

PRESERVING OUR HISTORY: ROTARY CLUB OF GREENSBORO

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Charles Weill

INTERVIEWER: Hermann Trojanowski

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HT: My name is Hermann Trojanowski. Today is June 29, 2009, and I'm at Weill Investment in Greensboro, North Carolina with Mr. Charles L. Weill to conduct a follow-up interview for the Preserving Our History: Rotary Club of Greensboro Oral History Project. Mr. Weill, again, thank you for receiving me this afternoon. And now, we'll be talking about Sea Scouts and your service during World War II in the Army. Can you tell me when you decided to join the Sea Scouts?

CW: After the usual – just basing in the Boy Scouts as distinguished from the Sea Scouts – programs in the Boy Scouts were largely for youths twelve to fifteen. At age fifteen, it was commonplace to affiliate with the senior scouting program, and I chose the Sea Scouts.

HT: And when was that?

CW: 1938.

HT: When you mentioned the Sea Scouts the other day on the telephone, I was totally unaware of the Sea Scouting program. Can you tell me something about the organization and its activities?

CW: The Sea Scouts were a youth program affiliated – or I shouldn't say affiliated, modeled is perhaps a better term – after Naval practices because the programs were oriented to war activities, boating, particularly. Still maintaining the discipline of the scouting program, and the actual program activity was an affiliate or branch of the Boy Scouting program.

HT: It seemed rather odd that Greensboro would have a Sea Scout Ship, or troop as you called it. There are no large bodies of water, no rivers, and that sort of thing. So, how did it come about that Greensboro actually had a troop or a ship, rather?

CW: I do not have a well-defined answer for the initiation of Sea Scouting in Greensboro, that is, when it was started. When I joined, the program was well underway. The water that we relied upon was High Rock Lake, which had been built a few years previously by Aluminum Corporation of America as an

impoundment of water for their electricity needs serving the aluminum plant near Badin, North Carolina. They had built several lakes on the Yadkin River, limited the access, and our group, meaning the ship and council – the Boy Scout Council – had obtained the rights to use that lake, one of the very few organizations or persons legally permitted on the lake.

HT: Was it difficult to get back and forth between here and High Rock in those days?

CW: The distance was about fifty miles, and a few of the Scouters, members of the ship, and the senior professional Scouters had automobiles. And we relied on that type of transportation to access the encampment. And we usually found ourselves participating in those activities on the weekend.

HT: Did you meet locally as well as down at High Rock?

CW: Yes, we had a classic troop, Boy Scout troop type meeting place in one of the churches. It was the First Christian Church on North Elm Street. We met weekly.

HT: What were some of the activities you fellas did on the weekends when you went down to High Rock?

CW: I believe they fell in two categories. One was building and development of the camp site, including the buildings, which we did ourselves. The other was maintenance of and utilization of the floating equipment, largely sailboats. We did have some other boats such as row boats, canoes. The primary interest was sailboats.

HT: Did you have regattas?

CW: Oh, we did have some competition amongst the troop members, but it was limited to our own membership. I don't remember that we visited other places. Transportation was too difficult in the late '30s.

HT: Now, did other ships come in from various parts of North Carolina to use the High Rock Lake at that time?

CW: No. Ours was an exclusive utilization. The camp site was owned, I guess, by the aluminum company. And the Boy Scout Council had a lease on that property, as I remember the arrangement. It was for our exclusive use. I do not remember other organizations visiting or participating.

HT: How many fellows were in the ship?

CW: It was organized pretty much like a Boy Scout troop with thirty-some odd, plus the older leadership.

HT: And I think you mentioned over the phone that Charlie Hagan was one of the leaders of the ship.

CW: Charlie Hagan organized it and was a dynamic leader. We called him “the Skipper,” classic of the terms used in Sea Scouting.

HT: Were there any other prominent – men who became prominent later on from Greensboro who were members of the ship?

CW: Oh, I think a number of people went on to some form of prominence in adulthood, but that could be said about any of the Boy Scouting programs. Some people are natural leaders and tend to rise in adult programs.

HT: Well, tell me a little bit about Mr. Hagan, how he influenced your life and that sort of thing.

CW: I believe the manner in which Hagan led that scout effort – the Sea Scout Ship, as we called it – with a certain degree of discipline, as well as inspiration – evidenced by the fact that he later was a General in the Marines – was very influential in the development of those of us under his guidance. We were young – fifteen to eighteen years old, time of reaching maturity. And I believe his leadership influenced that favorably.

HT: Do you recall any unusual events that happened while you were a Sea Scout – funny, hilarious, and that sort of thing?

