

Harold E. Williams
Narrator

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Interviewer
NYS Military Museum

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Chatham, New York

WC: Today is the 10th of May 2010. We are in Chatham, New York. My name is Wayne Clark. I'm with the New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center in Saratoga Springs, New York. Sir, for the record would you please state your full name, and date and place of birth, please.

HEW: My full name is Harold E. Williams. I was born January 23, 1923 in Valatie, New York.

WC: Did you attend school in Valatie?

HEW: Yes.

WC: How far did you go in school?

HEW: Eighth grade.

WC: And did you go to work at that point?

HEW: Yes, I quit and I went to work down in the factory in Valatie, New York.

WC: What did you do at the factory in Valatie?

HEW: Well it was an old cotton mill. We just spun yarn.

WC: You did that until you took a job in the arsenal?

HEW: I left there and I went to, yes, I went to the arsenal to work, and I had to get permission to leave there. My mother signed for me to join the service.

WC: At the arsenal, what kind of work did you do?

HEW: We made O-Rings for the big Long Toms. I did the rough cutting—they didn't trust me to do the good cutting.

WC: Do you recall where you were when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

HEW: Yes. I was in a drug store in Albany, New York, and they were announcing it there. That's where I first heard it.

WC: Once that happened, did your life change at all from that moment on?

HEW: Well, I was young and full of vinegar then, and I guess all of us young guys, we wanted to get into it. My mother didn't want me to go in, but I did sign my name and then I had to get her signature on the papers to go in the service.

WC: How old were you when you entered the service?

HEW: Eighteen going on nineteen.

WC: So you enlisted in the Army.

HEW: Yes.

WC: Why did you pick the Army as opposed to the Navy, or...?

HEW: I don't know, no particular reason.

WC: Where did they send you for your basic training?

HEW: Basic training—we went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. From there they shipped us out to Fort Knox, Kentucky.

WC: Was that your first time away from home?

HEW: Yes.

WC: What was it like at Fort Knox?

HEW: Fort Knox was rigorous training—it was armored infantry training. You had to learn to drive everything, in case a guy got hurt or something. We learned to drive everything—the tanks, the trucks, the jeeps, the half-tracks, the weapons carrier, but most of all our training was—we had to learn to do twenty words a minute on the Morse Code. And we never got to use it overseas, because we went to the 510's, and they just had little crystal sets in them and we didn't need..., but we had them on our half-tracks.

WC: Now, after your basic training, did you go on to any specialized training after that?

HEW: After the basic training, from Fort Knox, they sent me down to Camp Campbell, Kentucky, and did some more training there.

WC: What kind of training did you get there?

HEW: Camp Campbell—walking, a lot of marching, a lot of hiking and, of course, the basic, you know, over the fences, and over the bars and that sort of training. Nothing like Rangers get.

WC: After Fort Campbell, what happened next?

HEW: Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I was sent to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and sent overseas.

WC: Did you go as a replacement or with the whole unit?

HEW: We didn't know where we were going. When we got to Africa, the 62nd was already up in the line, and some guys got hurt. We were both radio operators and they

needed them in the forward observation, so they just took Jackson and me, a fellow that—we went through basic together. We wound up in Africa together. We wound up in the same outfit together.

WC: Did he go through the same training?

HEW: Yes, Jackson and me.

WC: How did you get overseas?

HW: I forget the name of the ship. I know it was rough.

WC: Did you go in a convoy or single ship?

HEW: I think we had a convoy.

WC: Did you get seasick at all?

HEW: Oh yes, the mess hall was a mess. Very sick. We went into the Med, and we got into the Mediterranean, and boy, we had all kinds of [unclear] and things around us because that was the old submarine alley, and we sailed up to Oran, and we got there and the French—what do they call them again? They were on any side that was there at the time, that's the way they were.

WC: I think they called them the Vichy.

HEW: The Vichy, yes. They killed a few of the guys around us. When we went into Oran, the bodies were still floating in the harbor. But the Rangers went in and took care of them really quick. Glad I didn't have to do that.

WC: So once you landed...

HEW: Then we went down to Casablanca, down in that area. That's where they were picking men out of different units to fill in the gap of people—our outfit got hit hard. They weren't prepared. The Germans were superior to us, actually there, because they had the big long weapons, and at that moment we didn't have the Long Toms and that, and they had the big tanks, you know that tiger tank, and at that time we didn't have anything that would knock a tiger tank out, but that didn't last very long. We got big equipment. From there we went through Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, right on to the Bay of [unclear] in Africa.

WC: Did you have any contact with the enemy during...?

HEW: Yeah, oh yeah, I was telling my wife, one time when they left Jackson and me out, they took us up in a jeep, and just dropped us off, and here was some 105's already there—these are the ones with no top on them, no turret I mean. It's all open with a 105—they call them a priest tank because they had a platform in the back and it had a 50 caliber like a place a preacher would stand and preach, and I guess they lost a few of them. They needed radio operators, so they dropped Jackson and me off. We didn't know where to go. I hadn't got out of the jeep five minutes, and along came the Stukas—they called it Stuka Alley up there—and I ran and jumped in a hole with this guy.

