

**Malcolm Atkinson
Veteran**

**Mike Russert and Wayne Clark
NYS Military Museum
Interviewers**

**Interviewed at the Chapman Museum
Glens Falls, NY
18 February 2004**

Interviewer: this is an interview with Malcolm Atkinson. We are at the Chapman Museum in Glen Falls New York. It is the 18th February, 2004, 9:30 AM. Interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clark.

Interviewer: could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth?
Malcolm Atkinson, April 13, 1920. I was born in Powlett, Vermont.

Interviewer: do you remember when and where you were and your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Yes I was sitting on the mountain looking at the scenery. My wife and I hadn't yet married. I didn't know it until the next day when I got back to Glens Falls. I was working at Finch and Pruyn at the time. I didn't know it until the next day.

Interviewer: how were you told and do you remember what your reaction was when you heard about this?

No, it just happened. I was never much of a hand going into emotional parts.

Interviewer: were you drafted or did you enlist?
I enlisted.

Interviewer: why did you enlist?

Well I knew I was going to be drafted and I had an uncle who had served for 18 years in the service. He advised me to enlist.

Interviewer: why did you select the Army?

I don't know. There was no reason. He was Army so that's what I done.

Interviewer: where did you enlist?

Right here in Glen Falls. I didn't live in Vermont. I lived in Hartford.

Interviewer: so when did you move to New York State?

When I was two years old.

Interviewer: after you enlisted, where were you when inducted and where did you go for basic training?

We went to Albany and we signed our papers there. From there we went to Fort Dix in New Jersey.

Interviewer: how long were you there?

Not long, two or three weeks. And we went from there to Florida, Jacksonville, and Camp Blanding. We took our basic training there. And we were there, I would say until about June 1942.

We went from there to on the Pee Dee River between North and South Carolina for maneuvers. And we were there, well we moved from there to Camp Edwards in Massachusetts about, sometime in August or something like that.

Interviewer: Did you receive any specialized training at all?

Well not necessarily. Only thing, no not specialized.

Interviewer: Now I noticed you were a gunner with an 81mm mortar. Did you receive any training with that?

Oh sure, that was basic training. I, also, was a number one machine gunner too, heavy water cooled.

Interviewer: When you went to Massachusetts were you assigned to a unit at all?

Oh we were assigned to a unit all the way.

Interviewer: What unit was that?

The 36th Division, 143rd Regiment, H Company. We followed that all the way through.

Interviewer: Now when you got into Massachusetts, is that where you embarked for Europe from?

No, we were there from the winter of 1942. We took amphibious landings on Martha's Vineyard.

Interviewer: What kind of landing craft were you in?

LCIs. We left there sometime in March.

Interviewer: This would be March of '43?

Yes, March of '43. We went to Port Elizabeth, New Jersey. We sailed out of there the 1st of April, 1943.

Interviewer: did you go on a convoy?

Yes. We landed in Africa at Oran on April 13, 1943. We were there for probably a month I guess. And then we went from there to Rabat, Casablanca, right across the desert on the train. First time I'd ever seen a snow plow on a freight train plowing sand off the track. We were in St. Augustine at the time that the president, they had the conference there.

Interviewer: did you get to see the president?

Not there, we were the perimeter guard; we surrounded the city with a guard. We went from there to Rabat, which is 100 miles north of Casablanca. We were there for some reason but I don't know why.

Interviewer: did you ever do any kind of specialized training there?

No!

Interviewer: you were just base there? Did you have any relations with the local people at all?

Oh yeah, we see them and we always talked with them whenever we could find someone who could understand us.

Interviewer: did you live in tents there?

Tents, yes, yes we never had barracks. And when we went back to Oran, we went to a place called St. Cloud. That was a staging area. We were there for the invasion of Sicily. We had some of the high mucky mucks like DeGaulle, Eisenhower, and Patton were there. They ate at our kitchen.

Interviewer: did you get to see them?

