Francis Chesnick
Veteran

Interviewed at the
Rome Free Academy
Rome, NY
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Francis Chesnick **FC**
Student interviewer **SI**

SI: What is your full name?

FC: Francis Chesnick.

SI: Where and when were you born?

FC: I was born on a farm about a mile from the little village called Uniondale in northeastern Pennsylvania on February 14, 1925.

SI: What education did you have prior to going into the service?

FC: I had eight years of elementary school and four years of high school. I graduated from high school in 1942.

SI: Did you have a job before you enlisted into the military?

FC: Yes. You see, I was seventeen when I graduated from high school and I had a year to go before I would have to register for the military, so I worked in a local creamery where farmers brought their milk for collection.

SI: Why did you enlist in the military?

FC: I didn't enlist. I had to sign up for the draft when I was eighteen years old. I was eighteen years old on February 14, 1943, and that's when I registered for the military.

SI: What branch of service were you in?

FC: I was in the Army.

SI: Is this where you wanted to be, or did you want to be in the Air Force or another branch?

FC: Well, when I was seventeen I wanted to enlist in the Air Force but my mother wouldn't let me do it. She thought—well, I don't know what she thought. But anyway, I had to wait a year before I could get into the military when I was drafted.

SI: Where did you go for basic training?

FC: For basic training I went to Fort Hood, Texas and took basic training in the tank destroyers [?]

SI: What did you learn while you were there?

FC: Regular basic training really hasn't changed to date from way back then. You took calisthenics, short order drill, we learned a little jujitsu, went on long marches, we learned all the nomenclature of the various arms that the military used. It took about 13 weeks of basic training.

SI: Did you learn to use any specific weapons?

FC: Yes. Actually, the M1 rifle.

SI: Since this was your first experience in the military, what did you feel about it? Did you like it?

FC: When I was home on the farm we didn't have anyplace to go, really. Binghamton, New York was 45 miles away and Scranton, Pennsylvania was 25 miles away. Prior to going in the military those were the farthest places I'd gone away from home, which wasn't very often really. I was really happy to join the military.

SI: In your information it says you were selected for Army specialized training. What was that?

FC: To this day I wonder why they did it, but the Army set up a program where people with higher IQs would go to college, and they took about 250,000 of us, 18 and 19 years old. I went to Louisiana State University for a while and then transferred to a little college in western Louisiana called McNeese College at Lake Charles, and I studied engineering there for 8 months and then they disbanded the program.

SI: After you went to this training, what units or ships were you assigned to?

FC: I was assigned, after that Army specialized training program (that was the STP), I was assigned to the 99th Infantry Division, which was stationed at that time at Camp Maxey in northeastern Texas.

SI: When did you leave the US to go to Europe to fight?

FC: We left Camp Maxey the first part of September in 1944 and the whole division assembled at Boston. We sailed out from Boston on the 29th of September, 1944 for Scotland. We left in a convoy of 150 ships, all types of ships, troop ships, oil tankers, whatnot.

SI: When you were going over there, what did you think was going to happen?

FC: Well (laughs) I guess you don't really realize what's going to happen until you actually get into it. We just wondered when we would actually get into the fighting on the front lines. But you really don't feel the reality of it until you get there.

SI: Did you have any special jobs that you had to do?

FC: In my squad they gave me an O3 Springfield rifle with a scope on it, so I was the sniper of the crew. But on our first action, that scope they had on there fogged up all the time so when we got back to our base I asked for a new M1 rifle.

SI: What was it like being a sniper? What did you have to do?

FC: Well, what I had to do was when we went on patrol or something, if we caught sight of the enemy in the distance, I had to try to pick him off.

SI: How were your officers? Did you like them?

FC: My officers were good; I liked them.

SI: When did you experience your first combat?

FC: Well, our whole division went on the front lines on November 9, 1944 in eastern Belgium. Two days later, my squad—there were 12 of us—went on a patrol toward the German lines, and after about a mile in front of our positions, we spied some movement in the woods, it was heavily forested there. The trees were these big spruces, just like they grow around here. That was a whole forest of them. We spied some movement in there and of course we were trained to get cover quick. We got all down behind those big spruce trees and sure enough a German patrol of about 50 people was coming towards us. We were in a position to ambush them, which we did. This was two days after we got on line. We killed a few of them, and they took off the other way. Of course, this was our first action, and we took off the other way back to our lines. (Laughs) But this was our first real action of the 99th Infantry Division in World War II.

