

I am talking with Donald Straith, a former member of Company A, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division. Mr. Straith, thank you for consenting to sit down and talk with us. The first thing I would like to start with is what induced you to go into the Army in the first place?

Mr. Straith: As a kid my ambition was to be a naval officer. I got classes when I was in the 9th grade so that washed that out. The Navy was still close to my heart when I went in the service. But at the induction center I reached the point where they asked what service I wanted and I thought, "In the Navy I would have a warm hammock but when that ship goes down, that is the end." Even with water in the bottom of the foxhole, there is firm ground underneath it. So I figured I would be better off there.

So you would stand a better chance on dry land or semi-dry land under the circumstances. So you went in, in 1944 correct?

Mr. Straith: Correct.

You took your initial training at Fort McClellan, Alabama?

Mr. Straith: Correct.

Do you want to talk a little about Fort McClellan in the 1940's?

Mr. Straith: Other than the hard work I still have fond memories of it. We trained as an infantry cannon company on the 105 meter howitzer M3 which is the short-barreled howitzer for infantry support. The thought was that we would all go into self-propelled 105's overseas. But back in the induction center I had seen a trooper walk through the lobby with his shined boots and his silver wings and I thought, "That looks pretty interesting." So when the call went out for people who were interested, I was one of the ones that signed up.

So you volunteered for Airborne?

Mr. Straith: Right.

You took your airborne training and after you left Fort McClellan you went to Fort Benning?

Mr. Straith: They shipped us down to Fort Benning at the end of our basic training. I went through basic training, advanced training and demolition school and then headed overseas from there.

How was Airborne school?

Mr. Straith: It was tough but I came out of there in the best physical shape I have ever been in, in my life.

Did you enjoy it? Did you like jumping?

Mr. Straith: It took getting used to but yes I enjoyed it. I was just disappointed that by the time I got out I hadn't been able to make more jumps.

How many jumps total did you make?

Mr. Straith: I only made 9 jumps. After the war there wasn't equipment available to have the number of training jumps. We were supposed to have one week for six weeks and we had one and that was it. This was back in France after the war was over.

A paid jump?

Mr. Straith: Well you could call it that. There were men that decided that they weren't going to jump; the war was over, they weren't going to take a chance at that point. To my knowledge they were taken off jump status.

So they forfeited their jump pay?

Mr. Straith: Right. But they figured they weren't going to be in for more than a couple of months anyway; and that was their decision.

I respect that decision; jumping can be hazardous.

Mr. Straith: It can be but it shouldn't be; let's put it that way. At least not in peace time it shouldn't be.

Training jumps shouldn't be hazardous but people get hurt; it happens. You shipped overseas after you finished your Airborne training and demolitions training and you went to England to the replacement center right?

Mr. Straith: Right, on the Queen Mary.

How long were you there?

Mr. Straith: They told us there were 18,000 on board. But the largest figure I have ever seen printed was 15,000. So whether they never really revealed how much they crammed in there, I don't know. It was close quarters I know that.

Yes that is what I have been told. Anything significant on the trip over?

Mr. Straith: Just that it was November in the North Atlantic and it was more comfortable sleeping on deck with an overcoat than sleeping in the state room. I have to stop and think now. There were 24 of us assigned to a state room which in peace time would have been a first class state room. But there were only twelve bunks. So one night 12 of us

slept in the cabin and the other 12 slept on deck and then the next night reversed it. There was no air conditioning so 12 guys sleeping in one cabin it got pretty darn hot.

Pretty ripe I would imagine.

Mr. Straith: That too. We slept with no blankets; just in our skivvies and it still was virtually unbearable. So I opted for the deck when I had a chance to.

You landed in England; were you in England very long?

Mr. Straith: I was in England for about three weeks. We went in on the 10th of November. We all shipped down to England to the division area and then we were portioned out there to various regimental rear echelons.

So with you being Airborne qualified, rather than going into the regular pipeline of replacements, you went directly to the 101st and into their system as soon as you arrived in England?

Mr. Straith: Right and at that point went directly to the 506th rear echelon which was in Denford Park.

Very Good. Any additional training there?

