Michael A. Altieri
Narrator

Wayne Clarke
Michael Russert
Interviewer

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MR: This is an interview at the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society in Buffalo, New York. It's the sixteenth of May 2007, approximately 10:15 AM. Interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clark. Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

MA: Yes. Michael A. Altieri, senior. Born May 10, 1926 in Schenectady, New York.

MR: Okay. What was your educational background prior to entering service?

MA: I graduated from high school in June of 1944. Shortly after, I took my physical for service–that was in July. I was called up in September. September 8 of '44.

MR: Go back a second. Do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

MA: Yes, it was a Sunday afternoon, maybe about four o'clock–of course, in Schenectady. We lived in a two-family home. Grandparents were upstairs, we lived downstairs. I had come home from a movie at the local theater, the Palace Theater. And of course it was four o'clock, December 7. I walked in the house, my mom and dad were sitting at the radio. They had a small plastic radio of the time, and my dad said they bombed Pearl Harbor. Of course, I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was, or what that meant. I was fifteen. The next day, we went to school. I just started in September, it was high school. They announced that the president would be speaking so they'd have radios on. I think it was in study hall–we were all called to go to study hall, there were a couple of big study halls–and we heard the president declaring war. Again, it had no real impact other than we were going to go to war, whatever that meant. Shortly after that, some of the fellows that were seventeen or so, who were seniors–I was a freshman–started going in service and then we started getting the full impact. About a year before that, one of my uncles was drafted, they had started the selective service, and he was in. He was later discharged, unable to meet the requirements of the service. He was a quiet gentleman who just didn't adjust. The next year we kept reading how badly the European forces were doing. The Japanese were overrunning the South Pacific, all the islands there. It was just a bad time in 1942. Just going back a little bit, in December, at Christmas time right after the war started, it was a sad Christmas. We didn't make much of it, of course. We had a family of nine children, I was the oldest. The younger children were looking forward to Christmas and Santa Claus and the holidays. It was just a dreary time. Somehow we got through that. Again, 1942, we were still taking a beating in Japan, in Europe, and through the period of early '43 I think we started

moving out in Africa and we started to take the initiative. When I got in service, back in September of '44, D-day had begun in June of that year. We were doing great pushing the Germans all the way through France and back into Germany. Suddenly, there was a German offensive at Christmas time in 1944, and that became the Battle of the Bulge. Again, a terrible period that we read about.

MR: Can we go back a second? When you went into the service, were you drafted?

MA: I was drafted. Before that, I wanted to finish high school. A lot of my friends joined up and didn't finish, but I wanted to finish high school. I had plans, at that time to go to college. They were not realistic because I knew the first step would be going to service. I got drafted, I got the call up in, as I mentioned, July. Well, that was the physical, went to Albany for the physical. Then later on, I was called up on September 8, in '44. I remember to this day that we reported to the fire station on Erie Boulevard. It was a crystal clear morning, they bussed us over to Albany, and then from Albany we went to Fort Dix. We had gone without supper or anything, so they graciously served us an orange and a sandwich. About, I think, eleven o'clock at night. Next morning, the routine of the army started. We were up early, must have been five o'clock. Then we started the routine of shots, the whole thing. One highlight was, we were there in Fort Dix for almost two weeks. So, I did get a leave to go home, back to Schenectady. It was just a weekend pass. So, I got to go back–it was late September–in a uniform. Most of the guys didn't come home for years, but I was home in two weeks. That was a highlight. Then, back to Fort Dix and subsequently to Fort Bragg for training. At Fort Bragg for about four months, from September to January, then we had a delay and moved back to Schenectady.

MR: What kind of training did you do?