I didn't even have a foxhole dug, and I'll tell you, I wet my pants—that's how scared I was. That was not a good way to be broken in. The minute we got out of the jeep, I didn't know what it was, and somebody hollered, "Get down," and I ran with this guy into his hole. I didn't have a foxhole dug, but I'll tell you it didn't take me long to dig one afterwards.

WC: Did they shoot up the jeep?

HEW: I don't know, the jeep was going down. I don't know, I can't tell you. He took off.

WC: And then you got settled into the unit?

HEW: Got settled in the unit and then we went through Kasserine Pass, El Guettar, all the way through Tunisia. Of course, you know, the Jerries had a lot of planes in Tunisia, but our Air Force did a job on them. They crucified those things; they got rid of them.

WC: What was your daily routine like?

HEW: Well, up until that time I had never been out with the infantry yet. My first time out with the infantry was—not in Africa, I never went out with the infantry in Africa—but when we got to Sicily, we did. We were the only LST in Sicily that took casualties in that invasion. Our LST, we had ninety-eight guys wounded, some of them were killed, but most were wounded, on the boat I was on. It got on the sandbar and couldn't get off.

WC: Now, how many guys were on the boat?

HEW: Our 62nd outfit had probably about—they had the medical outfit, they had a couple of us radio operators, and all the rest were infantry, and they went to let down one of the boats, and one of the davits—there's one on each side that lets them down—broke, and it went headlong, and the guys, a lot of them drowned. A fellow from our outfit went over the edge, and got some[unclear]. He didn't know how to swim—Ed Dean—I never forgot that.

WC: And you were with the 62nd armored field artillery battalion?

HEW: Yes, from Africa right through until the end of the war.

WC: Now what about your casualty rate amongst—you were in a platoon-size?

HEW: Well I was in a battery. We had headquarters, A,B,C, and S-service battery—we had five. Eight hundred men in the battalion.

WC: And what battery were you in?

HEW: I was in the headquarters; that was where all the forward observation was, in the headquarters. All the communications were headquarters.

WC: Now what type of work were you actually doing yourself?

HEW: Well, when I went out, I just carried a 510 radio.

WC: What kind of personal weapon did you carry?

HEW: I carried a little carbine because when we carried one in each hand, they were a lot of weight.

WC: What did you think of the carbine?

HEW: Well, the carbine wasn't any good when you were at a distance. It was for close-ups, but carbines were not the weapon for long distance or anything. In fact, when I was out with Lieutenant French one day, they were taking the ground. They were firing just ahead of us, and our batteries fell short, and they were hitting around us and we had to call a cease fire. Then, when we got going again—where the infantry was, they were laying all over the place—I picked up an M-1. That was the rifle for the Army—the M-1—and I kept that with me, because I could fit it in the half-track when we traveled, and I'd have it.

WC: What kind of clothing did you wear in Africa? Did you wear the regular...?

HEW: Fatigues.

WC: The heat must have been unbearable.

HEW: The heat and sand fleas. Oh, they were horrible. Sand fleas—terrible. You couldn't lay anything down in Africa because these Arabs, they would steal everything. You couldn't lay anything down.

WC: Now did you have much contact with the civilian population?

HEW: As we went through one village one day, there were only three or four buildings in it, and, believe it or not, on one of the buildings hung a Coca-Cola sign. It was unbelievable. We laughed about it. Coca-Cola here.

WC: What kind of rations were you living on?

HEW: C-Rations. Whatever, meat and vegetable stew, meat and vegetable hash—that's where I got the name Cornwilly from. They called me Cornwilly because I loved corned beef and hash. The guys hated it. I liked it, so they nicknamed me Cornwilly. In fact, Colonel Bennett, whenever he wrote to me, he'd always say, "Cornwilly."

WC: You guys didn't have a mess hall?

HEW: Oh no. We never had hot food when we were out. The only time we had hot food was when we got a rest and C Battery came up. The cooks were in C battery and they'd make a hot meal for us. Sometimes they'd come up and things would happen, and they'd have to put the kitchen away and head back.

WC: And then you mentioned landing in Italy.

HEW: Sicily. Gale of Sicily, Licata.

WC: And you guys were under heavy attack?

HEW: Well that's where, you know, the airborne—they shot them out of the sky. They didn't know what they were—they lost a lot of airborne. They just put up a terrific anti-aircraft fight. They thought it was Germans—it wasn't, it was our own men. On our boat, Colonel Bennett mentioned that to me when I went down to see him, that I was the only LST boat in the whole landing that got stuck on a sandbar, and that sandbar right above us was a cliff. Later on, it reminded us a little of Omaha, the bluffs, you know, but this was a high one and the Jerries would come over it. You wouldn't see them until they'd get over it and they were on you. They never hit the boat direct, but they strafed it terrible, and that's where a lot of the guys got hurt.

WC: Any contact with the Italian Army at all?

HEW: When we got in, they were very friendly. They were ready to give up. The Germans left them to hold the fort, but they didn't put much resistance up. In fact, they were glad to see us.