Mr. Straith: Not really. We did mostly calisthenics and long distance runs. My recollection is of no specific training outside of the physical part.

Every veteran I have interviewed mentions the physical strain of the 101st; a lot of running, calisthenics, a lot of road marches.

Mr. Straith: We did a lot.

Did your physical fitness improve there over what you had in Airborne school?

Mr. Straith: No I think I had reached the point after Airborne school. Like I said before I was there in the best physical condition I had ever been in my life. I think I just more or less maintained that level. I wish I were in that shape today.

As do I, but it is part of aging. So you arrived there on the 10th and then about three weeks later you shipped over to France. You joined the 101st there in rest camp at the time?

Mr. Straith: The reason we were in rear echelon in England was because the division was still in Holland. As soon as they pulled the division out of Holland back to Mourmelon in France they flew us directly over to join them. I think we arrived the day after they did.

What did you do in Mourmelon on ____?

Mr. Straith: We moved into a forward French cavalry post. They were one story buildings that were stone plastered. They were very chilly. Each one had a fireplace. It was necessary to keep that stoked all the time to have any warmth. As far as training there were remnants of World War I trenches in the area. We would be taken out and do field problems and teach each member to lead by hand and arm signals and that sort of thing.

So the veterans that were coming out of Holland, how were you received by them being the new, being newbie's so to speak?

Mr. Straith: I sort of felt like an outcast at times. There were some of the men who accepted us and there were others who looked down on us because we weren't part of the original group. But it didn't matter that much in the long run because by the time, I'm jumping the gun here, I was with the company three weeks and I went off to the hospital and when I came back there was only one man in my squad left anyhow, so the ones I met before it didn't matter. It was a whole new group.

Did you sense any resentment from the veterans that you hadn't been there when they went to Holland?

Mr. Straith: I don't think it was that as much as just that I wasn't one of the originals in the company. I didn't come overseas with them; not so much that I wasn't in the previous actions with them. But just that I wasn't an original ___ man where the regiment trained.

So you were the new kid on the block type thing?

Mr. Straith: More or less, yes.

You were there just a very short time before the division was sent to Bastogne.

Mr. Straith: Maybe 3 ½ weeks. We joined them on the 28th or the 29th of November and we left for Bastogne on the 18th of December.

Now you were in a rifle platoon were you not? You didn't wind up in demolition?

Mr. Straith: Unfortunately I did not end up in demolition. We lined up the replacements and we would count across five men and they would go to Headquarters Company 1st Battalion, five more would go to A Company and five more would go to B Company. When they got down to the end they would start over again. So I don't really know how many men from that group went into A Company. I just know that the first five went. They probably got through the whole regiment and started over again and counted off more into A Company. I know there were other replacements that came in, in that period between Holland and Bastogne. But if they came in at the same time I did or whether they were a regular group that I wasn't aware of, I can't say really.

Where did you pick up your equipment that you needed, you didn't ship over from the states with all of your combat equipment, where was that issued?

Mr. Straith: That's a good question. As far as I can recall we brought everything except our firearms. I don't think we took our rifles with us. I think those were issued after we joined the company. Although in England I know we had some weapons because one of the men with a carbine went pheasant hunting one day with it. Some had weapons and I would have to assume that we all had weapons.

I understand that when you went pheasant hunting you met with some success.

Mr. Straith: Well we pulled off two shots and a pheasant flushed out of the underbrush and the second shot got him right in the base of the shoulder or the wing and up through the neck and left all the edible parts intact.

That's quite a shot with a rifle.

Mr. Straith: Well with the carbine; the carbine is as accurate as M1's. It was a lucky shot really.

How was the pheasant?

Mr. Straith: The one little bit I got was good. We eventually got chased by a Constable. By the time I came out of hiding and made it back to the barracks, they had already cleaned the pheasant, cooked it and there was one little piece left for me. But I am sure it was good.

Back to Mourmelon, the division received, of course, very short notice and you were trucked into Bastogne. Were you one of the fortunate ones that had a winter overcoat and the things that you needed to try to get some assemblance of staying warm?