SI: Was it different from what you expected?

FC: Not really. We were trained in what we had to do.

SI: Your information says you fought in many battles. Tell us about your experience in the Battle of the Ruhr River Dams.

FC: It was about March, maybe the 5th or 6th that we got to the Rhine River right across from the city of Dusseldorf. We thought we were going to have a good rest there because the Rhine was about 400 miles from Switzerland to the North Sea and the Germans were blowing every bridge. And lo and behold on the 7th of March, our 9th Armored Division captured a bridge at Remagen, so the next day we were put on alert that we were going to go down and cross the bridge and expand the bridgehead on the other side. I believe it was on the 10th of March my division crossed the bridge. I walked across the Remagen Bridge and we fought to expand the bridgehead on the other side.

SI: Could you tell us about the Battle of the Bulge?

FC: Our division, as I mentioned before, went on line on a 20 mile front from the village of Monschau, Germany down to a village called Losheim, about 20 miles. It was heavily forested, all spruce forest, anywhere from 4 to 7-8 miles in depth. We were practically on the German-Belgian border. We came back west and it was all farmland, little villages of anything from 500-1000 people. There's only 3 or 4 roads coming through Germany back to our lines. Of course we had those heavily defended.

On the 16th of December, wholly unexpected at 5:30 in the morning, the Germans let off with a heavy artillery barrage that lasted about an hour and a half. Then they attacked with their infantry. On the west side of that force was a little village called Elsenborn, and the object of the Germans on the first day, they were supposed to clear the forest, kill or capture the enemy, capture Elsenborn by 11:00 and then form a defensive line to prevent American reinforcements from coming down from the north. Well, we fought for four days in that woods, and the Germans never did capture Elsenborn, they never did capture it during the whole Battle of the Bulge. Our division from the north part, we swung like opening a door. Right up in the north part, the village of Monschau, the Germans didn't get through at all there, but when you got to the end there, the 20 miles, they got in about 5 or 7 miles. In those four days, our division lost about 3000 men, casualties, wounded and killed. It was heavily forested. We, well, for example, we left England about late in October, and I wasn't able to take my clothes off to take a shower until late in February, three and a half months later. During those four or five days when we fought heavily with the Germans breaking through, we had nothing to eat except chocolate bars and we slept curled around one of those spruce trees. It was just terrible conditions, but actually we did our job preventing the Germans from making a breakthrough up in the northern part there. The snow was terrible too; it was one of the worst years for snow that the Bulge had ever had.

SI: Can you tell us about the Battle of the Rhineland?

FC: The Battle of the Rhineland was entirely different from the country we were in. It was farm country, it was all level and after the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans had really lost their will to fight. We made it across the Rhineland from the village in the area of Aachen, Germany to Dusseldorf in about six days. I think it was about 50-60 miles. The Germans didn't put up a lot of resistance except in a couple of the towns.

SI: What happened in the Battle of the Remagen Bridge?

FC: Well of course the bridge was still standing there when we crossed it about March 10th or so. Inland from the Rhine, inland towards Germany it was maybe about 20 miles. That was rugged country. The reason we wanted to get those 20 miles was that there was a superhighway, just like our two and four lane highways, running down the interior of Germany from, say, Cologne down to Frankfurt. We wanted that four lane highway so we could put our armor on there and take off. But it was awfully rugged country, and we slugged it out with the Germans. We crossed rivers at night with water (gestures chest high)…. Well, you know, the snow was melting and I remember one night we crossed a river where the water was right up to my shoulders. It was really tough going in there. It took us probably two weeks to get to our objective over there.

SI: What did you do in the Ruhr Industrial Area?

FC: Well, the first thing they told us was we had it completely encircled with several divisions, and I remember they told us there were 50,000 German soldiers in there. We ended up capturing 350,000. That was rugged country also. We met resistance here and there, but as I mentioned before the Germans had lost their will to fight and most of the time they were ready to be captured. Sometimes I captured 50 or 100 in one bunch, just myself. They just put up their hands and threw their rifles away. Even on one occasion, what was left of one of their armored divisions, just because we couldn't control it that much, we told them to come right through. They came right through with their big tanks all loaded (laughs)…. It was scary because one of those guys could throw a hand grenade or pick you off with a rifle. They were like we were. They didn't want to get killed, didn't want to get hurt, most of them. So we got through it.

SI: It says you were in the Army of Occupation in Germany? What did you do there?