CW: We did experience at our camping activities – from time to time exceptional challenges, more so than you would experience in the Boy Scouting programs, simply because we were on the water, and we were at times involved in poor weather, bad weather, and suffered the consequences on the – with the boats. And we learned that water and inclement weather can be dangerous – challenging and dangerous.

HT: Did you travel at all outside of the Greensboro-High Rock Lake area during the time, go to the coast for meetings?

CW: I don’t remember any particular activity with which we were involved as Sea Scouts. As mentioned earlier, the difficulty in transportation, limitations on vehicles, pretty much confined us to the campsite at High Rock.

HT: I think you mentioned over the telephone the other day that you won some sort of award, or the ship won an award?

CW: Yes. The program was so successful that in 1939 the ship was recognized at the national level as being the best program in the Boy Scout movement, in the senior

Boy Scout movement. And so, accorded the – and consequently, it was accorded the title of National Flagship.

HT: What did that mean exactly?

CW: It means we were the best Sea Scout program in the United States.

HT: For that year?

CW: For that year.

HT: That's wonderful. I'm sure that made everybody very, very proud.

CW: It did. It gained enough attention that *Life* magazine, which was the most popular magazine publication of the day, sent reporters and photographers to our High Rock campsite to photograph and write about our activities. It was scheduled – that article and those pictures were scheduled for presentation the first week of September in 1939. Because of the beginning of World War II with the invasion of Poland by the German army, that story and the pictures were not published.

HT: So, they were never published at a later date?

CW: No.

HT: I'm sure that was a great disappointment to everybody.

CW: It was.

HT: And Charlie Hagan was still the Skipper at that time when you won?

CW: Yes.

HT: Was he one of the main causes for the ship winning, probably?

CW: In my opinion, it was his leadership that caused us to reach those levels of accomplishment.

HT: This is probably good segue to go into your World War II time. When did you join the military, or were you drafted?

CW: On my eighteenth birthday, in August 1942, I enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves with the hope that being registered would postpone active service, for which I was immediately eligible by virtue of the draft that was in effect at that time and, along with others, hoped to continue an educational program, which I had started at Chapel Hill. Again, thinking that if I were a registered reservist the Army knew

where I was and that I would be available, they, perhaps, would extend the educational experience.

HT: At that time did Chapel Hill have ROTC programs?

CW: I believe they did. They did have a Navy program for advanced training that was just beginning.

HT: So, you were at Chapel Hill for how much longer after August 1942?

CW: Until March of 1943.

HT: Is that when you were called up?

CW: Yes.

HT: And did you have to attend boot camp?

CW: I did.

HT: And where was that?

CW: After the call to service, processing was at Fort Bragg for a week or ten days. And then, I was sent to Fort McClellan, Alabama, for what we referred to as basic training.

HT: Do you recall how long basic training was in those days?

CW: Three months.

HT: Because I had six weeks of basic training when I was in the Air Force. So, other than physical training and that sort of thing, what else did you study during basic training?

CW: How to become a foot soldier.

HT: I assume you had rifle training and firearm training, and that sort of thing?

CW: Yes.

HT: Any kind of specialty training?

CW: Not at that level at that time.

HT: I guess you were lucky that you went to Fort McClellan probably in the spring instead of the summertime, because it is rather warm down there.

CW: It was in April, and – somewhere around mid-April to around mid-July, and it was hot in the latter part.

HT: And no air conditioning?

CW: No such thing as air conditioning. The part of the Army camp to which we were assigned was temporary barracks. I doubt that there was air conditioning even in the permanent buildings. I never got there.

HT: What do you remember most vividly about your time during basic training?

CW: The program to teach everyone discipline and body strengthening.

HT: And after you graduated from boot camp, where did you go next?

CW: At the conclusion of basic training, the Army was providing only soldiers with what I guess we would call an aptitude or intelligence test – somewhat akin to an I.Q. type of testing. Those who received adequate results at testing program were offered a chance for specialized training, what was then called the Army Specialized Training Program, or ASTP for short.

HT: And did you participate in the ASTP?

CW: I did.

HT: And what was that like?

CW: More of a college setting with Army discipline and continued physical training.

HT: Was this at Fort McClellan? Where was this held?

CW: I was sent from Fort McClellan to Clemson University for further classification. Stayed there about ten days or two weeks, and then, for me, it was to Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., in the engineering school.

HT: And how long did the ASTP last?

CW: The Army maintained that program until March of 1944. For the purpose of this discussion, I think it's worthy to note that many of the colleges and universities were assigned one of these programs.

HT: I think there was one at N.C. State [North Carolina State University], because I remember seeing some paperwork about that.