Mr. Straith: Pretty much so. But on our way into Bastogne it didn't seem so cold; it was so hot that I seen other men taking their overcoats off and hanging them over the fences of Mourmelon. So I did the same with mine. I regretted that afterward.

You lived to regret that.

Mr. Straith: Oh definitely.

Did you have any interaction on your way into Bastogne? I know there were a lot of troops retreating from the area. Did you have any interaction with the soldiers that were fleeing?

Mr. Straith: We didn't encounter any until we were actually in Bastogne. Once we entered Bastogne the roads were clogged with people headed the other way. At the time

we didn't understand why we would be going one way and they would be going the other way. I didn't realize first that they were retreating and we were advancing.

I know you didn't have much ammunition. I heard stories of soldiers advancing with the 101st hollering at the soldiers on the other side, "Let us have some of your ammunition." Did you see any exchange there?

Mr. Straith: Not between the advancing and the retreating but I didn't see that much of them because I was a scout at the time. I went in and crossed over a ridge in town and we were swinging out on another road. We didn't really get in the center of town at all. I didn't really get close to any of those retreating troops. By the time we were headed out the other side of town, they were all gone. They were all behind us.

Right. Once you arrived in Bastogne how did your unit establish itself and what was your mission?

Mr. Straith: We came in from the north and swung just through the edge of Bastogne and headed back to our road to the northeast to a town called Noville. At that time we didn't know it but we were sort of stemming the advance; we were out in front of everything. You asked about ammunition, shortly before we reached Noville we stopped for a briefing and a jeep brought crates of hand grenades. It could have brought ammunition at that time, I don't recall that specifically. I know I had one bandolier. Again it's hard to remember 55 or 56 years ago but I think that it was issued back at Mourmelon. Otherwise entering Bastogne as a scout I wouldn't have had any ammunition. I'm sure that I received that bandolier at Mourmelon. It's possible but more bandoliers were brought by that jeep. That's something I don't recall.

You said you were with the scout platoon or squad?

Mr. Straith: No. I was just out on flank scouting for our company.

Okay, you were a scout for your company. What was that like?

Mr. Straith: Well of course I was the lead team and young and fresh and new to combat. I was sure the Germans were going to pour out of every little patch of woods that we passed. I was closer to the woods than I was to the company so I sort of wondered if I was out there as a sacrificial lamb. But I didn't see a one.

You didn't see any Germans.

Mr. Straith: Well they weren't around on that side of town at that point of time anyhow. For that matter going into Noville I didn't see any.

So at this point did your company dig in, in a perimeter?

Mr. Straith: Our 1st Battalion was sent into Noville and we were to attack out from Noville and hopefully take the surrounding high ground. Our company went through the center and up to a cemetery and then at the point in time we were supposed to attack over the cemetery wall with B Company on one side and C Company on the other side. But after the first few men got over the wall they were taken with so intense that they stopped the rest of us. They told us to take cover and more or less maintain that position that night. By the next morning we were cut off from Bastogne and I was wounded a short time after that. I didn't really see much more of what was going on. I was at the aid station.

Your wound came from shrapnel right?

Mr. Straith: No, from a machine gun.

It was a machine gun?

Mr. Straith: Mortar shells were falling just down the slope from where I was lying at the time. When I was hit I thought it was a stone kicked out by one of the shells. But there was a machine gun firing also. But from the hole that it left, it was a nice round hole. It was pretty obvious that it was a bullet rather than a fragment. I was kept at company headquarters for a little while and then sent back to the aid station on the side of town nearest Bastogne. I stayed there until about 2 o'clock in the afternoon when they had opened the road again and pulled the battalion out of Noville back toward Bastogne.

I read in your personal memoirs about your evacuation and I would love to record that for posterity. Would you describe during the evacuation you came under machine gun attack.

