

First if I could get you to say your full name.

Mr. Hesler: My full name is Kenneth E. Hesler or Ken Hesler.

What unit did you serve with?

Mr. Hesler: In the 101st I served with the 463rd Parachute Field Artillery Battalion.

At what time did you serve with that unit?

Mr. Hesler: We served with the 101st at my unit only from; we joined them just before Bastogne until the end of the war. So from December 1944 until May; although I came home before that.

Did you enlist or were you drafted?

Mr. Hesler: I enlisted and I was in the service a good time before I joined the 101st or even the airborne. I enlisted shortly after graduating high school in June 1942. I had read all about World War I and I knew that war wasn't very nice. I was only 17 so I got my mother to lie about my age. But there was a reason for that and that was because you could ask for a unit. So I said I am no idiot I want to defend our country. I want to join the coast artillery. I got the coast artillery and off I went to New York City.

What kind of job was that?

Mr. Hesler: Actually I went to New York City and took basic training right on the East River in downtown New York in a parking lot two blocks from Wall Street. Four weeks after I enlisted I was on a ship heading for England as part of an automatic weapons battalion going over to get ready for the invasion of North Africa.

Why did you decide to enlist?

Mr. Hesler: Well everybody was going to enlist. The war had started you had to go do your thing. It wasn't as if you had some great career there waiting for you. You were just out of school. So you just enlisted or you begged your mother to lie about your age. Whatever you had to do to get in.

What kind of advanced training or specialized training did you have for your job?

Mr. Hesler: In the military, none. For example, in New York during basic training we were training on 37 mm anti-aircraft guns but we didn't have any. We drew squares on the concrete and sat down and pretended we were firing because we had no weapon; we had no guns. We just did routine basic training and at that point and time that was it. Then we got new weapons, 40 mm _____, and we went to England and we began to train. We did training exercises and fired weapons at the coast. There was no specialized training. That was the units job that the units trained to do it. I was mostly a gunner. I

stood and hit the pedal on the ____ gun and slid the shells into the top at that part of my wartime experience.

What was your physical training like during basic training as far as...

Mr. Hesler: June in downtown New York, June or July, hot and marching in a parking lot. We would do close order drill and physical exercise of course. They were looking for troops ready to go overseas. It wasn't anything fancy.

How well do you think that this training prepared you to go into combat?

Mr. Hesler: It was a time when on maneuvers they took 2 ½ ton trucks and put a sign on the side that said tank. When I went in we had English style helmets and I did my first firing rifle qualification with an old Springfield rifle. We only got ____ when we went overseas. That was not a great concern that you had. You knew you were in the service and you were going off to war. We got to England. In training I was fortunate to be in a group that had a sergeant who was American Indian. While all the rest of the people did very routine kind of drills we played war on the side of a hillside there. We went in the woods and did all crawling close order crawling and everything through the brush. There was no big lesson plan for any of this training.

How long did you actually train during stateside and once you got...?

Mr. Hesler: I trained stateside about two month's total basic training and then we got new weapons and got ready to go. I shipped out of Staten Island on the 6th of August 1942, right when the Wolf Pack submarines were in a very large convoy. We trained in England until October where we shipped out by another ship for North Africa.

What were your impressions of the fellow soldiers in your unit?

Mr. Hesler: You have to put in mind that I am from down state Illinois. I had never met anybody that was Italian descent or Polish descent or Jewish background. They were people who some time or another mostly had come up from Kentucky. So here I go to New York and this is a New York organization. Almost everyone in the organization except for 120 of us had came from central Illinois and Michigan; some Swedens. They were second generation Italians, second generation Poles, and second generation Bohemians, whatever. This was a melting pot deluxe. More than half of the unit spoke fluent Italian; which made it very nice in Sicily and Italy. I have very great regard for them. I have gone back to several of those reunions too. It's a totally different experience; than the 101st is or the airborne.

So what was that like being thrown in with different groups?

