

Cleron Smith

Interviewer: Okay could you state your name and when and where you were born where you're from.

Smith: My name and where I was born?

Interviewer: Yeh

Smith: My name is Cleron Austin Smith and I was born in West Tennessee near the city of Martin, Tennessee I was born on October 25, 1922.

Interviewer: Did you grow up there?

Smith: I grew up there we were farmers and I spent my boyhood days in that area. As a matter of fact it was strictly rural area at that time and we we had to walk to school. There was school wagons and it ran it was pulled by horses but they would measure the distance and make a decision as to who was eligible to ride the school wagon. And where we lived we lived about six feet living far enough where we living far enough that we got to ride so they marked us off we had to walk.

Interviewer: Wow how long was it?

Smith: It was about three miles but I was small and most everyone would cut through a wooded area and I was scared to death going through that woods.

Interviewer: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Smith: I had I had four sisters and three brothers so my mother and father had four boys and four girls.

Interviewer: Wow that's a lot.

Smith: And I was the youngest.

Interviewer: Youngest period?

Smith: Youngest of the brood.

Interviewer: So were you spoiled?

Smith: Was I what?

Interviewer: Were you spoiled?

Smith: I would say to a certain degree I think having been the youngest one I was. However though I felt that as I grew up all of my brothers and sisters was my supervisors.

Interviewer: So what kind of farm was it I mean?

Smith: What kind of farm?

Interviewer: Yeh

Smith: Well the farm that we had my daddy always planned other than the standard crops that other people would grow in that area. Of course the standard was cotton fields, corn, peanuts, and sweet potatoes but in addition to that he would grow strawberries and watermelons and blackberries. And all of that had to be cultivated hand picked and when I was five years old they stopped growing tobacco and I was always grateful for that.

Interviewer: I've heard that's a nasty job. So were you drafted into the military or did you

Smith: Yes, yes I was.

Interviewer: How old were you?

Smith: The day I was 21 years old I got my papers the next day.

Interviewer: Did your brothers go to?

Smith: Yeh

Interviewer: Did your brothers did they

Smith: My oldest brother was not he was employed by the railroad and he didn't have to worry about it because the job he had was needed very much in the time of conflict. But my other brother went into the service he was drafted and he spent five years in the South Pacific and had jungle fever twice while he was there.

Interviewer: What year was it that you were drafted?

Smith: Huh

Interviewer: What year were you drafted?

Smith: I it was 1942.

Interviewer: Where did you go from there I mean boot camp or

Smith: I went into ah I had to go to a place near Chattanooga to be inducted then they sent us home for two weeks because it was getting near Christmas time. And when the two weeks was up was the first part of the year why then I had to report back to our camp see was in Dresden, Tennessee and then they came into Nashville and we were sent back to Fort Overthrow, Georgia that was the name of the and then we were sent out from there and I went to Fort Hood, Texas. And Fort Hood, Texas had just become a new army post as a matter of fact the construction work was continuing to go on even while we were there you could see the buildings being put up. And I stayed there took the basic training for 13 weeks. And after the thirteen weeks I we was put on a troop train and we went to Shinangle, Pennsylvania we stayed there in that camp about 9 days and then we went into Fort Patrick Henry Virginia and we went on a some kind of a barge and was transported out to the boat that we went over

on. It was a small boat it only accommodated about 175 soldiers and it was just one among many many that made up the convoy to cross the Atlantic and it took 27 days and nights to cross the Atlantic. And it was a of courses it was a new experience and we none of us realized what danger that we were in. When we went through the straits of Gibraltar the area is only about 22 miles Spain on one side and I guess the French Maraca on the other it was dangerous very dangerous and you could not go through the Gibraltar with one ship right after the other because you could have been fired on from either shore. We had to wait out turn and we would zip through a quickly as possible and all of the operation was about 2 or 2:30 a.m. in the morning because that was when it was darkest and they could not very well see. And that's how we got through the straights. But on the way there we stopped off for a short period of time in Bermuda. And there weren't any cars on the island of Bermuda and it was really a beautiful place.

Interviewer: Really what division were you in what group were you in what division?