Mr. Straith: I eventually ended up in Bastogne at the collecting station there and spent the night. The next morning someone woke me and said, "We think we have one road open and we are going to send out a truck of walking wounded." So I got in the truck and sat directly behind the driver. We headed out through Bastogne and out another road. Shortly after leaving Bastogne we ran into a roadblock and the machine gun in the roadblock strafed the truck and killed the driver. It racketed my shoulders as we all dove for the bottom. It killed another trooper a couple of seats back from me. We rolled to a stop two or three hundred yards down the road and we didn't know where we were or what direction we were headed because it was foggy, overcast. We heard engines approaching and we thought it was Germans coming after us but it turned out to be an American jeep and half track that had heard the firing and came out of the side road to see what was going on. So they led us off the way they had come to the next village where there was an aid station. While they were patching up the men on the truck who had been wounded a second time we started taking on small arms fire there so they told us to leave there immediately. We eventually, maybe 15 minutes later, arrived at a small chateau which was the 103rd collecting station. We got out of the truck and before we could get inside they told us to get into a couple of ambulances that were waiting there because they were in the process of evacuating the chateau because the Germans were so close. The ambulance I got into went to a village called S_____ which is where they

relocated the collecting station. After spending an hour or two there they came through and said that any of the wounded who had not already been entered into their records back at the chateau would have to leave. So they loaded us back into another ambulance. We headed off in that ostensibly for the rear and took a turn in the road at one point and saw shell fire on the hillside ahead of us. So we turned around and got out of there in a hurry. Finally late that afternoon we reached a town _____ where a school had been taken over as a temporary hospital. We stayed there for a short time, actually it was not late in the afternoon; it was the middle of the afternoon or so. A short time later they came through and again said that anyone who had not been previously entered as a patient would have to leave. We got into another ambulance and took off again and finally that evening arrived in Sinai at the 130th General Hospital. There we had a bed for the night and got a hot meal which was the first thing I had to eat in three days except for one slice of bread and jam. I was happy to be there.

I would imagine; a warm place, a hot meal and finally someone to attend to your wound.

Mr. Straith: They didn't really do anything except change the dressing there. The next morning we were off again on a hospital train. We were on there for I believe two days, no heat; K-rations to eat. We eventually arrived in Paris late at night. We were taken by bus to a hospital in one of the suburbs and they were waiting for us with big pitchers of hot pea soup. I had never liked pea soup but from that time on, I loved it. Coming off that cold hospital train and having hot pea soup waiting was serendipity.

A little piece of heaven.

Mr. Straith: You better believe it.

I can imagine. Now how long did you stay there at that hospital?

Mr. Straith: I was at that hospital for one week. They loaded quite a few of us onto a train and sent us to Sherburg where we arrived on New Year's Eve, 1944. We had been sleeping on the train and we had heard gunfire and thought we were being attacked. It turned out to be somebody in the area celebrating New Years Eve or celebrating the New Year. We were loaded the next day on to a British hospital ship which was a converted British coastal steamer. Two days after that went on to England.

How long did you stay in England?

Mr. Straith: That was the 3rd of January and I went first to the 188th General and from there to the 317th General Hospital. I eventually left the hospital sometime in March or late February and went to the replacement depot. There were four of us at the hospital from the 101st that were shipped out back to the replacement depot. We were issued new equipment and new weapons. We were issued 45's because they said that their orders were that all paratroopers would be issued 45's; which was news to us but we welcomed them.

You never had one before?

Mr. Straith: No. We were only there a few days before they shipped us off to France. Actually to a little town called Givet which is right on the border between France and Belgium. We were there for about a week. Most of it was lying in the sun on some old battle ruins. We could hear artillery in the distance but we were a long, long way away. We were happy.

So was this a forward replacement center?

Mr. Straith: It was the 11th replacement depot.

Did they ensure that you went back to the 101st or did they just not care and just send you off to ...?

Mr. Straith: Well they had to arrange for transportation from the outfits. The division was getting ready for division review by Eisenhower so they waited until the day after to come and pick us up. We missed out on that; one of the many things we missed out on. But we got back there on the 16th of March. We were there for two weeks. On the 1st of April we headed off to Germany to the Rheine where we went into a more or less static position on the west side of the Rheine across from the Ruhr Pocket. The whole idea being to keep the Germans who were encircled in the Ruhr Pocket from trying to cross back to the other side. Our company made one night raid across the river in company strength and in the ensuing events my squad had three men killed and one wounded. Our platoon medic was also killed.

