Interviewee:	**Douglass, Billy A., Sr.**
Interviewer:	**Kevin McCranie**
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McCranie: Are you aware that we are recording this conversation?

Douglass: Yes, I am.

McCranie: And do we have your permission to do this?

Douglass: Yes, you do.

McCranie: You said you had a statement to make – would you like to go ahead with that?

Douglass: Yes, if you don't mind. Last summer, visiting with my son-in-law, our talks turned to our war experiences. He is a forgotten Korean War vet and I a World War II survivor. During our conversation, his eight-year-old daughter joined in and asked, "Grandpa, what did you do in the war?" I passed off her comment about doing a lot of traveling and that seemed to satisfy her, but it started me to do a lot of thinking also. So I asked my seventeen-year-old grandson if they taught anything of the war in high school. I was quite surprised – he was in doubt as to who the enemies had been. This past fall the fiasco with the Florida balloting situation, the longer it progressed, the more frustrated I became. Finally in a fit of despair, I wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper, and it was a pretty facetious letter berating the balloting situation, the dimples and the shards and so on, but in part I said that I had served with

General Patton through Europe in World War II and was wondering if our efforts had been in vain. So it was pretty bitter. As a result, to my surprise it got published, and the same day I received a call from a member of the local Elks lodge asking if I'd be interested in being a guest speaker at their next luncheon. Well, it just so happened that luncheon fell on the sixtieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor, and I spoke for about a half hour. As I spoke, memories that had lain dormant in my memory bank for over sixty years came flooding back. I received a very gratifying standing ovation and a gentleman at the head table said, "Sir, that's the first standing ovation a guest speaker has ever received at this lodge that I'm aware of." So as I was leaving, several of the members of the lodge stopped me and asked questions and I ended up staying there for nearly an hour. As it turned out, most of them had been just small children or some hadn't even been born. It was a very gratifying experience. Now as the media keeps reminding us, the World War II vets are passing away at a rate of over about 1,000 a day, and soon we'll be a forgotten generation. The only permanent reminder of World War II that I'm familiar with is the National D-Day Museum created by Dr. Stephen Ambrose in New Orleans. I have in my mind that I may try to put all this on paper some day, and if it's discovered years later, maybe remind the reader why this great country of ours is not speaking German or Japanese. And that's where I'm at right now.

McCranie: [comments on the purpose of the oral history program not transcribed] Could you tell me a little bit about when and where you were born?

Douglass: I was born in a small farm house in northern Illinois near a little town called Hillsdale, which was about 150 people. In those days ... I'm seventy-seven years old ... in those days our doctor, who was in another town, a neighboring town of Geneseo, which was about twenty miles away, and he traveled by horse and buggy. So I was born without the assistance of any professional help of any kind. I went to a small one-room grade school. I can't recall how one teacher managed to handle eight grades and all the subjects that we took. I can't feature how she did it. Anyway, I managed to get through grade school, entered a community high school at

Hillsdale, Illinois. There were twelve kids in my class – my freshman class – eight girls and four boys. I think the maximum enrollment at any one time was about seventy, and the twelve of us went through four years intact. After high school I started driving a truck and of course registered for the draft, and then was eventually drafted into the service.

McCranie: And what year were you born, sir?

Douglass: 1924. April 12, 1924.

McCranie: Did you enter the service before or after Pearl Harbor?

Douglass: After.

McCranie: Can you tell me where you were when you heard about the attack?

Douglass: I was in school – in high school. In fact, that's the year I graduated.

McCranie: What was your reaction to the attack?

Douglass: Quite surprised. Very surprised. And wanting to join the service that day.

McCranie: What stopped you from joining the service that day?

Douglass: I really can't recall. I don't know what the situation was except possibly I didn't have any transportation to get to where it was available.

McCranie: Had you been keeping up with world events prior to the attack?

Douglass: To the best of my memory, I'd say yes.

McCranie: So you knew that the Germans and the Japanese had been acting up a little bit.

Douglass: Oh, yes.

McCranie: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Douglass: I had two sisters younger than I – one, one year younger and one, two years younger.

McCranie: What year were you finally drafted?

Douglass: In May of 1943.

McCranie: So you were basically a civilian for the first year and a half of the war.

Douglass: Right.

McCranie: Did you notice life changing? What you could get at the store or anything like that before you entered the service?

Douglass: I cannot recall anything such as gas rationing or grocery rationing or anything of that effect. I know it was in existence, but I can't recall it for some reason.

McCranie: You were drafted in May of '43. What was your family's reaction to that, your going off to serve?

Douglass: There's another little story with that, if you don't mind. I'd just made nineteen, I was driving a truck in and around northern Illinois, hauling war-related materials, most of them of an urgent nature. I stopped by home one day and my mother had just received a postcard from the Selective Service board. On the card it informed her that they had received word that I had enlisted and they wanted to know what branch of the service and when. So the draft board was in a neighboring town and I borrowed Dad's car and went over there immediately. As I entered, it was a group of seniors and they were an unsmiling lot. When I introduced myself and told them why I was there, I soon gained the impression I was public enemy number one. They were very unsmiling and not very nice. I was directed on to a small office in the back of the board building and read the riot act again by a gentleman back there who provided me with a government issued bus ticket and told me to be on a bus that night to the induction center. Needless to say, I was on the bus that night. That was May 16. The next morning, May 17, I was at the Camp Grant induction center near Rockford, Illinois, and I was in the Army.

McCranie: Why were they so unsmiling to when you first walked in the door? Any idea?

Douglass: I don't know unless they thought I'd been trying to pull something to evade the draft. I don't know where they got the information from that I'd enlisted; that was a puzzle. I never did find out.

McCranie: Did you have time to go back home before you caught the bus?

Douglass: Yeah, I went back home from the draft board, packed a small bag, and my dad took me to the quad cities about twenty miles from the little town they lived in. And that's where I caught the bus to the induction center.

McCranie: That didn't give you much time to say goodbye, did it?

Douglass: It sure didn't. They were making up for lost time on my part.

McCranie: You leave a girlfriend behind?

Douglass: Not really.

McCranie: You said you were driving a truck prior to your enlistment. What type of war-related materials were you carrying and where were you taking these things?

Douglass: Most of it I wasn't aware of. It was generally put in the trailer and sealed. And in those days a semi-trailer, if it was eighteen to twenty foot long, was a monstrous thing. It's nothing like these forty-five and fifty footers they pull nowadays.