Smith: Well I trained in the tank destroyer they taught us how to destroy tanks because that was mostly in some of the parts of it they used tank destroyers because the enemy had tanks and you had to you had to learn was taught how to destroy a tank and that's what the tank destroyer did. But after arriving they put us in a tank which we knew all of the week spots in it because we had been taught you know where the soft spots was. But I didn't stay in the tank destroyer in the tank very long because there was so many jobs that had to be done. And we had to be so careful because we would be out in the area and that area was made you think you was living back in biblical times it was so unsettled. And they would come over the enemy would in a plane and photograph us daily and you knew when they came over you was going to be bombed that night. And of course then you would work on your fox hole you would have to dig it deeper and in some places it was almost impossible to dig because it was rock and turf. Of course some of that turf had never been probably moved since it was formed and it was almost like digging in concrete to get some of it out. Then we were always visited by a reptile that was called a monkey lizard and they were the most gruesome things you ever looked at they were about that long but they would if you got near them they could change their color the color of what surrounded and they'd get in our fox hole and I was petrified of the thought of one being in there with me. Because when it become an air raid you'd rush to your fox hole and you knew everything about where it was and you'd get there in the darkness.

Interviewer: Did they bite the lizards?

Smith: Pardon

Interviewer: Did the lizards bite? Did the lizards did they bite?

Smith: Oh yeh they would bite but they'd frighten you too.

Interviewer: Where did you go from there? How long were you there?

Smith: Roughly I guess about 14 months and I was we landed in Oran, Africa and then we Oran was about 15 or 20 miles from out in the wide open spaces a place called Canistel, Africa. The area was

mostly made up of Arabs and there was some French people living in that area but they weren't exactly they spoke French and as well as Arabic what would you call the Arabs Arabic. And but they weren't I never did think they were exactly like the French people we are more or less familiar with. They seemed to be a little darker I don't know whether they had Arab blood in them or what but they were very some of them were very viscous people. But during that war that was with the German War and Italian War you know Italy fought with Germany against the United States. They used donkeys little small donkeys and they had saddle bags I guess you would call it that they would pack their good in and then they would lead those little ole donkeys. But they would lead those donkeys they got paid from both sides from the German Army and the American Army both but they would double cross double cross you. If the army was moving in and the Germans they would ride those donkeys through that area which was a signal where the other army was coming and they got paid form both sides they were double crossing people. And we our mess halls was very low buildings crudely built and didn't have any windows couldn't have any windows and they were covered with tar paper black tar paper so that they could not be spotted you know easily from the air.

Interviewer: Right

Smith: And you couldn't have any lights of course I never smoked but those who smoked weren't allowed to because they could see you if they saw any light or anything you'd be bombed. So the they had generators that made lights inside of those mess halls and you'd have to work around the clock there would be shifts and it was really a bad area because you had to be on guard at all times. And there were times that if you got caught away from your main quarters and darkness came you always had to be fearful from them attacking you from the road side. It wasn't roads it was just lanes and sometimes you would have to put your back to the next soldier because we didn't have any lights and you would have to put your arms together and walk backward because that gave someone could see in front and someone from the rear. That was some doing I'll tell you it was hard to learn how to walk like that. But when I went over on the boat being very young and never having been away from home because in those days when I was growing up we didn't have the means of traveling there weren't any very few buses and there was a train that went through. But all you had was buggies and wagons and so when we was on that boat they put us out on deck mostly to get us from the in where we would have fresh air and sunshine up on the deck. And they'd put us up there to watch for submarines. Well I would not have known what a submarine was had one of come up right in front of us you know. But apparently some did surface because one onetime during the trip it seemed like all of those boats mounted with big guns opened up and I was standing near the one that was on the boat I was on and when it went off it absolutely paralyzed me and knocked my hearing out. And it was a couple of weeks before it came back and then I had problems with the climate and the winds over the Mediterranean Sea was bad. And there was times that of the night you would almost after midnight you would almost freeze and of course we had the army wool blankets we would wrap up in. And then about 9:30 every morning the sun would pop out and it would be so hot that you could hardly breath and that did something to your skin it made your skin feel like bees were stinging you. And we had a terrible time with that and we war near a place called Lions Mountain and they had those lions small smaller than the ones we see in the zoo. But the area being so dry they would be looking for water and we had built our camp up to where we had an ole