Oh yeah, at that time I was a cook. Eisenhower and Patton went to the line like regular soldiers. DeGaulle had to have the private table with a tablecloth, China, silverware and all that stuff and someone to wait on him. As far as I was concerned he wasn't much of a soldier.

Interviewer: What were your opinions about Eisenhower and Patton?

They were good, we like them fine, and they were good officers.

Interviewer: did they sit with the DeGaulle?

No they sat on the ground with the men.

Interviewer: really?

Then, when they made the invasion of Sicily. We had a cadre out of our outfit that went with them to, I suppose, have combat because we hadn't had any combat all the while we were in Africa we had not been in combat. So when they got back we prepared ourselves for the invasion of Italy.

Interviewer: how did you prepare?

Oh, we just got stuff ready.

Interviewer: did you do any more amphibious training at all?

No and I can't remember the day when we left Africa for Italy. But we landed on 8 September at Salerno. And I got captured on the 13th.

Interviewer: now when you landed on the eighth was it a hot beach?

Yes it was.

Interviewer: could you describe the landings? Were you in the first wave?

I was in the first wave, yes. Well there was machine guns, artillery and air force around. And we just kept driving in as far as we could. I was going along and I heard a, you learn kind of fast, I heard a what they call a screaming Mimi. It is artillery and you crank it up and it makes a noise and they were cranking it up. I was out in a pasture of an Italian farm and I heard this noise and I knew what it was so I started looking for someplace to get under or in back of and in Italy they have water tanks where they feed water to the cattle and one of them was right close by and I headed for it. I hit the ground in back of it but that's the last thing I remember because the artillery shell landed just a ways from me and I was knocked unconscious. When I come to there was a German who says, "For you the war is over!".

Interviewer: he spoke English to you?

Just that much and it was.

Interviewer: was there anybody with you?

No I was by myself. I was ahead of most of them. I had H 81 mm mortar ammunition on my back. And I was taking it up.

Interviewer: how many rounds were you carrying?

Six! Three on the back in three in front.

Interviewer: now had you been wounded at all when you were hit?

Just in my hands and in my legs.

Interviewer: did you receive any kind of treatment at all for your wounds?

Oh yes when we got back to their headquarters, CP control, they treated my hands and my legs. They took us, there were some paratroopers that had come in that night. I think it was but I don't remember. But anyhow there were some of them that had been taken. And they moved us back to an old Italian prison and we were there for three or four days.

Interviewer: now you were captured by the Germans?

Yes, Italy had already given up by then. Somewhere in that camp I contacted scarlet fever. So there were 81 of us, the paratroopers and I was by myself. They put us on trucks and took us towards Rome. As we went over the mountains, we were bombed and strafed by the Americans and the British. That was about the first word I learned was "flieger". When the driver says "flieger" he was out of the truck and down over the bank and I would holler to the guys in the back and we would go over the bank too.

Interviewer: now did you have guards with you in the trucks?

Well, there wasn't any place you could go and there were guards all around. So there were German soldiers all around, all over.

When we got into Rome and we stopped by the Coliseum and the driver says come on in, we went and looked into it. "Come" is the same in German as it is in English.

Interviewer: so he just took you there for a little tour of it?

No we just looked over the wall and into it to see what it was like. When we got there we were put on railroad cars like your 40 x 8. Went up through the Brenner Pass into Munich. Brenner Pass is something. You can look up and you don't see the top. Just two railroad tracks, it's all there is through it.

Interviewer: how about food? Were you fed by the Germans?

A piece of bread and some cheese. We got into Munich, camp 7A, Stalag 7A and I was so sick they put me right into the hospital there. I was in the hospital for three months.

Interviewer: do you think you were treated well while you were there?

Yes, as well as could be expected, I guess. The American German doctor said they were going to waste medicine on me because I wasn't going to live. But I fooled them.

Interviewer: so even without medication you survived?