McCranie: And where were you carrying the stuff back and forth between?

Douglass: Normally out of the Chicago area to the quad cities – Moline, Rock Island, Davenport, Iowa.

McCranie: What was your first taste of military life once you arrived after your bus ride?

Douglass: At the induction center? That next morning when I was sworn in, they issued us our military clothing, our dogtags. We took a battery of tests to determine what your qualifications would be, but spent most of the day taking physicals. Having been born with amblyopia (that's a non-functioning right eye), I became a reason for serious discussion among some doctors, and they finally determined that I would be acceptable for limited service. All of my papers and my service record were stamped in big large red letters: LIMITED SERVICE.

McCranie: And what does "limited service" entitle you to?

Douglass: I never really did understand. We were there for about a week and we were ... we were kind of a rag-tag bunch of kids that didn't have any idea of what was going on. We were put to work scrubbing barracks. Of course we had our heads shaved. We played soldier. Then finally after a week we were placed on military buses and transported to Camp Ellis, Illinois, down about the mid-part of the state, for basic training. This camp was out in the middle of nowhere, a gigantic place. Hundreds of barracks. I recall all of them having big brick chimneys on the end. Our buses were stopped at the main gate and armed guards came on and looked us over, made a few snide remarks, and then upon leaving the gate we were pretty certain we were in the Army.

McCranie: What did they make you do first thing, once you got to that camp?

Douglass: Okay, we got in kind of late in the evening and were assigned to a barracks. At some time during that night they posted a list on the bulletin board with our assignments and we were assigned to ten-man squads of four squads making up a platoon. Our training company consisted of four platoons. Also at that time they introduced us to our training cadre of non-commissioned officers. The following morning we fell out for reveille, and following breakfast they marched us to a Quartermaster supply building. At that time they issued us our helmets, our packs, ammunition belts, mess gear, canteen, first aid kit, bayonets, and leggings. I don't know if you're familiar with that. We wore kind of a leather tied-up canvas legging over our pant legs. We were issued our rifle, a 30-caliber Garand M-1, and our new platoon sergeant, who was part of the training cadre, informed us that the rifle would be forever known as our "piece" and we were told to memorize the serial number of it immediately. And that started our six weeks of basic training.

McCranie: What did you think of your NCOs there?

Douglass: They were strictly business. I don't know if you watch some of these Jerry

Springer shows or something where these boot camp guys come in and berate young bad kids? They weren't nothing like that. They were fair, but they were very firm. They operated on the basis of firm, fair, and friendly.

McCranie: Did they keep you in line?

Douglass: You bet. Definitely

McCranie: Any surprises during your first few days in basic training?

Douglass: Not really. We of course learned the basics of close order drill and marching and they put us through the obstacle courses where they had a 30-gun machine gun firing right over you. We did endurance marches with full field packs and always doing constant, close-order drill. Had to go on the firing range to qualify as a rifleman. And as I said previously, I had amblyopia in my right eye so I'd always fired a rifle or shotgun left-handed. When it became my turn to be order up to the firing line, I placed the "piece," my rifle (which was called a piece from then on) in my left hand, and that was when I received my first royal military chewing out. The range director came up and said, "What are you doing with that piece in your left hand? Get it over in your right hand." I started to give him my excuse and then I found out very soon that there were no excuses in the military. So I qualified with the M-1 in my right hand, looking over the stock of the gun, aiming with my left eye. The M-1 packs a real wallop, and for the next few days I had a very sore jaw. During this training we were all trained in at least three different jobs. Inquiries resulted in the information that you may not be there to do your job and someone else may have to fall in and take over for you.

McCranie: What type of jobs did they train you for?

Douglass: I was trained for ... I was sent off for six weeks to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin,

because I was the only man in that unit who had taken typing in high school. I was sent off to clerical school for three weeks and then come back to my unit. I was a truck driver, so I became a truck driver in the service, a bulldozer operator, and they threw other job at me and that was in the electrical field. I remember in an open field they had about twenty old telephone poles planted, and we learned to climb poles and do wiring and so on. Those old poles had been climbed so many times with the spurs (and the military used tree spurs for climbing, which were about two inch long as opposed to linemen nowadays, they wear little short spurs), and those old poles were nothing but creosote slivers. And if your spur happened to slip out and you slid down the pole, you spent the next day or two picking creosote slivers out of your midriff. But never the less, on June 25, 1943, the 1301st Engineer General Service Regiment was activated and I was assigned to B Company. If you recall, I said all my records had been stamped "limited service." In true Army fashion, I was assigned to this general service regiment, and that's where I spent my entire World War II career.

McCranie: Talking about your training, any reason they would have given you that electrical training? Anything pre-qualify you for that?

Douglass: No, not really. We spent about nine months there and primarily we build pontoon bridges, Bailey bridges, fixed bridges. We'd build them and tear them down and build them and tear them down. We practiced clearing mine fields. We were trained to handle to handle all available explosives that they had available at that time. Of course, we repeatedly went back to the firing range to sharpen our firing skills. We were so proficient at building bridges, I think we could have done it in our sleep.

McCranie: You find the work interesting?

Douglass: Very interesting. You've probably heard the old expression that basic training made men from boys? That is a very true statement.

McCranie: Make any very good friends there during the basic training period?

Douglass: A few. Not too many. We were really too busy and worked so hard, when you got back to the barracks that night after you had your evening meal, back to barracks, everyone was ready for the bed. There wasn't too much free time at all to be active in personal friendships or anything of that nature.

McCranie: Could you describe a typical day of your basic training?

Douglass: We rolled out at 4:45 for reveille, to breakfast. Normally went on about a five-mile march with full field pack. Depending on what was on the schedule for that day, possibly loaded into trucks and went out fifteen - twenty miles to some small brook or river and we'd build a bridge. Build it, tear it down ... pontoon bridges were built with pontoons that were pumped up from a compressor truck. We would tear it down, let the air out of the pontoons, fold them back up and take them back to the supply headquarters.

McCranie: Did you have pretty good food while you were there in basic training?

Douglass: Oh, it was a constant gripe about the quality of the food, but it sustained all of us. We made out very well with it.

McCranie: Why did you gripe about it?

Douglass: It seemed like there wasn't much variety. You could just about know what you were going to be having for each meal the day previous.