CW: Don't remember N.C. State, but I do remember a lot of other colleges. When the program was terminated in – all of us were assigned to operating units. It was apparent that this program had been in place in many schools just by virtue of the affiliations that I later developed.

HT: So, for you, how long did the program last?

CW: From August through March, about eight months.

HT: And what type of courses did you take? You said you went to the engineering school.

CW: Many of the courses were similar to, or the same, that I had had at Chapel Hill at the university. They were supplemented by science courses leading to training for engineering certification, though the program was never completed.

HT: So, after you completed your course at Georgetown, what did you do next?

CW: When the ASTP was terminated, as I remember it – understood it then and remember it – they were terminated all over the country at the same time. And participants were then assigned to active Army units. I was transferred from Georgetown program to the 102nd Infantry Division then based at Camp Swift in Texas.

HT: Where is Camp Swift in Texas?

CW: Near – it's adjacent to Bastrop, and that's not too far from Austin.

HT: Okay. And what type of work did you do at Camp Swift?

CW: I was assigned to an infantry unit for further training with the existing personnel in preparation for transfer overseas.

HT: Do you recall how long of a period that was?

CW: Yes, I arrived in Texas in late March in 1944 – field training there and shipped out in August of that year to Fort Dix, New Jersey.

HT: So, you were at Camp Swift during D-Day time, which was June 1944?

CW: No, D-Day was 1945.

HT: I got the wrong year. And from Fort –

CW: Excuse me, I'm sorry. You said D-Day was '44. I was there – you are exactly correct – I was there in '44 at D-Day. My mind was drifting, and I was thinking you were referring to V-E Day [Victory in Europe Day].

HT: V-E Day, right.

CW: D-Day was June 6, '44.

HT: And I guess everything was rather hush-hush about D-Day. So you probably didn't hear anything about it until several days, maybe several weeks after the landing?

CW: Oh, as I remember, we heard about it immediately.

HT: Oh, really? On the radio?

CW: I suppose. We had the newspapers, the *Stars and Stripes*, the newspaper that was circulated to all the troops.

HT: So, when you were in New Jersey, did you have to do further training there, or was it just preparation to go overseas?

CW: Both. But while we were in New Jersey, a distraction of sorts was a transit strike in Philadelphia. Our division was called upon to maintain civil discipline in Philadelphia, and many of us were assigned to ride the public transportation vehicles.

HT: Almost like MPs [military police]?

CW: Yes.

HT: And do you recall what the strike was all about at that time?

CW: I really don't.

HT: Anything exciting happen during that strike?

CW: Nothing to my knowledge.

HT: You were probably glad of that?

CW: Yes. We were armed. So, it was –

HT: It was quite serious.

CW: It was necessary for the transportation system to continue, and during those years most everything was frozen. So, wages, rents, food was rationed. Difficult – difficult time.

HT: Now, during all this time, did you get a chance to go home on leave at all, between basic training and the time you got to Fort Dix?

CW: I think on one or two occasions I had a long weekend. But I don't remember any extended period where we were released.

HT: And you said you were at Fort Dix soon to be shipped overseas. What type of ship did you take?

CW: We left Fort Dix in the middle of September, if I remember the dates correctly, on a Liberty ship. Let me change that. There were two classes of ships that were being mass-produced, and I believe the type of ship that I sailed on was a Victory ship, so-called Victory ship. They were a little faster than the Liberty ships.

HT: Do you recall how many men were aboard with you by any chance?

CW: No.

HT: I've talked to other people who – they were on former ocean liners, and then there were 4,000 to 5,000 troops aboard, and that sort of thing.

CW: These were much smaller than the ocean liners, and I remember that we were packed in as plentifully as you could justify. You might say like sardines – bunks on tops of bunks.

HT: Open bay type of situation?

CW: Yes.

HT: Did anything eventful happen on your voyage across?

CW: No, we went in a convoy, and I don't remember anything unique.

HT: Did the ship have to zigzag?

CW: I suppose. I don't remember. Don't think I ever knew. Took us about a week to ten days to make the crossing in relatively slow boats.

HT: And once you reached Europe, where did you land?

CW: First stop was off the coast of England, South Hampton. We did not go ashore. We were there for a short time, and while on board the same ship, went across the channel to France, landing at Cherbourg.

HT: So, you never got off at South Hampton or England at all? I think you said you stayed aboard the entire time?

CW: Yes.

HT: That must have been quite frustrating to see some land and not be able to sort of stretch your legs and that sort of thing. Now, aboard ship, were there just men, or were there supplies, armaments, and that sort of thing? Do you recall?

CW: I do not know what the cargo might have been. The only purpose of that movement, as far as I knew, was to move our division, part of our division.