tent and even though it was small it would be about 8 or 10 people per tent and we would only have water certain times during the day that a truck with a big tank on it would come in our area and we had stakes put up with what they called I guess a leister bag that had little things that you could put your cup under and get water and they'd fill those up. And when they come through late in the I called it evening you never knew what time it was over there but when they came through I always managed to go through and get water because I got thirsty for water. I'd catch an extra canteen cup of water and I'd take it in and I had an ole bunk made out of 2 by 4s and I took some of those wire flat strip wires that came with the stuff that was bundled up you know when they would ship it they would cut those off strip those out and tanked them down and that was what you'd lay on. And I was on that and something came pulled the tent up and just pulled his self up under it and they'd drink my water out of the canteen. I'll tell you I was scared to stick my arms out afraid to move they went under that blanket and I just laid there I thought if he eats me up he's going to have to eat me with this blanket. But the next morning there was big claw marks where he had pulled his self up under there so it had to be one of those lions. We didn't have nay lights but it was a terrible feeling so all you could do all you could do was do the very best and pray so you did. And it seemed like you know that it was a never ending thing and then we would we would have to go in an army truck quite a long distance up toward the line to where the action was. And we would have to bring back soldiers enemies that was captured and it got to where that you had so many prisoners of war that you ran out of places to keep them. Well they would bring the material in and during the day they would bring those prisoners of war out and they dug the holes and they put the wire up they pinned themselves in. Of course we had guns on them and they couldn't get away and I would say there would be in each stock aid probably two or three hundred but they didn't keep them all in one stock aid they had them scattered about. I guess they had to protect them too in case of air raids you know and it was something else it was an experience that I'll never forget. And one day I was on guard and there was a real elderly man an Italian and first place he appeared to be too old having been put in the army but he was kindly sitting down and I noticed I couldn't figure out what he was doing and I walked closer and he had pictures of his family and he was crying. And I don't think I had ever felt any more sorry for anybody and it made you realize that people as a whole was all alike it was only our governments that was different. And so I learned had to to speak some Italian so I asked him what his problem was. And he told me that he was very depressed and that he was thinking about his family but I tried to be real nice to him and treated him right he was a brother and it must have paid off because all the time that he was in that camp he always wanted to be my friend. But now we had some that were Germans and they were of the higher caliber of soldiers under Hitler. And they were considered the crack troops of Germany and they wore those little ole caps with feathers in them kind of like Robin Hood in a sense and they probably came from the more prosperous German family they were very highly educated. And they was very resentful in every way so when we would take details out to work they wasn't gonna work and they would do things that you couldn't really force them to work to do anything. And one time they had an area where they was kind of clearing it up I guess they was going to build another tent or a stock aid and they had shovels and picks and some axes which I always thought lordy mercy that's a bad thing to have an ax in the hands of the enemy. One of those Germans deliberately cut his foot with the ax so he wouldn't have to work and he would have to go to the hospital. And it was just stuff like that going on all of the time and then on one occasion in our camp our first Sargent the Arabs would steal they would steal stuff our personal things but they would do that

during the night and one morning when daylight came our First Sargent had been stabbed to death by one of those Arabs. And I'll tell you a little bit how they live they would build their huts maybe just a square building and it would have one large door in it and they would construct that building out of stones and red clay which a lot of that soil was clay. And then they would get water from the sea which was salty and they would make up a mortar with that clay and that's how they put those stones together and when that hot sun came out oh it would bake those buildings and they were very strong. And they would have maybe one Arab man would have as many as 8 wives and when they would go out they would go about their activity during the day as though there wasn't any war going on and

Woman in the background: Honey you need to tell her about your unit and General Patton.

Smith: I will hone.

Interviewer: Okay here we go stop for technical difficulties. Okay

Smith: You want me to start?

Interviewer: Sure

Smith: As I was saying the Arab man would have maybe as many as 8 wives and it was really something to observe those people. When they went about their daily activity just like there weren't anything going on. And they would go out maybe to the market or wherever these women had to walk directly behind that man. And I surmised that the last one was always the one that was behind him and they must have had to line up in formation according to their seniority that's the way it appeared and the elderly one would be the last one in the line. And it always appeared that the older wives had to do the volume of the work and then they must they could have left one or two of them back at this building to care for the kids if they did that I don't know that they did they have just left the kids to shuffle for themselves. But when nighttime came most all of them had sheep and they had chickens and they had donkeys and a few of them had cows. They would bring all of those animals in that building for the night and they would roll out a straw matt for the family to sleep on and the cattle and all those animals walked around the people while they were lying on that matt. Some of the children had broken fingers and arms and looked like they was deformed and it had to be nothing other than injuries that they received from those animals stepping on them and all of that. It was sad and many of them had huge sores on them and they were beggars a lot of them they would beg for food and so when we would have line up of course we was out in the open we would line up for our food well then these they always sent the children to beg and they had little satuals around their shoulders and if you gave them anything they would put it in that satual. And of course we lived a lot of times our meat was spam and I had a sorry feeling for the children and I'd always try to save some bread you know and gave it to them but I thought well I will save my spam and put that between the bread and make them a sandwich they'd like that. But then I noticed that they would open that bread up and take that spam and give it a throw on the ground so I didn't understand that if they were starving. Well come to find out that Arabs hundreds of years ago they roasted some pigs and they all had a feast of pork and they become very sick and probably many of them died and after that day forward never again would any Arabs eat any pork. And I'm glad I was told that I couldn't understand it. But they would undo their clothing and show you their