MA: We did the infantry training for eleven weeks, and field infantry training for seven weeks. That was on the 105 howitzers. They made a lot of noise. I became the gunner on the howitzer. At that time, they were nothing like they are today. We all took turns, changing positions, loading the gun with the shells and all, putting the ammunition in, but I became the gunner. We left Fort Bragg on January 27 or so. As I mentioned, there was a short delay, supposed to be a five-day delay. Went back to Schenectady, but it was terrible weather. I think it was the most snow of the winters that I could remember. So we couldn't go anywhere; there was no gas, we didn't have a car. All we did was go to the bowling alley, which was relatively nearby. Then, back to camp again. Back and forth: Dix, and then they moved us to Fort Meade, Maryland, where we did some training boarding ships with a full pack and guns and everything, helmets. I think I weighed one hundred nineteen when I went in. I think the equipment, the gun, and the helmet weighed more than I did. But, we made it, and shortly after we were shipped out of Fort Meade into Camp [unintelligible]. That was February 27 of '45. All I remember there is that it was evening, we looked up and we were going up the gangplank, and all I could see was a little lighted section of the ship. And it said "Queen Elizabeth." We boarded the ship and the next morning we sailed to Europe.

MR: And did you go as a replacement?

MA: Yes. We were replacements and when we got on the ship we were told there were seventeen thousand troops on the ship. WACs, women, officers, replacements… Many of the replacements were fellows that had gone home. They'd been injured, wounded, or whatever, and we had them going back to Europe. It took us seven days to get to Scotland. We zigzagged across the ocean, back and forth. It was quite a sight. We saw the whales when we went out to left shore, on the side.

[Video stops and starts again]

MR: Go ahead.

MA: Again, we got there in seven days. Luckily, there were no submarines that could catch us because we were faster than the subs. We zigzagged there, and it was an inspiring scene, port of Glasgow, in Scotland. We didn't spend very much time there. We trained all the way down in Southampton in England, the Southern part of England. Stayed there maybe a couple days. Cold, it was terribly cold. We were in tents, and they had potbelly stoves in the tents. In order to heat them, needed some wood for the stove… Pulled up the boards from the walk and used those, burned those. Shortly after, we boarded the ship and we crossed the channel. That didn't take long. We landed at the harbor in France, and they took us right to the warehouse and there was a band playing–it wasn't Glenn Miller, but it sounded like Glenn Miller–great. Shortly after, they loaded us on trucks–6x6s–one of the first stops we made was a French chateau, and they put us up for the night, and then we went on to several other places. I made a note of it, to myself, at the time. One was in Givet, France. Then we moved again into Verviers, Belgium. Again, in a warehouse, and there we were bunked with several of the–either the hundred-and-first or eighty-second–airborne fellows that had been wounded at the Battle of the Bulge. Here we were, eighteen-year-olds, and they were veterans that were several years older. Hadn't seen combat and all that–they were ferocious–and we almost didn't think they were part of our army. Then, we got on the 6x6s after being in Belgium for maybe an overnight. By the way, they let us go downtown, in the small town of Verviers, and they had a chocolate shop. We went in there, and they had in the showcase, pieces of chocolate. Not very many–we could buy one piece of chocolate–and that was the thrill. Shortly later, we went on our 6x6. They loaded us up again, we got back into France. Now we were third army replacements, they moved us to Belgium first, because I think they were expecting another problem with the Germans coming in. We were replacements for that… Back into France–we saw Luxemburg, there was another small country that we went right by–and then finally we crossed over the Rhine into Germany. One of the things that sticks out in my mind is seeing kids as we trucked into Germany. Little kids begging for gum and chocolates. We had been so conditioned to be anti-German, that we wouldn't even give them anything at the time. We wound up in Winnenden, Germany. Which was a small town, and then we trucked again… And all the time that we traveled, we could see all the planes that had been crashed all around us. Allied planes, from the dogfights that were going on. We saw our planes going overhead, bombing the Germans in front of us. Of course, the British bombed at night. We wound up in a Buttlar Nazi Youth Camp. This was a small town, up in the hills, and in that camp, that's about the time that Roosevelt died. It was a bad time for some of us because they fed us some chicken that wasn't too good. We had all some GI problems.

MR: How did you feel when you heard about the death of the President? He'd been the president for all of your life.