WC: How much time did you spend there?

HEW: Just a month. That really ended quick. That wasn't a long campaign. We ended up near Palermo, and everybody got a pass and that was the time that I met the only person back in the United States that I knew in civilian life. He was in the 9th infantry division. Name was John Puzio, from Brainard. We were walking on the street, and we looked at one another and I said, "John Puzio," and he said, "Harold Williams," and we gave each other a hug. I didn't see him again after that, but up in Belgium I heard the 9th Division was there and I went looking for him. We had a rest period, and I went looking for him, and a young captain told me that he got killed in a bunker, so when I got back, I went to see his parents. John Puzio from Brainard, New York.

WC: That must have been hard for you, wasn't it, going to visit his family?

HEW: I'll tell you what happened, when I went there, it was raining a little bit, and I asked the fellows, if any of the fellows knew Johnny Puzio, and they said, "Who are you?" and I said, "I'm a good old friend." "Oh, are you a relative?" I said, "Well, I'm an old friend; we grew up together." And he said, "Go over and see that officer over at the tent." I went over, and that officer looked like a kid, young, you know—you know what I'm talking about, they get up the ranks quick in the infantry. He asked me a couple of questions, and I said to him, "Yeah, I'd like to see John; we grew up together." He said, "Well, I'm sorry, John got killed the other day in the bunker." I said, "Is there anything I can take back to his parents?" He said, "We've already got his stuff together and we sent it back." So, I went to see them after the war. They live up in Brainard. Of course, they're gone now. The only guy I knew from the United States that I met during the war.

WC: So, what happened next?

HEW: After Sicily, we thought we were going to Italy, but when we got on this British ship, we knew that this was not a troop ship, and we had an escort all the way going, and they dropped [unclear] bombs all night long when we were traveling up [unclear] and

when we got up to the big Rock of Gibraltar they pulled us in a while and the British put on a big display there. That was one of the most heavily defended terra firmas in the world at that time, because that's where all the ships went in with the weapons and stuff for Russia and that, and for us too. From there we went to England; once we got out they stopped our escort because I guess we were going fast enough, and the subs were pretty well under control then. We went up to Glasgow, and they took us to the little town of [unclear] England, and that's where we took our ease for a while. Then after that, they started sending us down on the coast, [unclear] in sands and that. That was all the assault training.

WC: So, did you have any idea of what was coming up?

HEW: Well, we knew something was coming up, but it was kept very secret. In fact, while we were on maneuvers—now, I did not see this, but we found out about it afterwards. Seven of our LTs were attacked by German U-boats; they snuck in and they got... Seven hundred men drowned. The reason why they drowned is—their life preservers. They had them around their waists and they weren't supposed to—they were supposed to have them up under their armpits. And they were face down and they drowned in the water. Eisenhower was furious about that. Oh, he was furious, but they kept it a secret on account of morale. That happened while we were on maneuvers. I'm just glad our ship wasn't on the tail-end, because they picked the tail-end of them.

WC: Well I guess that happened at D-Day, too, I heard a number of them...

HEW: Yes, they snuck in—but most of them got it, though, before they got away. Boy, three thousand ships out there, and all of them had guns on them.

WC: No, but I meant the life jackets.

HEW: Oh, the life jackets you're talking about.

WC: They had them around their waists.

HEW: That's why, when that happened, it spread like wildfire and, of course, it saved a lot of lives. In Normandy, if they had done the same thing there, they'd have drowned. Now, when you got off the LST, and you went down the ropes, those landing craft infantry, they'd sway back and forth, you know, and if you missed one of them, you went down. A lot of guys went down and never came up. I didn't have to do that. I was on a Rhino, a big flat, just like this floor, flat, a big Rhino, and we had a lot of guns and stuff on it, and a lot of 50 calibers which they wanted on shore, and they didn't have [unclear]. If it wasn't for the Navy, boy, God bless the Navy. Some of those guys really wanted to get into it, and he wanted to court martial some of them because they disobeyed orders and got in too close with the cruisers and that. Boy, I'll tell you, the Navy saved our bacon.

WC: When you landed at D-Day, what beach did you land on?

HEW: Red Fox.

WC: That was Omaha.

HEW: There was Red Fox and Easy something to the right of us, and I know we were on the left of the 29th division—they were on the right of us—and the 1st infantry was on the left side. We went in together. When my Rhino started to go in, they came out with a little boat. The guy had a big bullhorn, and boy, the language he was yelling at us. “Get the thing off of here,” he said, “because you’re drawing fire on the infantry,” because they were picking off everything. There wasn’t anything safe—there were no safe spots.

WC: What was it like for you? Was the noise deafening?

HEW: Oh boy, when those big guns on the Arkansas went off, oh my, my, oi yoi yoi. It seemed like the boat was lifted right out of the water. The waves would come up—what a powerful thing they are, boy, to be on the end of that. Boy, oh boy. We saw later on what it did, too—all over the fields everywhere were Germans. They never touched the beach. We never had any protection on the beach at all. There were no foxholes, you know, bomb holes, nothing.

