

Tell us where you were born and where you were born please.

Mr. Reece: Jim Reece and I was born in York County South Carolina on September 23, 1919.

You served in the Army, right sir?

Mr. Reece: That's right.

Can you state your parent's names and their occupations as well?

Mr. Reece: I.P. Reece and Susan E. McCarter Reece. My mother was a housewife and my dad worked in a textile plant.

Did you have brothers and sisters that also served in the military?

Mr. Reece: There were 10 children, six boys and four girls.

Did any of them serve in the military as well?

Mr. Reece: Several of them did, yes.

Do you have any recollections of the Great Depression growing up as a child?

Mr. Reece: Some but we survived it by us all just pitching in and doing what had to be done.

Did it affect your family too bad?

Mr. Reece: There were 10 children and like I say it was a depression and there is no question about that, but we never went hungry.

Were you old enough to have a job before you entered the service?

Mr. Reece: Yes I worked in textile design there in the hometown of Kramerton, North Carolina, which is a small town but it was about 3,000 population. The two plants worked about 2,000 people. They came from miles around to work there.

Before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, how seriously did you take the threat to America by a foreign nation?

Mr. Reece: I was already in the service before Pearl Harbor. I had already been drafted. If I had been three weeks younger I wouldn't have had to register for the draft but not only that I was in the first group that left. When they attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, I was home on weekend leave at that time. Some little boy came up to me and told me that is the first I heard about it, said, "Soldier, the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor. What are you going to do about it?" That is the first I heard about that.

What was your reaction to that when they attacked Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Reece: I took things pretty calmly. I knew that we had a job to do and we set about doing it. That was true all the way through. Some people think it is a little bit harsh but you are trained to kill the soldier before they kill you or kill your family. It was pretty straight away.

When did you realize that you would be drafted sir?

Mr. Reece: It was probably, I don't recall exactly, maybe six months before.....

Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Reece: No, I was drafted February of the year that they bombed Pearl Harbor.

February 1941.

Mr. Reece: Yes.

You were artillery in the Army?

Mr. Reece: My basic training was in the artillery and I stayed in artillery all the time.

Is that what you wanted to do before you came into the military? Did you have any preference?

Mr. Reece: I didn't have any preference. I was going to go wherever they sent me.

Did you go to an induction center when you got drafted?

Mr. Reece: I went through an induction center and right on to what we call back then a pack artillery outfit where you broke an artillery piece down and put it on so many mules and hauled it around. It was pretty basic you know. That is the way it was.

You said you went to basic training at Fort Bragg?

Mr. Reece: Fort Bragg, North Carolina, yes.

How long were you there?

Mr. Reece: I was in basic training in.... I went to artillery OCS, Officer Candidate School, probably the next spring. It seems to me like I was in OCS 16 and graduated at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

What was your impression of your fellow recruits going through basic training?

Mr. Reece: They were just like me, they were from everywhere. Some of them were from highly electoral people and some of them weren't. Some of them had strange backgrounds to

mine but it never occurred to me to do anything except to think of them in terms of individual soldiers.

How did you get selected for OCS? Did you just apply or did they just pick you sir? How did that work?

Mr. Reece: Back then, of course they had your IQ test to go by, they had a lot of records and they just selected certain people. If those people applied then they went before a board and they made the decision about who they thought had the qualifications to pass the OCS program. It was about three months. They called us 90 day wonders back then. We would go to Fort Sill and go through the classes out there and then we were commissioned at the end of that.

Did you participate in any maneuvers stateside sir?

Mr. Reece: Oh yes. The main ones I participated in were the Tennessee maneuvers. I was from North Carolina, but the main maneuvers that I participated in before we went overseas were the Tennessee maneuvers. That was basically in the Lebanon/Murfreesboro area outside of Nashville.

Did you feel those maneuvers; did they train you and prepare you and your soldiers well for combat?

Mr. Reece: It was realistic, yes. They did a good job.