FC: We were assigned to a town, and all we did was stand along the bridge or intersection and there were all kinds of people, displaced people coming through—civilians--who wanted to get back to their own country. They came in lines, thousands of them coming through. All we did was check some of them out, anybody that looked suspicious. It was an easy life, occupation.

SI: It says you were a sergeant at a prisoner of war camp, is that right?

FC: Yeah. After occupation, you had to have a certain number of points, they called them. There were a certain number of criteria that were assigned to those points. Of course, I was single, had no dependents back home, and we didn't get over there until late in 1944 so I had to wait until my points accumulated before I could come home. So I was assigned to a prisoner of war camp just outside of Brussels, Belgium. All we did was watch over the prisoners, gave them work details.

SI: Did you win any awards for your service in these battles?

FC: Right after we ambushed that German patrol on November 11th our regimental commander of the 12 of us came up and gave us the Combat Infantry Badge. The Combat Infantry Badge was eventually given to everybody who was in the infantry in combat. I have a picture of the regimental commander awarding the Combat Infantry Badge to us. And we got the Bronze Star, which is the lowest star. The lowest combat medal.

SI: How did it feel to get these medals?

FC: The Combat Infantry Badge was the one you wanted, because not too many of the total Army was in the infantry, right in the front lines. In the front lines, the infantryman, the rifleman…. I think 20 percent of the total were in the infantry, and they suffered 90 percent of the casualties. I wasn't too enthused about getting that medal. There were a lot of people who should have them and didn't get them, and there were people who got them who shouldn't have gotten them.

SI: Since you were in Europe, when did you find out about the concentration camps that the Nazis had?

FC: I can't remember whether we literally found out about them, but I think I found out about them from reading newspapers even before I was in the Army. Part of my division went through one of those areas where the concentration camps were, but my regiment didn't. I didn't see them at all when I was in Germany.

SI: During the war, what were you guys fed? Was the food good?

FC: Well our staple in the infantry was K rations. They came in a wax coated cardboard box. In there was breakfast, dinner and supper. Breakfast had powdered eggs you mixed together --they tasted like (he just laughs). The dinner, I think, would be a little can of cheese, and the supper was hash. In addition to that was a chocolate bar, a Hershey's chocolate bar. It was very concentrated, a solid bar. Sometimes that was our only food for a day, like in the Battle of the Bulge. There was a little package of crackers and a plastic bag of Nestle's coffee, instant coffee. That coffee, a lot of times that was the only warm thing we had to drink. When you emptied the carton it came in, it was wax coated, and we lit that with a match and packed our canteen cup full of snow. And by the time the carton was melted we had warm water, maybe a couple of inches, and we dumped the coffee in there, and we had a warm cup of coffee. Also in that little package were some matches and a little box of either 3 or 4 cigarettes in there. I didn't smoke before I went into the army, and to this day I never smoked. So I gave the cigarettes to people who smoked. Most people smoked.

SI: Were you able to keep in touch with people back home?

FC: Yeah. We had--what do you call them?—little papers that you wrote a letter on and I guess they microfilmed them, or did something with them. I carried them down in my

shirt, and I had a pencil someplace in my pocket. Anytime you wanted to write you could write, and we got mail coming from home practically every day. They had a system set up.

SI: What were your funniest and most memorable moments of the war?

FC: (Laughs) Well, I guess it'll be a little story. When we crossed the Remagen Bridge, there was sign up there that said "Cross the Rhine with dry feet, courtesy of the 9th Armored Division." The 9th Armored Division captured the bridge. That stuck in my memory after the war, and I often wondered what happened to that sign. Three years ago I was down in Fort Knox Kentucky, that's our main Armored training camp, and they have a museum there with, especially, the tanks, the Germans' and ours. And while I was going through the museum I looked up and I saw a sign that had one arrow pointed to Dusseldorf and the other arrow pointed to Cologne. When I got past it and I looked up on the other side, that sign said—and this is in the museum at Fort Knox—it said "Cross the Rhine with dry feet courtesy of the 9th Army Division." (Laughs) I thought that was rather humorous. There's humor in war. What was the other part?

SI: Your most memorable moment?

FC: Most memorable moment? I guess when the war was over. When the war was over we were down in southern Germany, there was no throwing up the guns or whooping and hollering. I guess maybe I just turned to the guy next to me and shook his hand and said "I'm glad we made it" or "Thank God we made it" or something like that.

SI: Who are some of the people you remember most?