MA: Yes, all of my life. It was a depressing time because he, through the whole war, was our leader in effect. When we heard that Truman took over, we had no idea who Truman was, he was the new president. We felt sad about that. Shortly after that we took some prisoners, they were coming up the road. The reconnaissance was traveling at night. If you can visualize it, it was pitch black–there was no light anywhere. We pulled guard duty, my buddy and I. By the way, the Germans were all around us–we knew that because we saw their equipment–and they took off when we got there. It was so dark, when we pulled guard duty–there was just a little field where our trucks were–all we did was stay in the camp, the camp with the trucks. Every time we heard a sound–we were two eighteen-year-old guys–we didn't know what to do. But anyway, we stayed there and we got light again, we were happy about that.

MR: What kind of weapon did you have?

MA: We had at that time, because we were artillery, carbines. Before that, we trained with N-1s.

MR: So, as a replacement, you went into an artillery unit?

MA: At that point, they called up some of the guys. I didn't get called–boy, I was unhappy about that. I was a gunner, and I figured I was a guy who was going up. Luckily, as it turned out, I did get called. Many of my friends were still there. Then we moved into Beirut, Germany. This was right outside the Czech border. Our planes were flying over… Hitler died about that time, just after Roosevelt, and there were rumors that the war would be ending soon. One night, apparently somebody lit a fire or whatever, the German plane came over with rockets and they hit the camp. We all scattered. We left the tent, put my shoes on, went to a root cellar, which was nearby… It's like a dug in cellar, with cover and all. We were all so scared about that that I put my boots on backwards. I didn't know they were on backwards until we got back… When we got there, it was about seven days after they were liberated–our advanced troops who went through there. There was a wine cellar. Huge wine cellar, because it was a popular place. Hitler's and others'–it was a gold gem. We tried to get into the wine cellar, but we were barred from doing so by the officers, who had taken advantage of their position… Within a matter of days, the war ended. It was an afternoon, May 8. We didn't have any speakers or anything, but I did notice there was a notice posted on one of the trees–just nailed to the tree. I kept a copy of it [holds up paper].

MR: That's the actual one that you found?

MA: The actual one. It was on the tree, and it was afternoon. Whoever tapped it spelled "king" k-i-n-k, so he was fast in putting it together. He indicated that Prime Minister Churchill would make an official announcement at 15:00 today, which would be three o'clock. And the Germans were repeatedly asked if they knew and understood the significance of the armistice, and they replied yes and they said it would be carried out in Germany. According to the Czech printer [points to paper], there were Germans fighting in Prague. There was still a lot of fighting going on, just over the border. What was happening was the Russians were moving on the Germans

and the Germans were rushing out to our side. In fact, that afternoon, one of the officers or someone got a hold of barrels of beer. Confiscated them. We were in the open field, and the German planes came in, apparently running from the Russians. They were fighter planes, and they swooped over us, tipped their wings. Of course, we ran in all directions, but they tipped their wings, and they came in to surrender. So, we were lucky there too. After the war ended–shortly after–several of us reported to an organization in Erlangen, Germany. That was a former German army base. We were told it was a thirty-sixth machine records unit. Now, I went from a trained 105 howitzer to a machine records unit. I didn't know what that was, but apparently it was from my background, and I had passed some tests… High school graduate. I got this outfit, was assigned to the third army headquarters and it was great. My other buddies had gone on to their different divisions. In fact, one of the guys was wounded–a good friend, whom I later met when we came back from overseas. The work that we did in the machine records unit was primarily third army, we kept track of all the German records, or rather, our records, for the army. We got the morning reports and one of the groups transferred the morning reports–information that we put on our tabulating machines, keypunch operator, keypunch machines, and so on. Again, I was very fortunate to get assigned to that outfit. It was the third army unit. So, as a result of that, we could wear the third army badge. Later, we moved to Munich, and were there about six months. And that was also good.

MR: In what ways?