Mr. Hesler: I will say for the record, war is bad and war is not anything you like or that you want to be involved in. There are many things about it that are terrible. But World War II is the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. It provided me my education. It

provided me my wife. It provided me all my experiences with people of all backgrounds. It's the kind of experience I could never get. If it had not been for World War II I might still be working in some little factory in some down state Illinois town. It literally gave you everything that you are today. In that sense it has a very positive effect as opposed to well apart from all of that, things of war.

What were your impressions of the leader of your unit?

Mr. Hesler: I had two different sets. The first organization I was in and we were in the invasion of North Africa; went in all through North Africa and into Sicily. The leaders were not the best in that organization. You can even go back to the reunion and there is no Esprit de Corp in that organization. Some of them have been in what I will call mundane military jobs prior to the war. The Captain of the battalion in England, one of the greatest events we had fell into a chalk foxhole and couldn't get out. That was one of the hilarious events of that organization. The airborne is a whole different thing. I don't want to get into a lot of the historical things but the 456th Parachute Field Artillery was part of the 82nd Airborne. They went to North Africa in April of 1943 and parachuted into Sicily. The 456th had some difficulty with Ridgeway and Taylor because they had; there was some artillery shells falling around the gun and people began a round off and they fired the battalion commander. But they didn't go to Serlano. After we got to Sicily we were in Palermo for nine months doing nothing more or less; a few bombing raids. We had a six hour pass a weekend to downtown Palermo and you went to the bar next door to the USO club. Six hours later they loaded you on a truck and they took you back to camp. At this time they were getting ready to plan for the Normandy invasion. They broke up the 456th and sent the designation of the 456th in two batteries to England and redesignated on Anzio what was left as the 463rd. They had been looking for artillery people of all kinds. Shortly after Rome fell in 1944 I took my parachute training in Rome and did all my basic jumps at Ciampino Airport in Rome in fatigues and GI shoes. This was conducted by the 463rd itself. This is an organization that had combat experience all the way in from Sicily. They had to fill these other two batteries and that is where myself and a number of others came in. They recruited people for parachute training and that was the era where once you got out of this business you didn't dare become idle anyplace because if you got in a replacement depot and you were in the Air Force you could find yourself in the infantry or wherever. We filled those gaps and in August of 1944 we flew in by C-47s across the sea to southern France and jumped just north of San Trope in southern France. So that was the first airborne task force that I did. To use the phrase, we were a bastard battalion. I mean that kindly. We formed combat teams with infantry. We were combat support in Italy and in southern France for the first special service force. They were the _____. They were comparable to the 10th mountain unit now and also the 509th. We worked in tandem with them. We were a self-sustaining airborne unit in that we had trucks and trailers and carried our own ammunition and weren't dependent upon that kind of thing.

When you first went overseas from New York how did you travel?

Mr. Hesler: I traveled on the USS Monterey on the top deck inside 24 hours and outside on the deck 24 hours. It was a ship that would hold 3,300 and we had 5,000. It was crowded.

What were the conditions like?

Mr. Hesler: It was one of great experience. I'm a big ocean traveler now. I told my wife, you have to travel across the Atlantic. You have to go across the ocean. Apart from that it was greasy and smelly. We went down on the 5th deck for dining. It was crowded but it was different. It was fun.

What was going through your mind as you traveled?

Mr. Hesler: I suppose mostly just a big adventure. We didn't know where we were going. We were on a ship heading east. You played cards and you ate candy bars. You gambled a lot; playing dice, cards, poker.

Your first combat experience was North Africa correct?

Mr. Hesler: Right. We landed at Mers-El-Kebir just west of Oran and took over a French fort. Our first task was right there guarding or watching the French soldiers so that they didn't; we didn't trust the French soldiers. We landed with ample mosquito netting and all kinds of those things. There was no food because we had eaten all of our C-rations on the way down on the ship. So we had wine and French bread for about the first two days. That was enjoyable.

What was your first actual combat?

Mr. Hesler: My first actual combat would have been some bombing raids. The first serious combat that I would say I was engaged in we would take 2 ½ ton trucks moving east. On several occasions we were strafed by stupid eye bombers. In that part we are not totally in what I would call the front lines but we were actively moving east all the time. It was mostly bombing raids and strafing raids.

What was that like for you?