McCranie: Anything particular that stands out in your mind about your period of basic training?

Douglass: Only the fact that when I went into the service, I was about 5'8" and weighed about 130 pounds. I grew in the service. I came out of the service 5'10½ " and about 150 pounds. But in basic ... I thought I was in pretty good shape, but when I finished with basic training, I was in very good shape. I could lift things that I had no idea that I could even attempt to try to lift prior to that. Just felt good about the whole situation. Physically you really felt good.

McCranie: After your period of basic training, where did they send you?

Douglass: After we completed basic training, we were all itching to get out and join the fight, and we shipped out to our point of embarkation on March 8, 1944. We arrived at Camp Miles Standish, just outside of Boston, on March 13. The Boston harbor was a beehive of activity. Our boarding was delayed for three days, and the explanation given was that our ship hadn't been able to get allocated dock space, and that when we did board, we'd be going in a convoy across the north Atlantic and we would have Navy escorts with us on the way because the German U-boats had been creating havoc with our convoys. The reason I know these dates ... I kept a little log throughout my entire career. I managed to get ahold of a French map when we hit France and I kept track of our movements in Europe and dates, so these dates are all pretty accurate. We finally boarded and sailed on March 23 on the SS *E B Alexander*, which was a liberty ship. We were in a convoy of thirty-two ships and we had four Navy destroyers escorting us. At about 2:30 in the morning on March 26, there was a terrific explosion that rocked the ship. Water came streaming down the hatch into the holds where the men were all bunked up. Somebody shouted "torpedo!" and mass panic ensued. No more water came in and we didn't sink, so order was restored. In going up on the deck at daylight, we discovered the entire port side of the ship caved in and the entire railing was gone, and apparently a helmsman on a neighboring ship in the convoy had dozed off that night and he broadsided us. But it kind of put the fear of God in everyone at the time.

We arrived in Liverpool, England, on April 5. We immediately received dock space; the

shipping was just a tremendous function. Even though this harbor was as busy as Boston, we managed to get right in. Part of the unit went by rail and another part of the regiment went by truck to Swindon, England. We arrived that afternoon and we were ordered to immediately pitch us a tent city for the entire regiment. During our stay in Swindon, it was miserable. I had no knowledge of what to expect when we got into England, but it was cold, it was rainy, high humidity, and it seemed like everything would mildew overnight. They instructed us to build a fence around the perimeter of the tent city, and that created quite a disruption with all the members because where were we gonna go? Didn't know anything about England, didn't know any place to go. But come to find out the reason we built the fence was to keep the small English children out. England was in terrible shape. These little children were starving and they would come around to our mess area and beg for scraps out of the mess kits that were being emptied into the garbage cans. They were really in a deplorable condition.

On the 28th of April, we broke camp there, boarded trucks again in what turned out to be a two-day trip to Tidworth Park. I had never seen so much military activity in all my life. Little did we know that we were just weeks away from the invasion of France at that time. While we were at Tidworth, we were assigned to General Patton's Third Army. We assembled all of our rolling equipment, checked and rechecked everything for a trip to Europe. We left Tidworth for the Winchester staging area on August 2, and from there to Southampton on August 4. While we were at Southampton, the unit was broken up into several parts for transportation across the English Channel. Apparently we used everything would float, from British fishing ships to Landing Craft Infantry and Landing Craft Tanks. We spent two days in the English Channel, and as most people know, the English Channel is probably one of the roughest bodies of water that there is. The reason we spent two days out there is because there was just so much stuff going into France that ... they had moved docks into the beach area, and they were just so loaded up with vessels going in with supplies and so on that you just had to set back out in the Channel and wait your turn. We were crammed into boats which ... it was only supposed to have been an eight-hour trip and we ended up being on them for two days. The English are great on boiled food. It was boiled potatoes with (I think) mutton in it, probably boiled. Most of it went over the railing.

McCranie: Did you get seasick?

Douglass: No. Several were seasick as could be. Fortunately, I wasn't one of them. But I had so many people sick around me that it very nearly got to me. We finally got in and had an opportunity to unload, and our division unloaded and was split between Omaha and Utah beaches. The day we landed was on August 6; that was exactly sixty days after the invasion. Of course, Patton had been held back because he's strictly an armor man and they needed to make some kind of an advancement so he could get off the beach when he brought his armor in. Even though sixty days had lapsed, the push into France had been pretty rough and slow going, and they really hadn't made a whole lot of headway. You've probably heard of the hedgerows that existed in Normandy?

McCranie: Oh, yes.

Douglass: They created a real problem for the troops. The northern Illinois boys such as myself were familiar with hedgerows because they were used up in our part of the country in lieu of wire fences. The farmers in northern Illinois, after the hedgerows had grown up seven or eight years, they would cut them back and make fence posts out of it. It was a tremendous wood for making fence posts; they'd last forever. But the ones in Normandy had never been cut back, and they were nearly impregnable. They had about two-inch thorns on them and actually they were so thick that there was places a rabbit couldn't even get through. The French country roads were very narrow, just hardly wide enough for a truck. After they finally got through some of these hedgerows and got a little room for advancement, Patton's tanks came in and started their move. From then on it was build bridges, blow up hedgerows, anything to keep ... our primary duty was to keep his tanks moving. After embarking, we immediately went to Ste. Mere Eglise and then on to Bricquebec on August 7, St. James on August 9, Fougeres on the 10th. While we were at Fougeres, we later found out that a division of German soldiers numbering about 100,000 were encircled in the Feleaise [sp?] Gap. American troops had them partially surrounded, and we later

found out that our regiment was the only troops on the south side of this encirclement. Fortunately, the Germans didn't know it and neither did we – we'd have been scared to death. But anyway, while having them partially encircled, they managed to withdraw back into France and regroup. At Fougeres we encountered our first fatality. A young private was clearing mines and he happened to set off a German anti-tank Teller mine. His dogtags were found in a tree and that's about all that was found of him.

McCranie: What was your first impression of landing in France and all the fighting that had gone on around there?

Douglass: The beaches were a littered mess. There were landing craft partially submerged, there was still a lot of the like railroad tracks that the Germans had drove in on the beach area to stop tanks and trucks and so on from coming ashore. The beaches were just a littered mess, that's the only way I can explain it. I was in a state of bewilderment, I guess you could say. Fortunately they kept us moving, and moving fast. So we managed to get off the beaches and into trucks and started on our way into France. While we were going across France, we existed primarily on K-rations.