MA: It was almost like having an office job, nine to five. There wasn't much to do at night, but at least we could go around and be free from the demands of marching or anything like that. In fact, nearby our building, which was a former German airforce building, there was an encampment for displaced persons. They were waiting to go back to their own countries. One day we walked down there, and they had a dance as best they could. They had instruments and they played, so we went to that. By the way, they lived in shacks, it was just a terrible living arrangement. They were used for German labor, out in fields and in factories and so on. They were from every country that you could imagine: Hungary, Romania, Italy, all over. They left shortly after. We–the Americans–took them by truck back to their countries, and they had flags on their truck, waving the flags and you knew what country they were going to. It was quite a sight. They called them DPs, displaced persons. I guess that happened all throughout Germany. But Munich and Southern Germany, just a beautiful place to be. Not unlike upstate New York. In fact, the weather was about the same. And it was springtime, and then summer. We went through the early part of the winter, then shipped to Bad Tolz, which was down in the Alps. There we were assigned–although in Munich, we were in a separate building–to a former German garrison. But there too, we were able to enjoy the nearby Alps. We went skiing, we played basketball at night in the gymnasium. The local townspeople did our laundry. And we paid them–we bartered–paid them in soap, chocolates, and toothpaste. So, it was an interesting time there. Shortly after that, we moved up to Heidelberg, Germany. We were expecting to go to some other city, but we moved to Heidelberg, a university city. This was even better, just a glorious place.

MR: Was there a lot of damage from the war?

MA: In Heidelberg there wasn't, it was a university town. In fact, we were right downtown, and the University was right there. We were in a former Woolrich building right downtown, just like the Woolrich building that they have here. Yeah, we set up in there. Now–before, they called us the third army–we became the organization for the whole United States forces, European theater. We had a different badge that we could wear. I signed up for classes at the University, at night. That was interesting, I had a life art course and a martial arts course. I wanted to go into art, I thought that would be my field. The model in the life art course was beautiful. But it was only a matter of a couple weeks, maybe. I had to drop the courses because we were shipping out to the Northern part of Germany, getting ready to come home. We left in July of '45. So, I had been in Germany, and overseas for the better part of a year and a half. I was anxious to get home, as were most of the others.

MR: Before you talk about that, you mentioned here in the form you completed–you talked about your commanding officer of your headquarters unit being the son of the head of the American Red Cross?

MA: Yes. That was interesting.

MR: What was his name? The person you…

MA: His name was Captain O'Connor. I don't remember his first name, but he was a fine gentleman. Obviously had some influence, through his dad, because his wife was there, and she was in the Red Cross. They lived right in a private home away from our building. But a nice gentleman, and one day–this was in July–we saw an entourage of motorcycles and limousines coming up to our building, and sure enough it was George Patton, General Patton. He came in, and the organization had about sixty troops in there–back then, it was a total unit–but, he came in and inspected. I talked to him. He was quite a guy, he was at least sixty. All the pictures you see of him, he had the shiny helmet, the pearl handled pistol, shiny boots–he was the soldier's soldier. He chatted with me, asked how everything was going. I said "fine, sir." If I had thought of it I would have taken his picture, but I couldn't–didn't have a camera. At the time, I was a mail clerk, and when I first got there, I saw two medals that had come in. One was not a silver star, but a bronze star, and there was one other. I think the reason he came–of course, they didn't share it with the troops, certainly not with a private–was to present the medal to Captain O'Connor for outstanding work in organizing the unit. It was a mobile unit, and they moved right across, right back to the army.

MR: You did mention, also, the voice was rather different from George C. Scott.

MA: I just couldn't believe it when I said "hello" to him and he talked to me. He had a squeaky voice. There was this big guy, six foot tall, squeaky voice. And I think, George C. Scott, with his voice, although his acting was great, his voice did not fit the George Patton that I knew. It was just unbelievable. Yeah, he's a funny guy though.

MR: Now, you mentioned you also had an encounter with a famous artist.

MA: Oh yes, Norman Rockwell was in Erlangen when I first reported to the outfit in that garrison. He was there drawing pictures in the temporary Red Cross Club, and he was just drawing caricatures, as he did for the Saturday Evening Post. Just a short guy in an army uniform. I'm sure he was special services, but that was quite an experience, to see him doing what he was doing.

WC: Was he a civilian, or was he actually in the military?

MA: He was a civilian, but special services. In fact, I ran into Mickey Rooney, and Mickey Rooney was in special services. When I was a mail clerk, Mickey Rooney was standing in front of me at the APO, they called it, Army Post Office. By the way, he was only about four feet tall.

