

**Robert LaFollette Groves
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke and Mike Russert
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on March 24th, 2004
Oneonta, New York**

Q: This is an interview at the hotel, it is the 24th of March 2004 approximately 1:50 p.m. Interviewers are Wayne Clark and Mike Russert. Can you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

RG: Robert L Groves, I was born in Conrath Wisconsin, Northern Wisconsin on a farm in 1922. January 1922.

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

RG: I attended the Oneonta school system. I started school when I was 5 and I graduated from Oneonta high school when I was 17.

Q: When did you move to New York State?

RG: When I was 5 years old.

Q: Do you remember where you were and your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

RG: I sure do. I was working at the place I worked until a year ago. White Golf's Florist in Oneonta here and, I, on December 7th, I was 19 years old and when I heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor I was alarmed and upset and felt I should be taking part in something, and I waited a year or so and I enlisted.

Q: You enlisted?

RG: Yes

Q: Why did you select the army?

RG: Well at the time I wanted to be a hero. I thought maybe I could be there for some guy gets hit and I'd bomb the hell out of them and all the places and everything. I was a runt and I'd never been any place in my life outside of Oneonta mostly I lived on a farm. I was pretty naïve. When I enlisted I told them what I wanted to do and next thing I knew I was a medic in the US army.

Q: Where did you go for your basic training?

RG: I went to Fort Dicks and from there I was transferred to Camp Butner North Carolina, and that's where I got my basic training.

Q: That must've been quite the shock to be that far away from home if you'd never been away from home. How did you cope with that?

RG: I was awful home sick. Yeah, I was pretty miserable for a while, but there was always something going on. We were busy, and I soon got over it I was young and had never been away from home. I made a lot of friends and acquaintances and that was important to me.

Q: How long was your basic training?

RG: Actually I don't exactly remember

Q: That's okay.

RG: I think basic lasted for maybe a few months. It didn't seem like more than that because, let's see where was it here, I think it was. We left fort Dicks. And see, I didn't write down...

Q: That's okay you don't have to have the exact date.

RG: But I was sent to for Dicks, I don't remember being there very long but went to camp Butner soon after that, but basic training lasted for... I don't remember now, it's been too long now.

Q: Now as part of this basic training were you given medic training or did you go somewhere else for the medic training?

RG: no, I learned it right there in the office with the doctor and passed and I worked in the medical dispensary and at first I didn't even do that without training like I didn't do that, you know. I had never shot a gun in my life even though I had grown up on a farm and my brothers all hunted and I didn't. So I had to take a gun apart and go out on the range and fire it which I thought was ridiculous because I was in the medics by then. They made me qualify and I qualified as marksman and came back in and resumed my medical duties. But after a while I finally became a dental technician. A dentist most of the time. We were tasked to an MP battalion, 509 MP battalion, and attached to first army, and we were with them most of the way until I came home. Just shortly before I came home and transferred to another officer for purposes of getting us home.

Q: Now what was the dental like? Was it the old foot operated drill?

RG: Absolutely, a pedal machine that drilled.

Q: Sounds painful!

RG: I had a big chest with a drawer in the top of it... or a thin that lifted out. That held all the instruments and everything. I believe you had to, SLAP the hand, the instrument into the hand of the dentist I was working with if he wanted it. And God help you if you didn't get him the right one. And I didn't know anything about it but I learned.

Q: How did you sterilize the equipment?

RG: Well we had electricity and we had a small thing to sterilize it. Like a small tray, you know, and you put it in a heater, and that was one of my duties. Sterilize the stuff and take care of it, and pack up when we moved which was frequently when we got in Europe.

Q: I hate to ask this but when you didn't have electricity what did you do to sterilize it?

RG: I think we boiled things.

Q: You boiled things, okay. Did you have a lot of customers?

