

The first thing I wanted to talk about was to get some background information; your name where you are from, what branch of the service and what unit you served in and where at. Give me your name, rank, unit, your story of where you are from and when you were inducted into the Army.

Mr. Mathis: I was born right over here at Bumpus Mill, one mile out of town. I got drafted there in 1943. I guess it was. I came from a very poor family. My mother was _____. I would go along with her every morning and build a fire up under that old black big pot. You probably don't know what I am talking about but it had a great big pot then. There weren't any washing machines or dryers. There wasn't any electricity back then. I had six sisters in front of me and a brother. We were just the poorest family in town. There wasn't any of this giving away stuff back then. You had to raise a garden and raise what you eat.

Was that when they had the Victory gardens or was that something you had beforehand anyway?

Mr. Mathis: Well that is just about what everybody done mostly. There were a few people there that had money that they could buy at the stores. We had chickens and you sold your eggs for coffee and sugar. That was the big shortage with us. We lived a real happy family. Everybody played their part. They had a little something to do every day. Finally I got up to be a teenager in school and we still had the same problem. Then they had a nickel pad there and a lot of times I would run short on paper. I had one little girl in there and we were kind of sweet and she would loan me a tablet. But anyway we jumped from there to up on the 1940's.

You went to school in Bumpus Mills?

Mr. Mathis: Yes.

During the 40's Fort Campbell had started up. Did you have any contact with soldiers out there when you were younger?

Mr. Mathis: I was still going to school. I had a two-year high school. I own the building now. I bought it. When the school was out there it was 1941 I believe and they started building Fort Campbell. Everybody wanted a job up there. I had been working for this farmer for 50 something days. You were lucky to get that back then. An adult got 75 cents and I didn't like that much. Anyway that was the system. Finally Fort Campbell started taking the land and all that so people started moving. At the end of school, my principal, I had a two-year high school, took teachers and they were going to Fort Campbell to get a job to work. I wasn't quite 18 then. So this one guy, he was the principal of the school there, he knows my families problems and all. He said, "Aren't you going?" I said, "No, I am not old enough." He came around later and he said, "Can't we raise your age?" I believe they were paying \$1.32 contracting, building old barracks. But you had to have \$6.50 to join the union. He said, "Can you dig up \$6.50, you can just ride with us." I went home and told my mother. I don't know where she got it but she dug up \$6.50.

You did that for how long before you went into the Army?

Mr. Mathis: That was when they were building Camp 41.

About two years approximately?

Mr. Mathis: Yes.

That was a good paying job after the depression and then you go into building Campbell....

Mr. Mathis: Oh yeah, it wasn't nothing before that. I will tell you about what that man done. He was a very intelligent man. Buford Thomas, he came from over here at Cumberland City. I got with him and went up there. He bought me a cap with a bib on it to make me look a little older. When I got up there at the union office, he was there. He stood back and when it came my turn up he put a little stool out there that was about a foot high so I could stand taller.

How long did it take to get Fort Campbell built up to where troops started coming there. It went up pretty quick.

Mr. Mathis: Oh yeah that one summer there; they had different contracts all over the place.

About how long did it take to build one of those barrack per crew?

Mr. Mathis: To get it complete, I don't know. But not long.

I stayed in one of them for a month and a half one time on Fort Campbell.

Mr. Mathis: I packed most of them rafters that went over the top.

I remember they used to tell us it would burn down in 30 seconds because they were so old and it was made of wood. So it was actually pretty busy and there were crews everywhere when they were building Fort Campbell? How many blocks did they put up? Was everything going on simultaneously or was there a system to the way they were building everything?

Mr. Mathis: Like I said, this contractor had this section; it went up fast. It didn't take long. Your first soldiers up there were all black where gate 2 is at now. They came in there first. They were still building on buildings but they got that section built first and they had a black outfit there; all the draftees coming in for their training. I don't think they came from no place else. I think that was their first stop.

