school and queen of the prom. She was and still is a beautiful girl. Louise graduated and got a job, she did not go to college. She got a job working in a bank in Buffalo and we went together for three years. I would not trade that courtship for all the years of my life. We behaved ourselves, more than people do nowadays. She finally asked me to marry her and we did on May 28, 1949. We have been married now for fifty-two and a half years. My wife has given me two beautiful children, our son Tom and our daughter Linda. They in turn have given me eleven beautiful grandchildren: Vicki, Kelly, Emily, Mica, Jamie and Jill. My son's children are: Matthew, Michael, Katie, Lindsey, and Chrissy. They are beautiful kids, full of joy, all different and all valedictorians so far in their schools. I'm very proud of them, I have a lot to be thankful for.
After working eight years for a guy in the sheet metal business, I started my own heating and air-conditioning business for the next forty-two years. Five years ago I went to work at (55:15 unclear) in Jamestown bagging groceries until I had my open heart surgery.

I have been back to Germany about fourteen times, my wife about nineteen times. Every time our daughter had a baby we went. She married a German, I had a tough time with that at first. But time heals all wounds. In fact, my son-in-law set me up with a trip back to the town I was stationed at after the war, I have pictures in my book. I am standing in the same spot, the same corner, the same church steps then, and thirty five years later so it was a nice trip for me. I met some of the same people. My ambition is that someone will drive me back to Utah Beach, it may happen this spring, depending on my health. I would like to go to the cemetery and see the monuments. I correspond with a young French lad now, he is twenty-three years old policeman. He goes every June 6th, D-Day (military term on which a combat attack is initiated) to put flowers on different graves that he picks out because he believes what we did for his country was amazing. He has sent me postcards of the monuments there, some sand from Utah and Omaha Beaches. It's all in my book and it is nice to have.

Now we'll go back to my daughter who lives in Germany. Three years ago I was visiting her there and this is how much things change. I even sang with a Germany singing club believe it or not in this country for fifty years. The reason for that was my in-laws were from Germany, they came over many years ago. My wife and her two sisters are of German decent. My father-in-law practically told me if you want to marry my daughter, you are going to sing in the club. [Laughs] I said, "Well, she's worth it." I even sang at my daughter's wedding in Germany. I was honored to sing The Lord's Prayer. But that is another story which would take an hour to tell.

Once I returned from the war I joined a VFW post in Seneca, New York until we moved to Jamestown transferring to Post 557 in Bemus Point. I'm an active member there and I write their newsletter every other month. I enjoy doing that because it gives me a chance to get things out of my system. The war never bothered me mentally until seven years ago when everything came on the radio in celebration of the 50th anniversary of D-Day. For some reason, now that I am retired, I have too much time on my hands to think, and the memories all start coming back. I allowed myself to read some stuff and I got to the guilt point in my life of "Why was I here? Why am I safe, and my buddies are still over there?" I only have one buddy left, did I tell you about Rocky?

I: No, you were going to tell us about him
MS: He lives in New Jersey. We went through everything from training, to fighting overseas, returning home. I called him last Sunday to wish him a Happy Hanukkah, this is something we have been doing every year. He in turn wished me Happy Holidays for Christmas. We have always had a bond between us, hoping it will never break. It is a common bond that soldiers develop. I respect his religion and he respects mine that is what this country is all about. What started to bother me was I wrote a small article that appeared in the Post-Journal, about how I would like to visit Utah and Omaha Beaches that is also in my book. The V.A. Counselor in Jamestown called me up and she said "I'm going to put you in for compensation." I never knew it was available. This was about four years ago. I went to a psychologist that the V.A. appointed for me (1:01:19 unclear) and we get together every Tuesday. Myself, I'm the only the World War II guy here, and six Vietnam boys and we just talk. A year ago, they sent me to a Veterans Hospital in Batavia for a PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) program where I spent twenty-eight days with four guys from World War II and eight guys from Vietnam. Each day was spent sitting around a table talking and trying to help each other. After the second day my Vietnam boys came over, (by the way I was honored that they appointed me president of group) they said "you know Mel, we never realized you guys went through the same crap we

did" I asked why do you think that? A war is a war, dying is dying, killing is killing and living is living. It's all the same. Maybe we did it in different ways, you guys had helicopters and we had trucks and tanks. But the human element is still there. They wore their Vietnam hats each day in the session. I said this is wrong, I want a hat from WWII. So they went over and bought me one, its over there with my book. That made me feel good. I still get together every week, with the Jamestown group and the sessions really help. When we have things on our minds, we can all talk about it. I'm talking to you right now because of the work you are doing, but it is hard to talk to strangers.