HT: And you were still with the – which one?

CW: 102nd Infantry.

HT: 102nd Infantry. Do you recall who the commanding officer was for that division by any chance?

CW: No, I did bring a book. And if that's of interest, we can –

HT: Well, that's all right. I thought it might be somebody famous. Well, after you landed in France, what was the next event that happened?

CW: We moved into the area of Normandy that would – known now as the hedgerow country, which was farming country, a lot of shrubbery around fields. We camped there. In the meantime, the project following D-Day had moved through the hedgerows and were headed to Paris – the advanced troops were headed to Paris.

HT: Did you stay in Paris very long, or was it sort of stopping off point?

CW: Actually, I did not get to Paris at that part of the tour. We were delayed in the Normandy area, the hedgerow area, because after landing the advancing troops were moving so rapidly that they were stretching supply lines, and all of our rolling equipment was commandeered to help set up what was called the Red Ball Express to move materials, food, and ordinance, everything to keep those troops rolling through France. And that caused us to remain in Normandy for an extended period. I've forgotten the length of time. I do remember it rained every day and living in pup tents, and it was awfully wet.

HT: This was the autumn of 1944, so it started getting cool?

CW: Yes, it was late September – early October.

HT: You and the other troops probably sat around quite a bit just waiting for the next set of orders to come down. How did you occupy your time?

CW: As I remember it – and that’s 65 years ago – we continued the military training, in order that everybody remained capable, disciplined, organized. And the leadership of the division simply set up training programs.

HT: You mentioned earlier – going back to the Red Ball Express, can you tell me some more about that? Because I’ve heard a little about that, the stretching of the supply line and that sort of thing. Did you – of course, you weren’t really involved in that at all?

CW: No, they just used our rolling stock, rolling trucks.

HT: Did you ever get those trucks back?

CW: Eventually we did. The Red Ball Express was just a continuous flow of materials and equipment, and those trucks were run, as I understand it, twenty-four hours a day without ever stopping the engines, just kept them rolling. You would substitute a crew.

HT: Wow.

CW: Made sure that those advanced troops got what they needed. This was a time when General Patton was moving rapidly through France. The tanks required a tremendous amount of gasoline. Troops were beginning to be spread over wider territory, and they had to be fed and equipped.

HT: That must have been a logistical nightmare.

CW: Well, I suppose it was. That’s what created the Red Ball Express.

HT: I had heard – I think Betty Carter, the university archivist, said that black troops were involved in the Red Ball Express, are you familiar with that at all?

CW: No, not as such. At the time we are discussing, this part of the military activity – troop personnel were still segregated. I believe there was an emphasis, my belief only, on service assignments for the African-American troops. So they might have been in the quartermaster corps, or might have well been involved in this transportation. I don’t know. I was not aware of anything unique in that area other than the segregated troops, such as the Tuskegee Flyers.

HT: When did you and the rest of the troops finally move out of the Normandy area?

CW: In the latter part of October, we moved by rail through France to the area of the West German border, a border of West German – I'm sorry, the Western border of Germany – through Belgium and Holland.

HT: Now, in December 1944, the Battle of the Bulge began. And I think you mentioned on the phone that you were on the peripheral of that battle.

CW: Before that battle we were committed to the line, front line, at the German border near a town called Aachen. That's spelled A-a-c-h-e-n.

HT: That's where Charmaine had his headquarters?

CW: Yes. And from the time of that entry into the firing on activity, we had the assignment to work through what was referred to then as the Siegfried Line of the western defense that Germany had built. I don't know the exact distance between Germany's western border and the Roer, and that's R-o-e-r River, which was the backbone of that defensive line. But it took into about mid-December to work through that area, which was heavily fortified with pillboxes, tunnels, pre-defined defense mechanisms. Took until mid-December to get to the river. That was our toughest fighting experience. Some days you would advance 100 yards, some days a quarter mile. But it was slow and difficult and very expensive as to equipment and personnel.

HT: Of course, being the winter that didn't help, I'm sure.

CW: It was wet and cold, coldest winter, I think, on record in Western Europe. We had a lot of non-battle casualties like sickness, frostbite, frozen feet.

HT: And, of course, the non-casualties had to be moved back to hospitals and that sort of thing to be taken care of.

CW: They were evacuated from our unit. I don't know where they went.

HT: Were they replaced, to your knowledge?

CW: Oh, yes. Replacements were coming to all these front-line units all the time.

HT: What type of cannon did you have at that time?

CW: I had a Newman [?] rifle.

HT: That was it?