Mr. Hesler: You got the hell out of the truck in a hurry and head to the side of the road. You stick your face down in the dirt and you hang on. It's sort of like I would say it's like when you ride on an airplane. You get on an airplane and there you are and that's it. There isn't anything you can do about it. You do the best that you can to take care of yourself. You get out of the way and get down and put your face in the dirt.

How did your attitude change after your first combat experience?

Mr. Hesler: I can't say that there was a big change really. I guess there was never terribly a big change. In the early part of the war I was not in any serious combat other than bombing raids and strafing raids and this kind of thing until southern France.

What was that like?

Mr. Hesler: Keep in mind that southern France was not Normandy. It was called the Champagne Campaign. We jumped about 4 o'clock in the morning north of San Trope in two units so that if something happened to one half of the battery the other half was still whole. The unit down by San Trope ran into a lot of action, captured a lot of prisoners and had casualties. I was north with a group that landed around _____. Other than a little mopping up things there was never really much action in that.

How was the morale in your unit?

Mr. Hesler: In what unit; the airborne unit?

Yes, the airborne unit.

Mr. Hesler: It was very good. We had excellent officers. We had our commander, Colonel John Cooper, that just died about this past year. We were fortunate and we had as our commanding officer, John Cooper, who was an excellent officer and politician. We never went without supplies or weapons. We carried extra 75-mm Howitzers. We had an addition; our S1, S2 and S3 were West Point VMI people. They were top notch people. I have collected from the archives about 2,500 pages of the 463rd activities from the day the 463rd was conceived in February 1944 until the end of the war and every day's record are typed even in combat with every single fire mission and all the coordinates ever fired by that organization were recorded. This was a stickler organization but the morale was very high; very good.

How did you take care of personal hygiene during combat?

Mr. Hesler: In North Africa the biggest challenge was simply the heat. Although we were up in the mountains in the Atlas Mountains. Every so often they would load us on a truck and take us to the Mediterranean and you would jump into the ocean with your sweat caked fatigues and clean yourself with that. Otherwise you did the best you could. In combat you did and you didn't. By large you just didn't. That wasn't a major worry while you were in combat. After the end of Bastogne and because I had a lot of service overseas I was among a group that got to on a three day pass to Paris. It was freezing in Bastogne. You just take your clothes off out there under a piece of canvas and get a bucket. You put one leg in and washed one side and you took it out and put it in the snow and then you put the other leg in the bucket and that was it. I suppose that in a two week period that is the only time you made any effort to keep clean. You had on about four or five layers of clothing. I think I had started out with just normal military underclothing. I had winter clothing and then a pair of regular GI winter dress and then a pair of combat

fatigues with a field jacket and an overcoat over that. Very often you went around like this and beating your hands to keep warm.

What about taking care of illness and wounds?

Mr. Hesler: I was fortunate I was never wounded. The only scar I have from World War II is a scar on my thumb here that I got in Sicily from having a knife trying to make one of these things you can show photographs on a little screen. That was the most exciting thing that happened at that time for a month. The ambulance came screaming out with _____ and the back doors flew open and they jumped out and grabbed my thumb and bandaged it. That was the big event of the war. It depended on where you were. In Sicily if you had a scratch on your hand, you had big scabs that formed and sores. We had made some mistake. We had been drinking milk that we had bought from civilians. Sometimes in North Africa you would get little boils on your face and this kind of thing. It was just that kind of problem. I never had any real problem of illness or anything. We had to take _____ tablets all the time because of the malaria and if you took too many you turned yellow. It was just that kind of activity. I never had any serious illnesses. In fact cross my fingers, I never have.

Overall all how was the medical; the medics?

Mr. Hesler: It was good. In my first tour of duty with the other organization we didn't have a great demand on it. It was not a big issue you know. They were there and they took care of you. Fortunately if you didn't have a problem, it didn't become a thing. You tried not to go on sick call any more than you could because usually someone had to pick up the slack for you if you did. So you just avoided that.

Now you said you weren't wounded?

Mr. Hesler: I was not wounded, no. I had many close calls. I walked with a magic umbrella over my head.

How about those around you? Did you lose any?