I have a witnessing and testimony that I give to my Lord about what the Cross means to me. I also sing a song. In my testimony I don't talk about me, but where my Cross has been and how tattered it got. The Cross is hanging in my daughter's dining room in Germany as a medal of her father. I had a replica made to show the people in church, it was just one of the greatest things I ever did. I talk about the Cross, and two years ago I was in Erie Hospital for open heart surgery. There two-by-two tiles on the ceiling, I counted forty tiles. Wait, let me go back, I was at work at the grocery store, two weeks before Thanksgiving, it was Senior Citizens day, the turkeys were heavy. I had trouble bagging them and putting them in the carts. One of my co-workers saw I was having trouble. Earlier that morning, I had wrapped up a birthday gift for my granddaughter and struggled getting back up the stairs. There was pain in my shoulder and across my chest. Being an ex-fire-chief, I should have known what these symptoms meant. But this stuff never happens to you. So I got up the stairs, had breakfast which did not stay down long, and bluffed my way out of the house because I didn't want to worry my wife. I brought the package to be mailed and went to work, but after the first half hour I could not handle the pain.

They called my doctor and he said bring him right in and gave me an EKG test (electrocardiogram) and the next thing I know I am in a wheel chair. I knew I was in trouble because a nurse was pushing me and he was walking with me up the ramp into the hospital. I was in intensive care for four days. They gave me a nuclear stress test. The next day I was on my way to Erie Hospital for open heart surgery. Next they gave me an Angiogram and the bad news was I had 197% blockage. So it is a good thing it worked out otherwise I would not be here today. The next day I had an emergency operation and the young doctor introduced himself as my anesthesiologist and was ready to put me to sleep. He lifted up the sheet first and saw there was an area on my body that looked like it exploded, it was all black and blue.(@1:07:55 Mel is pointing to a lower part of his body that is not on camera). He called my surgeon over to look at this and said to take me upstairs, he cannot operate on me [unclear @1:08:10]

I: Do you remember the doctor's name?
MS: Dr. Lee in Hammond. So they took me back upstairs and I have three more days to think and pray. The Lord works in strange ways. The extra time gave my daughter a chance to situate her family with friends and get an emergency flight back to America to be with us. When I came out of the operation, I had no idea my daughter was going to be here. I was so drugged up with tubes coming out of everywhere, I wasn't able to talk. When they left I looked up and counted those forty ceiling tiles. There were six tiles down and three across that formed a perfect cross over me and I just clung to it. I always believed in my life I have to do my share of suffering as the Lord did for us as he hung on the cross for our sins. I clung to that cross and I prayed: Lord, there has to be some reason that you got me through a war, I lived a full life, married a beautiful woman, have two wonderful kids, eleven beautiful grandchildren,

had a business for forty-two years, retired, celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary, all these opportunities that my buddies never had a chance to experience. Why am I spared? I had the pleasure of serving as Fire Chief, Chaplain and President of the Union Fire Company [unclear@1:10:50]. I had the pleasure of serving on the district Boy Scouts of America as the Buffalo Counsel District Chairman. I had the honor of serving as President of the Westside Alliance Club which is a very active club and President of the Westside Chamber of Commerce. I was also President of Colden Chamber of Commerce in New York when we moved down there. I also served on [unclear @1:11:15] on our church consulate as President in Colden for a few years. I said, Lord, I am tired and I'm ready to go home. I prayed, please take me home. Well Sunday comes and I am still there. On the fourth day in the hospital they moved me into phase two into the recovery room. I said, well Lord apparently You don't want me yet so You must have something in mind for me to do. I'll tell You what Lord, You give me my voice back, some strength, and I will do my testimony and my witnessing to You and sing Your songs. As I told you earlier, after the war I got over my stutter by singing and I would sing in church and at weddings. Now I sing at funerals of my friends. I've sung the National Anthem at memorials and many civic functions. So I thought that was the reason I am still here. It took two years, but within these last three months I did get my voice back to where I could sing again. I sing my favorite song, after I give my testimony. Do you want me to sing it?

I: Sure.
MS: Melvin sings religious song He Touched Me ….[@1:13:18 very sincerely] Then I challenge the people to think about God's love for them…[continues singing] And that is the way I witness and that is about the end of my story.

I: You have a beautiful voice.
MS: Thank you.

I: I do have a couple of questions. Will you talk to us about the flag behind you?
(Description: It is a Nazi swastika flag, red background with a black symbol inside a white circle. There are many signatures on it)
MS: [@1:15:37 tape skips] I have two other banners at home like this, that are ten foot long they were generally flown from balconies and such. When the war ended and we found something we wanted to send home, like a sword, I would wrap it up in a German flag, put it in a shell casing and ship it home. The shell casings and flags always made it home, but the stuff inside was taken out. Now this flag, we were all sitting around in a field in Czechoslovakia, and the orders came down to turn in our German weapons for safe keeping until it was time to go home. I think one of the officers wanted them, but we didn't let him have them. I had a beautiful Luger as well as a holster and ammunition. While we were sitting in the field I had my buddies sign it and write where they were from. It is a nice memento for me. About twelve years ago, I started picking out names and called information in those towns. I got in touch with quite a few of them, before they died. My buddy from Tallahassee was a school principal before he died. There are now only three of us left from this group that I know of. It was a nice way for me get in touch with those guys, we still call each other. I used to go to Army reunions. My outfit is T.O. that is Texas-Oklahoma [Mel points to his military cap]. Also know as “Tough Ombres”. They have a reunion every year, but it got so I could not afford to go anymore and when I had a business I could not go. I had the honor of singing the National Anthem at their weekend banquets and Memorial Services on Sunday morning and that was very inspiring for me. I got over my stuttering by singing and that is how I carry on. And that is the story of that flag. Any other questions?