How was that raid conducted? Was there a bridge or did you go across on an amphibious assault?

Mr. Straith: We went across in small rowboats which the engineers had brought in and stockpiled on one side of the river.

Were they military boats or confiscated civilian?

Mr. Straith: They were military, flat-bottomed scout type things that they used for personnel foot bridges, pontoon bridges.

Had you had any prior training in amphibious assault and how to paddle a boat?

Mr. Straith: No. We had canoe paddles and I can't tell you now whether we had two per boat or four per boat. They weren't very big boats. We had six or the most maybe eight in the boat. My recollection is that they were very small boats.

Now the Rheine flows very swiftly. How hard was it to get that little boat with eight men in it across the Rheine?

Mr. Straith: I don't recall that we had any difficulty getting across. I think we angled more or less in a way that would take us to where we wanted to go to counteract the flow.

Start off stream-land down-stream type of thing.

Mr. Straith: Exactly.

So what was the purpose of that raid?

Mr. Straith: To take prisoners and collect information. Actually it was still light when we crossed so they would have seen us coming. We started up a road toward the nearest town and by then it was dark. The Germans had felled trees on either side to fall across the road so we were stumbling and crashing into the trees; guys were cursing. They knew we were coming. Somewhere along the road a sentry yelled out for us to halt. The entire point let loose on the sentry and we never found his body but we assumed he didn't survive. My platoon was the point platoon and when we reached the edge of town they had the point set up a roadblock there while the other two platoons went in and around the town. While we were in position there they apparently had a mortar battery that was zeroed in at that particular point. It dropped two salvos on us. I was the assistant bazooka man that night. My bazooka man was sitting behind a tree at a fork in the road with the bazooka over his shoulder although he had already found that it didn't work.

The bazooka didn't work?

Mr. Straith: We had tried to fire a rocket and it didn't fire. So there was really no need for it to be sitting up over his shoulder. I was lying directly behind him, our 30-caliber machine gun was on his right side and his right one was on the left side. One of the shells landed in the road about 10 feet behind us to the right. The fragments arched over me and the rifleman caught the bazooka man full across the back and ripped his whole back open and a fragment got the machine gunner in his leg. The two of us that was closest was underneath the arch of the projectory of fragments so we were both spared.

Again you narrowly escaped?

Mr. Straith: Yes, very close. A big piece of paving that was a hard pack clay road, a chunk of that flew up and came down and landed on my helmet. I tried hard to squeeze all of me into the helmet but I wouldn't fit.

But you did fit into that little compression in the ground.

Mr. Straith: Oh yeah, there wasn't much of that either. But at the same time our B.A.R team which had been just off one side of the road was hit. One of the men I was told was hit square in the mid section by one of the shells and blown in half and his partner on the B.A.R was mortally wounded. So we had lost three men right there. The medic had been hit in the temple by a fragment. He was bandaged up and told to head down to where we were supposed to be picked up by the boats. When we all had reached the other side, we

found that the medic wasn't there. A week later when white flags were seen over there, a retrieval party was sent over to bring the bodies back and they found four bodies there; one of them being the medic who apparently had lost too much blood and had died somewhere there. Displaced workers from other countries who were in the area had dug a mass grave and buried the four bodies and had erected a cross over it with an inscription that those four American soldiers who had been killed on that particular date. Fortunately, my Company Commander, he led the recovery back over and took a picture of that grave with the cross on it. I have a copy of that picture.

Who was your Company Commander?

Mr. Straith: Captain William Kennedy. He was a good man. He just died a year ago, well just last October he died.

Do you feel like you were well led?

Mr. Straith: Yes. He was a good man.

Was the raid successful? Did you manage to capture any prisoners that night?

Mr. Straith: They brought back three elderly men who didn't know anything. It was actually totally useless.

Three elderly German men who were non-combatants, just residents.

Mr. Straith: Right, they were non-combatants. The German army had totally pulled out of the area. That was why the displaced people were there and were able to put up white flags for us and to invite us back over. But I doubt there was any information ____ from the three elderly civilians. How far back the Germans were pulled at point, I don't know. But it was only a day or two after that that the entire division pulled out of that area.