McCranie: How'd you like eating those?

Douglass: Not too well. You know, they came in a box about the size of Crackerjacks. There was a small tin of either some kind of meat or occasionally it would be some sort of egg dish. Small rock-hard chocolate bar, two dog biscuits (as we called them) – two little crackers that were hard as rocks, a pack of lemonade mix, and a little box with four cigarettes in it. And that was our supplies through France. I remember on August 15, we were into Angiers and we stumbled onto the Cointreau distillery. We confiscated the contents of the warehouse. Cointreau is an orange-flavored liqueur, and when you mixed it with our lemon powder, it made a pretty powerful drink, even though it was in our aluminum mess cups. Just last week I was in a liquor

store here in Panama City and I saw a bottle of Cointreau on the shelf. It sells now for about $40 a bottle. Word soon got out of our achievement and I don't know, somebody talked when they should have been listening and we were ordered to transport the entire shipment of liquor to the Third Army headquarters. Needless to say, a goodly amount never left our unit.

We zig-zagged back and forth through central France, sometimes backtracking and trying another route. On August 31, we arrived at Fontainebleau. It's about forty miles south of Paris, a beautiful town. This was the nearest to Paris that we ever got. Patton's Third Army and all units in his Third Army were forbidden to enter Paris for political reasons. They wanted Britain's Montgomery and our First Army and the Free French to liberate Paris, so Patton's outfit was told to stay away. Although France had built an elaborate defensive line along the German border ... what was it called? The Maginot Line?

McCranie: Yes, sir.

Douglass: The Germans just simply skirted one end of it and overran the entire country. They exerted very little damage to the country as I was told, but most of the damage inflicted on France was the result of our bombing raids meant to dislodge the Germans from their strongholds. In my personal opinion, the French showed little animosity toward the Germans because after all, they were neighbors. The Free French created minor problems for them prior to our arrival, but the Free French were very instrumental in helping save our downed aviators. They had an impressive underground system and they were able to route our flyers back to England. On occasion we saw signs of collaboration with the Germans, and a few French women had their heads shaved. I always felt it was mostly show, and if all the French men and women who collaborated or associated with the Germans in any way had had their heads shaved, it would have been a country of skinheads.

During our trips across France we encountered several chateaus, and occasionally we'd bivouac overnight in one of those chateaus. All of our unit was young people such as myself. We had a few "old-timers" that were twenty-five years old, but most of us were nineteen or

twenty. We'd get into these chateaus and go down in the basement and here'd be row after row after row of bottled wine. Of course, in those days Americans weren't into wine too much. We would get into that and get kind of happy, but what we didn't realize that below that cellar was a series of other cellars and the farther down you went, the better the quality of the wine. So we were ending up drinking the green stuff, you might say.

McCranie: Did you meet many of the French and what did you think of the French?

Douglass: We really never encountered too many. The people in Normandy were exceptionally nice. They did everything they could for us. They were (you might say) like the British – they were practically starving because the countryside had been just about obliterated and there was very little live animal life anywhere. You'd see the fields were full of dead cows and dead horses. You saw very few chickens. They just didn't have anything. But they were willing to share with us what they did have. Like they would bring us apples or fruit from their orchard. They were exceptionally nice people. The farther we got into France, they were always glad to see the Americans, but it seemed like it disintegrated the father we got toward the German border.

Our stiffest resistance in France was in the vicinity of Commercy, Nancy, Metz, Pont-a-Moussan and Hagondange ... this was getting up fairly close to the German border. While we were in the vicinity of Pont-a-Mousson the second time ... the first time we got there the Germans ran us out, so we had to go back and run them back out.

McCranie: Was your engineer unit involved in the fighting or did you have infantry or armor with you?

Douglass: It was mostly the armor. We did some hand-to-hand combat with our rifles and so on, but most of it was done with the tanks. At the time we were around in that area that I just mentioned, it was when the Germans made their last big push through Belgium at Bastogne. Of

course, Patton's entire army was ordered to Bastogne post haste to support the besieged troops that were there. I'm here to tell you, it was an extremely mad dash in some of the worst winter in Europe's history, and how we survived the Germans there and more so, the weather, is still a mystery to me. Our sleeping bags were nothing more than a GI wool blanket with a little canvas cover around it, and it was so miserably cold there our combat boots would freeze solid at night. I think the only way we survived the weather at Bastogne was just our extreme physical condition.

McCranie: How did you end up in Bastogne?

Douglass: With Patton. We were down in the Pont-a-Moussan - Metz area and all of his units were ordered up there to help out with ... well, apparently all that was up there at the time was a few airborne units that were getting the daylights beat out of them. Their cooks and clerks and everyone had to man rifles and take up the fight man-to-man in there. It was said to have been the worst winter in German history, and it was ice and snow and slush and mud. I can recall trucks stopping on the road and then all of a sudden just slowly starting to slide sideways and slide right on off the road into a ditch.

When we were leaving Bastogne, we went to Malmédy, and we witnessed the Grave Registration people trying to identify the hundreds of Americans that had surrendered and the Germans had mowed them down. There were just any number of bodies still in the fields where they'd been mowed down. It had snowed – a heavy snow – and there were arms and legs sticking up. The bodies, of course, had been frozen stiff. That was a sickening sight, one of the most disgusting sights that I saw during my entire career.

McCranie: Did you realize the Germans had shot them after they surrendered at that point, or did you know what had happened to them?

Douglass: Yeah, this was about three days after it happened, and the word was out what had

transpired.

McCranie: Did that change your perception of the Germans?

Douglass: It certainly did. It certainly did. Following that we headed back to the area of Thionville and we entered the German homeland at Serrig on March 21. Little town, Serrig, it was about ten miles from the Luxembourg border. But while we were in the Metz area and prior to our going up to Bastogne, we had bridged the Moselle and the Saar and the Nied rivers with pontoon bridges to keep Patton's tanks moving. At that time most all the supplies were coming from the beaches in France and they had what they referred to as the Red Ball Express. It was a group of mostly black drivers on military 6 by 6 trucks, and they would haul them full of jerry cans of fuel and ammunition, food, clothing, whatever supplies were needed up there. Those guys rolled! I mean, they drove those old trucks as hard as they could drive them. And still Patton was surging ahead. He had run out of fuel with his tanks and finally the supply trucks would get up there and there'd be words exchanged between the tank crews and truck drivers, and before you'd know it they'd be in a fistfight. But they certainly did a job getting supplies up to us.