I: Would you show us your photo in uniform?
MS: This is when I was young. I have pictures in my combat outfit and all that stuff..[Mel holds up professional photo of him in his Army uniform]. Here is an interesting item, it is a "V-letter". A lot of people who fought in the later wars (Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf) did not know what "V" mail was. It is something our government came up with when we were serving in Europe. It is a piece of paper this size [seems to be the 8 1/2" by 11" length] on which you wrote your message to your family or sweetheart. Then the censors would look it over and cut out any information that may be sensitive for security, like the name of a town, in case it fell into enemy hands. You would then fold it up and given to the mail corp. They would photograph your letter and reduce it to a smaller size. When I went to France, I never received mail and my folks did not hear from me for a good three months. When I did get mail, I received two sacks. I used to draw when I was in high school. When I was in the hospital in France, before Christmas, I drew this picture of a soldier with "Merry Christmas" on his helmet for my mother and dad. This one is my pride and joy. [@1:20:06 Mel holds up the impressive-looking sketch of soldier's face]. I have all kinds of V-mail in my memory book over there that I sent to my relatives that they returned to me.

I: You are very artistic.
MS: Thank you. The censor's stamp is up here. I wrote, from your son Melvin, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, Dear Mother and Dad, somewhere in France, November 1944, Peace on Earth, good will toward men, your loving and devoted son.

I: I have two more questions. What is a pillbox? You were talking about a German pillbox.
MS: A pillbox, was a small, one-room size German fortification that defended the Siegfried Line. They had a cannon aimed out of a porthole. Each pillbox covered the one next to it to help each other. It was not easy, but our engineers and bombers got them out of there. The German pillbox is similar to the concrete bunkers on the coast of France you see in the movie invasions about V-Day.

I: Did you want to mention the prisoner of war camps you helped to liberate?
MS: Auschwitz was one of them, but I was not there personally. I don't remember those camp names anymore, but I do recall the underground mines in Germany my Division found. They had stored all the art treasures and gold the Germans stole from Czechoslovakia and France. [unclear @1:22:40]. There was a big railroad car with a huge gun that could fire miles away, we finally destroyed that. It was a hidden weapon that was rolled out, fired, then rolled back into the railroad car and nobody knew where the attack came.

I: Will you tell us about your medals?
MS: Mel holds up a photo of himself in his Army Reserves uniform and reads off his awards. European Theater of Operations – Five Battle Stars for Normandy/[unclear@1:23:39] – Good Conduct Medal/World War II Victory Medal/The Army Occupation of Germany Medal. I received from New York State in the last ten years, The Distinguished Service Cross and my Division received the French Jubilee Medal for the 50th Anniversary of D-Day and my 9th Division was awarded The Presidential Unit Citation and a French Cross [unclear @1:24:07] I am very proud of that.

I: Do you have any comments to say to the youth of tomorrow?
MS: I was thinking about the young troops in Afghanistan. They are going through a war like

the one in Vietnam with all that cave warfare. For the youth of tomorrow, I refer to the article I wrote about the price of freedom as seen through the eyes of a Normandy soldier. I tell them about why they have the freedom they do today. You'll have to read the article and I hope young people do. It seems to me, what I observed in the last three months since the September 11th bombing, (unclear @1:25:18), they have gotten prayer back in the schools, they have allowed prayers at graduation exercises, the church and state issue is breaking down. I love to see flags in church and displayed in towns In my newsletter I encourage all my friends who are veterans to take the time to make a video,or an audio, or to take a pencil to paper and record their experiences. I have had so many young people come to me and say their parents or grandparents never told them anything about their service. Every time one of us dies, their story goes with them. That is why I encourage them to do it. I started a book and I keep adding to it. I hope this tape works out okay. So that is my journey in life. Why I am here? Only God knows.

I: I was wondering if you would do me a favor? Would you end your video by singing our National Anthem? [They laugh]
MS: I would love to sing it. When I sang it on a baseball field in Buffalo, it was one of those tribute days when all the firefighters were there, a helicopter came down, and the flags were paraded. I was standing on first base with my adrenaline pumping. You can't listen to the speakers because they are a couple of seconds behind you so I just turned off my hearing aids and went to it. MEL SINGS – finishing with the line – I learned that if you want to get a standing ovation, sing the National Anthem.

I: That was wonderful, thank you very much for sharing your stories with us.