

This interview is being conducted on Thursday, December 3, 2015 at the home of Frank A. Skowron. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Mr. Skowron who served in the U.S. Army, 45th Infantry Division during World War II. He heard of the Veterans' History Project through me and has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans History Project. Here is his story:

When and where were you born?

I was born in Chicago, October 12, 1924.

Some family details -- What were your parents' occupations?

My father worked in a factory; my mother was a homemaker. – there was ten kids.

Oh, my goodness. That's the next question – how many brothers and sisters did you have?

Yeah, ten – five and five.

So there were five boys and five girls in your family.

Yes.

And did any of the boys go into the service?

Yes, I had one brother who went into -- he was in the Navy.

And was he in during World War II as well?

He was – yeah, he was in World War II.

What was his name?

His name was Joe.

Joe Skowron.

Yeah.

He came home from the war – I take it?

Yes, he came home safe.

What did you do before entering the service?

I just did odd jobs. I worked in a grocery store, more or less.

Did you graduate high school?

No. Wait a while – I have one year of high school.

How old were you when you went into the Army? Were you drafted or did you enlist?

I was drafted.

What year was that?

Well, it must have been in 1943.

How old were you in 1943?

18.

Where did they send you?

Well, they sent me to Fort Benning. – Fort Sheridan they sent me and from there they sent me to Fort Benning.

Did you have basic training at Fort Sheridan?

No, I had my basic training in Fort Benning.

So they just sent you to Fort Sheridan just as an entry – going in through Fort Sheridan?

I had my training – where the heck was it – Texas –

Well, Fort Benning is Georgia.

That's where I ended up, in Fort Benning.

Well, where else did they send you – did you have specialized training?

No. Camp Walters, Texas; that's where I had my basic training.

Camp Walters, Texas – and then what happened after basic training?

-- interruption -- **Basic training in Camp Walters in Texas. How long were you there for basic training? Couple of months?**

Yeah.

And that was just regular Army infantry training?

Yeah.

And where did you go from Texas, do you remember?

They put me on a ship to go overseas.

Do you remember which ship it was – the name of it or anything?

No, I don't remember.

How was the ride going overseas – was it rough, was it bad.

Well, it was rough; it was more or less on a Liberty Ship.

Oh, a Liberty Ship, okay. So where did you land when you got to Europe?

Inaudible

England or France –

No audible response

Did you go to a base – any European base?

I forgot a lot of that stuff.

Well, that's okay. You landed somewhere in Europe. What did you do once you got to Europe. Did they put you right into action?

More or less so, yeah.

Can you describe it? What did you have to do?

WE were going up to the front lines.

And where was the front line at that time?

In Anzio.

Are you saying Auran?

No, wait a while – Anzio.

This was in 1943, so the war definitely was going on at that time. Before – I know you told me and you'll tell me about it again, you said you were at Anzio, but before you went to Anzio – did you go right to Anzio –

No.

Or did you go someplace else?

Somewhere else.

You don't remember where you were?

No.

Do you remember going to Anzio –

Well, from there we went --

How about if I – Frank has given me a booklet here that was given to him on Veterans' Day in 2010 –it's called "Veterans Memorial" and he has a short biography in this booklet relating to his service. I think if I read this out loud he may remember some details – so I will read this into the record for Frank. There's also a photo of him in uniform.

"Corporal Frank Skowron served in World War II in the European-African-Middle Eastern Theater of Operations. His service was honored with a Bronze Star, American Campaign Medal and European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with two bronze service stars with Arrowhead, as well as numerous medals and badges earned for Meritorious Service."

Frank also has a framed wall showcase with all his medals in it.

"Frank was captured during the Anzio Invasion and reported missing in action on February 17, 1944. After military training at Camp Walters, Texas, Frank was assigned to the 45th Infantry Division and shipped to Europe as part of the invasion of Anzio. During the battle he was captured by German troops and marched to a prison camp three miles south of Rome. It was a replacement center from which prisoners were transferred to concentration camps in Axis-occupied Europe. During an Allied bombing raid, Corporal Skowron and others escaped from the camp. They met friendly farmers who dressed them in civilian clothes and were told to go to the Vatican for help. Meeting with the Italian underground, he lived for days in the catacombs before being placed with a family who lived directly across the street from the German headquarters. He remained in seclusion, evading capture from numerous searches until the liberation of Rome. After the liberation and an audience with the Pope, Corporal Skowron was shipped back to the United States."