While you were on Fort Campbell and soldiers started coming in, were you planning on joining the Army or were you just waiting to be drafted?

Mr. Mathis: Oh no. I was just 17 then and didn't have any idea. After that job, I want to say that they had a lot of those barracks done in 18 months. I believe I was just in the first year of high school at that time. I had to go another year down there to get a two year certificate. I went there and I don't believe it was the 12th that moved down there. We were all going to school and we had to run down to the old bank down there at 120 now. We would watch them go by and them tanks were something. We would run down there and the teacher and all would let the kids see them. I wound up riding on top of them in Europe.

Did you think that that was what you would have liked to do when you would go and watch the convoys go by?

Mr. Mathis: I did kind of like the tanks, but I never dreamt.

You weren't itching to get over there like some of the people in 1941 when everybody was itching after Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Mathis: No, as I you know I didn't really realize what was going on as far as war was concerned. I left there; I got out when I graduated and I went and I had a sister that lived out in Dayton, Ohio. I went out there and got me a job at Kroger. I was 17 then. I went downtown and registered and they stuck me two questionnaires out the window. I filled them out and in 10 days.

That was your registration for Selective Service?

Mr. Mathis: Yes. That was the draft. I filled them out and took them back and in ten days I got a call, so I went down there and had a transfer back here to Dover.

They let you do that?

Mr. Mathis: Yeah, you could transfer.

So you sort of selected who you wanted to go to training with?

Mr. Mathis: Yes, with somebody I know. I didn't know anybody out there at all in Ohio. I came back here and the next month there was 48 of us that got on a bus.

Can I go back a little bit to just before you were drafted just maybe about politics? What did people your age and the people around Fort Campbell, Bumpus Mills, and Stewart County; were they favorable to President Roosevelt? When they looked at him were they behind the war? Surely people were not exactly happy to be at war but were they pretty much behind war?

Mr. Mathis: You didn't have anybody saying anything about Roosevelt. You didn't have any demonstrators; but of course you had a few guys that didn't want to go at all.

But it was a good war in a way.

Mr. Mathis: It had to be. All of them guys had big farms; they could get off and deferred. If you was married and had kids, you didn't go right then. They were just picking guys that signed up for it. There were a few married but without kids.

Most of the 48 people that you were on the bus with you knew and they were pretty much just like you?

Mr. Mathis: There was a few of them married; maybe they had one baby. We got on a bus, 48 of us I would say. Somehow they selected me for the meal ticket getting down at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Why? I don't know. We got to Paris and everybody done packed up on beer. They got over to Paris then you know and Whiskey and they didn't have any. But they had a lot of rum. Everybody went in there

that had money and got them a bottle of rum. We got out to Mississippi and I had lost the meal tickets. But somebody found them and we got squared away. We stayed there in Mississippi for a week or so.

Is that where you got your shots and where you swore in and all of that?

Mr. Mathis: Yes. They distributed us out there to wherever we were going to take basic.

Did you lose anybody at that point? Was there anybody that wasn't fit for service?

Mr. Mathis: There were several in there that couldn't read and write. That wasn't any excuse. They kept them back for a little schooling. They didn't go with the rest of us. Most of that 48, I would say maybe 25 of them wound up down there at Camp Blanning, Florida.

I know it. Where did you end up going then? You ended up in Camp Blanning?

Mr. Mathis: Yes.

That was a basic training post?

Mr. Mathis: Yes.

What kind of training did you go through at Camp Blanning?

Mr. Mathis: Just everything in basic.

Basic combat training?

Mr. Mathis: Yes.

Did you go to your advanced individual training or your MOS; whatever your skill was. I don't know how they referred to it.

Mr. Mathis: It was just that after you got out of basic training, you went home for six to eight weeks. You went home for 21 days or something. I went to Camp Shanks, New York, and shipped out for overseas.

When you went to training, was the group that you started training with, did you stay with that group through training or even went to war with that unit or did they keep mixing you up.