CW: That was it.
[End of First CD]

CW: The distances between our forces and the enemy were anywhere from fifty to a few hundred yards. Every now and then it would be a direct confrontation, but we didn't – I didn't experience any hand-to-hand conflict myself. We were prepared for it with bayonets, grenades, and we attacked a pill box. It was shorter distances, but by and large, that's the purpose of the rifle. We had as part of our organization – be it platoons or companies – we had machine guns and mortars, all hand-held, the type that you could carry. We were – had assigned, from time to time, other armaments such as tank companies. This was infantry service.

HT: And I'm assuming you slept in tents?

CW: No. Fox holes.

HT: Fox holes, that's unbelievable. So, every day or every time you moved, you had to dig a new fox hole?

CW: Yes.

HT: Yourself, or did you help each other? How did that work?

CW: Most of the experience I had was with one other person. So, there were two men fox holes so that you could have alternate watches throughout the night.

HT: I'm sure those fox holes are not very comfortable, being wet and cold and that sort of thing, no cover.

CW: Oh, we covered them by digging them large enough for two people. Get whatever scrap you can find, cover part of it, leaving the hole just large enough to get in and out. Then you'd throw some of the dirt back on top of the cover.

HT: I'm assuming you were not allowed to build fires or anything like that?

CW: No, we had to get in the fox hole and pull some kind of cover over the opening. You could use the ration box, which was covered in wax and turn it on its end and set it on fire like a candle – use it to knock some of the chill off the food. And the little boxes were about four inches wide by eight inches long – didn't last too long, but they would provide a little bit of light and warmth.

HT: And what about food?

CW: Food was in the form of, you know fox holes, in the form of what you called K-rations or very condensed high-energy food packaged in either – within that little container – either in tin or some kind of a sealant like a cellophane sealant.

HT: And how did you acquire the K-rations because if you were constantly moving, how did supplies get to you?

CW: They would be distributed at night under cover of darkness. And you put one or two or three in your knapsack, carry them with you.

HT: Because you had to travel fairly light, I assume?

CW: Yes, when you're in that mode. Now, if you weren't in that mode one hundred percent of the time – being in it for several weeks, two or three weeks at a time, and then shift off in reserves. Go back a mile or two. Reserve troops would take over. During that period when you were stationary, you'd dig your hole a little bit bigger at night, and just live in it.

HT: Do you recall what the soil was like in this area, rocky?

CW: No, I don't remember it being rocky. I remember it being mucky because of all the rain. But this was farm country. Land had been tilled for generations. The little folding shovel that you had.

HT: I'm assuming that all the civilians had been evacuated long before you got there.

CW: In the area where our most intensive fighting, that's true. We didn't see any civilians until after crossing the Roer River. Between the Roer and the Rhine, we began to see a few civilians. That was after the Battle of the Bulge.

HT: What type of communications did you and your fellow troops have with people in the back, at headquarters and that sort of thing?

CW: Just word of mouth, with each other if there was need be. Communication, actual formal communications, which were largely by one or two means. One was hand-held radio phones pretty much limited to the signal personnel. And when they had wire, land wire, to roll out between the headquarters unit to some other life-type unit, wire was just laid on top of the ground.

HT: Now, during the time you were in this area, did your fellow troops have to retreat, or was it always a forward advance?

CW: Unfortunately, at times, we had to give up some land. But movement was very limited. It was all on foot through those muddy fields, and – but we didn't go very far at a time. And we might suffer a counter attack, lose some ground, and have to retake it.

HT: So, I understand the Battle of the Bulge lasted until sometime in January of 1945. So, you were out there during the holidays and that sort of thing?

CW: In our area we had pretty well achieved our objective of the Roer River by mid-December. We were preparing to cross the river and continue the advance when

the Battle of the Bulge, which was really a counter attack, Germany's massive counter attack, against our lines began about that time. Somewhere like a week or so before Christmas, as I remember the timing. It was south of our then positions. And best we could learn, that direction of that movement was toward Liège, Belgium, which was a big supply depot. The Germans were running short of supplies, particularly fuel, so it looked as though they were headed to Liège to capture what we had – what the United States had. We were east of there, east of Liège. In the effort to stop that counter attack were counters by the Allied troops, largely U.S. troops, on both the north and south of that wedge that the Germans were developing. In the beginning of that attack, the Bulge attack, was in very poor weather, cloud cover, dense fog. So, our Air Force was unable to assist. Shortly after Christmas the skies cleared. Air Force was able to attack the Germans – U.S. Air Force, they would attack the Germans. Together with ground forces, it pretty well stopped that effort.

HT: Were there British or other Ally troops nearby?