sores and then they would put their hand up beside their head to indicate I am sick for you to give them more. And then we would have to every so often go if we was around where they were we would have to go and step into a bath solution to kill the germs that might have been on our shoes. Our hands you know from taking our shoes tying our shoes taking our shoes off putting on socks and you had to be so careful. And of course the water we had over there was so spiced up with all kinds of stuff that would kill any infection I could hardly drink that water. And then they gave us the day every soldier had a bottle of ataburn does that sound right you kind of forget the names of something those pills they was little old yellow pills. And after you took many many of them your skin would turn yellow but I would rather have yellow skin so I took mine but it was some experience. But I served under George Patton; George Patton was a great General. And I think it's sad even to this day that I don't feel that he was written up properly in the history to be the type of man that he was. He was a great man and he would often come around where the troops were just mingle in around them now he was rough talking and he was strong but I guess he had to be to because he had some big shoes to fill but I liked him. And there was a reporter name Ernie Pile he was one of the finest people and Ernie came around where we were many times. But Ernie was killed and I have never forgotten Ernie Pile I have his book if you've never read it you should check it out sometime and read it Ernie Pile.

Interviewer: Ernie Pail?

Woman in the background: Pile I think.

Smith: But he was a great person and I don't think he was really given of course I realize n time of war they don't stop to make a note of all those outstanding people and all of that but it seems that some of the better ones was cheated.

Interviewer: Did you ever have any conversations with Patton or just

Smith: With what?

Interviewer: General Patton

Smith: Not really I was near him one day when he came by and some of the some of the soldiers of course we ground with our bed anyway but they were lying kind of near some little ole trees and there was several of them because its hard to explain in an area like that and you weren't brought up under a climate such as that it was tiring and you'd feel just tired. And many of them was probably depresses and all that stuff so they was lying on the ground just about. And so the General came through and he went over and kind of just took his foot and kind of kicked the boys shoe and said soldier what are you doing or what do you think you're doing. The soldier didn't care who it was it didn't matter to him and this soldier used some strong words and said I'm sleeping what do you think words to that effect so then the General said he used some strong languages and he said I'm glad somebody around this plane knows what they do. So it was all made you feel good toward him because he put his self on your level. But then when I came when I came back from Africa I came back on the US General Mann and it was a it was a much nicer boat than what we went over on. I don't know if I stated but that was the largest convoy that went over with that has ever crossed the Atlantic. I think the United States of America got

over boat that was available. Of course the one that I went over in should have never been on the ocean it was a landing barge. But we came back on the US General Mann and it was a much later boat and we got better service and the food was better. And then I came back to Virginia and after I was there a few days they sent me to Bucker Pennsylvania to a hospital called DeShaun General Hospital and it was a lot of soldiers there and they had great big wards and it wasn't anything to see maybe 50 soldiers in one ward. And one bed right after the other bedded them like potatoes you know. And so many of them were there for different reasons and I was there because my ears and then been giving a lot of problems and as I stated the winds from the Mediterranean Sea was hard to handle so I think I must have had an ear infection. And it couldn't we had no facilities over there to be treated. While I was there they sent me to lip reading school I graduated from lip reading school. And I enjoyed the schooling it was very interesting and I was even offered to go to one of their schools in the U.S., I didn't know they had any they set them up during the war, to teach lip reading. But I was a young man I didn't want to be in school to be teaching people to lip read even though I had had it myself I didn't want to be confined so I went on and turned it down. But they gave me they gave me a hearing aid and I tried out a number of them and finally I chose one but I really didn't like it when I chose it but you might say it was the lesser of the two evils. And it would make noise a terrible noise of course my hearing was a nerve deafness and I couldn't stand to ware it. And it was so complicated to attach the thing to your body and I knew I would never be able to work there just weren't any employment anywhere that you could that was suited for that type of person. And too the town that I came from this small town great people loved them but they had never seen hearing aids bless their heart many people came to see my hearing aid. And it got to where it didn't half work but there wasn't anything I could do about it because there weren't any places you could go to get it repaired. And so I made it but

Interviewer: What year did you come back from the war what year did you come home?