McCranie: Did your unit have problems obtaining supplies?

Douglass: No, we were pretty fortunate. I'll tell you, we ended up to be a regiment of scroungers. We could come with up with just about whatever we needed from the countryside. As such, if anybody happened to have a jeep and walked off and left it for a few minutes, the jeep would disappear [laughter]. In fact, when we left Europe, I think we left about sixty jeeps behind us that were not table of equipment that we could take with us. So we were real scroungers.

From Serrig we went to St. Wendel, then back to Saarbrücken.

McCranie: And during this time you're making all these movements, what type of operations

is your engineering unit doing?

Douglass: Still working minefields and ... minefields and bridges were primarily our two big things. Of course, with the German autobahn system, once we got into Germany it was a breeze – we really moved. From Saarbrücken we moved to Bad Kreuznach and bridged the Nahe River. We stayed mostly south of Frankfurt, we caught such cities as Wiesbaden, Mainz, Worms, Mannheim, Stuttgart, and then we went up toward Würzburg, Bamberg, and we finally ended up in a little town of Erlangen just north of Nuremberg, where the war trials were held. Germany – the devastation was horrendous. Our bomber crews had really did a job. Buildings that weren't completely destroyed all had some sort of damage, and of course our last big obstacle in Germany was the Rhine River. Once we crossed it, it was pretty clear sailing. But we built several pontoon bridges across the Rhine and at Oppenheim we built a permanent bridge. Apparently this exercise had been planned several months in advance and the powers to be in the military were already considering the revitalization of Germany. Barge traffic in Germany was a major function, very similar to our Mississippi. The Rhine River was an equivalent, I think, to our Mississippi with regard to barge traffic. So our job was to build a two-way fixed bridge with a ninety-foot navigational span, and it was really a major undertaking for 1,200 men. But like I said, our regiment had become very proficient in scavenging. Each company was given a specific part of the bridge construction. One company found a little operating sawmill, so they were charged with providing timbers and lumber. One company started on one bank and the other company started on the opposite bank .... And what I failed to mention – we had liberated a couple of slave labor camps on the eastern side of France, and those poor people were in rags, they were starved to death, they were nothing but skin and bones. They really had no place to go. So whenever we moved, they just grabbed onto anything they could grab on and they tagged along with us. And we tried our best to clothe them a little bit and keep them fed. When we started in on this bridge, they pitched in just like part of the troops and they were so eager to help, but sometimes they were more in the way than they helpful. One of the units had found a couple of old steam-powered pile drivers somewhere and they put them on barges and floated them

down to the bridge site. We scrounged up generators for lighting and welding. One of the difficult tasks was locating 90-foot I-beams to make the navigational span. But we'd already built a pontoon bridge upriver and the tank traffic was still go, so .... We had lots of support from every branch of the service. The Navy come in there with small boats. I was surprised to find the Navy in the middle of Germany. Artillery set up ack-ack batteries around the bridge site. Navy Seabees were shipped in to lend a hand.

McCranie: How did your unit get along with these other units?

Douglass: Great. Really ...

End side A

Douglass: ... tempo and the frame of mind and the atmosphere of this bridge project can't be put into words. Everyone just pitched in like you would not believe and in a matter of twelve short days, that bridge was open. It was open for two-way tank traffic with a ninety-foot navigational span in the center of it. It was on April 12. Of course, that's the day President Roosevelt expired. So the bridge was immediately dedicated as the President Roosevelt Memorial Bridge.

V-E Day was May 8, 1945; found us in Erlangen, Germany, just a few miles north of Nuremberg. A point system had been devised to determine who would stay and who would go home, and if I recall correctly, if you'd accumulated thirty points, you were eligible to be rotated back to the States, to the United States, and be discharged. Now, I could be wrong on this, but if you had less than thirty points, then you'd remain in Europe as the Army of Occupation. Well, every man in our unit with the exception of replacements had in excess of sixty points, so we all knew that we'd soon be on our way home. We lazed around Erlangen for about three weeks getting cleaned up ... really, personal hygiene all through France had been minimal at best, and we did really get cleaned up for once in our life while at Erlangen. One of my friends and I went

down to Nuremberg to the airfield down there and I had flown a little bit prior to going into service, so had he. We found an old German _____[??] observation aircraft. We flew it back down to Erlangen and landed in a pasture down there, and we gave airplane rides for a few days. But this was short lived, however, because on June 8, our regiment was ordered to fall in because our commanding officer wanted to make a speech to us. We thought, well, oh boy, this is it – we're going home. Colonel Francis X. Purcell, our regimental commander, climbed up into the back of a truck, made one of the shortest speeches in his career. I remember every word to this day, over sixty years later. And he said, "Men, the War Department has declared this regiment essential to the continuing war effort; we depart tomorrow morning at 0800 hours direct to the Asiatic Pacific theater to participate in the invasion of the Japanese homeland. Good luck, men. Carry on." I'll tell you, thoughts of going home were soon displaced with thoughts of imminent death. Every man in the unit thought that our death warrants had been signed, because we knew the invasion of the Japanese homeland ... we would have to fight every Jap – man, woman, and child, to the death. Because we'd heard of these kamikaze pilots and complete units in the islands in the Pacific committing Hari Kari and so on. It was a morale-breaker if there ever was one.

One thing I failed to mention – we had a medical detachment assigned to us – four men to each company. Those guys ... the only thing they lacked was a visible halo. They were tremendous. We had one big red-headed medic, he was about 6'4" and had to weigh every bit of 200 pounds, as gruff and rough and they come, and I don't think there was a female nurse anywhere in the country that was any more capable and more thoughtful than he was. I've seen that big dude pick up a man his size, cradle him in his arms like a baby and walk through a minefield bringing him back to where they could attend to him. Unfortunately, we had to leave our medics behind when we left Erlangen. That was another sad part of the whole operation. I apologize for breaking up there, but it was a sad situation.

