

**William D. Van Alstyne, Jr.**  
**Veteran**

**Interviewed at home**  
**25 December 1993**

**Q:** Where were you stationed in War World II?

**WVA:** I was drafted and I was sent to Fort McClellan, Alabama for my basic training. And after seventeen weeks of basic training they gave us a ten day delay in route. So I had ten days to get from Fort McClellan to Fort Meade, Maryland and after we got our physicals and haircuts I was put on a ship from Hampton Roads and ten days later I landed in Oran, Africa. We were, as typical in the army, we were moved around, shoved around. Getting ready to leave there and not knowing where we were going because everything was secret. We couldn't say anything. We left Oran in early 1944, for an unknown destination.

**Q:** How long were you there?

**WVA:** In Oran? For a week or 10 days. 10 days.

Then they put us on a British convoy and we went out to sea not knowing where we were going. We ended up in Naples, Italy. And they put us on a train, I forget what they used to call it I think 40 or 8, or 40 by 8, 40 men or 8 cows or horses. We went on tracks that were very slow and we ended up in Concerta, Italy at a replacement depot. This was just before the time that everything was about to break out in European theater. They sent us, after we were there for a week or two, back to Naples and put us on a ship for Anzio, Beach Head.

**Q:** Now until this time you saw no combat?

**WVA:** No, I was just moving around.

We were going into.....

**Q:** You didn't dig any trenches or anything like that?

**WVA:** No, no. We had training here but didn't do it over there.

We got to Anzio and while we were on a ship off Anzio they had the D-day invasion of Normandy. The Germans were, what they were doing, they were trying to hit the Germans from a lot of fronts. They couldn't concentrate on just one. So we went into Anzio and troops in Anzio were attacking north in Italy. I don't know just how many divisions. I was the replacement. If you know what a replacement is, that's when somebody gets killed you take his place. That's what my job was. So we went into Anzio and we could only come in so far. We had to take landing craft because the Germans were still shelling Anzio. So I, all of us had to run. We get off the ship and get on a landing craft. Then we had to run across the beach and get into a safe hole because the Germans were shelling us.

**Q:** Did anyone die?

**WVA:** Not right then. No, no we got through that because they were protecting us. The ships were firing you know. I don't know how much detail I should go.

Our job was to follow the units that were breaking out of Anzio. I think we followed them to a town, I can't remember the name of the town. That's where we joined the 34th infantry division. Because my name was Van Alstyne I was picked down near the end and I went into the machine gun squad in the 2nd Battalion the 168, Company G. I spent all the rest of my time in Italy with the Company G 168th going up the whole Italian peninsula.

**Q:** Did you shoot a machine gun?

**WVA:** That's what I was doing first. First I was an ammunition bearer. But then, due to casualties, people getting killed or hurt. I moved up to a machine gunner and I'd say a few months later I was a squad leader. I was at that time, 19 years old and I was leading a machine gun squad in Italy.

**Q:** Were you trained in machine guns?

**WVA:** I was trained in heavy machine guns, which were permanent, you had to set them up. The light machine guns that we had, went along with the infantry, with the fighting, combat. You had to be mobile. I had a machine gun squad for quite some time. Right to the end in fact. I never got hit. I got bounced around a few times and I lost some men. But I didn't, don't ask me why.

**Q:** Did you see any men die?

**WVA:** Usually we got them out of there. We were fortunate. But we did see many dead Germans, dead Americans around. The division I was in was a veteran division who had been in Ireland when they first went over.

**Q:** How did you lead them if it was a veteran division?

**WVA:** It's a matter of longevity. I was the next one in line. They were getting hurt or getting hit. They just moved me up there. My only job was to follow orders and give them orders. I had a few that wouldn't take them, they deserted us. That's kind of between us. We just followed all the way up through. If you look at a map of Italy, it was not easy. Italy was very mountainous and very much rivers.

**Q:** So you were in tanks or trucks or jeeps?

**WVA:** No. We walked. Infantry walks. Sometimes they put us in trucks, if you went back for a rest or something. They'd bring the trucks up and put you all on and take you back 5-10 miles. You'd get fresh hot food, fresh clothes, clean clothes, showers.

**Q:** What did you eat when you walked?

**WVA:** Rations. Sea rations, they called them, which were in cans. We carried them. They had K rations, which were in a package that was watertight sealed. They had crackers, cookies, can of spam or something, pack of cigarettes, little pack, little bitty thing. When they could, the kitchen would try to get as close to you as they could. When we got in the mountains, the Apinines. We, and myself included, helped work with the mules. They couldn't get the jeeps or couldn't get the trucks up there. We had to get a mule team. The mule team was made up of Italian prisoners that were taken when we took Italy. So we had to go back and get them. The Italians were too noisy and too inefficient. So a lot of us had to go back and bring the mules up to the front, they were strapped in with ammunition and food and medical supplies.

**Q:** Were the Italians noisy and inefficient because they didn't want to cooperate?

**WVA:** I don't know. The Italians were noisy anyway. They tend to be noisy. Of course a mule is tough to handle. They are stubborn. They know the shell, they hear the noise. You had to get a bunch of them to pull them up the trail. Once in a while one would go over the bank, they would have to shoot it and get somebody down to get some of it.

**Q:** Were you ever in a fight?

**WVA:** Yes. This was what we were doing. Yes. The infantryman and company G, he is in actual combat with the Germans. You saw them, not all the time. We didn't want to be seen lots of time either. It's tough for you, for you, you were always on the attack, you were always after the Germans. And when you are in a set area, you're dug in. They were looking for you and that's where you lose a lot of men. They shell us. Yes, I was in actual combat, not hand to hand. I didn't go until later, went in 1944. January February 44. I came home in 46 but the war ended in 45. I was a little over a year in actual combat.

