

Interviewer: Okay this is Rick Burr I'm here with John Gower he's a WWI veteran. We are at his home in Clarksville, Tennessee. Mr. Gower go ahead and state your full name for me please.

Gower: John Howard Gower

Interviewer: Okay and where were you born at Gower?

Gower: Montgomery County Tennessee.

Interviewer: Now what was your date of birth?

Gower: November 19, 1920.

Interviewer: Okay I would like to go ahead before we get into your experience as a veteran talk a little bit about growing up here in Montgomery and you said Robertson County is that right?

Gower: Yes

Interviewer: Okay do you remember much about the great depression? I know you were pretty young back then but

Gower: Yes I remember it pretty well. My father had just bought a farm in around 26 or 27 when I was real young. And the money he had to borrow had to borrow money at that time to pay for it and then you most of your money you borrowed was from individuals. And when the times got real rough the depression come along the individuals needed there money so they called in and he lost that farm. But then we moved we was in Robertson County at that time and then moved back to Clarksville High School that's where I went Montgomery County to my elementary school and the old Clarksville High School. Until I become a sophomore I went to Clarksville High School for a year and a half and we bought another farm out of the county and so

Interviewer: Was that still during the depression when you got the next farm?

Gower: No it was right after the depression it was in I believe it was 38.

Interviewer: Do you remember what kind of work he was doing between the two farms? You remember what he did to make ends meet for your family?

Gower: well he was farming.

Interviewer: Just didn't own the farm?

Gower: He didn't own the farm at that time.

Interviewer: Okay

Gower: Then he bought another farm right after the depression. Then at my sophomore year there wasn't that much going on as far as work so the army was unknown in this part of the country so I volunteered for the service. And from them on I went to up state New York from here in the first

infantry division and I spent most of my time all of my time through combat and about four years in the first infantry division.

Interviewer: So you joined the army actually before the WWII broke out then?

Gower: Oh yes I joined the army in March 1940.

Interviewer: Okay so that was a couple of years before Pearl Harbor or at least a year.

Gower: Yeh

Interviewer: Interesting while you were in the military up there in New York before the bombing of Pearl Harbor how aware were you and other members of the military about what was going on in Europe?

Gower: Well actually when the war when Pearl Harbor was bombed we was on maneuvers and they called a Louisiana man back in 19 I can't give you the dates but I've got it and I got bit in the field by a scorpion and they put me in the hospital. And Pearl Harbor while I was in the hospital and they discharged people out of the hospital that could make it so by the time I got back to my unit which wasn't but a mile or to from the hospital they had my stuff loaded put in the jeep and we was headed back to New York to get organized. And then right after that I was in the 26th infantry regiment at that time and they brought all the first division together and we wound up jointly then getting ready for WWII.

Interviewer: Okay once you guys got all organized packed up did they tell you where you were going? When you left did you leave from New York over to Europe or to Africa?

Gower: No we were doing other duties when they we done a lot duties for the Navy. On submarine duty they would assign us liberty ships going back and forth to Europe guarding on the firing bridge. We would sit up there and watch for submarines and do whatever we needed to do. It was kind of rough duty because they were going I don't know how the submarines could work and see with 100 foot waves.

Interviewer: Yeh

Gower: The waves, you'd look over to the ship a few hundred yards from you and he'd be way up there and you'd be down in the hole it was that way, it was rough duty. And then when the Presidents had the Atlantic Conference with some of the leaders in England and I don't know rest of Europe part of it. We was out for a month packed for whatever needs to happen if anything happened we was out to sea.

Interviewer: What was morale like during that time?

Gower: I beg your pardon.

Interviewer: What was morale like in your unit?

Gower: It was pretty good because at that time of the unit that we was in was strictly regular army and they didn't have any drafted people in it at all. Some of the National Guard people was transferred over into the regular army but most of it was regular army.

Interviewer: You think if it had been more drafted soldiers morale would have been a little bit lower and a little bit more dissention?

Gower: I don't about that I never had we went overseas with 100 percent regular army.

Interviewer: When you did go overseas did you guys where was the first place you went to overseas?

Gower: Well we left out of New York City and took the Queen Mary the division did and we went into Northern Scotland and that's where we disembarked and we come down to into England a little town called Tidworths England.

Interviewer: How long were you in Scotland for?

Gower: At that time just a few hours.

Interviewer: Oh okay.

Gower: But then after we come down to England in this town called Tidworths I remember the name of the town they evacuated all of the civilians out of it and made it military barracks. And then they as far as know my unit was small I don't remember exactly how many of us less then 100. We went back to Scotland under the British to take some commander training up there and we stayed up there for two or three months.

Interviewer: Was that training pretty intense or what kind of stuff did you have to do to go through that training with the British? Was it just maneuvers and drills?

Gower: Well it was British commanders that it hadn't been long since they'd been in DF and places like that. They come out of there and they give us combat training most of it was hard enough like that.