WC: Did you talk to him at all?

MA: Yes, oh yes. We were chatting. He was a good guy. But back to Norman Rockwell, I subsequently became a very big fan of his. In fact, we've got all kinds of plates and everything, and pictures that he drew.

WC: Did you ever write to him or anything after the war?

MA: No, I didn't. I know he had quite a career after. And he had quite a career before, but… We've got a lot of reading on him. In fact, when we went up to Vermont, we went right by his place. We had a tour–it didn't stop there, but they pointed out where he was born and where he lived. Quite an experience. We saw Paulette Goddard, talking about individuals who were prominent at the time. Paulette Goddard was a beautiful actress, saw her in Charlotte, North Carolina when we were down there for training. We had a weekend free.

WC: Did you ever see any USO shows at all?

MA: Yes, in Munich, we saw all kinds of USO shows. Bob Hope and his entourage, then we also saw one with Jack Benny, and all the prominent people at that time. Near [unintelligible], it was either Stuttgart or Frankfurt, in a stadium there. I still have pictures from when we saw him there.

WC: So, when did you return home?

MA: We boarded the ship coming home, again, sometime in July. And that was at Bremerhaven, Germany. That Bremerhaven, at the time was almost nothing, just barren buildings. We were anxious to leave there. We got on the–I think it was the Liberty Ship coming back, and I've got some pictures of that. My good friend, my good buddy who got called up when we were back in the field–he's the one that got hit, who got wounded… And [another friend] was there too, that's the individual that was from Buffalo. We sailed back–it took us a little bit longer–on the Victory Ship. We went to Fort Dix, and within a short period of time, we were discharged, and we returned home. Happy to get home, July 28, 1946.

WC: Did you make use of the GI Bill?

MA: Yes, we did. I was fond of golf–I couldn't get into art school because they were filled up at that time–so, I went back to my first love, playing golf. I played golf in '46, '47… I thought about going back to school, but I started working in January '47. In 1949, I decided to go back. By this time, I got married in September '49. Still working as a civilian at a navy base, that's what I did. I went back to school on the GI Bill. Went to Union College for five years. Subsequently, as things were developed, we moved from Schenectady to Syracuse. The demands of the job became such and the family was growing, so we then moved after five years to Buffalo. Then I went back to school, finished my degree at UB in '72. At that point, I was nearing the end of my official government career, but nevertheless I wanted to get a degree, which was very helpful. I used a good part of my GI Bill, although some of it expired, so I went on my own, as well as with the GI Bill.

WC: Did you ever use the 52-20 club?

MA: The 52-20 club was in concert with my ability to play golf [laughs]. Twenty bucks. Very helpful. I signed up for that–I never expected to stay on it as long as I did… I think I–

WC: You didn't max it out?

MA: You had six months. I didn't break the record. Some of the guys did. Twenty bucks at the time was a vehicle.

WC: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

MA: I joined the Catholic War Veterans in Schenectady. We were there for a while, played ball and all that. But I didn't join it later, I did some other things. Later, up here in Buffalo, I had some heart problems. I returned 1986, after forty years of government service. I joined the VFW and the American Legion in about '89, about '90–somewhere in there. I didn't become an activist though, I just became a member. A member in both organizations. Of course, others joined them too, in fact, they always have a campaign going on.

WC: Did you stay in contact with anyone that was in service with you?

MA: We actually were discharged in '46. That winter, we started a group of New Yorkers, when I was back in Munich. We called ourselves the Pentagon Club. I drew a plaque with five names on it: One chap was from Schenectady, I was from Syracuse, two were from Brooklyn, and one from the Hampton. So we became the Pentagon Club, and we vowed to get together when we were discharged. And we did–we got together in New York. Went down there in Christmas of '46. One of the chaps, who was a mail clerk at one point and made a lot of money on the black market, owned a brand new car. 1946. We drove up all of Times Square in that car, the five of us. And I visited all their homes and all that. A couple of the fellows became teachers, Sandy became a biologist, got his doctorate. That was the only contact we had together, but we kept writing, sent Christmas cards. I still contact one of the chaps–the fellow in Syracuse, just by way

of Christmas cards. I did write to others, of course, that I had met, fellows who have subsequently passed on. Several of them passed on, but we lost contact.
WC: How do you think your time in service had an effect on your life?