Mr. Hesler: Yes we had a good many casualties in Bastogne. We lost a good many in southern France. Keep in mind that I had been in this other organization. I knew those people. I knew their girlfriends names and some of them I wrote letters for who couldn't write to their girlfriends and that sort of thing. I knew those people very well. The 463rd and just before I joined just before the invasion of southern France and I never really had that close associations. I came back to the reunion. I only had one person, a very close friend of mine that had come back. I am probably the only one here from the 463rd now until they have their little separate reunion. People get killed in war and that is how it is. You can't go crying and complaining. It just happens. They are here today and gone tomorrow.

How was that dealt with as far as those that did lose close friends to keep the morale?

Mr. Hesler: There is a saying about World War II veterans; we never had counselors. Counseling was not in the book. You just dealt with it. You get used to it after awhile; such as in Bastogne in the freezing cold weather you see a ¾ ton truck with bodies piled in it with all those feet stuck out the back; frozen. That is what war is. We knew in the 101st that when we went into Bastogne, we all knew that we weren't going any place. They were going to stay there. They were going to stay there and they were going to last manned it. That is part of the game. Organizations like the 101st during World War II ran excellent propaganda programs within the unit. They would do things; they sent out newsletters every day. They would create lines like, "They got us surrounded, the poor bastards!" When the Germans said that they were going to kill any 101st members that they captured, they ordered us to sew our patches on our field jacket so we could be recognized. Of course there were three threads. This was a campaign of morale, Esprit de Corp; they worked that very hard. Patton didn't save us. We just needed him to bring us supplies. We ran out of food and almost ammunition before they air dropped in Bastogne. We were a cocky outfit.

How well were you supplied during that time in Bastogne?

Mr. Hesler: Keep in mind that I was in an organization that came up from southern France. We were to join the 17th airborne. We arrived in Mourmelon where the 101st was on December 12th and we had our own trucks. The 101st didn't have trucks and things like that. They just had somebody take them. We had our own kitchen truck. We had just been resupplied with new winter boots and overcoats. The 101st went to Bastogne without any winter wear. Most of them just had little skimpy jackets. So we were all ready. We were supposed to join the 17th Airborne and Colonel Cooper went up to General McAuliffe and said, "We will go with you." He said, "No I can't do anything about it. Go down and see Colonel Harper of the 327th." So he went down to Harper and he said, "Fine come on if you want to." So we went along with the 101st to Bastogne and we weren't really supposed to go there. We just stayed with the unit and became a part of the 101st. We were just at the right time at the right place.

Did you get much free time during the war?

Mr. Hesler: Yes and no. I mean if you call being in Palermo and you are there for nine months and you are on guard duty four hours twice a day and you get a six hour pass each week then you can call that free time if you want. In the 101st and in the 463rd even before the 101st after we landed in the invasion of southern France we went up to _____ along the coast of southern France to Mantone. That is a great place. I go back there once in a while. We had our own recreational hotel there; the 463rd's hotel. When they got a few days off they would send troops back there every week. Just after the invasion we were up in the border of Italy in the Maritime Alps mostly in a holding action engaging in harassing fire; exchanging back and forth with the Germans there. That was mostly what we were doing there. We were preventing Germans from escaping Italy.

How well were you able to keep in touch with your family back home?

Mr. Hesler: We wrote letters; v-mail. They were sheets of paper about this big and you would handwrite a letter on it and then they would photograph and it would be about that big of a square. That went back as a small thing. I kept in very good contact. I sent postcards. Unfortunately somewhere along there I lost all the stenciled letters my mother had; I ended up with some of those. They would just take a razor blade and slice out things they didn't want you to say and you tried to figure out ways to tell them where you were. Or you would be in Palermo and you would send them a Palermo postcard or you would be at Nice, France, and you would send a Nice postcard. I kept in good contact. Now I left home in June of 1942 and didn't go back until the first of April 1945.

I think you said earlier that you met your wife during....