WC: Were there a lot of casualties that you saw coming in?

HEW: They were floating back towards us, yeah. The borders were red in some places. If those of us on that Rhino had landed when we should have, well I don’t know, only God knows, I don’t think I’d be here today. Because they were hitting little LCIs, landing craft infantry, these little [unclear]. They aren’t that big, but they’re a good size. They hold forty, let’s see the one that Colonel Bennett went in on had forty-four infantrymen, and the young coxswain, and they all died, but General—I keep calling him General, but he was a Colonel then. He was the one that was taking this infantry LCI in. He was the highest-ranking officer left alive on that first landing on that beach they were on. But over us, his best friend Colonel McQuade got hit; they never even found his body. But Colonel Bennett—he should have gotten the Congressional Medal of Honor that day, we all agreed to that. He got the DSC for it. He got hit twice. If we had landed when we should have, I don’t know, I don’t think I’d be here.

WC: When you jumped off the boat, were you in deep water?

HEW: No, when we came in, before, as it was coming in, we got almost to the beach and ready to drop, and here’s the guys lying all over the place and nobody wanted to let the ramp down on them. So, a couple of guys from Rhino jumped off and ran up and set them on one side, so we could let the ramp down, because we didn’t want to let the ramp down... They were all over the place. Unbelievable. [Shakes head]

WC: Did your unit stay together or was everybody separated?

HEW: We were all scattered. Nobody knew where... It almost seemed like we were deserted. Colonel Bennett, God bless him, he had the job of going up and down that beach, and exposing himself time after time. He came upon a young captain who was digging in the sand, and he put his hand on his shoulder, and he said, “I need you. We’ve got to get these guys together.” He wouldn’t even get up; he just kept digging, so

Colonel Bennett went on. I didn't see this, but I heard about this afterwards. Then he came upon this squad...

WC: What were you doing at that point, were you just trying to get dug in?

HEW: No, what we wanted to do was get up the ravine as quick as we could, because at that time, the Germans were firing blindly. Their forward observers, they got them, the Navy got the towers that these observers were in, where they were reporting, you know the relay, the coordinates, where to go and that. The Navy got them, and that helped out a lot, so they fired blindly, but they couldn't miss. They were still hitting the beach. They couldn't miss, even though they were firing blindly. But, the equipment and stuff, and there was a truck picking up the guys.

WC: At what point were you and your unit able to assemble and...?

HEW: Not until the next day, the 7th. Nobody knew where anybody was. It was such a disarray, it didn't seem like the American Army. A lot of people don't know in America that we happened to pick a place where the Germans were waiting for us. They were on maneuvers. We didn't find this out until a day later, because when they went up the bluff to take the big gun—I wasn't in on that one, my buddy was—when they took the big gun, some of the guys, they had flamethrowers and that, even when they surrendered, there was such hatred, it is not easy to describe. He told Colonel Bennett at that time, the German officer said, "If you'd have waited until tomorrow, we'd have been gone". They were on maneuvers, and they were elite. These were all seasoned. They didn't have single machines, they had the Bofors—two machine guns. They had every inch of the beach zeroed in. Every inch of it. They knew where everything was, and the guy down here in the park, he could tell you a lot more about this than me. He was in the Rangers, and they only had a few guys really left to fight when they went up that cliff and scaled it. He lives down here in the park. We meet quite often. They saved a lot of our lives by getting the big guns, and then when they did find some of them, they were duds; they weren't the real guns. They found them after a while, the Rangers did, and that stopped that raining down us, the big guns that were overlooking Pointe du Hoc. I'm glad I didn't have that job to do.

WC: So the next day you were able to assemble with your unit?

HEW: Yes, the next day, the 7th, we went right up over the bluff. In fact, my son took me down three years ago to see Colonel Bennett, well General Bennett—he stayed in after the war and he got his four stars. They sent him all over, sent him back to Czechoslovakia where he ended up, sent him to Korea, DMZ, and that. But anyway, we went down to see him, and he was telling me that this one German officer had told him, "Herr Colonel, you should have waited until tomorrow. Then you would have more men left alive." Of course, he wanted to blow his head off. A lot of anger, lot of anger. Then it was, boy it was—well, you know about Saint Lo, you've heard about Saint Lo, that was a bad one up through there. We were in on that—in fact, up there is where a lot of our planes killed our own boys. They bombed both Germans and Americans. In fact, one of the Generals got killed up there. I forgot his name now, but he did get killed up there.

The Air Force felt bad about it, but dropped them in the wrong place. And then there was the breakthrough at Calais. We didn't know where we were. He had us out ahead of Germans, the Germans were behind us, and we were ahead of them, and it was crazy. You didn't know where anybody was.

WC: Was your unit suffering heavy casualties at that point?

HEW: Yes, we lost a few guys, but compared to the bigger outfits like the infantry and that, compared to them, we didn't lose like they did.

WC: How were you losing them, through artillery fire or snipers?

HEW: Most of the time, a lot of snipers and also a couple of the guys stepped on mines. We had one guy with a half-track, drove over it and he got killed on that. No safe places.