That next morning at eight o'clock, we boarded 40&8s boxcars and we went by rail to St. Victoret staging area near Marseilles, France. Now, these 40&8 boxcars – rail cars – were old World War I vintage and that designation was from World War I, meaning there was room for forty men and eight horses. We got to the staging area near Marseilles on June 13, and six days

later, after being equipped with all new clothing and equipment, we boarded the SS *Sea Quail* – it was another liberty ship. We shipped out at 9 AM on the morning of July 19. We passed through the Straits of Gibraltar on the 21st of July and we arrived at Colón, Panama, on August 1.

McCranie: How was the voyage across?

Douglass: Long and everyone still was had this thought in their mind of what was waiting for us in the Pacific. It was a very sobering trip. The weather was not bad, not bad at all. When we arrived in Colón, Panama, we were allowed an overnight. Prior to disembarking from the ship, they paid us in greenbacks. It was the first time since leaving Boston that we'd seen any American money. (We had been paid in Europe with Military Script). The only difference was that all of the money that we were paid off with had "Hawaii" stamped on the back of it in big black letters. It was Hawaiian dollars, but it was American money with "Hawaii" stamped on the back of it. When we got into town in Colón ... they had a center square and the square was circled by two-story buildings, but the bottom story was nothing but one continuous row of little green rooms with just one window and a door in them, and in each one of the doors was standing a "lady of the evening." Needless to say, they did a roaring business that night.

Back on board the *Sea Quail* the next morning, we passed through the Panama Canal, we traversed the Gatun Lake – the freshwater lake between the two oceans. They installed shower pipes up on the deck and of course, across the Atlantic all we had was saltwater for showers, so everyone had the opportunity to get a freshwater shower while we were in the canal system. Then we headed out across the Pacific. I spent most of the nights up in the bow of the ship because in the Pacific there was all kinds of little flourescent bodies in the water and it was a beautiful sight to set up in the bow and watch those little flourescent bodies floating around. This trip was uneventful as far as weather was concerned, but it was boring. The ship was overloaded to begin with, with bodies. On each side were concrete ballast, stood about four feet high and probably about four feet wide of concrete, which made nice tables for card playing. So

there were poker games galore going on constantly. Someone had the initiative to paint up a shelter half with a crap layout, so they had crap shooting. Gambling was rampant.

McCranie: Were you good at gambling?

Douglass: I gambled a lot, but I lost everything I had. On the 17th we crossed the International Date Line, and all ships require a ceremony when you do that, and we were told we were entering the domain of the Golden Dragon. Each member of the regiment was initiated into the silent mysteries of the Far East by the ships' crew. It was a little fun thing on a very trying trip. They had a little mimeograph machine where you ... an old stylus ... I don't know if you're familiar with the old reproduction system where you cut a stylus and put it on a mimeograph machine ...?

McCranie: Oh, yes.

Douglass: And they made us a little certificate (which I still have, incidently), and just four days after that we crossed the Equator. So another onboard ceremony was held; that changed us from "pollywogs" to "trusty shellbacks" and we were indoctrinated into the domain of Neptunus Rex. Oh, they had some fun. Kind of like a fraternity house initiation, pulling little jokes on fellows. But to make a long story short, on August 25, we arrived at Hollandia, New Guinea and we debarked on what we thought was gonna be jungle training, only to find out "hey, get back on, we're moving again." So the next day we re-boarded the *Sea Quail*, we crossed the Equator a second time en route to Tacloban, Leyte, in the Philippines. And while we were en route, we received word that President Harry Truman, bless his heart, had the intestinal fortitude to employ the Atomic bomb. Everyone on board was ecstatic. We just knew they was gonna turn the ship around and take us home. No such luck. Second bomb was dropped prior to our reaching Tacloban, and V-J Day was announced on what? September 2. We were still on board the *Sea Quail*, but we finally arrived on ...

McCranie: Did that improve your morale, once you realized it was V-J Day?

Douglass: Oh, yes, definitely. And we knew we were going home on the *Sea Quail*. But we finally arrived in Batangas, Luzon, on September 6 and we disembarked and set up camp at a town called Bwana [??]. Believe it or not, that's the last we saw of the *Sea Quail*. In a few days we went back to Batangas by truck, arrived back there on September 10, and then for the next thirteen days it was a grueling truck convoy to Manila. We finally arrived at the University of the Philippines in Manila on September 23 and by this time nearly the entire regiment was suffering from malaria. It was a pretty sad, sickly lot. I came down with malaria and I was so weak I could hardly lift my head up.

We soon became what I called the "lost outfit." For two months we did everything in our power to try to direct attention to our situation. Some of our officers had pulled rank and finagaled a flight home. I don't know who was responsible for us, but we were finally told that a freighter was coming in and that if we'd go down to the dock and build bunks in it and prepare it for a troop ship, we could take it home. Well, still reeling from the effects of malaria, the whole gang turned out, and in one day's time we had the ship prepared for troop movement. We went back to the University of the Philippines where we'd been bivouacking, pack our bags, and we were told to be down there at seven o'clock the next morning. Well, when we got down there at seven o'clock the next morning, the ship was gone. Apparently they loaded up a bunch of low-point Air Force boys about two o'clock in the morning and shipped them out.

Well, to make a long story short, we finally got on a ship, the USS *President Polk*, on December 10. We arrived in San Francisco the day after Christmas, December 26. We took a ferry over to Camp Stoneman on the 23rd, boarded troop trains, and arrived back where I started at Camp Grant, Illinois, on January 5, 1946. It took three days of processing for us to be ready for discharge at Camp Grant, and suddenly they discovered that they did not have any Class A uniforms for processing us out. We were supposed to be discharged in a Class A uniform [chuckles]. We were made a proposition – we could either remain in the service for about a week until they got in the Class A uniforms, or we could accept a discharge in our khaki shirts

and pants and our Class A uniforms could be requested at a later date. Well, guess what? I was on my way home January 8, out of the Army and in khakis. For my participation in World War II, I received the good conduct medal, the Europe-African-Middle Eastern campaign medal with four bronze battle stars, and they were namely the northern France campaign, the Ardennes, the Rhineland, and Cental Europe. Also received the Asiatic-Pacific campaign medal, Philippine liberation ribbon, the World War II victory medal, and I had made sharpshooter on the rifle range so I had the sharpshooter badge with the rifle bar, and three overseas ribbons. You were issued an overseas ribbon every time you completed a full six-month service. So we were issued three overseas ribbons, which indicated eighteen months overseas. I think actually we were over there about twenty.

