

Interviewer: We are here with Mr. Robert Harle and I guess we should start at the beginning. When were you drafted or enlisted?

Harle: I enlisted in September of 1940. And I enlisted in a National Guard unit in Jamestown New York. President Roosevelt had federalized the National Guard and I figured that was a good opportunity to get in the military because the war at that time was just beginning to boil over in Europe. We never dreamed we'd even go there so I was with them for three years with the National Guard outfit training draftees as they were brought in to this expanding army. Then in 1944 I got shipped out to England and the minute I got to England I found out the paratroopers were earning \$50 extra money a month. So I figured hey if I'm gonna die I'll get \$50 a month anyway. So I signed up took my training right there in England.

Interviewer: So you were in the National Guard when Pearl Harbor during Pearl Harbor.

Harle: Oh yea

Interviewer: And what was your reaction?

Harle: To Pearl Harbor you mean?

Interviewer: Yea to Pearl Harbor.

Harle: Well we were coming back from Carolina maneuvers and the convoy had stopped in Gettysburg Pennsylvania and we were strung out right through the battle field Civil War battlefield there when we got the word by radio. We stayed there all that night slept under the trucks in the trucks and everything. And we were quite excited actually a bunch of young guys you know. And but everything the routine everything changed right then. Before on the way down south there was people throwing notes into the trucks when we went through waving after that no more communication with anybody until we got back. And then we started getting these various jobs to do. Preparing vehicles and training some new draftees that had just gotten in to the outfit. We went to the west coast and we were strung out up through California into Oregon. We had riflemen we had mortar men some of them were a thousand yards apart or more. That's not a very good defense system defending the west coast you know that's the best we had. And it got to a point where they would tow what looked like anti-tank guns through the little towns out there at night through convoys. But they were covered with canvas to all appearances they were a regular camp actually they were rear ends of trucks old trucks with a big pipe welded to it and then they put a standard canvas jacket on it to impress people they would tow these in convoys through the street. No one knew the difference you know and I thought oh goodness this is how ill prepared we are. And we were

Interviewer: So they moved you from New York where y'all were stationed out to the west coast to do coast defense?

Harle: Yea we were spread out all over the place out there.

Interviewer: It wasn't a good coast defense I take it.

Harle: Pardon

Interviewer: It wasn't a very good coastal defense with y'all spread out.

Harle: It wasn't while we were there some of our outfit was assigned to escort Japanese civilians down to San Anita California where they put them in internment camps. And that lasted about a month's detail and I thought this is going to be a rotten thing you know you've got women you've got children and days before they were working in the factories like anybody else you know. And here they come take you out of your house go down to the camp down there. And we got over that then we knew we were going to be broken up as an outfit and sent piece by piece to what we learned was going to be the European Theatre operations.

Interviewer: And that's when you got sent over to England and decided you wanted to be a paratrooper.

Harle: Yea

Interviewer: What was the training like in England?

Harle: It was quite unusual it was intense and it lasted only two weeks. As compared to the courses they had here in this country and it was on the side of a hill that's the only place they had to do it. And physical training was very intense. I know on this hill every morning we had to grab our ankles bend over grab our ankles and we had to walk up that hill you couldn't let go of your ankles. You had to walk to the top of this hill then turn around and walk back down like that and just stretch your hamstrings until you just couldn't understand it you know. And then we were running, run about two and a half to five miles. And then we would have breakfast and that went on and intermingled with that one day in the afternoon they would take us and show us how to pack chutes and we had to pack five of our own chutes. So you jumped your own chute the one you packed so there were no complaints if you packed it wrong and it didn't open.

Interviewer: It was your fault.

Harle: But they did a good job instructing so we had up. And those five chutes they were ones that we qualified with.

Interviewer: What was it like the first time you jumped out of an airplane?