Interviewer: What kind of weapon was your primary weapon at the beginning of the war?

Gower: I was in the heavy weapons company and there was 30 caliber machine guns mostly and our side arms was 45 and I never had a riffle.

Interviewer: Really

Gower: Until well I did later on when they come out with the carbeam we had some of those.

Interviewer: Right

Gower: But we had 30 and 50 caliber machine guns.

Interviewer: Pretty dependable back then?

Gower: It was good.

Interviewer: Were they?

Gower: The fighting in Northern Africa where most of my fighting was done.

Interviewer: Is that where you went after you finished your training with the British?

Gower: No we went back to British and made the invasion I made the invasion we took a ship out of Southern England into the Mediterranean there and I went place of invasion was a city name Oran and we all over the northern part of Africa.

Interviewer: Were you still attached to a British Company or the British at this time?

Gower: No we was first infantry division but the British were running the show in the higher command.

Interviewer: Right

Gower: General Montgomery and Alexander cause they had they experience they had been there

Interviewer: Yeh war had been going on for a little while at this point.

Gower: Yeh a little while and it was a pretty rough country. The 50 calibers were fine machine guns if the bullet didn't get them the rocks would kicks up so many rocks.

Interviewer: Kicks up a lot of stuff didn't they?

Gower: Yeh we used them mostly on mounted the early part of the war we used them mostly on mounted jeeps.

Interviewer: Right

Gower: A 50 and a 30 mounted on it and after the Northern Africa

Interviewer: How long were you there in Northern Africa?

Gower: Oh I can't give you the exact time but I could look it up about a year.

Interviewer: Really did you see much action over there.

Gower: Until the invasion we went in there at the start of it and until the invasion of Sicily. I went in the invasion of Sicily and on the LST that I showed you the picture of.

Interviewer: LST go ahead and clarify what that is for the people.

Gower: Landing ship tank is what it is well it got sunk.

Interviewer: The ship that you were sailing over to Sicily on the invasion on?

Gower: I beg your pardon.

Interviewer: The ship you were sailing from Africa to Sicily on?

Gower: Yeh we made it to just about there got hung up on a sand bar about 100 miles off of the beach and that's where we got it.

Interviewer: How did it get sunk was it hit?

Gower: A plane dropped a 500 bomb down the elevator shaft.

Interviewer: Where were you on the ship when this happened?

Gower: I was on the front raft waiting to get off. See we just broke off

Interviewer: So everybody was down there ready to hit the beach?

Gower: Yeh and it was three survivors out of 50 of us.

Interviewer: From your unit?

Gower: From my immediate unit.

Interviewer: Right

Gower: Yeh we had two sections of guns we lost everything we had. Then I was put in a ship back to Oran and stayed in the hospital a good while and reassigned to

Interviewer: Were you injured during the bombing?

Gower: Yes I was put out of action.

Interviewer: Really

Gower: I was in the hospital for over a month.

Interviewer: What type of injuries did you receive?

Gower: I was cut up shrap metal all over. It's hard to believe that if you're familiar with the LST and the forward elevator shaft it's not over probably 60 feet from the ramp and the ramp happened to be down. So all the concussion went out but the metal parts it tore up everything. It killed all but three so that's pretty of my unit there was a lot more than that killed in the Navy and the other units.

Interviewer: Yeh

Gower: After that we went back to North Africa to the hospital around the city of Oran and then the guys who were able to go back in combat they sent them back in combat and the ones like myself had a pretty long time before they could go back. So they put us in what they called a noncombat company and I stayed in that about six or eight months and then after that it got rough going in Italy and I was in

the northern part and we wasn't was told we wasn't supposed to be in combat in the war. But we went up there and did light duty about five miles behind the front which was about as safe as you could get. But that was the end of my combat time there. And when they started the rotation plan about a year when the war was phasing down the first ship that went out there was 54 of us and I left on the first ship out of Europe cause I had enough war put together I'd been over there a long time. So I made the first ship back and that's when all the news people followed that into Miami. Didn't get to bring no souvenirs back cause we had to go through customs.

Interviewer: Really

Gower: We went through customs they took a 45 automatic off of me. I wasn't supposed to have it but I kept it anyway and they took it off and that was it. And I was shipped into Attaberry Indiana and that's where they put me on a medical discharge then and I'm still on one been on one ever since.

Interviewer: What kind of work did you do once you got out of the military and when was that 1945 then?

Gower: Yeh

Interviewer: Is that when you got out?

Gower: In July 45. Well I went to work out at Fort Campbell in what they called small arms making machine guns and repairing stuff. Then I went to work for the postal department. I went to work for them with my military time and time with the government and retired from them. And at that time I went to work for the State of Tennessee as I told you before.

Interviewer: Right

Gower: And then I stayed over there for I believe it was eight years and then after that I came back well I had a business of my own two of us had a business together we kept that about two or three years about fours years we closed it down. Then I went to work for the City of Clarksville and I worked for them for eight years and then I finally retired.