WC: Now were you riding in a vehicle, or were you on foot?

HEW: Always rode in vehicle until we caught up with the infantry, and then if they wanted a forward observer to go out, and a radio man, we'd go out with the infantry when they attacked, but don't forget that there was a lot of armored stuff going on now. The Germans didn't have time to really regroup or anything. We were just pushing the daylight out of them, and every time you'd go through these villages, you'd see dead people laying all over where they'd machine-gunned them as they'd go through.

WC: You mean civilians?

HEW: Oh yeah, because that's their way of saying bye-bye.

WC: What part of the year was this, at that point?

HEW: This was July when we going through France, and then Paris was liberated, and we got a chance to have a rest for a while, and they were picking guys out—two men from each battery, and we had five batteries, so that would be ten men each week would get a chance. We were in the rest area, the bivouac area, and they'd send us back to Paris for rest and recreation. A fellow that, just before this happened—we were somewhere in France, and I can't tell where it was, but I know Ray and I, we decided we were going in this German's hen house, and we were going to get some eggs. So, we went in there and got some eggs, and the Germans came out yelling at us, so we gave them C-Rations and that quieted them right down. Ray and I were cooking the eggs. I'll never forget it. We had a little stove like that, we were pushing it up and down to get the air in it because you turned the jet and put the match on it. It burned gas, and we were going to boil these eggs, and we were arguing over who was going to get the extra egg, and all of a sudden, a shot rang out in the alley. "Cornwilly," he said, "I'm hit." He said, "I'm hit." I said, "Where?" He said, "Right in the groin." He said, "I'm hit." He hollers at me to go get a medic, and I'm running all over, and they're hollering at me, "You damn fool, get down," but I had to get a medic for the guy because he was hurt. Just as they took him away in the jeep, he says to me—he was our section leader, he was a sergeant, because I'd go with him out with the officer. You see, you used to have an officer, a non-comm and then a radio operator.

WC: Now what rank were you at that point?

HEW: T/5.

WC: Which was a corporal?

HEW: Yes. I have to laugh. He said, "Willy, will you do me a favor? You know we've been talking about going to Paris together. Just take care of my 45 and my bed roll."

Ray was single. He got decorated highly out of Omaha. They took him off, and doggone it, a few weeks later he came back to the outfit, and they picked names, and doggone it, his name and my name were picked together in the battery of all the other men. We two were picked, and we went to Paris, and we were supposed to stay three days and come home. And we didn't come home, and we thank God that they didn't call him into the line while we were gone. Oh man, did we get it when we got back. They threatened us to [unclear], they threatened of course, but nothing happened.

WC: Now, when you were out in the field, how often did you get a change of clothes?

HEW: Whenever you had the opportunity, is all I can say. It's not like [unclear] infantry. When I talk about the infantry so much, it's because I have a deep respect in my heart for them, boy. They're the real heroes of the war—is the infantry. They do the dirty work. I'll never forget one day in France. We were out with an infantry unit, and I can't tell you where it was, but again our outfit fired short and they were coming right in on us, and we had to ask them to cease fire. They did, and then we got up and started going again with the infantry and we were walking along this [unclear] path and here's two guys, and they were crying and hugging each other and screaming, and that. So, I don't know who the guy was. I said, "What's the matter with them?" He said, "Some Jerry just lobbed a grenade in their tank, and they're blind." I'll tell you, that bothered me for the longest time. Puts the fear of God in you.

WC: Do you want to tell us about the Bulge?

HEW: Well, the Bulge, that was the 30th infantry we were supporting during the Bulge. We had just gone through the Siegfried Line, up around through Malmedy. Malmedy was where they massacred the 101st airborne, the Germans did. Monschau—that was up in Hürtgen Forest—that was right where the Bulge was. Well, when the [unclear] hit, we were in a little small town. I think it was just outside of Hürtgen Forest, and they bypassed us, but they caught the infantry full. They were thousands taken prisoners, and a lot of them were killed. But we didn't know it. We didn't even know it—that we were pincerred in. They went right by us. In the end, God was on our side. We couldn't believe it the next day when we heard the news. The tops of the trees were all cut right off from these airbursts. You know, that's what they did it for—they cut the tops of the trees off, and, then when they hit with the artillery, then the air blast would go off in the air and then scatter to the ground. That was a sloppy looking mess up there in Hürtgen Forest.

WC: Now what were your living conditions like? Were you living and sleeping in the vehicles or underneath?

HEW: If we could, we'd sleep under a little pup tent, or under a vehicle, or if we could find a house where you could think it was safe, but you had to be careful because some guys got killed just going in. They boobytrapped them, the Germans did, when they left, because they knew that people—the infantry or armies—would be looking for a place to sleep. So, you had to be careful of that. Especially if you were on guard duty at night, you'd go underneath the—you're supposed to stand up, but a lot of us would go under one of the 105s and you felt a lot safer there than standing up because it seemed like everything moved at night.

WC: What about your clothing and equipment? Did you think it was adequate for the cold weather?

HEW: We can't complain. I cannot say that for the infantry. We can't complain. We did pretty good.