Harle: Oddly enough it wasn't frightening at all because they had given us ground training jumping off a wooden platform that was 14 foot high had some straw laid out there. And you just jump out and land and practice your roll which was up across your ankle across your knee your hip and then your shoulder. And we up that things jump off and come down roll back up and we constantly it was just like going out of an airplane door. No the first time we jumped you couldn't have kept me in that plane. It was a beautiful day summer and I made three jumps the one day and my finishing jumps the next day. Then they had a little ceremony down in the gully by this hill that we trained on and they gave us our wings and that was it. And then they assigned us to different companies within the 502nd parachute regiment. So like I say on D-Day I was on the high seas going to England when D-Day occurred.

Interviewer: So when did you actually parachute into Germany or England.

Harle: Holland was my first combat jump it was in Holland. And that was in Scepter 17th 1944. And that was another beautiful day for a jump we went in the middle of the day broad sunshine took us about an

hour and a half I guess across that channel. We went around about route coming down to the south in France up through Belgium into Holland. And it was a good jump there was not much activity in the sector I jumped in. The first few hours oh we'd exchange a little bit of rifle fire but nothing great. But during the night they must have brought down some German troops on what I understood later was like a trolley or a train and they had them scattered out through the woods. We had dug fox holes in amongst the trees shallow it was sandy and we woke up the first dawn in the morning my buddy he was in the next hole he said don't sit up. And tracers were going about that high right off our heads right through the woods up and down machine tracers you could see them coming they were kind of a lite blue color yellowish blue. And they were just sweeping through there I thought my God we'll never get out of here. But finally they let up and then the second day we were there the British finally arrived with their convoy they were supposed to arrive the day before. And a bunch of us jumped on tanks and road them down through the woods there and we cleared out a lot of oh maybe 40 50 of them out of there captured them and brought them back. We had them in a compound with a rope around them and we'd throw a small cigarette butt once in a while through it wouldn't never hit the ground somebody would grab it finish it off. Then we'd throw them a bar of chocolate once in a while. But then it got steadily worse as the campaign went on every day was a little bit worse little bit worse. And we were there right up through the winter month so I was there in November when it was snowy and cold we would go on patrols up the dykes see how far they had worked down the dyke. And one patrol I was on I was carrying a radio and it weighed 40 pounds and we went back we had to go through this orchard and mines were set in there and we had a marrow trail marked out where you could go through this orchard and not step on a mine. And we got through that alright there was about 30 of us all together we were approaching these houses one by one and going through each house of course it was empty. The forth house we started drawing rifle fire out of so being a reconnaissance patrol as opposed to what they call a combat patrol you were supposed to make contact and back away. All they wanted to know really was how far they had advanced but you were allowed to defend yourself. So we returned some fire then we backed out through the orchard half way through that orchard I slipped in the mud and fell right on my back in that mine field. And I thought oh here we go you know but as luck would have it it wasn't my day. And we backed off and we were laying against the dyke and I had a lieutenant with me and he had field glasses and he'd crawl up the dyke to the top of the dyke and it was a German house that we drew the fire from. And a German halftrack which is a monstrous vehicle you would probably get 14 people in it came down the dyke and stopped at that house. And he got the bright idea he was going to see if he could drop some artillery on that house and luckily on that vehicle. And we I got a radio and we called for one round for range from the artillery which was supporting us they picked a good day. Some days the English artillery would be doing it the next day maybe American artillery would be on it. This day by the luck of the Irish or something we drew the English artillery. Pulled for one round to them that's one round per gun not just one round you know. And he called they were practically on top of us about from here to the highway and it was coming in dung dung dung. Hit the house the halftrack escaped that was a scary thing. We were there

Interviewer: So they had a bunch of guns aimed essentially on top of

Harle: We had to call we had to call in the co-ordinance as to where this house was you know. And the artillery they had similar maps there just point here and usually they were pretty accurate our first rounds they were pretty good.

Interviewer: So what really one of them does is one guy in the front of them

Harle: They wanted to see how accurate it was and if it was accurate then we were going to call for a fire for an effect you know.