Where did the division go then? Where did you move to?

Mr. Straith: We loaded on freight trains and went to Ludwigshafen, Germany, and a very secure route down through northern France. We disembarked there and loaded ducks and went across to Mannheim because all the bridges were blown. We stayed in the ducks for quite some time as we headed on east across southern Germany. At some point we lost the ducks and they were replaced by trucks but I don't know exactly at what point that was.

At least you didn't have to walk.

Mr. Straith: We didn't have to walk, no. Airborne walk, never!

When you moved southeast, what was your mission at that time?

Mr. Straith: Merely to continue to pursue the retreating German armies and eventually to take Berchtesgaden; which was supposed to be the center of the German readout which was going to fight to the end and never did.

Did you encounter any resistance from the werewolves from the Hitler youth?

Mr. Straith: The German Army was surrendering so fast there were thousands of them coming back up the autobahn headed in the other direction. Our troops that were farthest forward would just disarm the German units and tell them to head back up the road. They didn't even have escorts. They were just headed back toward Germany.

So at this point you felt relatively safe?

Mr. Straith: Yes, definitely. As we approached Berchtesgaden we turned off the autobahn onto a side road down into the mountains and were held up by a blown bridge. There were some snipers down through that area. I believe the division took its last three casualties at that time. But I don't recall hearing any of that small arms fire. We camped there overnight and during the night there was a tremendous explosion. I was sure we were under attack. It turned out that the men that were guarding the abutment to the bridge had thrown a roll of primer cord into their bonfire at which they were keeping warm. The primer cord exploded but it certainly alerted us in a hurry. The next day we loaded up and went back out to the autobahn and headed for Berchtesgaden. My memory is sticking, and sleeping in our vehicle; I woke up and stuck my head out. It was dark out and some soldier was walking by. I said, "Where are we?" He said, "You are in Berchtesgaden." There is some discrepancy on when we actually arrived. I am in correspondence right now with a professor who is doing work on Berchtesgaden. I have come up with three or four different stories of when we arrived there. When I get home after this reunion I am hoping to get a letter from him getting his input on that.

With the precise date perhaps.

Mr. Straith: As I say, it was sometime in the evening. I can't say what time we got there or what time I was aware we were there. The Italian records show that we arrived at 11:30 at night. Another source has a daylight picture of what purported to be our 1st Battalion entering Berchtesgaden during the daytime. Take your choice.

And your mission there, you thought you were going to have to go in and take the Eagles nest but at that time...

Mr. Straith: By that time it was pretty obvious that there was no longer any resistance. So it was just a matter of going in and occupying the area.

How long did you stay as an occupation force?

Mr. Straith: In Austria?

Yes.

Mr. Straith: Until the 1st of August.

How was life there; pretty good?

Mr. Strait: Wonderful; there couldn't be a better place to end the war and recuperate afterwards. On V-E Day, I was sitting on the balcony of my private room looking out at the snow covered Alps. Across the street there was a house that was being used as a German field hospital. Some German officer was sitting out there playing a guitar. It was a very idealic setting you might say.

Some change from Bastogne.

Mr. Straith: Very different, very different. They were playing a tune up there but it wasn't on a guitar.

After your occupation duties were completed; let me back up to before that because you were there through August which went into V-J Day. Did you hear any roomers at that time about the division being reconstituted and redeployed and being used in Japan?

Mr. Straith: When we left Austria the 1st of August, we were told we would go back to France and begin a six weeks training program to refit us and retrain us to leave for the Pacific. We were to make one jump a week for six weeks. This was the 1st of August and they dropped the first atom bomb on the 9th? I don't know it was the second week of August.

9th & 10th I think

Mr. Straith: Of course that abruptly changed all the plans. So we ended up only making one training jump and that wasn't until the 1st week of September. But part of the problem was that they didn't have the C-47s available on a large scale to make a lot of jumps. I would liked to have made a couple more. I would have liked to have gotten into double figures.

At that point did you have enough points to muster out or were you kept on active duty for awhile?