Smith: I came home it must have been it must have been about 44 and it wasn't a it wasn't too long after that until the war ended not too long after that.

Interviewer: When you got back did you go home or did you move somewhere else?

Smith: I went home and I my mother was still living so I stayed home with my mother for a short while I took a job temporarily in a factory. And I didn't cherish being in a factory thinking I would have to be there the rest of my life. So I went to Michigan and I took a job in as an inventory clerk Rio Motors and I had a good job and was real motors I guess that was some of the trucks that was built that was in the war because they were Garments I mean trucks. So I was unhappy there so I came back home believe it or not I went back to work in the factory. And the way the factory was the way they treated people and the pay was so terrible that we organized and to try to get better working conditions a lot more consideration than we had of course that would go a long ways when you have to work everyday. And then I was asked if I wanted to go back to school but I was asked to go on staff and it was the amount that of a workers union and was formed in Nashville, Tennessee in 1914. And how come it to be formed in Nashville in 1914 they were under some other organization in New York and Chicago and all of those places but they weren't getting the proper representation. So some of the leaders pull off from the other organization and took a train to Nashville and they met at what used to be the old Duncan Hotel



here in Nashville. It is now what is that hotel on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue on the right there is it the Double Tree or something like that. That's where the old Duncan Hotel once stood. Well they wanted to put more or less start activities throughout the South and many places it was really like war beginning to go into. But I went on the staff and I served about a year in the state of Mississippi which was terrible conditions and we it was to risky to go out to talk with people. And so we put on a radio program and we hired some young people that played string music and many of them were families that went to their fame boys and whenever they left it didn't make any difference because they were good people and they sand religious songs and all of the. Of course there wasn't any rock-n-roll back then and so that's how we had to reach the people was through radio. But then when we would leave the studio to go and get in our car to leave then we would be faced with a bunch of anti people that was just ready to take us apart. And I had to move the first day check into a motel and they were do anti labor at that time that they asked me to leave the next day. I didn't know what I was going to do because it was about 30 miles to where we had an office set up and that was too far to have to drive and especially if you was able to get out to see anyone in the evening after they got off of work. So I decided that I would get a sleeping area and so I picked this big corner house just off of the square in that ole town. And this lady this ladies name was Mattie Welder. Miss Mattie was very frail looking little lady with snow white hair wore a long white apron even when she went to the mailbox or wherever. So I asked her I said I'm in need of a room so she said I have one. She showed me and it was a nice room I said let me tell you...its blinking does that make any difference? (He was refereeing to the camera)

Interviewer: I'm not sure let me check oh its fine.

Smith: I don't believe I makes any difference.

Interviewer: Oh it's fine.

Smith: So Miss Mattie I said I think I should tell you the type of work that I do. I'm in the area to try to raise the standard of living and try to help the down trotted. And I said the name of our organization and I told her. She said that doesn't make any difference to me because my husband was a railroad man and he belonged to the brotherhood of locomotive and she said I spent 24 years in that court house in that judges office and she said it doesn't make any difference to me where you work. So it wasn't but about three days until some of the town fathers formed a committee and came down to talk to Miss Mattie said you know you have a labor man living here and we don't want labor in this town. She said yes I do and she said I don't think it's any of your business you can't come in here telling me who I can rent rooms to. Do you know the man? If you don't you should meet him. And she said I just fail to appreciate you people coming in here because I know everyone of you and you know the time that I spent in that court house. She said I resent you even walking across my grass and trotting down my yard said why don't you get out and go tend to your own business. They did

Interviewer: I bet

Smith: And but it was a strange place. They had two stores well they had more than tow but these special two they had everything in those stores from the cradle to the grave. And the farmers would

come in and they would make a loan in the spring and mortgage their entire property for the supplies that they would need for the summer. And then when they would (tape ended)