RG: Surprisingly yeah. I was working with a dentist most of the time who was a kind of a, playboy. And he joined the army to see the world. We did a lot of work in the states here before we left he just went in the jeep every afternoon in some places. He'd see everything, we were just behind first army headquarters we weren't far from the front ever, but he had to see everything. So he left me alone a good share of the time, so I took

it upon myself and I cleaned teeth for nearly everybody in the battalion. And In my time off I had them make appointments, I'd bring them in and I'd clean their teeth and examined them and if they had bad cavities, and... we had a lot of boys from the South who had never seen a dentist in their lives. In one company, C-Company was all from the South and their teeth were in terrible shape. And I used to make appointments, and if he weren't around I'd make an appointment with the local field hospital right where we were and they got in right there and got their teeth taken care of. Most of them came out with better teeth than they'd ever had before.

Q: Now how did you go overseas?

RG: I went over in a boat. It took me two weeks I think. And we went up around and came down towards Ireland and landed near Bristle, in England.

Q: Now, did you go over with your unit? Did you go as a whole unit or did you go separately?

RG: We went as a whole unit except for C-company, they joined us later, or else they joined us just before we went over. They were trained, did their basic training in the South and the rest of the boys were all from New York-New Jersey. Pretty much from the rest of the companies. And when we landed in Bristle we... well we didn't land in Bristle, I can't remember we landed. We went by truck to Bristle and they had billets there for us and I was there for 11 months, before the invasion. And I certainly know where I was December 6th.

Q: When did you go into Europe itself, continental Europe?

RG: We went in across the channel on day three

Q: Oh! So you were that close to the front lines when they went in.

RG: Oh yeah, we were right attached to first army headquarters and we were either just ahead or in back of them all the time so we were in the front in our MP outfit that trafficked me all the way across France, Belgium, and Germany.

Q: Now when you went in on day three was the beach still under fire?

RG: Oh yes. When we got there the night before we were off shore and we anchored there. Planes came over the shore and strafed and everything else that night. The next day we landed, and they had the landing bar, and where the front dropped down, you know where the vehicles dropped off, drove off. I remember one of my buddies who was driving one of those jeeps piled probably ten or twelve feet high with duffle bags of equipment and everything and I thought I was going to have to wait on shore and just before we left he said, "Hop on Bobby! And don't get your ass wet." And I did I climbed on top and I think my fingernails were still in those duffle bags and when we drove off that barge it seemed like it was going to be easy. And all of a sudden went just like this! It hit a hole and I flew! I was holding on like this and I flew off to the side and I held on and I never got wet. And It was an experience I'll never forget I was scared to death.

Q: Were there still a lot of bodies on the beach and in the water?

RG: There were some, but I didn't see that many because we didn't go in that far those first few days. We went to a landing area and kinda got our outfit together and I think we were there for three to ten days before we moved on, just a little ways in you know. But after that every time first army moved and sometimes twice while they moved we moved. There was um... my duties were to take care of the teeth of course. And

sometimes they'd send someone out to see if the boys, they did traffic duty mostly, all the way across Germany and during the war they were active that way. It was a unique outfit.

Q: In what way did you think it was unique?

RG: Well, they were so active and able to do so many things and they could move quickly and direct convoys through when they needed them fast to the front that sort of thing. Of course I was mostly at the headquarters and didn't get out that much, but I'd see them when people came in for healthcare.

Q: Now, did you ever treat anyone or the dentist that you worked with that had a facial wound or lost teeth in some way?

RG: No. It was mostly a routine type thing =. We didn't get, I think probably most of those boys went right to a hospital because they had a better facility than we had. Ours was strictly field equipment. We could repair a lot of things, but a major surgery would be a difficult thing. In the first place, I wasn't trained for major surgery, you all know that, but I could handle what I learned how to do.

Q: Now, did you ever, I know you weren't a dentist, but did you ever have to fill teeth yourself?

RG: No. no, I considered being a dentist when I came out, and I went back to the shop where I worked before and was there until a year ago.

Q: Did you ever see a USO show at all while you were in the service?

RG: I don't think I ever saw USO shows. Mostly we weren't, they weren't readily available for us. I think we were too near the action for that, you know?

Q: Were you ever given much leave time?

RG: I never had any.

Q: that's because your dentist had it all.

RG: That's right. No, I never had any, I never took any leave anywhere.