Mr. Straith: No, I was too far down. In Austria they had been sending 85 pointers. By the time we got back to France they were working their way down but I don't think they were in the 60's at that point. A lot of the fellows who were below me in point standing were shipped off to I believe the 508th in Germany or the 82nd. They kept on the ones who would presumably be going home very shortly. To keep us occupied they set up a widespread of athletic programs, theater programs, music and various things. All the men involved would be taken out on special duty. We were supposed to be called on for guard duty at the compound we were in. It took one platoon for every 24 hour shift. So you

figure three platoons per company and twelve companies in the regiment, we shouldn't have had to pull it very often. There were so many men in each company who were off on special duty and off on furlough; various things like that. We were pulling guard duty every third night. We were expected to be up all night and then train all day and two days later do the same thing. It got to the point where I was sick of the place and wanted to get out of there. So I saw a notice on the company bulletin board for a school in England for various courses that would supposedly retrain you for civilian life. I saw one listed for a survey course; an eight week survey course in England. I had been there on furlough about a month earlier and acquired a girlfriend in London.

And we continue...you were talking about the survey training course in England.

Mr. Straith: I signed up for an eight week surveying course. A month earlier I had been on furlough in England and acquired girlfriends and I was _____ to get back over there. There were a number of us from the regiment who signed up for various courses. When we left we were told that if the division went home while we were still at the school that we would have the option of either dropping out of school and going home with the division because we anticipated that the division would be sent home as a unit; or conversely we could stay and finish our course at the end of which regardless of our point total we would be shipped home. I was the only one who elected to stay and finish my course. In January I went in and picked up my travel orders. In the meantime the division had been deactivated on the 30th of November.

Right.

Mr. Straith: In January I went in and picked up my travel orders. My travel orders were to return to the 506th in S____, France.

Which no longer existed.

Mr. Straith: I argued the point that we had been told that we would be shipped home regardless of our points. He said, "Oh, we can't ship anyone home under 50 points and you only have 49 points." They told me there was nothing they could do there. I had to wait until we got to the embarkation camp at South Hampton. I went to South Hampton which meant I was headed for the continent and I didn't want to go back there. I wanted to stay in England. By then I had two girlfriends. I went AWOL into London to go to the UK base headquarters to plead my case there. I promptly got picked up by the MP's and was restricted to the Red Cross club that I had walked into to stay for the night and told to report to the Judge Advocate General the next morning at 8:00. I pleaded my case to him and he said that there was nothing he could do there. I had to wait until I got to the embarkation camp on the other side of the channel and I was to be on the first train back to South Hampton. So when we got back over across the channel to France I went through the whole rigamor again at the embarkation camp there and they said, "There is nothing we can do here, you will have to go back to whatever your last Army headquarters was and they will assign you from there." The last Army we had been in, the headquarters had been back in Munich. I didn't want to go all the way back there. So

somebody said, "Well when your troop train goes through Paris, when it stops at the station there get off and report to the railway transportation officer." Which I did. He sent me to Western Base Headquarters. They said, "You have three choices: you can either go back to Munich to 3rd Army or 7th Army headquarters (whatever it was), you can go to grades registration unit out in some little village in the countryside in France, or you can stay in Paris in an MP Company." I picked the MP Company in Paris. The MP Company turned out to be, not the guys who go out and pick up guys like me who are AWOL. It was a security company. They guarded Western Base Headquarters, Western Base Finance and there were several other offices around Paris. They guarded the Ambassador during the day and his home at night and some other posts. I was at Western Base Headquarters one day. I'll back up again. We were on duty six hours and off eighteen; six hours off eighteen; six hours off twelve and then we would move up a shift. When we completed the entire rotation then we would have 36 hours off to do what we wanted.

That is not bad shifts.