[some conversation not transcribed]

A couple of points that I failed to make – I had absconded a German Volkswagen, the equivalent to our Jeep, and I was going into Metz one day and I happened to look over to my right and here come a group of aircraft, low, like 100 feet or less. The nearer they got, I saw the swastikas on them, and man, I bailed out of my Volkswagen and into the ditch and looked up, and I could see the pilots. They were so low I could see the pilot looking down at me. There was probably about twenty of them all told, and they were making a big drive on some installation there at Metz. Of course, I thought every one of them was after me personally. One of them apparently got hit by anti-aircraft fire and it came over, I'd say less than 100 feet high – it was smoking. It crashed into a field about four football fields from me. After they left I went over there, and of course a bunch of Frenchmen had climbed all over the aircraft. The pilot was dead. One of the Frenchmen had taken his sidearm from the pilot. I relieved the Frenchman of that. It was a little .380 Biretta pistol, and I brought that home with me; that was my only war souvenir. The gruesome part of it was the pilot's blood was all on the inside of the holster.

The longer I talk, the more things pop up in my mind. I forget where we were in Germany, but they had just encountered one of Hitler's concentration camps, had overran it I think about three days prior to our finding out about it. Our company's 1st sergeant and two platoon sergeants got into a Jeep and went to this camp. If I remember correctly, I think it was Dachau. They were gone most of the day, and they came back and everyone was asking, "Well,

what did you see? What was it like?" And those men, their lives were completely changed. They never mentioned the camp, they never told us anything about what they saw. And now, from viewing the History Channel, I can understand why. But it completely changed their lives; from then on until we discharged, they weren't the same people.

McCranie: How did they change?

Douglass: They just ... their complete demeanor. You didn't hear much laughing or joking out of them like you used to. Apparently the sight was so shocking it actually had some sort of mental ... I don't know how to say it. Like they'd ... I can't explain it. They were not the same people that came back that went up there. So the only thing they did say ... some of the other people in the unit said that they'd like to go up and see it. They said, "Don't go." That was all they said, "Don't go."

McCranie: Did you run into many German civilians?

Douglass: Quite a few. They were pleasant. I felt some sorry for some of these old German people; the war had passed them by and their little house was ... made it intact, their little flowers out front and everything was so pretty. Then while we were building that bridge at Oppenheim, they needed those ninety-foot-long I-beams ... they came through little towns ... streets would wind through the towns ... they'd precede these big old monstrous trucks carrying these I-beams with a bulldozer and would straighten out all the sharp curves in the road, and here some of those pretty little homes were the victim of the bulldozers. So the war had passed them by and they thought everything was fine, and then here come these engineers and knock their house down.

McCranie: Did the civilians seem resentful of you, or they seem happy to see you or how would you characterize them at that?

Douglass: Most of the Germans that we encountered were civil. Very little action or reaction toward us. I went back to Germany about three years ago, and I went to Bad Kreuznach where we had built a bridge, and I couldn't recognize any of the country. It's if I never had been there. I never recognized a single thing while I was there. And I traveled a good bit in Germany to the same towns that we had been in in World War II, and I could not recognize anything that I had seen in World War II.

McCranie: It's all been developed or ...?

Douglass: It's all been rebuilt, and it's just fantastic. And Germany is the most beautiful country you could ever want to visit.

McCranie: Did you run into many German prisoners of war?

Douglass: Not really. If they were, they never let you know that they were. You mean on my recent visit?

McCranie: No, I mean ....

Douglass: During the war?

McCranie: During the war, yes, sir.

Douglass: We would see whole companies or regiments that had given up marching back with a few GIs accompanying them. They were pretty beaten up outfits. They knew they were losing, they couldn't see any reason for continuing the war, supplies had become a problem for them, food had become a problem for them. They just gave the impression that, "Hey, we're glad it's over -- for us," you know.

McCranie: Did you ever come under German fire?

Douglass: In Metz we did, yes.

McCranie: Artillery fire or ...?

Douglass: No, rifle fire – hand gun.

McCranie: And what happened there?

Douglass: The Germans had a fairly strong toehold in Metz on the Moselle River. And we kind of stumbled up onto them, not knowing that they were there. It was a case of shoot and get out, which we did. We fell back, got a little bit organized, and then went back in with other fire support and we ran them on out of there. But that was the only place where we actually encountered what you might call hand-to-hand combat. It wasn't any bayonet business, but it was near enough to where there was rifles and handguns fired back and forth to one another.

McCranie: The Germans put up a pretty good fight for you?

Douglass: Oh, yes. Germans were good soldiers. No one can ever deny them that. They were ... along the beaches, the Germans that we encountered in western Europe, western France, were tremendous soldiers. Well trained, disciplined. The farther we got toward the French-German border, the less disciplined, the less trained, and the younger soldiers we encountered. As we entered Germany a lot of them we encountered I don't think could even shave yet. It had really gotten down to the bottom for personnel.

McCranie: Since you were in the Third Army, did you ever see or hear Patton talk?

Douglass: Oh, yes, several times. In fact, the French were great for having these stovepipe hats that would collapse, and I had gotten one of those stovepipe hats and had it on my head in the back of a truck as we were going down the road, and his Jeep came flying by and he shut down the whole line, come back and called me down off the truck and blasted me like you would not believe. Patton was an egotistical so and so with his pearl-handled pistols and his shellacked helmet. He didn't care how dirty, how unshaven you were, but if you had button on your fatigues, it had better be buttoned. I heard him make a speech in England before we shipped to Europe, some of the filthiest language that ever came out of a human's mouth. There were all types of people listening including nurses, WACs, but he didn't care. He said what we were gonna do to the ... I don't know if I can repeat this or not ... if you want to delete it from the tape later, it's okay. "When we get done with these Germans, we're going over and kick the hell out of them purple-pissing Japanese!" That was the words ... I remember those were the words he used regarding the Japanese. And we went from one egotistical's domain to the Pacific to another one – MacArthur's. MacArthur had in his mind ... I think he had a financial interest in the Philippines and it was his intention to have this engineer regiment rebuilt the University of the Philippines, but we had other ideas. He got very little cooperation our of our unit. And he was one with the sunglasses and the swagger stick and the corncob pipe. I'd hate to see those two in the same theater of operation.