Yes, I had a British soldier, a Welsh fellow, who took care of me. He took good care of me. After I got out of the hospital, I went from there to Stalag IIB. It was up near Neustettin near the Polish/German border. That was in the last of December 1943. We wasn't getting much to eat there.

Interviewer: were you given blankets were the barracks heated at all?

They weren't heated. We had one thin blanket.

Interviewer: did you ever get any Red Cross packages there?

Not there. We had them later. We were there for a couple weeks and I didn't like the food. They asked for volunteers to go out on a farm to work. I said yes and raised my hand. I could steal enough stuff on a farm to eat so I said yes I will go. The farm was 35 miles from Danzig on the North Sea.

Where were we?

Interviewer: you had just started to go off and work on the farm. What kind of farm was it?

Vegetable farm?

It was 3500 hecters and that is about 4500 acres. They raised potatoes and grain and had dairies. They raise sheep for their own use and pigs. When I first went on the farm I worked in the woods cutting wood for the families in the village. One day the inspector, superintendent says to us, there were 18 of us on the farm; he says we need someone to work in the blacksmith shop. Well I had two uncles who were blacksmiths so I had some experience with that. So I says I would. What I didn't know, before I learned while I was there, it was a good education. We shod horses, fixed machinery, made wagons. While we were in the woods that winter, we cut a tree, a black spruce that was 10 foot across on the stump. A fellow from Wisconsin and I felled it. We were warned not to break down any small trees because we would be reprimanded for it. We waited three weeks for the wind to be right before we could cut it. After we cut it, the first stick off of it

was 100 foot long. They come in there with one cylinder bulldog tractors and took it out on the road. Then it went into Danzig on the shipyard for a gin pole to load ships.

Interviewer: were you treated well by the farmers?

Oh yes! Real well! They appreciated what we done for them.

Interviewer: now did you receive extra food to work on the farms?

Oh yes! I was paid extra money. We got so many marks per month for working and I had extra rations for working in the blacksmith shop which I didn't know when I said I would go. All our rations were put in together and we had a soup every day. Potatoes, cabbage and whatever meat was put in. Put up into seven different days.

Interviewer: now that you stay in a separate area from the other prisoners?

On the farm? No there was the 18 of us altogether in one building, one house. We were nowhere near the camp. It was probably 100 km from the farm.

Interviewer: were there soldiers guarding you at all times?

There was one soldier who was a guard, yes. You couldn't go anywhere because what the heck the nearest front line 1500 miles away

Interviewer: was this guard friendly toward you guys?

Oh yes! Christmas time he'd come in and stood his rifle in the corner we would have a few schnapps, a keg of beer and that was our Christmas celebration. I had a family that I work overtime on weekends, Sundays and nights if they needed it. They had no man in the family to take care of them. So the heavy work. And they kept saying wait until Christmas, wait until Christmas. I says well we will wait until Christmas but I don't know what it is going to be. But anyhow they give me, the girls brought a box, there was white bread, cake and oranges, a bottle of schnapps, their whole ration for a year. She brought it to the fence and give it to me. And I was invited to go to their house for Christmas dinner. We had roast goose.

Interviewer: was this outside the compound?

Well, our compound was like an area of this square, pointing to the room, with a fence on it.

Interviewer: you were allowed to go out for the dinner then?

Oh yes! We wasn't restricted to much. In fact, I used to take a driving team and go to the railroad station which was 6 km from the farm every morning at 5 o'clock and pick up the mail and whatever the big house had ordered from Stolp which was the nearest town and come back. They had given me a pass so I wouldn't be picked up by the Gestapo or the SS troops.

Interviewer: did they supply you with winter clothing?

Well, we got some from Stalag IIB, overcoats, shoes and stuff. You had to take care of them because there were no replacements. While we were on the farm, we got Red Cross parcels once a month.

Interviewer: did anybody escape or try to escape?
Where would you go? The nearest front was 1500 miles.

Interviewer: so you were deep inside of Germany.