CW: The British were north of the U.S. troops, and the Canadians were north of the British, all toward the North Sea, toward the Channel Islands. The French were south of U.S. troops, from most of the counter – most of the effort to stop the Bulge, the German Bulge, was provided by the American troops.

HT: I was reading a little bit before I came out. Apparently, General Montgomery, a British general, got in quite a bit of trouble by sort of claiming that the British had done more than they actually had in the Battle of the Bulge. Do you recall this at all? Was there a little bit of –

CW: I don't remember.

HT: Do you recall who your commanding general was?

CW: General Keating was commander most of the time that I remember.

HT: Keating?

CW: K-e-a-t-i-n-g. I'm having trouble now remembering whether he was regimental commander or the division commander.

HT: You had mentioned General Patton earlier in the conversation. Do you have any thoughts about General Patton?

CW: No, other than that he was very effective at what he was doing in the Third Army. I was in the Ninth Army.

HT: Right. How about General Eisenhower, do you have any thoughts about him?

CW: Yes. Obviously, he was highly admired. To lead such an effort and to have the fortitude to organize and carry out the D-Day landing, and the advances through Western Europe, was just indescribably great. So, I can only admire him having been one of the participants in that program.

HT: You never got a chance to meet him, though?

CW: No.

HT: Well, I guess we better get back to your time. And this was in Northern Germany, not in Belgium, where you were on the other –

CW: Went through Belgium and Holland. Basically, all of my fighting activity was in Northern Germany.

HT: Northern Germany. And so, what happened next after, I guess, it was January 1945?

CW: The Battle of the Bulge was contained. And troops had to be repositioned and reequipped. We had been holding in our positions on the northern side of the Bulge – very little fighting activity, but constant peppering away with small arms fire. Everybody did that. And our next major move was to cross the Roer River. So, it was not a – it was a major river, but not a large river. But the problem was that at the headwaters of the Roer were two major dams. And it was presumed, correctly, that the Germans would destroy those dams and allow that water to flood the river any time we attempted to cross it. And that's exactly what happened in February of '45. After the water receded a little bit, still swift, engineers built a foot bridge across the river. And in late February, a massive attack was organized, and we crossed, moving in a northeasterly direction somewhat aligned to the shore of the North Sea. We advanced through Garrison [?], Mönchengladbach, to the Rhine River. Took about ten days of continuous activity.

HT: Now, during all this time were you ever wounded?

CW: Afterwards, later.

HT: No frostbite?

CW: No.

HT: So, what happened after the troops got to the Rhine River?

CW: Fortunately, south of where we were at the river, one bridge remained. Some very thoughtful troops in the Third Army – I believe it was, the first or the Third, both of which were south of us – crossed the river at Remagen, and established a

beachhead on the east side of the river. And the efforts, the mission, permitted equipping that beachhead – again had no relationship to our position, but it allowed the beachhead to expand, and the forces to be concentrated at that location. And in early April, the Rhine was bridged by our engineers into Duisburg – which is north of Düsseldorf, major city – and we were able to cross the river on rolling stop, that's trucks, and begin the long road to the Elbe River. And went through major cities like Munster, Belleville, Hanover to the Elbe.

HT: How did the determined civilians react as you were going through all these German cities?

CW: I only had about five or six days of that particular activity, but my recollection is that the citizens were very complacent and knew the war had been lost. They were cooperative. At that point they were not a hindrance to our efforts.

HT: And did you ever reach the Elbe River?

CW: I didn't. I got into a firefight at the Weser River, which is just west of Hanover. We had a three-day battle, and I was shot on the second day.

HT: So, I guess you had to be evacuated back to the hospital somewhere?

CW: Yes, sir. Go back in stages through your regimental command team, your battalion, your regiment, and I finally wound up at a field hospital at Paderborn. Had some initial surgery. Then from Paderborn to a general hospital in Paris.

HT: How long of a recovery period did you have?

CW: Two months.

HT: And did you have to have physical therapy and that sort of thing?

CW: No, I had more surgery, but I didn't have to have any physical therapy other than what I administered to myself. It was just movement activity.

HT: So, how did you find the care in the field hospital, and the general hospital?

CW: Far as I was concerned, it was adequate. They got me –

HT: They got you patched together.

CW: They got me put back together.

HT: That's right. Was it very severe, the wounds?

CW: I don't think you would rate it as very severe when we think about the kinds we see today, or the kind that are televised. It was – fortunately, nothing structurally was destroyed. I had a bullet that went through the top part of my shoulder, did not hit any bones. So, I had a rather ragged laceration where the bullet came out. But absent the structural damage and the fact that the bullet went on through instead of lodging in me, they were able to repair it, and I just had to grow it back.