Mr. Hesler: I said I would have never met my wife. I met my wife in college. I spent most of the 33 years of my life as a college English teacher and journalism professor. Later on I taught magazine writing and news editing. Later on I was in the public relations business as an administrator for about 25 years. I had all the information services alumni service and all those things in my area. (tape cuts off).....battle and that sort of thing. It's here. It's only right here in this room or in these little woods or in this little space. You get confused when after the war you read books about the big scope and great scenes. Actually it's just this hill or that tree. It's a very close little experience. They don't fill you in on the big picture when you are dog foot.

If you don't mind repeating again what you did once your tour during World War II ended.

Mr. Hesler: When the 101st came out of Bastogne we went to ____ and then we went back to Mourmelon again before we went across the Rhine into Germany. At that point I got a 30 day temporary duty home. It was one of these things sort of on a point basis that I had been overseas. I was supposed to go back to Europe. I came back to the United States and my 30 days was expanded to 45 and then the point system came out and I had more than 85 points which was the minimum required to get out. I went to Fort ____, Illinois, and said let me out. I went off to college for a year. After bartending all my 5220 of free money I went to the University of Illinois and was going to be an electrical engineer. How I got in the field artillery in the first place and even got into the 463rd was because I had math in high school and I had a math background and took trigonometry and geometry. I went a year and that is not the life for me. There was none of that old verb and excitement so I went back in the service and joined the 4th Armored Division and went down to Fort Knox, Kentucky. I was an instructor at a cadre school. At that point in time at Headquarters and Headquarters Company there were a thousand people. Its two mental geniuses with a fellow that had a semester at Stanford and I had a semester and a half at the University of Illinois. We were the principal instructors and we taught cadre and we worked with people in classes trying to bring them up to a 6th grade reading level because recruitment was not a very big draw right after World War II. We had many times people would come in and many of them couldn't write their own name. They still managed to take them. After about a year and a half this Colonel in that unit, I

think he was at Murray State, one of the Universities in Kentucky and he said, “Get the hell out of the Army.” You don’t want to do that. It was different. It was totally different. This was the era where you had to stop. You could no longer teach bayonet training. You couldn’t touch a soldier teaching bayonet training. They used to slap that rifle up against your hip and say, “Get it up there!” All that stopped. The only place you could discipline a trainee was if you had somebody who was not behaving properly in a search routine when you put your feet back and lean over that tree there and demonstrate how you can kick their feet out from underneath them. All that stuff stopped. Unfortunately I was involved in a project that wrote, I say unfortunately because in the Korean War they had a great amount of difficulty with morale and troops not taking care of their wounded and all that kind of thing. I was involved in writing many of the lesson plans and they were all according to these rules. We would give lectures and you would have an officer that would come in and grade you right there as he watched you and make marks.

Did you earn any medals for your time during World War II?

Mr. Hesler: I had no special medals. In World War II we had one campaign ribbon for North Africa, Sicily, Italy and Europe. I had it up with seven campaign stars and battle stars and one arrowhead for the jump into southern France. I had no special medals.

Looking back how do you think your unit made a difference in the war?

Mr. Hesler: The first unit I was in I am sure could have not been missed okay. This was a period when it was not a thing like individual efforts. Everybody was involved in the war whether you were here or there. Even before I enlisted in the early time before I got into the service even between December and June you collected scrap medal and turned it in. I think the airborne unit, the 463rd and the 101st if you want to lump those together, I never had a doubt in the world after my experience in airborne. I never had to prove anything to myself again. On a daily kind of thing you have to prove yourself. After the war you had done that. You didn’t have to prove you were a man or anything like that. This takes care of that. You are complete and satisfied. Keep in mind the difference later with the Vietnam War there wasn’t any real descent about this. There was not a lot of flag waving and all that kind of thing going on. We didn’t go around as you see in some of these movies people talking about all this stuff. You were just there doing a job and much better than with the Vietnam War. It wasn’t a year’s tour of duty. It was duration plus six months. So you weren’t going any place. In Sicily for example, when we got the six hour pass, you know what we liked to do in addition to going to the tavern next door? We would go into the USO place where you could get donuts and we would listen to the donut ladies girls speak English. You hadn’t heard for a year and a half or two years, you hadn’t heard a woman say anything. You would just go in there and stand and listen to them talk. You get to where those kinds of things become very significant to you.