Mr. Mathis: Oh no. I think it was just three of my close buddies that stayed with me for awhile. The rest of them were just scattered wherever they needed them. I don't know how they really done it but wherever they were needed the most.

While you were in training, I know that there were these really large exercises in middle Tennessee; did your unit take part in any of those exercises that occurred in Tennessee? Around Lebanon I know that there was a big exercise.

Mr. Mathis: What kind of exercise are you talking about?

Just a large scale exercise. I think it was rehearsals for fighting in France. What was your unit preparation? What were your preparations to go into Europe while you were in the United States? Did you rehearse?

Mr. Mathis: We just done all of this exercising, climbing the wall and everything you done in basic training. As for training for Europe, I don't know whether they were, evidently they were.

When did you join up with the 12th Armored Division?

Mr. Mathis: I went to Shanks and me and these two buddies had hung together there through all of this. We went up to Camp Shanks and they had a rumor going around there that all guys with kids... there was one friend I had that had one kid and he said he wasn't going. He came around and he said, "Well I think I am going to take on to send me back. I hate to leave you'll!" During this period though, they sunk that ship over there and all of them five brothers, Sullivan brothers', drowned. They wouldn't send any 18-year-old over. They made a ruling of no 18 year-olds. I went back up there and told them. I was on the line to get on the ship. I said, "Well that _____, he is dead now." His face got long. I told my shooter, "Well you are going to go over there and clean them out."

Where did your unit board the ship?

Mr. Mathis: He got on a boat there. They sent me back down the McAfee, Texas.

To get up past 18?

Mr. Mathis: Yes. I was inducted in basic training. I was just waiting to get 18.

Where did you part the United States from when you did depart?

Mr. Mathis: They sent me back to Shanks.

Is that where everybody went?

Mr. Mathis: No, that is where I joined the 12th. The 12th originated there in Campbell, but they moved down to Texas. When I got out of Maxey, that is right out of Paris, Texas, right on the Oklahoma border there. Camp Maxey has been gone I think for years.

Camp Bullis?

Mr. Mathis: No. That is when I joined the 12th. We got a big museum. You can read about that in here.

What did you do when you joined the 12th?

Mr. Mathis: When I went in, they had in the 12th, they had so many tanks for a division and they had armored infantry.

So you were a rifleman?

Mr. Mathis: Yes. We fired tanks and half-tracks. Every tank had a half-track.

But there was no difference in a regular infantryman and an armored infantryman; it was the same training?

Mr. Mathis: Well yeah, they just did it a little different. It was just armored infantry but we just went with the tanks. A half-track followed each tank. They would go right on up until we got fired on so we got out of the half-track out on top of the tank. Then you rode right on up until you got fired on and then you slid off of the back and got behind the tank. They went right over the foxhole line. Of course over there that was in 1944 and that ground was frozen so hard that you couldn't dig a hole. So you had to roost them out of there.

What I would like to do, since we are there, let's talk about your first combat action; the first time you got into a firefight or a shelling or whatever. What happened that first night?

Mr. Mathis: I forget ____.

We will move ahead a little bit. Let's talk about what it was like that first contact, what happened and the circumstances.

Mr. Mathis: Let me tell you this, when we got on the ship at the entrance of Australia, it was an old ship, World War I. I almost died from being seasick. I hadn't eaten anything and we were on that thing for 19 days and I didn't eat anything. My buddy came down and we didn't have any bunks so he slept in a _____. There were about 5,000 people on that ship that made it to land. But we were down in that bottom hole and that wasn't good. Everybody in the room was vomiting but I was just about gone. I don't think I could have lasted much longer on that ship. We got over there and we were supposed to land in France. The subs got in a convoy and the ship I was on landed in England and we got off. We were over there in England at a little town. We didn't have our rations or nothing. The 8th Air Force was there right close so we ate out of their mess hall. Then we moved on over to LeHavre. Of course they done made the beach yet.

About what time after the invasion was that? How long after the invasion?