You said you got your commission in 1942?

Mr. Reece: I believe that is right.

You did maneuvers stateside before you went overseas, correct?

Mr. Reece: Oh yes. I was at a number of places. I went back to Bragg and then I went to Columbia, South Carolina. All that happened before I went overseas.

Those are all artillery units you went to right?

Mr. Reece: They were artillery units. Sometimes I worked at the battery lever while I was in training and then I went up to brigade staff awhile and what they call division artillery for awhile. It was good training.

Did you enjoy the artillery branch?

Mr. Reece: That was a real love for me because I love mathematics that gave me a lot of use. For instance, in our battery in the war we had an 8-inch Howitzer, so it was easier for me to memorize a lot of the artillery for that 8-inch Howitzer without having to look it up. It was just a fun thing. That was the best piece of artillery that the Army had at that time once we got overseas.

Did you travel overseas in troop ships?

Mr. Reece: Oh yes. I think we went over on the Queen Elizabeth but there was one strange thing that happened, there was a law at that time that said you couldn't take draftees, this was before I went to artillery school, out of the United States and there we were. We were sitting out there on a ship. I could lay on my bunk on the ship and I could touch eight people without moving. It was really, really crowded. That was before I went to artillery school.

What port did you leave from? What state?

Mr. Reece: We went out of New York, out of Brooklyn.

Where did you arrive in Europe?

Mr. Reece: In Glasgow, Scotland. We were stationed there in England for a good while.

How long was that voyage approximately, do you remember?

Mr. Reece: Oh I would say probably 20 days or something like that. Time enough for a lot of rumors to float around.

Do you remember how many people were on that ship?

Mr. Reece: I think it would carry about 20,000 troops if I recall, but see our battalion was only something about like 500.

How were the living conditions? I know you said you were kind of tight.

Mr. Reece: Well, the one I was talking about was the USS Hunter_____ which was a totally different ship. The Queen Elizabeth was a big luxury liner. It wasn't nearly as crowded as it was on the troop ship, the small troop ship. It was not all that uncomfortable but it was tight.

Did you guys have an escort, a Navy escort?

Mr. Reece: Oh yeah, we had a lot of ships along with us.

You had to zigzag for the submarines?

Mr. Reece: We had a lot of rumors about the Germans had just developed a submarine that could go twice as fast as anything that we had. Things like that were going on all the time.

You said you arrived in Glasgow, Scotland, right?

Mr. Reece: Right.

When you got there you stayed there for what, you said a month or so or a couple of days?

Mr. Reece: No, we just got off the ship and moved on down to into England. In fact we weren't too far from Stratford-o-avan where Shakespeare had the place. We were, as I recall, maybe 40 or 50 miles from there.

In England were you guys basically just training while you were there; training before you went into combat?

Mr. Reece: I was a Captain by that time. We had unit training and it was more to keep the troops occupied than it was to do additional training because all of us had pretty substantial basic training and even some advanced training while we were still in the states.

How would you classify your fellow officers and NCOs in your unit?

Mr. Reece: We had extremely good officers and NCOs too.

Very competent?

Mr. Reece: Very competent, yes.

You mentioned already Howitzers. What other kinds of equipment did you guys train with and weapons?

Mr. Reece: We had a smaller unit. The 8-inch Howitzer is the one that I trained with in the states before we went over so when I went over there I went back, they wanted me to come back and go into combat with my battalion that I had served with here in the United States. I went from General Patton's headquarters back to a Corp headquarters and Corp headquarters the battalion asked that I be sent back to them. I went into combat with the battalion that I trained with here in the United States.

Did all the weapons function pretty well?

Mr. Reece: Oh yeah. We certainly didn't have the sophistication that you have now but the 8-inch Howitzer that we spent most of our time with, it would shoot 10 ½ miles and have a probable error of maybe 20 yards or something like that. It was fantastic. The shell was 200 pounds. It was a highly accurate piece of artillery.