When they made the invasion of Normandy, we were warned not to try to escape because before it didn't matter escape they just bring us back. The further away we got the less punishment we got. But after the invasion of Normandy they said we would have to take drastic measures. We left the farm, the Russians started coming in, and they got as far as Warsaw. And the Germans didn't want us to get liberated by the Russians because they said they were worse than the Germans with prisoners which they were. So the old German, captain of the guard, gathered us altogether. There were 500 of us Americans in the area around Stolp. He says we are going to go to the American lines as fast we can go. So on February 13, 1944 no 45 we started to walk across Germany. We went to the North sea followed the shore all the way across. We crossed the Oder River and come to the Elbe River. When we got to the Elbe River we went south. When we crossed the Elbe River, all the guards threw their rifles into the river.

Interviewer: so they basically were trying to get you to the American lines and away from the Russians.

Right! Because the Russians were worse than the Germans. If you only knew how many Americans went into Siberia and never came back, it would be worse than Vietnam. My buddy who I had been buddies with all through the service he was liberated by the Russians but he happened to be right in a place where the Americans were close by so they had to turn them over to them. He said otherwise he never would have got back. After we were liberated, we were liberated by Patton's.

Interviewer: now were you when the camp you were liberated or just in a marching unit?
Just in a marching unit! We was in an old castle on the Elbe River. It was early in the morning and I come out go over to the Cook shack and I heard a plane and I looked up and there was a piper cub flying around and I took off my hat and waved. I went back into the castle and told the Americans there was a piper cub flying around. Just about that time shells started coming over. By 8 o'clock that morning Patton's outfit came in. They were three days ahead of supply and they had enough gasoline to last one day. They took us back into what, a place called Stendel. We were there for a week and then some American trucks came and took us to a camp called Lucky strike in France. On May 1 we got on a boat and headed for home. We got back to states sometime in May I can't remember. The 12th I think it was.

Interviewer: did you have to be hospitalized for any side effects from your years as a POW?
We didn't tell them whether we was or wasn't because we were in a hurry to get home. We come in to Newport News and we were there and processed and they give us a 65 day delay in route in our pay accumulated for all the time we were prisoners and for the combat pay and all that stuff. We got on the train and headed for New York. When I come into Albany the only telephone number I could remember was where my wife was when I left. So I called it and I could

remember it. And they said well those people don't live here anymore and they give me a number I could call. I called that and they come into Albany and picked me up.

Interviewer: when you were a prisoner were you able to write letters to your family?
Oh yeah we wrote. We had one letter a month and one postcard.

Interviewer: did you receive many letters while you were there?
Not a lot of them, no. It took them a long time to get processed.

Interviewer: were you ever aware of what was going on like the Normandy invasion?
I knew I knew about the invasion within about an hour after it happened.
There was a woman who used to listen to the BBC which was verboten. So she come down to the barracks, down to the house and said, "Hey Max, come here" and she told me the invasion of Normandy and happened that morning. By that time I had learned enough German so that I probably could pass for a German.

Interviewer: did you stay in contact with anyone who served with you?
Just Fran Booth is the only one. We we had been together all the while from Camp Dix all the way through.

Interviewer: is he still living?
No, he passed away last year.

Interviewer: so you stayed in contact with them all these years?
Oh yes, oh yes. In fact he had a place right next to mine. I give him some land to put a trailer on and he would come up on weekends.

Interviewer: where was he from?
New Jersey.

Interviewer: did you ever join any veterans' organizations?
Yes, I belong to the VFW, I had belonged to the American Legion, and the POW organization.

Interviewer: did you make use of the G.I. Bill at all?
I went to school I guess.

Interviewer: how about the 5220 club?
No. I never got into that.

Interviewer: how do you feel your time in service changed your life in any way?
Well my wife and I got married in January 3, 1942 and I didn't see her again for four years. So that changed it some. But I can't say it changed it too much.
They give him a photo of himself in uniform to hold in front of the camera.

Interviewer: do you remember when and where this was taken?

Not really.

Interviewer: thank you very much for your interview sir.