Q: Now, I noticed you said you were in Berlin during the during the Potsdam conference, so you went right into Berlin, your unit?

RG: Yep, we were billeted there.

Q: Did you ever have any contact with any POW camps or the concentration camps at all?

RG: No, I didn't get into any of that. No, we were strictly first unit army headquarters I guess you would say for health purposes.

Q: You said you were there for the Potsdam Conference, did you see any of the leaders that were there for the conference.

RG: No, I didn't. None of them had a toothache.

Q: And if they did they were afraid of that pedal drill right?

RG: Well that worked pretty well you'd be surprised. I used to do that in my sleep. I had an interesting experience, and I saw an awful lot of the country. An awful lot of Europe, because as we landed we went through France, Belgium, and through Germany to Berlin before I came home.

Q: Now, being near Berlin, did you ever have any contact with the Russians?

RG: Only when we first got to Berlin. We were pretty upset because we were under a Russian guard and that annoyed the hell out of us, and we were the soldiers.

Q: What do you mean you were under Russian guard?

RG: When we got in Berlin, Berlin had been partially taken by the Russians, and they wanted the exclusive right to say they'd taken Berlin. So there were Russians all over the place and when we got there we weren't allowed to go out of a building, part of the building, without permission from the Russian guards. We were actually like prisoners of war there, really. And that annoyed the hell out of us. But there were no incidents, bad incidents from it but it made us kinda mad for a while you know.

Q: Now this was the whole headquarters unit?

RG: Yep!

Q: That's interesting. How did your commanding officers react to something like that?

RG: They took it in stride I guess. They didn't seem to think there was anything difficult about it. They just took their orders as we did. Eventually that straightened out so we had a little more freedom, but to start with we had to ask. We started going over buildings and when there are Russian soldiers with a weapon in front of you, you didn't leave. Made us awful man.

Q: Okay, when did you end up going back over to the states?

RG: I came back in 1945. I was finding a ship back and it took a little while, transportation was slower than troop ships and everything. I was discharged on Thanksgiving Day on 1945.

Q: When you returned home did you join any veterans' organizations at all?

RG: I didn't, I don't think I even looked for any. I was fed up with the army. I'd had enough of it I never joined anything. Nope, I never did. I was home a few days and went back to work.

Q: So you didn't, you didn't use the GI bill for anything?

RG: Nope. I would like to go to college. And at one time I thought of becoming a dentist.

Q: So if you started work you didn't use your fifty two twenty club either?

RG: Nope, nope. They needed me at the greenhouse I worked before, it was two women trying to run a greenhouse, a good sized greenhouse, and a flower shop. Where we had five or six people there before you know, they needed me so badly I told them I'd help them out for a few months and I never got away. In 1945 I finally semi-retired a year ago.

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

RG: Yeah I hear from a couple guys once in a while and one of them stopped to see me once, or a couple of them have, but Oneonta is a little out of the way for all the places down in New Jersey and New York City, and you know, that's where most of them guys came from.

Q: They didn't come by to have their teeth cleaned or anything?

RG: Nope! No, but I had a lot of good friends in the army, as a T-5, a technician in the medical service.

Q: Do you think your time in service had any influence on your life or changed your life in any way?

RG: Oh it certainly did. I'm a farm boy and I had never been away from home! Except to go to school. It gave me, certainly a look at the rest of the world, what it was like, and some of the problems it had. You know, when you're kinda secluded in a small town and on a farm and everything, you don't really realize what's going on even though you read the papers and everything. You don't have any idea how big the place is. I have never been sorry I was in the service although I didn't like any of it. I hated the restrictions and everything just like most people did. I thought it was a lot of bologna. I can understand now why it was like it was because I got older I was young and impetuous then. At 19 you think you can conquer anything. I was 23 when I came out.

Q: Can you tell us when and where that was taken?

RG: This was taken in Liege Belgium, and it was probably six or seven months before the end of the war. In the summer before probably. It doesn't show the thick curly hair that I had then. But I must've been about 23.

Q: Alright we thank you very much for your interview. Thank you.

RG: Thank you.