Wow, that is quite a story. There are a couple of other men in this booklet –

Oh, yeah. That was at a Charter School where I was honored for my service.

Right, they were honoring the servicemen – I see, this is UNO – Veterans Memorial School Campus – this was downtown – 954 W. Washington Boulevard Third floor –

Yeah, but that was on 47th Street near Pulaski in Chicago.

Well, did that jog your memory? Can you give me some of your first-hand accounts of this when you were at Anzio?

At Anzio - I had my training, more or less, and went out to the front lines.

Okay, so describe the invasion. How did you get there? Were you on one of –

Well, I was a replacement.

Okay.

I wasn't actually in the invasion, you know.

Okay, you were replacement troops for the guys who were in there.

Yeah. That's where I got captured.

How did that happen? Do you remember how you got captured?

We were put in the wrong position by mistake. Instead of putting us in back of the road, they put us in front of the road.

Oh, my gosh.

And the German tanks come down right behind us and lowered the 88, and they said, Oops, just come out, and that was it.

How many men were with you when you were captured?

Quite a bit.

Well, can you give me a number?

Probably a whole platoon.

And how many men in a platoon?

Well, there must be at least 120 or so –

Wow – 120 men – so you were all taken at one time –

Yeah.

And where did they take you?

To a prison camp just south of Rome. It was a replacement – from there they shipped them to Berlin.

Well, how long did you stay at this prison camp south of Rome?

About 12 days; we weren't in - helping put up a barbed wire fence.

So they put you all to work right away.

They put us to work – when you worked you got a slice of bread –

Um-hmm – one slice?

We got a loaf of bread split with six people.

Okay. And where did you sleep? How was the sleeping?

It was more or less in a closed place; it must have been an Italian studio –

Okay.

I mean they must have been making films there and all; we called it Hollywood.

Ha, ha, ha

We called it Hollywood, and they closed the door, you know,

But where did you sleep – did you have beds or – on the floor?

Laid on the floor with – they had straw on there and that.

On the floor – gee

Yeah.

So you were there for twelve days.

Yeah, I was in there twelve days.

So what happened after the 12 days?

I had a chance to escape. The American planes were on a bombing mission and the security guard that was out there with his machine gun was watching our planes going on a mission and that's when we got a chance to crawl under the fence – and then we got outside the fence and we hid in this studio, more or less – I mean that I called Hollywood. And we just waited until it got dark – and then when it got dark we started crawling around, looking around for some help and some farmers said that they – you gotta keep going because there's tedeski (phonetic) – they called it tedeski – the Germans were around. And so we kept walking until some farmers helped us out. And they said try and go to the catacombs – and that's where we had – you could get help over there. So then we walked; we got to the catacombs – we spent about five days there so -- and they placed us in with -- we walked in to Rome and they placed us with different families.

How many guys escaped?

Well, quite a bit escaped, but the fella I escaped with could speak Italian, so we more or less went together. And then once we got into Rome we split up with different families.

What was the man's name that you escaped with --

I'm not sure.

Who spoke Italian?

I think his name was George, or something like that; I'm not sure.

Okay, not sure.

But anyhow we split up and I went with one family and he went with another family.

So you were not a prisoner for long because you escaped.

Yeah.

So how long did you stay with this family in Italy?

Well, we stayed there until the Americans liberated Rome.

So for over a year?

No.

Over a year – this was February of 1944 that you got captured – so I don't know – when was Rome liberated?

In '44.

Where were you – like in the basement of their house?

I lived there in their flat.

You couldn't go outside or anything, could you?

I was getting – I had a brand new suit – I got that in the other – inaudible – sleeves were about a mile long, hanging out, but when the Americans liberated Rome – that's when we got to visit with the church and that.