WC: Did you suffer from frostbite?

HEW: Only my ears. My ears got a touch but no, nothing like the infantry. In fact, some young guys in the foxhole, they'd take and put these empty casings from the shells, put them on the ground, and then put a blanket over them or something, and sleep on it. That was better than a pup tent. It was warmer anyway. We used a lot of the old houses and that, and then of course there were towns we took where they retreated, and it looked pretty safe. One town we were at—this was in Belgium, I never forgot this. This guy invited me to stay in his house. They were so glad to see the Americans. I stayed there, and he invited me down in the cellar, and I went down, and he had a whole row of kegs, and they were all full of vino—wine—and that, and I had a couple of glasses with him. We stood there talking, and he said, "Come here," and he took me over to a spot and he said—and I wondered what he was talking about, and he moved the dirt a little bit, it was fresh dirt, it was a grave. It was a German—he had invited him down and got him drunk, he told me, he said, "I got him drunk and then I knifed him." That's how much they hated the Germans. I never forgot that as long as I lived. He was a little old Belgian guy, but he hated Germans. He told me that they had molested his family and that.

WC: How long were you in Belgium for?

HEW: Not very long. Holland was only a short time. It was in Belgium where the paratroopers went in and got that flying buzz bomb. The paratroopers went in and got rid of that. Those things go over you—they'd go to London and they'd quit, and when they quit, they were coming down, out of fuel

WC: Did you ever see one of those?

HEW: Oh yeah, we saw them several times, but that's when the paratroopers were really after them. They finally got them. I think they went in at night and got the whole mess. They blew that thing to smithereens. I didn't see it, but they blew it up. A lot of guys have a lot dirty work that you thank God you didn't have.

WC: Where did you go after the Bulge?

HEW: After the Bulge—well, it didn't last too long after the Bulge—we had a few towns to go through and that. We wound up in Czechoslovakia. The war was coming to an end.

WC: Let me ask you, do you recall where you were when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt? He died in April, and the war with Germany ended in May.

HEW: I think we were just ending up in Germany. That was what, 1945?

WC: Yes.

HEW: I think we were, because you know when I went overseas, Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill were all in Casablanca. I didn't get to see them. Some of my outfit did—they went back as honor guards or something. I didn't get to see them, but they were there. When I landed in Oran, they were down in Casablanca. Where were we? I think we were up in the Bulge, in that area, when that happened, when he died. I think it was around there. It's hard to remember, it's so long ago.

WC: You ended up in Czechoslovakia?

HEW: Yeah, Pisek, Czechoslovakia. We had quite an experience there. The Russians, they came down. They were opposite of us—of the Elbe River. They were on the opposite side of us, we were on this side, and they were on the other, and that was the border, and neither the Americans or the Russians were to invade each other's territory.

WC: Now did you get there before the Russians?

HEW: Yes, we got there first. I want to tell you something that happened. The Russians decided that they wanted to come through our area. They were pilfering houses, they were raping women, they were doing everything. The Russians were like savages. Our Colonel told them they couldn't go beyond the demarcation line. This was our territory, and we would not go into their territory. But they insisted. He said, "If you insist, I've got all my 105's right behind me." He said, "If you cross the line, we will fire." Well thank God that that Russian officer was smart enough to back off, because I don't know what would have happened then. That was not a good situation, because the Colonel told them, "Don't you cross that line," because he went up in a Piper Cub and flew along the Elbe, and he could see down in the villages where they had gathered people together—the Russians—and as soon as they got them together, they massacred them, they just shot them.

WC: They were civilians?

HEW: They were civilians, oh yeah. They'd round them up. They'd say, "You have to get your orders while we're here." And when they'd get them—people would all go, you know—and when they'd get them there, they'd just slaughter them. And we didn't do anything. Terrible thing.

WC: Did you have any direct contact with any of the Russians yourself?

HEW: Yeah, I've got a picture of us arguing with the Russians. They wanted to come over and get chickens. We mixed in, but we weren't supposed to go across the river. So, we went one night. We kind of borrowed a jeep. Picture this, the jeeps were all locked in a motor pool, the war is over, and they were all in the motor pool, so we took one, one night, and we went into Pilsen—that's a big beer city, Pilsen's a big beer city. We backed up to the dock, and Sandro Bly from Ringtown, Pennsylvania, he spoke French, English, German and Russian—he spoke four languages—he went up on the dock and asked the guy if we could buy a couple of kegs of beer, and the guy said to him, “No, the Russians, they bought all of it.” He said, “No, they don't buy nothing,” he said, “They didn't buy it, they're taking it.” We saw them arguing, and we couldn't wait to get out of there because we didn't have anything. They had 40 sub-machine guns on their shoulders. The war was over. We didn't have any weapons at all. We just went in to get some beer. Thank God that we got of there. Couldn't wait to get out of there. No, they wouldn't give us any. He said, “You know, they're going to steal everything you've got someday,” he told him—this Czech guy—and by golly isn't it true? What they did. Remember, they begged America to come and help them. Well anyway, another mess we got out of.

WC: You were in Germany when the war ended?