FC: I guess what I would say, that were closest to me in the war, in my squad. Certainly, those that were killed. You became just like family to the 10 or 12 people who were with you. Casualties kept that squad down to about 7 or 8 people most of the time.

SI: When did you return home from the war?

FC: I was discharged down at Fort Meade, Maryland on March 6, 1946. I have my discharge with me (picks up the document and holds it toward the camera briefly.)

SI: What was it like when you came back home? Were there a lot of parades or anything like that?

FC: No. I guess right after the war, the war was over [in Europe] on May 8, 1945 and not long after that boys started coming home. In big cities like New York, they had big parades and things like that. By the time I got home a year later, well we came into New York harbor on probably around the 3rd or 5th of March 1946, and when we got into the harbor it was late at night, and you could see all the lights on the island – boy, they looked good. We stayed on the ship right in the harbor overnight. They didn't unload us over night. But the next morning—talk about a memorable moment--when I looked out

when it got light I saw the US flag flying over one of the buildings in New York City. And I thought "I'm home."

SI: So you have your certificate of honorable discharge there. What was that ceremony like?

FC: Oh, this here? (Picks up a document) Oh, there was a girl… We went to get discharged down in Fort Meade, Maryland, and of course there were a lot of people getting discharged at the same time, and there were a lot of clerks. Mine was a girl. She sat at a little booth. And we filled this out and went over it together, and she gave it to me and that was it.

SI: What were your feelings about it? Were you happy now that you were out?

FC: Well, I guess I had mixed feelings, really. I didn't really know what I was going to do, and I guess I was happy and at the same time I felt a little down too.

SI: When you got home, what did you do? Did you go to school or did you get a job?

FC: Well when I got home I went back to work in that little creamery where the farmers brought their milk. When we were kids growing up on a farm, about the only entertainment we could do was what we could make up ourselves. There were always about 10 of us; I come from a family of 7 boys and 6 girls. Five of us eventually were in the military in WWII. We played baseball a lot, played it every day, and we played it at school. I had a chance to play professional baseball for a couple of years, which I did with a team like we used to have in Utica, this was back in 1947 or 48. I played two years of that and I hurt my arm, and those little leagues start falling apart. And I came back and I worked at the creamery for a while, but while I was playing ball the guys asked me, "What are you going to do? Why don't you go to college?"

So I guess it was the fall of 1948 I went to Penn State, and I graduated from Penn State in 1952 with a degree in Agricultural Economics, and worked for a farm cooperative for better than 40 years, and I retired from that job. It was called Dairy Lea and it's still in business today.

SI: After your experiences in the military, would you recommend it to others?

FC: If you like regimentation… I liked the Army, in fact I signed up for the Reserves for three years. While I was in Penn State, my papers came through to sign up again. And my mother threw them in the fire. (Laughs) But anyway I guess that was a pretty good idea because all those who were, even in college at the time, they were called to go to the Korean War, and if I had stayed in the Reserves I would have been in the Korean War also. Yeah, I would recommend anybody, especially coming out of high school to spend 2 or 3 years or so because you're young yet, see if you like the army. There are all kinds of benefits in the Army. And if you don't like it you've got plenty of time to do what you want to do. When I went to Penn State as a freshman I was 23 years old.

SI: How has being in the military influenced your life?

FC: One thing that it did, going through combat and all that, it certainly made you, what they call, you might say, "grow up quick." As far as responsibility goes, I'd guess I'd have to say it was excellent because growing up on a farm and doing all the farm chores, you learn the responsibility of work at a young age. I think it disciplines you, it gives you, certainly, a different outlook on life, it helps you build your career and what you want to do in your future, things like this. I think it has a big impact on your life.

SI: That's all I have. Do you have anything else there?

FC: Ok, what I'll do…. (He pulls a paper out of the stack next to him and sets it before him) This is life prior to the army; we've covered the army life pretty good. You can do what you want with it. I started out [writing] it like this… (He begins to read from it)

My name is Francis Chesnick, I reside in the Town of Deerfield which is just north of the City of Utica in Oneida County, New York. But I'm a native of Pennsylvania. I was born on a dairy farm in northeastern Pennsylvania about halfway between Binghamton, New York and Scranton, Pennsylvania near a little village called Unionville. Prior to the Army, those two cities, Scranton and Binghamton, were as far as I got, and very occasionally did we get there. Our life was centered around the farm and our 2-room country school. Our family comprised 7 boys and 6 girls in addition to our mother and father. Five of us eventually got into the military. I was born on February 25, 1925. Ours was a dairy farm. We were not mechanized—very few farms were mechanized in the 1930s—so all the work on the farm was done by horse-drawn machinery. We learned to do work on the farm at a very young age, for example I learned to milk cows by hand, and milked a certain number of cows morning and night even before I went to school. I don't think we looked upon those chores as being a burden but as a satisfaction of getting a job done and running a farm and making a living at it.