McCranie: What was your personal opinion of MacArthur and Patton?

Douglass: My opinion of Patton was that he was an overbearing, egotistical so and so. He got the job done, there's no two ways about that. But the expression was ... he was referred to as "blood and guts Patton." Our blood, his guts. MacArthur, with his "I shall return" bit to the Philippines and he wades off of an LCI with cameras flashing in all directions so he'd go down in history as holding good on his promise ... Harry S. Truman kind of took care of him also.

[non-specific conversation not transcribed]

Patton ... it was a shame the way that he got his, but .... When I was visiting this ... a couple of

years ago, I was down in the Bavarian area, and I stayed at the Hotel General Patton. He's got a hotel named after him down there in a resort area. And got a self-portrait of himself on the wall of the dining room – it's about twenty-five feet high and at least ten feet wide – with his pearled six-shooters. I walked out on the front of the hotel out of the lobby out front to smoke a cigarette. There was some elderly German out there and boy, he was grumbling and giving me the business in German – I didn't know what he was saying. Some other American soldier walked out and he said, "What's the matter with that guy?" I said, "Well, I think he's a poor loser." But that's about my story.

McCranie: How did your health stay when you were going through France? How well off were you?

Douglass: Healthwise?

McCranie: Yes, sir.

Douglass: I stayed in remarkable shape. As I said, that was the coldest winter in German history, but the training we went through in the States was so thorough that it even had an effect on your mind. You knew you was in good shape. You knew you were capable of handling any situation that came your way. I don't recall ever even having a head cold in Germany or in Europe.

McCranie: And you said you got malaria in the Philippines – did they not give you Quinine when you landed?

Douglass: We took Atabrine, and every man looked like a Chinaman. It turned you yellow. But it was an after the fact situation, and that malaria really knocks the stew out of you. You have absolutely no energy. As soon as we arrived at the Philippines, there was talk of us going

home. I'd gone to sick call to get a new supply of the Atabrine, and one of the medics told me, he said, "I don't believe you're gonna be able to go onboard a ship." I said, "Fellow, you line it up and watch how I crawl up that ramp." So he said, "Well, okay, we'll keep you on duty."

McCranie: When you saw the massacre of the US soldiers there during the Ardennes, you said that your opinion of the Germans changed. How did it change?

Douglass: Oh, that was at Malmédy, where they shot down all the prisoners?

McCranie: Yes, sir.

Douglass: I had thought all along through the campaign that they were professional soldiers, well disciplined, well trained. When I saw that situation at Malmédy, they became more animals to me than they did soldiers. I lost complete respect for them. Even though the were an enemy, they did have my respect because of their status. But after that they became nothing more than animals.

McCranie: And with the slave labor camps that you liberated in France, what type of people were there at those camps?

Douglass: Mostly Polish. I'd say the bulk of them were Polish. But they were so thin, so emancipated [sic] that I don't see how they even managed to walk. But they were so thankful ... I guess the poor souls had no place to go or no way to go anywhere, so most of them just hung out with us, you might say ... called it hanging out. And any time we moved, they just would ... if there was an empty spot on a truck, they would climb on; nobody objected to it. Everyone felt so sorry for them that ... we'd have an extra fatigue jacket or something and give to them.

McCranie: They worked for you after you liberated them? They help you with your work?

Douglass: They would do anything that they could. They would do things that they weren't even asked to do. If they saw something that needed to be done, they did it. They were delightful people and [we] felt so sorry for them. I suppose if the military had their way, they would have loaded them all on trucks and hauled them off somewhere. But we were off so much by ourselves most of the time that we had very little contact with what you might say any high brass that could have made those decisions.

There was one episode I recall ... a B-17 getting shot down. A young kid bailed out ... the tail gunner bailed out and he landed near our unit. He stayed with us ... he thought he was the only one that got out, so he was a pretty depressed young fellow. He thought his whole crew was dead. His name was Irvin Crone. He was from some place in California. He and I became pretty close friends. He was with our unit for nearly a month. Of course, he had a nice big flying jacket with a fur collar on it. Finally word got out to someone that he was in the unit, so they made arrangements to get him shipped back to England. When he left he gave me his Air Force jacket, and I have that jacket to this day. But he didn't want to leave our unit. He got treated like a king. The regimental commander right on down, every officer, every non-commissioned officer was doing everything in their power to make his stay with us as comfortable as could be. Of course, he thought all his crew members had been killed, you know, and he didn't want to go back to England. He just wanted to stay with us. But they said no, you got to go back to your own unit. (I received a letter long after his return in which he stated his whole crew had bailed out and were safely back in Britain).

McCranie: You make a number of good friends in your unit in France and in the Pacific.

Douglass: Yeah, several good friends. However, I've only met one of them since World War II. Only one. I've got rosters of my company and rosters of the Headquarters Supply Company, and our regiment was made up of people from the east coast to the west coast and the Canadien border to the Gulf of Mexico. I think we had every state covered. We had ... I remember one of the older fellows from New Jersey, East Orange, New Jersey. He talked funny,

like the "poiple boid setting on the coib." And everyone made fun of the way he talked. Different funny little anecdotes like that pop up in my memory every now and then. We did do a good bit of liquor consumption in Europe. Calvados, Cointreau, wine, you name it. Whenever we had the opportunity, we'd grab on to a bottle or two.

McCranie: That got you in trouble, I'll bet.

Douglass: Occasionally. Not too often. It kind of helped displace some of the bad memories.

McCranie: How big a unit did you say your engineer regiment was again?

Douglass: The regiment had six companies, A through F? A, B, C, D, E, F, yeah. Each one of those were about 165 men, and then a Headquarters Supply Company that was about 200 men. It was a big unit, and when you put ... roughly 1,200 people. When you put all of them onto a liberty ship, it was full. And those holds, there was no air conditioning, no nothing on ship in those days. They had a big old air vent that ... your forward motion would force air down into the holds. You bunked up four bunks deep. You had just room enough to squeeze into a bunk. I spent most of my time up on the deck. Take my sleeping back up on the deck and sleep up there. But in the Pacific, maybe three or four times a night you'd be up there sleeping and here'd come a rain shower. So you run for cover and then it'd pass over and the deck would dry off, you just nicely get bedded down again and here'd come another rain shower.

[conversation about D-Day Museum not transcribed]

End transcription