So what do you think you took away from your experience overall during World War II and serving with the 101st?

Mr. Hesler: I would have had a different post war attitude about this had I stayed at my original unit; stayed with it. You made a big contribution. You did something. The Battle of the Bulge in Bastogne was a great and epic battle. It's easy to watch "Saving Private Ryan" and understand that not all wars are like a 20 minute scene in the landing of Normandy. This was a great adventure in which one division along with parts of a couple of other tank units held off eight German divisions. It was a great defensive position and there was more artillery in there than anybody would put in any place today. Some of it was already there. We were an extra unit. We had plenty of artillery. The Germans made there one big attack down the highway when the surrounding of Bastogne began and were literally blasted off the highway and they were chicken, I'm speaking somewhat from history and not my own knowledge at the time, to try again because unless the ground was frozen you couldn't get off of the highway with a tank. To have survived that surrounded for five days in a three mile circle and winning out is something you can be proud of all your life having done that.

Now you didn't say if you have any children.

Mr. Hesler: I have one child. I have a daughter who is a manager in a CPA firm. She is the manager of the area that deals with hospitals and non-profit corporations and all that kind of things. I just have one daughter and my wife. She was in college with me. She was a school teacher until I finished my; we got married 50 years ago this coming December. She taught until I had finished my graduate work and then after that she took care of our daughter. She has been a housewife. She hates that term. She is a very active person. As I said earlier all of this stuff comes out of the war; when the war begins and the war ends. Here is a 17 year old kid who had never been farther away from home than one Boy Scout trip to Kentucky. I go into the service with all this mix of people and in less than three years I am in Chicago, New York, London, Oran, Tunis, Algeria, Rome, Nice, and Paris. Those are experiences that never go away. It makes a totally different person out of you. You couldn't come back and be the same little green kid that left home. In all that time you wrote your parents but you didn't see anybody until you got back. You reflect back on it after a time. This was a reflection is that World War II in terms of my entire life probably meant more than totally any other experience. It made it possible to easily travel to Europe and go places and drag my wife to all the battle scenes and all these places. You are just a totally different person. It was a reflection. You hurt your finger but a year later you don't feel the pain anymore. The bad part of war is just there and you know it's not something you look back on because people.....it was terrible on the people in Europe. It's kind of a sad commentary when you talk about war in Africa and war in Bastogne. The one great thing you say about Bastogne is that it was cold and it didn't smell. That can be something that one can be thankful for. You don't think about that. Also about war, as I said earlier war is local. It's right where you are. If a guy comes in that door and starts shooting at you, that is what war is. The big decisions are little. You go to bed at night and that whole question is do I take my boots off or do I not take my boots off. Or you are walking up a mountain trail in France with mules where you are taking supplies up because that is the only way you can get them and the Germans planted shoe mines. They are just little mines that blow your foot off. You say, "Okay I walk behind this fellow. Do I look down and make sure that I step in his tracks." Now if I

do that and something goes off my face is down; or do I look up. These little things are the things that you think a lot about. As Johnny was saying earlier, "War is not like it is in the movies." War is terribly boring most of the time. You are doing nothing. You are waiting. Hurry up and wait which I suppose is still a code of the Army. In brief moments of great panic and exhilaration there are occasions of battle and whatever. After that is over you have got this high on adrenaline that no other high can ever match. This is when it is all over and you have survived and you are safe and you are going to find a place that has got beer or a bottle of wine. War is made up of that kind of series of things. Brief moments of panic, fear, and long periods of boring times. You don't like boring but when you reflect on it boring was good.

I think that covers it unless there anything else?

Mr. Hesler: No, the 101st had a great history. To have been a part of that is something that; you did some things in history that did really matter. You proved yourself both individually and as an organization and out of that, that is where Esprit de Corp comes from. That is my view about it. I go to these two different reunions. I don't go the other one much anymore; totally different. The last thing they want to do is talk about anything that happened during the war. Mostly they didn't like it. They didn't like the people; they didn't like this. People come to the reunion here and we still tell war stories. It's a fraternal kind of thing. It's not present if you don't come out of a high Esprit de Corp unit. So I will cease right there.

(Tape Ends)