HT: So, this was probably – by the time you left the Paris hospital, this must have been May or June?

CW: June.

HT: '45?

CW: Yes.

HT: And, so, V-E Day you were probably in Paris?

CW: I was in Paris. Yes.

HT: For V-E Day. And what was that like, do you recall?

CW: I was in the hospital that day, and, obviously, everyone was elated. Actually, the hospital was on the outskirts of Paris. So, I couldn't see what was taking place. I did get into the heart of the city a few days later. And, obviously, everyone was thrilled, excited, appreciative, and I got to enjoy that, those accolades.

HT: Right. So, after your recovery, were you able to go home back to the United States, or –

CW: No, returned to the unit, to the 102nd.

HT: But by this time the war was over?

CW: Yes.

HT: And so, how much longer did you remain in the Army?

CW: I came home, left Europe the end of December. Had to wait my turn on the boat.

HT: Everybody had accumulative points, is that right?

CW: Correct. Those with the greatest number of points were the first ones to return, and that's appropriate.

- HT: So, what kind of activities were you involved in from the time you left the hospital till the time you got to come home in December?
- CW: During that period, without being called an army of occupation – that’s really what we were – and our duties were largely guard-type duties. At the time I returned to the unit, they were still positioned along the Elbe River where they had been at the end of the war, just arrived at the end of the war. Later, we were transferred, or moved – transferred the position in Eastern Bavaria near the junction of the Austrian and Czechoslovakian border where it joins Germany. That guard duty or Army occupation-type role continued. Still not quite sure what we were doing, but we were positioned at a juncture point with the Russian troops. We simply had a log across the road. They were on one side, and we were on the other.
- HT: How did you find the Russian troops?
- CW: These were the troops who had fought through the war, and could not have been nicer or more enjoyable. We communicated by whatever methods two foreign languages can. And those that were in position in the field at the end of the war were wonderful – attitude great – were all glad to see the war was over. We had a common interest. Later, those older troops – the older Russian troops, I suppose they had been in their mission for years – were relieved and allowed to go home, and the younger ones were replacing them. We found their attitudes entirely different – cordial, but unfriendly.
- HT: Did you ever figure out why, what had changed in the two different types of troops?
- CW: We didn’t know at the time.
- HT: You didn’t know at the time. And what was your guess later on, any ideas what might have transpired?
- CW: Well, now that we know that the Cold War evolved, I suppose –
- HT: It had something to do with that?
- CW: I suppose that was the training they had to consider us as nonaffiliated. Whereas the early part of that experience, we all had a common interest. We had won the war after years and years of effort, and defeating our enemy was a common bond. It’s only natural.
- HT: Well, if I can backtrack just a little. During your entire time from the time you reached Cherbourg to the time you went back home, did you receive mail from home and that sort of thing?

CW: Yes.

HT: And packages, or anything like that?

CW: Periodically every few weeks some would come through.

HT: And you were able to write as well?

CW: Yes.

HT: So, was there –

CW: A little bit. Couldn't do much. Couldn't carry much. Couldn't handle it.

HT: And did you receive newspapers or anything like that from time to time?

CW: I don't remember anything other than the *Stars and Stripes*, which was an Army publication.

HT: Right.

CW: The paper Andy Rooney was a correspondent for. He speaks of it every now and then as being a war correspondent.

HT: Right. He spoke about it Sunday night.

CW: Yes. He had on his life jacket. I still have mine.

HT: I think he said that his didn't fit very well any more.

CW: Mine's a little snug.

HT: Well, and how did you get home, another troop ship?

CW: Yes. My number finally came up in December, earlier than the rest of the division because I had been there from the beginning. I was transferred to another division and left Le Havre, France, late December – middle or late December, I've forgotten when – on a Liberty ship. Liberty ships were so – they were built, mass produced by, Chillbiller's Lake, Kaiser Shipbuilding Company. I guess others were building them. They were just lumbering war-type tubs. We used to joke about them that they were propelled by – our joking was they were propelled by a wound-up rubber band. It took two weeks for that ship to get from France to New York.

HT: Do you by chance remember the name of the ship, do you?

LW: No.

HT: And I bet you were glad to see the United States?

LW: I was.

HT: And you were discharged somewhere in the New York area, or did you have to go back to Fort Bragg?

LW: Back to Fort Bragg.

HT: And so, when did you actually get out of the Army?

LW: In the end of January '46.

HT: '46. Then, I guess, it was back to Greensboro?

LW: Yes.

HT: And see the family again.

LW: Family came to – excuse me [coughs] – to pick me up.

HT: What kind of adjustment did you have to go through when you finally got home?