HEW: When the war ceased, we kept going, and we went down into Czechoslovakia, and that's where we ended up because we were supposed to link with the Russians. If Patton had his way, they'd have never even got into Germany, but they did.

WC: Was there a lot of celebration when the war ended?

HEW: It's hard to really say our feelings, you know, when you think, “Am I going to get to go back home?” Yeah, we weren't really in a place to celebrate. Now V-J in Japan, when that ended, we were in England because we got shipped back to England after the war was over.

WC: Were there rumors that you guys might end up going to the Pacific?

HEW: Oh yeah, oh yeah, we were all slated. So was the 1st infantry and a lot of the old[unclear] outfits. Oh yeah, we were all slated for there. Thank God, we didn't have to go. That was the big rumor; that went through like wildfire. Everybody thought we were going—the combat units—thought they'd be going to Japan.

WC: Was there celebration at that point when the war was over?

HEW: Oh yeah, I wasn't married, see, but a lot of the guys were, and I look back and I'd think how happy they were. Like Colonel Bennett, he couldn't wait to get home and see his beloved Bets. He's quite a guy. By the way, here's a picture of the General.

WC: Hold it up in front of you, and I can zoom in on it with camera.

[HEW holds up a book with a picture of two men shaking hands]

HEW: There's General Bennett; he was our Colonel in World War II. He took us into Omaha beach on D-Day.

WC: He's the gentlemen in the suit?

HEW: Yes, he's the Superintendent—that's West Point. That's my son taking the picture; he's not in it. My son took that picture. He writes, "Cornwilly, we've been together a long time, from December '43 to now. Your work as a forward observer—and you know that this position puts you and your crew in harm's way—you were at risk all the time, as we all were. Still you did your job and never complained. God bless you. Don Bennett.

WC: Nice.

HEW: He autographed that book for me.

WC: Let's see the cover of the book.

[Holds up a copy of the book Honor Untarnished by Donald V. Bennett]

HEW: Now this one here, is the Omaha Beach one, where our pictures are in this one. We have some pictures in here of Omaha Beach and that. That's the story of Omaha Beach right there.

[Holds up a copy of They were on Omaha Beach (The story of D-Day, told by Veterans) by Laurent Lefebvre]

Page 39 in here. There's four of us from the 62nd here.

[Holds up book open to a picture of himself and three other servicemen]

A French patriot sent this to me. One of the French forces in the Interior. He sent this to me, and he says, "Thank you for our freedom. God bless you." His parents were some of the undercover. This book was not written by an author. These are all men and all pictures of all the guys that landed D-Day in here. There's no end of pictures in here of guys that landed D-Day. That's quite a book.

WC: When were you sent back to the States?

HEW: I went back to the States—we sailed into Boston Harbor, I think the 19th. I'm not sure. I can't remember now the date that we actually landed at Boston.

WC: Did you go back with the entire unit?

HEW: No. This fellow Jackson that I told you about—we took our basic training together at Fort Knox. And when that was over, they sent us to different places. I went to Camp Campbell, and they sent him there too, but I didn't know that until one day we were walking down the street and there he was. And then we were split up. Now we didn't see each other until Oran, North Africa. We wound up in the same outfit together. When the war was over in Czechoslovakia, he got sent to England, and I got sent to England, and neither one of us knew it, because he was in one town and I happened to be in a town near it, and I came out of a pub walking down the street and there he was, and we laughed about it, and then we said goodbye because we figured we were going home from England. I sailed into Boston Harbor on this ship, and the little ship came out and

some nurse was on there, and her husband was on the troop ship, and she was singing to him, "I'll be home for Christmas, you can plan on me." I'll never forget that, and I turned around, and bumped right into Jackson. We were four different times on the same troop ships. We got split up four different times and got back together. We always... He just passed away here recently, Jackson.

But of all the things that will always be embedded in my mind, was I'll never forget that family when we stopped in front of that house. I'll never forget that as long as I live. The man came out. They were peering out the curtains. Our unit had stopped. We were way out ahead of a lot of outfits, and we stopped for a rest right in front of this little house. We saw him peering out the window, and out comes this elderly guy, and he walks up to Colonel Bennett, and he said, "Are you Americans?" And Colonel Bennett said, "We sure are." He said, "Are you here to stay?" He said, "Oh, yes, the whole American Army's right behind us. We're here to stay." So, he turned around and he went back in the house. He came out of the house—I never forgot it—there's this man and woman and three children. One was a little girl, she wasn't very high. They were all clinging to their parents, because they looked frightened. Finally, the little girl, she looks up at the sky—she was just looking up at that sky. She had never seen the outside. She was born in the garret in the house. So, the old man turned around, and he said to Colonel Bennett, "These people are all Jews. We've been hiding them since 1940." Since 1940. Here it is, '44. They'd been hiding them.

WC: Did you see any of the concentration camps?