MA: First of all, at the time, I felt that there was nothing else I should do but go in service. I think everybody felt that way, and I know all my friends went in. How it affected my life… Were it not for the GI Bill, of course, I don't think I ever would have had the opportunity to study, and go as far as I did with that. We bought our first home, not on the GI Bill–in fact, I took over a loan in Schenectady, then we bought one in Syracuse and took over that loan. I didn't know this, but when we moved to Buffalo, since I never had a GI loan, I could take on a GI loan. I did, and that was a great relief financially. So as far as education and housing, I think without that, it would have been a lot more difficult. The GI Bill was outstanding. I think it was signed in June 27 of '44. I think it was the same day I graduated from high school.

WC: Could you tell us where and when this photograph was taken [hands over photograph]? If you could just hold it up to the camera.

MA: This was in summertime, of course, in 1945 in Munich. In front of the 98th General Hospital, which was right by our office. The General Hospital was a hospital that the Americans took over. It was a former German hospital, of course. So I must have been nineteen at that point. No gray hair, although my wife will tell you I had gray hair early on [laughs].

WC: Could you hold up the drawing you made, showing your rooms?

MA: I was trying to keep a record of where I was and what I was doing [shows drawing]. I was going to put this on my canteen cup, all the way around it. I never got to it, but this was a rough draft of the Queen Elizabeth [points]...Oh, starting with basic training in Fort Bragg on 105 howitzers [points], then we shipped to overseas on the Queen Elizabeth. Landed in Glasgow, Scotland, the Northwestern part of England. Shipped down to South Hampton [gestures], across the channel–March 9, that we shipped–then over to Givet, France… Verviers, Belgium… all of this by 6x6 trucks, then we went by train back to France. Then, by truck again into Germany because no trains were running.

MR: Can you angle it this way a little bit?

MA: [Changes angle of map]. Then we moved to Buttlar. Interesting thing, I think it was in Gemunden–it was around Easter time, Palm Sunday. Yeah, it was Palm Sunday. We went to church, they trucked us down to the village. As all German cities, they had churches with the high spires and all that. Here, we had been indoctrinated that the Germans were anti-religious and all that, and all along the roadsides there were statues of crosses and everything else. So, we went to that church–the war was still on–with our full equipment: guns and everything else. You can imagine being in church with guns around you. So, we sat on one side and the civilians were sitting on the other. We looked at them and they looked at us. I almost said to myself: "I wonder whose side God is on?"... Then we went into Bayreuth, Germany, which was just outside of Czechoslovakia. Subsequently, the war ended and we wound up in Erlangen, Germany, which

was an alternate German base. And from there into Munich. And from Munich into Bad Tolz in the Alps. So, I never did get to finishing this, because we finally moved to Heidelberg and then Bremerhaven. So, we had quite an experience traveling through Germany–France and Germany, although briefly in France.

WC: Now, you have some photographs in there, were you there when they liberated Dachau?

MA: They liberated in April or May… We were there in October.

WC: Were there still some internees there?

MA: Yes, there were internees–several internees. By the way, it became a Red Cross spot [shows pictures].

WC: Which is you?

MA: Well, let's see… I think I'm right there [points to man in photograph].

WC: Now, did you ever meet any of the Russians at all?

MA: No, not Russians. They were just on the other side… We expected to go up to Berlin, and the word was that we would go to Berlin. Apparently it was decided to not have the Americans go out there [holds up old newspaper]. This is the "Stars and Stripes" that all the troops got. This was when Hitler was killed–or, when Hitler committed suicide. And it was shortly before it ended. In fact, it was May 3. The war ended on May 8. Then Truman took over [holds up different newspaper]. Of course, the big three at the time were Attlee, who took over from Churchill, and Stalin, of course.

WC: And this is the May 8 edition?

MA: That's the actual day the war ended in Europe.

WC: All right, thank you.