**Q:** Did you think it would ever end?

**WVA:** What scared you, you knew we were getting the upper hand, and you didn't want to be that last victim. Because they didn't give up. They would tend to take what they could with them. Then give up. That's what happened to my cousin, Dudley Mitchell. He was in the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division which was there. He was shot by a sniper and he never made it. We didn't want to be the last casualty. We knew we had them beat but we didn't want to be the last casualty.

**Q:** Do you have any other family or friends you lost over there?

**Q:** Did any other VanAlstyne brothers go?

**WVA:** No. I was the older. In our generation I was the older. Some of the others went Navy. I was the about the only one who went infantry from my era. Some other friends. But not with me.

**Q:** What kind of soldier were you?

**WVA:** I was in the army, in the infantry. Did a lot of walking, drank out of mud puddles. Hygiene sometimes was bad. What could you do?

**Q:** How did you get mail? Did you get mail?

**WVA:** Yes. They get it to you.

**Q:** How long does it take to get mail to you?

**WVA:** It depends what you were doing, where the front was. They ran the company, like where the company command was. They had radios.

**Q:** You had to stay after the war. What did you do?

**WVA:** I had to stay because I was single. And 19 plus years age. Wasn't married, no kids. So, I had to stay. You had to be there to clean up and get everything back to normal.

**Q:** Did you help take German soldiers as prisoners?

**WVA:** Yes, we didn't have much love for them but we were humane. We might give them a push, shove them around. I didn't see anybody shoot them.

**Q:** What were the German prisoners like?

**WVA:** They were very quiet when we got them.

**Q:** Did you see concentration camps?

**WVA:** No, I was not in that area.

Winston Churchill respected the American troops. He was in Italy, this time, we were getting ready for, actually getting ready for the big push all over and we were back on a rest and rehabilitation. Where you get fresh food, hot food and get your ammunition and get your guns in shape and get yourself in shape. Food and movies. Whenever they could, the army did try to give you what they could, but when you're fighting it's a lot different.

**Q:** Did you fight through a Christmas holiday?

**WVA:** Oh sure.

**Q:** Did you ever see those groups that went over to entertain the troops?

**WVA:** Yeah. I saw the Andrew sisters. I saw Marlena Dietrich, remember her? Saw her. You know how many of us saw her? I'd bet there wasn't over 30 or 40. She did it on a jeep on a platform like. She did a service for us up there. Who else? I don't know. Jack Haley. I didn't see a lot of them because they didn't come up that far. There was others. We had more or less the minor ones that would come up there. I didn't see Bob Hope or

anything like that. He never came up that far. He was in safer territory. He had to be, with what he had.

I didn't win a purple heart. I did not get hit. I got very close. I carried off wounded. Some of my personal friends, Lars Earlinson and Donald Larson. Got hit. I remember. Lars J. Earlinson. Swedish. He was very good. Tremendous, tremendous soldier. He got shot. Italians always had these little villages with concrete. They were all built one to another. A little village. We were in there. The Germans shot through a window and it hit the wall and hit him in the stomach. So the bullet had ricocheted and so we couldn't get him out. The Germans wouldn't let us out. Everytime we tried to do something they would shell you. So we had to wait until dark, bring the mules down. And put him on a mule. You couldn't get anything in there.

**Q:** Did he die?

**WVA:** The last I knew he was alive in a hospital. I don't know. I've never seen him sense or talked to him.

It was interesting. Very. Very, very.

I can remember after it was over, I was home, there were other things I did. We had trips, after it was over. Then I drove a jeep. First I worked at a wrecker, because I was garage. I said, "I don't want this". I took it because they were going to send us to Japan. But then the atomic bomb came and we didn't go. I went driving Jeep for a second battalion, S4. That's the entertainment division. They took care of entertainment, food, entertainment, shows. We were up in the Italian Alps and we had companies scattered all over. We'd have a USO show come in, of course they were minor ones, or we'd have a dance band come in and we'd have to go to the nearest village to get a bus load of Italian girls to come up and dance. We were responsible for doing that. I was a jeep officer. My officer was. Every time I drive the jeep after that I'd have to have a 'Civilians Authorized' tag on it. So my officer was kind of a, he's kind of a swinger. He'd say "take me here, take me there". And he'd say, "oh by the way, you can use the jeep for a few hours". So I could go into town and pick up a girl like nothing. 'Civilian Authorized' it was, you had to be pretty reliable to get it. In other words, they didn't want anybody running all over town with it.

When we came home, I went to Switzerland, did a tour there. We were up in the Alps, we were in Austria.

**Q:** What were you doing there?

**WVA:** We were keeping peace, in other words. Somebody had to be there to maintain the peace. Get the money back together and get their finances going. The army did that. That is what we were doing.

We had trouble with Tito in Trieste. We had to go over there. Tito, he was against the Russians I guess. But we used to tangle. He used to drive us off the street. But we were told not to fight them. So anyway I went back. Some of my friends went home earlier. I went to Switzerland.

When I came home I went to school for a while. Then my father got sick. I had to come out of school and then I was married to Evelyn and I had 2 kids. Then Evelyn got sick. She always used to say to me, "Now you know why you came out of World War II with no injuries. You were destined to take care of me." She said that many times.

So that's my life. And you know it all since.

Germans, they were a tough soldier, and they were dedicated. But the only problem with Germany that we used to see, they were regimented. They were taught to do certain things, at certain times, and they would do it. But the Americans, they couldn't figure us out. Guys would say, "Let's figure this out". If the officers told you to do something and it wasn't working, you'd say the hell with this. It worked out real well.