LW: I don't remember any adjustment period. Re-matriculated at Chapel Hill. But what should be recognized is that this wasn't unique. Half the people at Chapel Hill had a similar experience somewhere in some form.

HT: Did you start at Chapel Hill again that spring semester, or did you have to wait till the fall?

LW: I started in the spring.

HT: In the spring, okay.

LW: At that time we were on the quarter system.

HT: Oh, okay.

LW: So, I could pick up the spring quarter, starting as I remember in late March.

HT: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill to further your education?

LW: Yes.

HT: I guess there was a huge – I know there was a huge influx at N.C. State of guys using the GI Bill, and, naturally, the same thing at Chapel Hill. There wasn't room for everybody.

LW: Well, they simply put three people in every two-man room.

HT: And I know at N.C. State they had quonset huts for teaching purposes.

LW: We had those at Chapel Hill.

HT: It was just absolutely amazing. But everybody was glad the war was over. They wanted a further education and that sort of thing. That's great.

LW: At that time, you felt like you had lost three years. And the psychology that I suppose was in everybody's mind, in one way or another, was how do we make it up? How do we get back to what we were doing and planning to do? The inconveniences of three people in a two-man room, the crowded classes, the lack of transportation, those were insignificant to the goal of mitigating that three years, or whatever everybody had. That was not an uncommon time frame. How do you mitigate the use of that for something that's not going to be very productive? Can't use it very well in later life. What do you use a war experience for? Yes, you enhanced your maturity by virtue of the experience, but what were you doing then that would aid the vocation or the activity that you'd planned or were going to experience later on? A tradesman might have learned a skill. Perhaps he didn't go to school. He went to work in some productive capacity, factory or something. But those of us who were trying to get an education to do something else, recognized that we had expended three or so years of our life for an activity that was not going to provide much benefit.

HT: I guess the greatest benefit was the GI Bill because –

CW: From a programmatic standpoint the GI Bill and the financial assistance through housing were the two great benefits.

HT: Well, do you have any unusual stories that we haven't covered this afternoon about your time in the military that you would like to add to the interview?

CW: I can't think of any.

HT: OK. Well, I don't think I have any other questions to ask. Well, I do have one. What did you think of President Roosevelt? I've read sort of a biography this past weekend about what's called "Roosevelt and Lucy," one of his paramours. Of course nobody knew about that in those days.

CW: As a citizen, I did not care for the so-called New Deal programs. I am a conservative, and I suppose I was a conservative then without knowing just what I

was. But the Robin Hood types of governmental programs were offensive to me, because I had been brought up to look after yourself. On the other hand, it was time for many of those programs, as I've later learned. They were being discussed by his cousin, Theodore Roosevelt, thirty years before. They just had not been adopted. So, it was time for some of them. I thought then that the imposition of many of those programs was excessive. I don't know that that's so, because we couldn't do it two different ways. We had terrible conditions with the Depression. We needed something. As to the war effort, I believe he gave it as strong leadership as I could expect from anyone. He led the effort to assist the Allies without involving us in active confrontational participation, let the other guys do it. The Lend-Lease Program I'm speaking of, and the other assist programs that provided for the Allies, those who were doing the fighting. I think that was an excellent governmental program in our own defense. I've heard all the stories about Roosevelt encouraging our entry into the war to aid the economic situation. I don't know if any of that's true or not, but I do know as a consequence we became the strongest nation in the world. We under whatever leadership existed, and he had to have the credit for some of it whether Truman was a beneficiary of carrying it out, those programs post World War II – both internal or domestic programs, such as the GI Bill, and external, such as the Marshall Plan, to help our enemies rebuild – were brilliant governmental moves. And I believe Roosevelt is entitled to a credit for a great deal of that. So, I have mixed emotions. I don't like the liberal part of the domestic leadership. I do like what was a consequence of international and foreign involvement. And ultimately, domestic – in the end with the GI Bill and like program, we did not have a financial crisis at the end of World War II like we did World War I, 1921. We bridged all that. And when you assess society and society's gains, much of which emanated from the war effort, we're infinitely better off than we ever were. We took a leap forward like no society has ever done. Now, somebody's responsible. He gets the credit. Others, obviously, had to have a hand in it, a major hand. But no society, no nationality, no other broad group that you can define, has ever progressed at the rate, and to the extent, that this society did following World War II. Tom Brokaw's reference, the Greatest Generation, we're simply the beneficiaries of all that activity.

HT: Well, I don't have any other questions. So, I thank you so much for your time this afternoon. It's been great listening to your stories about scouting and the war.

CW: Thank you for taking the time.

HT: You're so welcome.

[Recorder turned off]

[End of interview]