HEW: One, only one. We were going through Leipzig, and I remember the fences were all torn down as we went by. The people were walking all over the place, they were nothing but skin and bones. They had no clothes on. Our Colonel got confronted by a German—well, they called him a Burgomaster, they're like a mayor. He complained to our Colonel that these people walking around the village scared people. So, Colonel Bennett took his 45 out, and he put it right up the guy's head, and the guys grabbed him and said, "No, Colonel, no, don't do it." But he said, "You know what I felt like doing, I felt like giving every one of those people a gun and turning them loose on the Germans." Oh, he was so angry; I never saw a Colonel so angry as he was. The Germans pretended like they didn't know anything that was going on. Anybody would know, you could smell the place.

WC: Now did you have any idea that there were concentration camps?

HEW: Oh yeah, we knew there were camps. We saw another one at—can't remember now—a little town we went through, on the outside there was this smokestack and fences all around. You knew what they were. They were all over the place. They had them everywhere. You couldn't hold all those Jews in one camp. They were everywhere, but I only saw a couple myself. They asked for volunteers to go in and... They fed them C-Rations, and some of them ate too much and they died from it. They weren't used to food. They died from the food. Not from the food—they died because they had malnutrition and it was too much for their bodies.

WC: Now when you got back home, did you make use of the GI bill at all?

HEW: Yes, when I got back, I bought my home under the GI bill, 4 ½ per cent it was, \$49 a month, and that included your taxes and insurance and everything on the house. That was back in 1947. 4 ½ percent I think it was.

WC: Did you make use of that 52-20 Club at all?

HEW: Only drew one check. I went and got a job. \$20 a week. I only drew one check.

WC: Did you join any veteran's organizations?

HEW: Yes, I joined the American Legion and the VFW.

WC: You mentioned you stayed in contact with some of the fellows you were in service with...

HEW: Yes, my very best friend just passed away about a month ago. He and I—whenever we'd get a break—he was in another forward observer unit, and whenever we'd come back for a rest, the first thing we'd do is look each other up. We were close. He just passed away. He was with Colonel Bennett the day they went up the bluff. He had it a lot rougher than me.

WC: Did you attend any reunions at all?

HEW: Been to four reunions. Went to the fiftieth at Tulsa, Oklahoma. My children bought my wife and I a ticket out. We went to Russ and Bonnie's—that's the fellow that just died. We stayed with them, and then we drove down to Tulsa. It was a four-hour drive. He lives in New Hampton, Missouri, and that was a big one. Colonel Bennett at that time, or General Bennett, he couldn't come because he had a shoulder operation. It was a big... That was the fiftieth—1994.

WC: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

HEW: I didn't think too much about God when I was in the service, until we got in tight spots. But I think it gave me a reverent fear of God. I think that's the thing that's gone away in our country. People don't fear God at all anymore. They think they're gods themselves. And it changed my life because Russ Magee—the fellow I just told you about my, very best friend that died—I went out to visit him one night, and we sat out on his fence. He had a few cows and that, and it was after dark, and we sat there on the fence talking, and he said, "You know, Willy," he stutters, he said "Willy, Willy, I met Bonnie and I fell in love, and I wanted to get married right away, but she said, "No, you smoke and you drink," but you know what, Willy," he said, he stuttered, "I quit."

Tape stops

It affected my life deeply because I was not a Christian, and I wondered what he was talking about. If I had died on Omaha Beach that day, I wouldn't be with God, because the only time I thought about God is when I got in trouble. That's the way it changed my

life. I came back and I had a wife and four children to take care of and that. I was not exactly....

Tape stops

I knew that I needed to make a change in my life. I was not doing the things that I should. I was not a spiritual leader in my family. I realized that there was something wrong in my life, and one day I just told the Lord, I said, "Lord, I give up. I can't do it without you." I admitted to the Lord that I was a sinner, and that I needed my sins forgiven, and I believe that when He died on the cross, He died for my sins. I told the Lord that. Nothing happened, no flashlights or bulbs or anything. Once you tell God that that you believe in His Word and what He did when He sent his son to die for you on the cross, I believe when you tell God that, your life has to be changed because the Bible says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," that if you'd believe in Him, you wouldn't perish. "Whosoever believes in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life," and I believe that. I think that's our only hope today. I want to say a word about my country. My country's been good to me. America has been everything to me. I love my country, but I'm very disturbed about the way I see our country going. I wish that all the young people would stop to think there's a possibility the way things are going, that we could lose our freedom, and we ought to thank God every day that we can get up in the morning and that we can have the freedom to do as we want, to worship. If you want to speak against your President, you can, but I believe you ought to pray for our President. He needs a lot of help, just like all of us do. I don't believe that he's taking us in the right direction right now, but... We need to pray for our nation all right. And the Word of God is what really changed my life. When I started reading the Bible, and I started seeing, my gosh, you're talking about things here, God, way ahead of the news-people today. If I want to know the news tomorrow, all I have to do is open that Bible and it tells me. And that's what I believe in now. I thank God that he spared my life. I don't know how I made it all the way when so many people died. I guess some had to die, and some had to live, and God spared my life, so I give God all the glory and all the credit. I just thank God that I was born in a country like this where we're free. People better wake up.

WC: Thank you for your interview.

HEW: Thank you.