Where was your first experience in combat sir?

Mr. Reece: We went in on the beach there in France. I think it was Omaha Beach. But we did not go in on D-Day. We went in on something like D+23 or something like that. We saw a lot of havoc on the beach. By the time we got in there were still a lot of dead bodies laying around. You probably read something about the hedgerow fighting. It was pretty brutal.

When you went to Normandy where did you continue on to?

Mr. Reece: We continued on down to west of Paris and then we went through Paris and then up to the northeast up through there.

Where did you first engage contact at?

Mr. Reece: We didn't get a lot of people killed like you do in the infantry. In the artillery we went nine months and 21 days and we were a good range of the enemy fire for all except three days. It's easy enough to get killed.

What was your reaction to being in the combat environment?

Mr. Reece: You get dead into it. You are saying, "Hey this has to be done so I will probably get killed any day so let's get on with it."

Were there others that don't act as well as you do?

Mr. Reece: Oh pretty much so. We had some soldiers that would shoot themselves in the foot to keep from going up front and things like that. The motivation back then was to get the enemy before they got you. That's a pretty good motivation. One interesting thing about it at that time is you may have never heard of a positive fuse. It was one of the great advances. What is amazing to me is even when I talk to my children and grandchildren they don't even know what I am talking about. The positive fuse is a proximity fuse and it was developed while I was over there. Just to explain real quickly about it, the positive fuse you fire and it comes over. When it gets a certain distance from the ground, it explodes. It has a little radio in it that sends out a signal. What made that so effective is its much better to have an air burst if you really want to do some damage than it is to let it hit in the ground and shoot. I will always remember the General once we got it called me down to talk to him and he wanted to explain to me how effective that was if you just used it properly. The Air Force I think invented it. The Germans had, about that time the jet planes had started coming over and I had never seen a jet plane. They weren't ours they were the Germans. That was scary.

What is the furthest you had advanced with your unit, you said west of Paris?

Mr. Reece: We went through Paris and we went on up across the Rhine River going into Germany. The fighting had really stopped before we got all the way, part of the way in Germany it stopped, but we went a little bit further. We didn't go all the way into Berlin. You said you got attached to General Patton's staff?

Mr. Reece: No, that was back in England.

Were you part of an occupation force after the war?

Mr. Reece: No, because I had enough points to where when the fighting started I was eligible and I wanted to get back to school anyways. I had enough points to get back home.

Did you have much free time while you were there sir?

Mr. Reece: Originally so, yeah. We would have time off to go to the Riviera and take a little vacation down there. That is the most beautiful place in the world. The sky is a different color there than it is anywhere else. We had a little time off.

Did you write a lot of letters home?

Mr. Reece: Oh yeah. One interesting thing about it, there was a pocket of Germans that was still held up over on the west coast of France and they pulled us out of the front lines and put us back over there to clean out this pocket there when we were artillery there at that time. We would work with the infantry in clearing up those pockets of German soldiers.

Did you guys ever encounter POWs? Did you capture any POWs?

Mr. Reece: Not really. The infantry usually did that. I remember a soldier coming by me one time and I spoke to him and he spoke to me. Here came another American soldier right behind him and said, "Did you see so and so?" I said, "He went that way." He was the German dressed in a French soldier's uniform.

What was your impression of the enemy, the Germans in Europe especially? I know you haven't encountered them but did you respect the average soldier?

Mr. Reece: Well keep in mind that when you have an evil philosophy a lot of bad things happen. The German people are more like the American people than say the French are. We would go through France and we would blow up a hole in the road and six months later we would go back and that same hole would be there in the road. In Germany you blow a hole in the road and there would be some blonde headed boy out there the next day straightening it up. It's very obvious, the difference. They just had a higher sense of responsibility and higher motivation to do what had to be done.

You said you were promoted during your time over there sir? What's the highest you got promoted?