Mr. Strait: There were no formations and no hours other than we had to be ready to go on our posts half an hour ahead of time with clean belts and clean leggings. Other than that we had no restrictions. I lost track of where I had been. But anyway I was at Western Base Headquarters the first shift I worked and I might have been one or two shifts and I moved up to a night shift and I was put on Western Base Finance. Western Base Finance was the 2nd or 3rd floor up in one of the old French buildings and ____ there; big double doorways opening off of the stairway and there was a fireplace with a maroon fire in it. The first night that I was on duty there I sat down in a soft arm chair in front of the fireplace and the next thing I knew there was the Sergeant-of-the-Guard standing in the door and I was sound asleep. So I was taken off that. Since I was the only combat veteran in the MP Company, or at least in that squad, I was told that the next morning I could sleep in. I didn't have to be ready to go on at 5:30 for the 6:00 to noon shift. I could sleep in and the Sergeant would post the rest of the guards and come back and pick me up. I didn't know it was in the _____. He came back, picked me up and took me to the Embassy and it turned out that I was going to be the Ambassadors personal bodyguard which only meant on the morning shift greeting him at the door at 10:00 when he arrived, carrying his briefcase up to the office, hanging up his coat for him, putting his briefcase on the disk, going out in the hall and standing outside his door until I was relieved. In the afternoon it was just reversed. The first few times on that duty I stood there stiffly at parade rest outside of his door until finally one day his appointment secretary informed me that I didn't have to stand at parade rest. I could sit in an armchair until somebody approached and then get up. I continued to do that the rest of the time I was there except for when I was on nights. When I was on nights I was a guard at his residence; which was inside a walled compound with steel covered gates. I was in a little room that had a switchboard, a cot, a table and a bell which rang when somebody wanted to come in the gate. So I could sit there and write letters, sleep on the cot and do anything I wanted. Nobody would know because nobody could get in without ringing the bell at the gate and they couldn't see in.

That was pretty light duty.

Mr. Straith: That was wonderful. When I came off the midnight to 6 in the morning shift I would come back to my domicile and our French civilian chef would have cheese omelet's waiting for us. I think most of the weight that I put on in the Army; I think I put on during this period.

How long were you assigned to the MP's in Paris?

Mr. Straith: I was only there for about five weeks as I recall. I came in off of a night shift one night and on the bulletin board was a notice: the following list of men will depart such and such a date and so on. They were shipping some of them home and I was about eight men under and I was one of them. My Sergeant said, "Too bad Don, you were up for promotion to Corporal next week." So I never got beyond Private First Class. But we shipped out from there and headed home. I went home on a victory ship which was sailing through a North Atlantic gale all the way. The waves would crash completely over the front of the ship. We would stand on the gun platform of the bow and if you were in the center you would stay dry. But if you were in the curve at all you got soaked each time we nosed through one of these waves. We would come up over the crest of one, head down and you would think, "This time we are not coming up, this time we are going all the way down." But we always came up. It was something to amuse ourselves. There wasn't too much else.

No. Where did you go to muster out?

Mr. Straith: We shipped to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. Once we got there it was quick. We were there maybe three days and got on a train home.

Very good.

Mr. Straith: ...After retrieving my ill-gotten souvenirs from underneath the barracks after I got my discharge because they took us down to a building where they had long tables laid out and we had to empty our duffle bag onto the table. They would paw through it and say what you could take and would take something else out and throw it in a pile. Of course anything that you weren't supposed to have you would have lost while you were there. So I had the night before taken it and stuck it under the barracks and it was still there when I got back. So I managed to get my five pistols home.

Lugers, Walters?

Mr. Straith: Unfortunately no Lugers and no Walters; my Army 45 and four pistols that I picked up along the way that I bartered my cigarettes for and things like that.

So you didn't smoke?

Mr. Straith: I was a non-smoker. I either traded my cigarettes to other guys for their candy bars or traded them ____ for guns.

Being a non-smoker in those was rather a novelty in itself wasn't it? Just about everybody smoked.

Mr. Straith: Just about everybody; but I never liked it and never have and still don't. Of course now I have a little bit of a lung problem so I stay away from it as much as I can.

That's from everybody smoking around you.

Mr. Straith: Right.

Well again I thank you for your recollections. It has been most enjoyable and educational and will be of value to our project. Thank you so much for your time.

Mr. Straith: Thank you and it has been a pleasure for me to sit here and discuss it with you.

I really appreciate it.