Mr. Mathis: We struck a compound over at Saint-Lo.

So that was just after the invasion then, not long after D-Day?

Mr. Mathis: That was something else.

When you were on your way over, did you have any reports on how the tanks being an armored unit, how well the tanks were doing in France against the German tanks? At that point was there any nervousness? Did you have any reservations or were you just ready to get over there and get into the fight?

Mr. Mathis: Our tanks weren't with us. Our tanks were over in France and we were over in England. We caught up with them along about Saint-Lo, France. The first town I noticed was Bitche, France, and it was.

Your first action was at Bitche, France, or was this Saint-Lo?

Mr. Mathis: They had already gone through there; this Bitche was just a small town. But they were still picking up, from both sides, bodies. We went on to; I don't know what the name of the next town was. But it wasn't far out of Bitche. I was telling a boy about that. He was going over there with the civil service. He sent me back a picture. He had his picture made with his arm up on the thing over Bitche and said that that is where they sent him. He was just working after the war. You didn't have too much time to do much thinking. I never did just really get scared of fighting or worrying about dying. I got a whole lot of ___ for that museum up there. I could help you out a whole lot on that 12th Armored.

Now that first fight though, can we go back to that? That first fight was it a battalion, a brigade, or was that the division moving?

Mr. Mathis: Well really I didn't know how many was moving up. I would say it was brigade.

It was fairly large and you were on the attack?

Mr. Mathis: Yeah. We was riding on the half-track like I told you and somehow the driver ran over something and knocked one of the tracks off. Everybody got scared. They couldn't get the thing moving. As long as you could move it you didn't give it much thought.

Were you under fire when the track was..?

Mr. Mathis: Yeah.

Artillery or small arms?

Mr. Mathis: Small arms mostly.

What was the countryside like? Was it hedgerow, fields, or were you just sitting out in the open or on farmland?

Mr. Mathis: Well actually you hung around that tank and when they started shelling, you got underneath. It was so cold. I don't see how they hardly stood that. They didn't have anything but the Army boots. My feet still tingle now. They almost froze. Finally they came up there with an old moccasin. I brought mine home. If it hadn't been for them, my feet would have been goners.

Were you there in France, in Belgium, during the Bulge or was 12th armored part of the Bulge?

Mr. Mathis: Once we hit Europe there in France, we went down to southern France; 7th Army. One day we loaded up and moved out, up to the 3rd Army.

Was that under General Patton?

Mr. Mathis: Yes.

Were you the relief column that went to Bastogne when 3rd Army went to relieve the 101st at Bastogne?
Were you in that column that moved up that way?

Mr. Mathis: No. I didn't make it across the Rheine. I got hit back in (I forget the name of the little town). They just estimated a few German outfits in there and it turned out to be a whole Army I guess.

Were you hit by artillery or small arms?

Mr. Mathis: Artillery.

Were there more casualties from artillery at that point or by small arms or about equal?

Mr. Mathis: I would say that artillery got most.

German artillery was a pretty intimidating experience.

Mr. Mathis: Yep.

Most people haven't been through an artillery barrage. There aren't a whole lot of people out there. What would you, if you could describe it, what would being in an artillery barrage be like?

Mr. Mathis: Like I told you the other day, with the publicity back here, between me and you all we had on our tanks was that little old 76. They had that 105 and you could hear it coming.

The German tanks shot the American tanks up pretty much? It seemed like the American tanks were usually outgunned and weren't as heavily armored.

Mr. Mathis: No they didn't have guns there that they did.

Did you witness a lot of our tanks being taken out by a lot of the German tanks?

Mr. Mathis: Oh yeah. There were two rivers that would come down, well they weren't rivers but we waited back through one of them. It wasn't deep but a tank couldn't go too deep for a tank to cross. They had a bridge what they called a water plant. They had a bridge there that would cross them. Five of our tanks got across that and they got them right off. They kept trying and they got more across. We stayed in there but that was one of the hottest battles I was in. They had known where that bridge was. At the end of the night, this great big building and it would hold just as many men as it could stand, shoulder to shoulder with more coming in. As artillery was coming in, it got so strong that somebody said, "Tighten up boy, if they get a dead hit on this, they will get a bunch of people."