Interviewer: Except the English decided

Harle: The English are like no other troops in the world they are a strange breed.

Interviewer: So how did ya'll get along with the English?

Harle: Personally I got along good with them but they would stop in the middle of the highway when it come a certain time of day set up along the highway make tea for the officers. They would have their tea and they had to have it in a tent or something in an enclosure. They wouldn't they didn't like to eat out in the open the English officers. But the English soldiers themselves they were like anybody else tough. English paratroopers are tough. They all got wiped out now 12,000, 10 or 12, 000 went in and it was down about 2,000 came out I think something like that. And when they came out they were a bloody mess I'll tell you. That was a bad operation for the English because they landed right in a bunch of German armored paratroops that they brought in German troops that they didn't know were there. They were supposed to grab this one big huge bridge and they got it and held it for a while and all these Germans moved in on them and just slaughtered them. The ones that were left swam across the Rhine River what they called part of the Rhine River to the other side some of them never made it some of them didn't know how to swim. And for them it was a bad operation for the Americans we grabbed very object that we went into to get. Mostly it was bridges and highways grab this one highway all the way up through across that iron bridge and then we could go right into Germany. If it had been well planned but it would have worked out fine. But we got our bridges the American sector we got our places we lost that iron bridge and I don't know how General Montgomery the English General that commanded all of that things there he was like General Patton in a way he was kind of a hot head. And he you know flamboyant this and flamboyant that he claimed his mechanized forces would within hours after we jumped he come up that highway that we had opened up for him and they were going to go right up and within an hour they were going to be right at the edge ready to go into Germany. He assumed every bridge would be taken on time but we had so many problems I tell you.

Interviewer: So y'all accomplished your objectives?

Harle: Oh yes the American objectives were and then they stabilized the lines so it was more or less straight instead of straggly you know. They have a neatness that they seem to think they have to maintain about what a battle line should be. Why I suppose they have their reasons but ordinarily there would be little spearheads way out in front someplace for a couple of miles then a fellow here. The way they stabilize the lines they drew us out of there. We were on the front lines there for about three months from September until the middle of November until they pulled us out and brought us back to France. And we were pretty well beat up too suffered a lot of casualties nowhere near like the English. But we weren't back there about a month and here come that Battle of the Bulge. Went back up to Belgium we went in trucks and some of us no overcoats some of us missing helmets. They hadn't resupplied us from the Holland operation yet.

Interviewer: It was such a quick turnaround.

Harle: Oh gosh we got up there and we met American soldiers coming out out of the Bulge being driven out of the Bulge. Some of them had lost their equipment and everything pretty well beat up and wild

eyed you know. A lot of wounded they were just retreating at full speed. It was an unusual site to see Americans young guys like yourself which we all were we all were just young boys retreating. You're always trained you're supposed to hold your ground go forward they had just overwhelmed them. We were going in and they were coming out and we got to where we were gonna go and they said town of Bastogne. And gutted out stations around the perimeter and everything and they closed that pocket around Bastogne and cut off our hospital what they called a hospital train which was our

Interviewer: Which was a medical outfit?

Harle: Yeah like a Mash unit really. And they captured now right away that was serious because all we had was what each regimental surgeon had in the way of medical supplies which was not a lot. And we held up that town for days and days and everyday an attack would come from a different section onto that circle. They didn't hit us all the way around at the same time they would stab in here stab in there and we'd fight them off and fight them off. And we had some artillery in there with us which was a good thing. If they hit on one side of the perimeter we had this mobile artillery they could get in position and help fight them back. And that went on for quite a few days. And then on Christmas morning a runner came into our compound there and he said get ready to fight six tanks and associated infantry ridding behind them or walking behind them coming in to where we were there. We all bailed out of there and ran out to the edge of the road there and got lined up down the ditch there and waited for them to get close. We had guys with bazookas knock one or two of them tanks off right now and they were followed by these Germans they had white bed sheets over them for camouflage supposedly against the snow. And some of them still had this German camouflage caps over the top of them. And they were walking behind the tanks well enough to keep cover once we landed a couple rounds on those tanks they infantry they scattered you know to get away from those tanks because they would blow up and burn. When they scattered we picked them off and in a short battle which probably lasted oh God an hour and a half at the most we had gotten all but one of the tanks and there was 67 German lying dead in the field out in front of us there. And as far as our company was concerned we had very few casualties some wounded I think one of two dead but we took every one of the Germans out. And I think with the next day somebody down the line got that other tank that was in there. And shortly after that I guess within a day or so General Patton broke through.