Interviewer: Did you keep in touch with the guys that you served with overseas?

Gower: There's three of us that survived the ship.

Interviewer: Right

Gower: One of them he lost his leg and we've been in touch ever since they've been here and I've been there. One of them's out of Maryland he died the one that lost his leg he died last summer summer before this past summer. And the other one lives in Westchester Pennsylvania and we talk about once a week.

Interviewer: Really?

Gower: And have been doing it ever since. And he's been down here he was down here he visited Clarksville about two and half months ago and spent the week down here with us. And I go up there we stay in contact and always have.

Interviewer: One question before we I'd like to show the picture of the ship actually before we get done but one question that's kind of intriguing to me that I've asked some of the people that I've interviewed so far is, I know war is war but thinking back on your experiences now and stuff with the patriotism and the comradely and stuff do you have positive memories or more negative memories as far as just your experience during the war and stuff looking back?

Gower: I'm positive about it I'm not a negative type person.

Interviewer: You think we needed to be over there then? You think getting involved in the war was the right thing?

Gower: Yes I definitely do I probably put it low rank as far as I started to go but I was well satisfied being fighting under the British because they had had a lot of experience fighting especially the desert fighting. And our generals I respect them too but they kind of got upset because they were under a British general, which Montgomery and Alexander but once they got some experience they took over and done alright. But I think it was handed real well and I have no regrets or no faults being under General Montgomery I'm sure a lot of people I don't know how the army runs now but at that time when we was in combat and I suppose it's the same way now I don't care whether you're a general a corporal or a private if it comes around time for you to speak you spoke up.

Interviewer: Right

Gower: And I have no regrets no regrets at all serving in the service. I stayed out of this country for over three years before I came back and then I stayed I think I told you four or five years I was wrong in that I was in the army five and half years but I was out of the country at one time over three for three years out of that five.

Interviewer: While you were overseas did you have any correspondence with anybody back in the states? Write back and forth with anybody?

Gower: Well there at the end I can show you what they call mail letter that we wrote that you couldn't read them when they got back here because I think I've got one or two back there that my mother kept. No for two years they didn't know where I was it's not like it is now. Everybody in the world knows where you are or what you're doing. But for two years they didn't know whether I was in New York or the now I could write home but you couldn't tell them nothing because they censored everything.

Interviewer: Right kind of blacked it out?

Gower: No they cut it out.

Interviewer: Oh did they?

Gower: They didn't black it out they cut it out. And I've heard other people say they didn't do theirs that a way but the unit I was in they was all regular army most of them and we didn't I didn't go through recruit drill or nothing like that.

Interviewer: Right

Gower: And we had a special unit when the other outfits had to have passes we didn't have to have passes. All we had to have our uniform on and I was there and my people used to say well so and so came home, we could go anywhere we wanted to go if we had inspection on Friday afternoon we could go wherever we wanted to go if we were back there Monday morning by time they started working. But I couldn't come from Montreal Canada 30 miles from Montreal Canada to Clarksville Tennessee in a weekend.

Interviewer: Yeh

Gower: So I just

Interviewer: Well I would like to go ahead and show your book and your picture if that's okay and get that on film right now. You said this book written by Rick Atkinson was actually about your unit is that correct?

Gower: Yeh isn't about the Northern African Campaign. There's some others in there too but it is about

Interviewer: Was this written by a historian or this guy wasn't actually over there or anything was he?

Gower: I don't know I don't think he was. I think he was a historian.

Interviewer: Okay that's the book right there.

Gower: It tells about the North African Campaign and all the units that was over there not just the unit I was in.

Interviewer: Right and the picture here you said was actually done by an artist?

Gower: A combat artist on the beaches of Sicily.

Interviewer: And you said when this was done you actually know which one you are in there right?

Gower: Because I watched him draw it.

Interviewer: Go ahead and point out which guy you are there for the camera.

Gower: The one kneeling. I was in pretty bad shape at that time.

Interviewer: You say you guys made it to the sand bar there?

Gower: No we was hung on a sand bar and breaking loose. And they don't show it there but we had a bunch of jeeps lined up pulling and the tank guns behind it to go off first but we didn't make it.

Interviewer: Very interesting well Mr. Gower is there anything you would like to add?

Gower: No nothing at all.

Interviewer: Well I'd like to sincerely thank you for your time letting me come over and do this. I'm sure it will be appreciated up there when it gets filed at the museum at Fort Campbell.

Gower: It's we could talk all day but that's basically it.

Interviewer: Yes as the years go along that's the big thing the most important thing as the years go along there's less and less memories I mean direct memories of the war and stuff of the people that were actually in it.

Gower: You forget the number and the dates.

Interviewer: Yeh I think this is a really good thing and I appreciate your time.

Gower: Thank you