For my first eight years of school, I went to a two-room school that was one and a half miles from our home. We walked to school, there were no buses to take us. We walked to school. Back in the early 1930s very few people had telephones or radios, so we went to school every day, whether we had a blizzard, whether we were snowed in, or whether there was a thunderstorm or not, because there was no way you could contact everybody. We just went to school and that was it, and everybody was in the same boat. That two-room school had two teachers, and each of them taught four grades. While I was in the fifth grade, my teacher asked me if when I come back in the fall, if I wanted to take sixth and seventh grade together in one year. I said, why not? So that's what I did. That's why I graduated high school when I was seventeen instead of eighteen.

For going to high school—that two-room school only had eight grades—so for going to high school we went to a school five miles away from our village. I graduated there in 1942. And I graduated at the top of my class as far as average goes. I was tops of 100 in my graduating class. Most of that graduating class went off to various parts of the

military in 1942, but I had to wait another year so that's when I took the job at the creamery where the farmers brought their milk.

The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The war in Europe was going on since Germany attacked Poland on September 1, 1939. During those two years, our country was pretty well divided on whether we should enter the war or not. There were a lot of debates going on, just like here when you have a controversy, like today. But then when the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor, it changed completely. The whole country got behind the war, and figured it was the thing to do to get in the war and defeat Germany and Japan. One of the things Japan had in mind—they had a whole list of things listed out, they were going to conquer China, which they did, and take control of the Pacific practically, which they did, and then destroy the United States. Think about that. Destroy the United States.

I remember clearly what I was doing when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. I was 16 years old. On our farm we heated our house with coal and wood. We always had a supply of wood in our woodshed. That Sunday afternoon I had an armful of wood I brought into the house. My mother was listening to the radio, and when I got in she said the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor. I knew where Pearl Harbor was in the Hawaiian Islands because in grade school we took a course called geography, and in geography you learn the continents and their relation to each other, the oceans and their relation to each other, the rivers and so forth. I didn't know how far away it was, but I knew it was in the Pacific someplace off from San Francisco. The whole country geared up to it. Closed down automobile manufacturing and those plants made tanks and guns and so forth. The railroad steam cars, steam engines were also made, but those factories were also geared up to make artillery, guns, tanks. They built new factories to make airplanes and so forth. The whole country geared right up to support the war effort.

As I mentioned before, when the war ended we didn't have any big celebrations when we fellows were down in southern Germany. We just turned to each other and shook hands with each other and said, "Thank God we made it."

(Picks up copy of a document and shows it to interviewer) Did you want a copy of this?

SI: We have a copy of it.

FC: (Picks up a paper bag and removes a jagged piece of metal about 6 inches long.) I was over there where the Battle of the Bulge was fought, and in some other places like Remagen Bridge, in 1994, and in the woods you could still find shrapnel. This is a piece. I'm not sure whether it's from an artillery or a mortar shell, but as you can see it's quite big. You wouldn't want to get hit by this. When it comes out, when it bursts, it's red hot. At night it's a bright red color when those artillery shells burst.

And on that patrol that I mentioned… (picks up photo album and looks for a picture)…. This here is the travels of a dollar bill (shows worn dollar bill in the album) I carried with me and I wrote down places, the Siegfried Line, the Remagen Bridge, stuff like that. Ok,

here are pictures of Remagen Bridge… But this (removes a picture from the album and hands it to the interviewer) is the original picture of when we came back from that patrol, two days later our regimental commander awarding us the Combat Infantry Badge.

SI: Which one are you?

FC: Can you pick me out?

SI: That guy in the middle?

FC: Yup. At that time I had that sniper rifle, that old Springfield rifle. See that scope on there?

SI: Yeah.

FC: That's the original picture. If you guys have got more time, and if you want, I've got a lot of pictures here of the area where we fought… the Battle of the Bulge…, from when I was there in 1994. I have friends over there that I met in 1994 and they have a museum in Belgium. I still write them. They've been here to my house, and we've been over there-- in fact we've been over there 3 times--and I donated the uniform that I came home with to their museum.

SI: That's about it, I guess. Thank you.