Interviewer: So what was the mood like amongst the American soldiers at Bastogne?

Harle: Pretty dog gone gloomy by the end of that siege because we had been circled around them for days and days. And we the paratroopers aren't really trained to be sieged they are mostly an attack unit you know strike and run here and go grab this and grab that. Defense is another thing it's you're not mobile you're in once place. And every day you figure well they're gonna come try and get us again today try and get us again today. It's not an idea situation and like I said after the siege was broken the guys were pretty well disgusted with the whole thing. And it wasn't long after that a few days they took us off the line and we were scattered through oh parts of France doing little odd jobs here and there you know nothing up front or anything like that.

Interviewer: So after Bastogne they pretty much kind of farmed you out to different units.

Harle: Uh huh and then they took us back to a rest area near Paris and we were so badly beaten up that when it came time for the Americans to jump the Rhine River which was a different invasion really, we were too beat up to even go. So we just sat there and the tent city and watched these other units fly over with their paratroops on their way to the Rhine. And they eventually got us moved up into Austria

and Germany. And 101st air borne division we captured Birches Garden which was Hitler's little town with its mountains and his house on top. And we were stationed in that town for quite a little while a few days.

Interviewer: I bet that was

Harle: And we all got a chance to get up on that mountain sit in his chair in his house. Some of them even got pictures of them sitting in his furniture up on the top of this big mountain. Of course the Americans were like anybody else they looted everything. Once you got into something you captured from the Germans you stole everything. If they were building in a house and we were driven out they would go in and steal souvenirs you know to take home. I found myself no different I brought home a big huge Nazi swastika banner that hung in the hall they had these big halls they were long probably that wide swastika maybe that big. Brought that home and for the first two or three years after my children started being born I cut the red bottom and the red top off of that and I had my wife make a Santa Clause suit and I'd play Santa Clause for my kids with that German flag not the swastika but the red part.

Interviewer: The red part.

Harle: And I don't know what ever happened to the dog gone thing I had that Santa Clause suit for a long while. The kids got wise I came home from work at night ladder up the porch climb in the bedroom window put that suit on come down the stairs into the living room where she had the kids waiting you know. And because we didn't have any chimney I could come down but you know they thought it was the real deal. Yea after we got into Austria and the war wound down in Europe we got acquainted with the natives there the people. And we even me and a couple other guys helped them do their hay they were cutting hay by hand. Went out and helped them helped them bail hay and so on we didn't care if they were Austrian or German when the war was over. I figured they were just like anybody else they worked. But it was beautiful in Austria beautiful country and we were there for oh gee about a month. And they come around what they call a high point system if you had 85 points you could go home and I just made it.

Interviewer: So at this time the war was already over?

Harle: Yea the war had just ended in Europe and I had enough points that they shipped all of us high point men into a German barracks.

Interviewer: Now how did you get points?

Harle: Oh they you got so many points for every year you was in service you had so many points if you were an expert rifleman you had for each three months you had spent overseas you got points things like that. Even got points for the good conduct ribbon if you had a good conduct ribbon you got so many points for that. And so that's how you accumulated oh yea ever medal you got points.

Interviewer: And you had accumulated enough points?

Harle: Yea I was one of the first groups that moved out to be shipped home. But God I got smallpox while I waiting to come home. And they put me in the hospital for three days filled me full of penicillin or whatever they had there. Got rid of that when I got back where these people were waiting to go home they had already moved out without me.