You can dig pretty fast when you are being shelled.

Mr. Mathis: Yeah but in this place there wasn't anybody that could hardly move.

So you just got down and hovered the ground?

Mr. Mathis: Yeah. We were in this water plant but you had cover over your head. They knew where we were at and they zeroed in on it.

They probably had a target reference point. So is this where you were wounded at, at the water plant?

Mr. Mathis: Yes.

Did the evacuation take long or was it pretty quick? Did they move you back?

Mr. Mathis: Afterwards; I just had a cut on my back shoulder and my left arm. The snow was deep and I finally got in that water plant. It was the next day, we got out of that. We were moving out and they started shelling again. It's in one of them books there. I could give you a whole lot of good information on the 12th. I didn't go all the way with them. They ended up all the way over in Austria.

Was that the end of the war for you?

Mr. Mathis: Yes.

Did you come back to the United States eventually or did you go to England and stay there for awhile and they moved you back that way?

Mr. Mathis: The war was almost over then. We were up there almost to Russia. Then they came back and I don't know exactly where; nobody knew where he was at half the time or his location.

Did you receive any mail from home? When you were on the front, did you get mail frequently?

Mr. Mathis: Not too much; didn't get it too regularly.

Were you able to write much? Did you find time to write?

Mr. Mathis: Yeah, but you know you couldn't hardly keep up with your writing material paper.

Did you keep a journal or anything like that or did your parents keep your letters that you wrote?

Mr. Mathis: Oh yeah, I got some there at home now.

Do you still read them?

Mr. Mathis: Yes. Somebody found one of them the other day. It didn't cost you anything. You would just write free up there.

You still do that.

Mr. Mathis: That was one of my old World War II free letters.

You are back in the United States and you were wounded and you are healing. Did you heal up before you were discharged? Being a draftee you were discharged pretty fast.

Mr. Mathis: No, I got healed up good. Finally the doctor, of course that was in 1945. He said, "You about ready to go home?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well I am going to turn you loose." I went up to Percy Jones in Michigan there and I can't remember the name of that hospital. That is where I got discharged from.

What did you do after the war? Did you come home and go back...?

Mr. Mathis: I came back and got on those farms on an old farm over there. I tried that for a couple of years.

One of the common themes is that most people would come back from the war and might have piddled a little bit for a couple of years. But most people that came back from World War II usually got their lives together. Would you say that that is the way it was for you?

Mr. Mathis: I don't know whether that would be my case or not. I messed around and raised a couple of acres of tobacco and messed around, more-or-less to get my money. I carried it off to market and it didn't break.

So you ended up farming?

Mr. Mathis: I quit.

You weren't married before the war but when you came home did you marry the girl that gave you the paper?

Mr. Mathis: No, I messed around there and waited a few years. But anyway, my poor old mother she had worked so hard all those years. She would go back to sales. She would come back and say she was rejected until the next day. I had a younger brother and we had come on home. All of those guys that were going to Detroit City was coming back and shaking all that change and driving a big car. So I said to them, "Where is that money tree out there in Detroit?" He's dead now. He looked up and said, "If you are waiting on me, you are losing time."

We are about to conclude the interview for today. Before we lock it up I just wanted to ask you, as far as casualties for your unit, you said it was a pretty heavy casualty rate, did you have a lot of wounded and friends that you lost?

Mr. Mathis: Yeah I had lost a lot.

A lot of combat?

Mr. Mathis: Yes.

Do you consider yourself luck just to have made it through?

Mr. Mathis: I was lucky. I know there was a man up there. A lot of people have a lack of religion. But me when they start talking like that, I moved.

Everybody is a Christian on the battlefield.

(End of Tape)