Mr. Reece: I got promoted to major while I was still in France.

Were you ever wounded over there in action?

Mr. Reece: The worst I was ever hurt I got scratched up diving into a foxhole, but I was not wounded, no.

Did you have any friends or fellow soldiers that were wounded or killed in your unit?

Mr. Reece: We had about nine killed out of our battalion. Heavy artillery is just not like being in the infantry. You can be shot at any time. I've had shells burst around me but I was never injured.

Did you ever have a sense of the big picture, the overall strategy of the outline in World War II or just not really?

Mr. Reece: Oh yeah. We kept up with it. We had a real good news organization over there that kept us posted. We knew pretty well what was going on, on all the fronts. In fact we would have a news reporter. I had one soldier who just had a photographic mind. He would bring it. He would just remember everything. We would have him give us the news report every day.

How did you feel when you heard of Roosevelt's death?

Mr. Reece: I took it pretty straightaway because I'm a conservative and Roosevelt was a Liberal. You can't overlook your basic philosophy about anyone. You don't want to see anyone die but Roosevelt was not a favorite President of mine. He wasn't a Ronald Reagan, I will tell you that.

You stayed there in Germany until 1945 then?

Mr. Reece: I came home in 1945 and I had about 82 days leave as I recall so I got out of the Army and went on to Engineering school. I had studied textile design ahead of time and when I went back I wanted to get into artillery so I went back to school when I got out which means I started in classes just right at the start of 1946.

Let's backtrack a little bit. How was it working with Patton?

Mr. Reece: He was a great General. I had a lot of respect for him. He was the roughest talking man I have ever been around. He just had his way about him. You go down the road and it would say speed limit 30 mph and you would go down another few hundred feet and it would say you have been warned. He just had a way about him of getting your attention. He was a fighter. He was rough talking. He had no love for the news media at all.

You said this was in England right? You worked with him in England?

Mr. Reece: I worked with him in England, yeah.

How long did you stay in England before you went down to France?

Mr. Reece: I was probably there maybe 80 or 90 days. What I did was I went up to Patton's staff and then went over to Wales to work to coordinate some work over there in Wales which was a training place.

How would you describe the overall ramifications of World War II; the consequences of World War II to the world?

Mr. Reece: At the time we thought it turned out great but we just slipped back into trying to be the good guys rather than the fair guys.

What do you think our future generations studying World War II should learn from it?

Mr. Reece: I think one of the news commentators wrote a book and said that that was probably the greatest generation, who was that?

That was Brokaw.

Mr. Reece: I think so too because in the battalion that I had commanded I had, I believe, 32 officers. Here a few years ago there were 18 of us left. We get together every two years. It's a great group of guys. It's great; highly qualified.

You said you got out after you came back to the states in 1945?

Mr. Reece: Yeah, I went back to school.

Did you appreciate the Army and what it had to offer?

Mr. Reece: Rich, I didn't grow up until I went into the service. I went in from a little town and I didn't realize what a tremendous high school education I got until I started being compared to people who had come from big schools. We had a real unusual town where teachers were paid more than they could make anything else. We had what's known as the Benevolent Dictator. Actually we had a man that owned that entire town but he did a lot of things for the people. In fact back then we could buy a quart of milk for a nickel. We rented a seven room house for 50 cents a room a week. Things were just different. Back then you could take 11 cents and buy as much as you can now for a dollar. It's just a different worth. People helped each other. It was good.

Is there anything else you would like to add that I may have missed about anything?

Mr. Reece: Someone always asks me how I would compare the Army back then to the Army today. Well, the technology is totally different today. Whether the soldiers today are as dependable as they were back then, you know, I would have some question about that. That is not for me to say. I don't know how you would compare them except looking at them as individuals and we are still individuals. That gets overlooked.

Thanks again for your help today.

Mr. Reece: Glad to do it.

(End of Interview)