Interviewer: So you had to wait?

Harle: There I am all alone my friend supposable had stolen my duffle bag and everything all of my souvenirs and I had souvenirs. I had three different pistols one was an Italian pistol a Beretta and I had a P3 what the Germans called a P38 a German gun then I found a great big monstrous revolver probably 50 caliber. You could stick your finger down the barrel that's how big the barrel was and it was an antique suppose a German had it for a long while in his house. Well I had that in there and I had oh I guess a hundred eight by ten black and white photographs the division photographer had taken some of each of the operations the division had been in. And for \$300 he would make up a set for you so I had them in there they stole them here I am just a little backpack on my back. And they put me in these replacement depots. They shipped me to Luxemburg I was at their depot for a while sent me back over to Germany again back to France finally in October 45 they put me on a ship in Lahr France and I made it home. I was discharged in October of the same year. That's pretty much my life story I had five years and one month in the service.

Interviewer: And you were overseas for about a year and half two

Harle: Not very long, long enough

Interviewer: Long enough to want to come back.

Harle: But I was happy about the whole thing you know. I wasn't wounded I got a Bronze Star you know and I was I had been upgraded two or three grades while I was in there. So I came out in pretty good shape which I couldn't say for a lot of them some of them were beat up pretty bad.

Interviewer: What was it like to come home after all of that?

Harle: Oh I tell you it was two weeks from France to Boston in a beat up little oh what they call a victory boat. And the north Atlantic in the winter is something else if you've ever been on it. But that little boat would come right up like that and dive down into the waves and the propeller would come out of the water. Every time the propellers would come out of the water they would rev up the engine would rev up. All night long you'd hear that and waves were guys were sick. The only way I managed to keep from being too sick I would have to go up on deck and stand there hang on the rail that way I didn't get sick. If I laid down down below decks just couldn't stomach anything. It was quite an adventure coming home. The last night we were on the ocean we were all up on deck looking to stop the Nantucket light ship. We figured once we see that light we know we're home. That was something else yea. You know I was no great hero or nothing like that I did my job.

Interviewer: Was that pretty much the way with everybody you're not there to be a hero your there to do your job and go home?

Harle: Oh we had guys that were gun hoe they weren't afraid of the devil himself. And some of them got killed for it and other wound up with Silver Stars and stuff like that. For the most part just do what they trained you to do and that was about it. And like a fool after I got home and got out of the service within months I rejoined the National Guard again the hometown unit you know. And I was with them a short time then I moved to California and that was it. Went out there to get a job worked out there until the company lost the contract and I moved back to my hometown in New York there been there ever since.

Interviewer: Okay

Harle: If you're looking for some action heroes you won't find them here. Not like you see on television you know. Everybody's idea of being a hero is a little different you know. But I will say one thing the Belgium people and the Dutch people nicest people in the world. Some of the Dutch people I still write to today that I met over in Holland still write to them and my wife writes them too. And there's some Belgium that were involved in the underground during the war I became acquainted with some of them and I still write to them. And they are always sending me like cards at Christmas time you know and anything like souvenirs you know one woman spend a long time knitting a real fancy doily to send to my wife sent that in the mail and everything. Things like that you know they appreciated us being there appreciated us being there. It was a strange war there won't be other wars like that I'm afraid that's gonna just be a I don't know what you would call it. It won't be a foot soldiers war it will be a long range wipe them out deal there. I don't know what else I could tell you my brother he was in the service my father before me was in the First World War My oldest son was in the Vietnam got wounded my youngest boy he was in the navy during the Vietnam War. I have a granddaughter that parachutes believe it or not. I would jump today if I thought my knees would hold up.

Interviewer: So it was one of those things you actually liked to do?

Harle: It never bothered me to if I could get somebody to tape up my ankles and my knees I'd jump today. It's been nice talking to you

Interviewer: Very good talking to you.

Tape ended