You went to visit the Pope?

Yeah.

Which Pope was it – Pope Pius XII?

Yes. There's a picture of the Pope.

Frank has a picture on his wall – I'll take a look at it – this is Pope John Paul

Yeah. But I didn't talk to the Polish Pope.

(reading) His Holiness Pope John Paul II imparts a special Apostolic Blessing for Frank and Lucille Skowron on the occasion of their 50th Wedding Anniversary. That was years later – Pope John Paul – but did you see the Pope when you were in Italy after you escaped?

After they liberated Rome, after Rome was liberated.

Okay, but that had to be in 1944. Are you saying that you saw the Pope then, in 1944?

Yeah, it must have been in '44.

Well, that was Pope Pius XII –

Something like that, yeah.

Did you go with other servicemen – all you guys who were –

That was – quite a bit of servicemen, you know.

And he met them all?

Yeah.

Pope Pius XII – he just gave a blessing –

Yeah.

Gave everybody a blessing – wow! So how long after that did you return home?

Well, they – that's when we were sent back to the camp and we waited – just waiting until we got a chance, after they had – they were supposed to fly me back to the States, 'cuz I was an ex prisoner of war; in case I got captured again they could shoot me, you know. I saw a lot of behind the lines. And then they put us – they told me they're gonna fly me all the way back to the States, and I didn't know my father was sick at the time.

Oh!

And they were – they were notified that I was missing in action; they got telegrams and so on and so forth, and so when they were gonna send me home, they were gonna fly me back to the States. They flew me from Italy to Africa and from Africa they put me on a Liberty Ship that took 21 days to get back home.

Oh my God!

So when I got home my Dad was in the funeral parlor; I missed him by one day. He didn't know if I was dead or alive!

Oh, that's too bad!

Yeah.

Italy to Africa – so then from Africa – so 21 days –

Yeah.

How was that trip on the water?

Lousy.

Did they have hammocks inside – where did you sleep on this ship?

Like that, you know.

Hammocks?

Somewhere along -- like that.

Did you get sick on the ship – seasick or anything?

A little bit when I was – from the start.

It was a long trip home.

Yeah. I didn't care but as long as my Dad – they lied to me. They told me I was gonna fly all the way back to the States –

Yeah.

And they flew me from Italy to Africa. And then they put me on a damn Liberty Ship – yeah.

Well, when you came back home – then – were you officially discharged from the Army?

No.

Well, what happened after your Dad –

From there that's when I went – I was – I had to go – that's when I went to Fort Benning.

Oh, Fort Benning.

All overhead cadre – that's where they wanted –

Okay, so did you get – how long did you stay at Fort Benning?

That's where I got discharged at the – convenience to the government – because I was a prisoner of war and I was sweating out that I was gonna go maybe to the Japs
(inaudible)

So that's why you were discharged in two years – but the war was over in 1945 – the war was over by then. So you got discharged from Fort Benning, Georgia.

Yeah.

And then you came – how did you get back here to Chicago?

Let's see –

By train, by bus?

By train, I guess; that's at Fort Benning. I got to Fort Sheridan and then from there some of the soldiers were going past Chicago so they dropped me off.

Oh, you got a ride.

Got a ride from Fort Sheridan, and then I got a ride to Ashland and Fullerton, or something like that. That was close; I got on the trolley – the streetcar.

The streetcars, right, exactly. So you got out in July of 1945.

Yeah.

So what did you do when you got back home? How did you adapt to being back home again?

I just got acquainted with everything, more or less, my friends and that.

Yeah. You weren't married at that time, were you?

No. I got married in '48.

How about the fellows that you met in the service, did you ever keep in touch with them or anything?

I had – where I was driven when I was in Rome, I live right – the people I lived with, there was a woman. She must have been the mother, and she was actually from Detroit.

Really?

Yeah. So when I was home she surprised me. She come to see me; I was working at a liquor business at the time as a bartender.

Wow!

And she come – she really surprised me because I gave her my address and she used to make – she used to cut out the – her daughter was a dressmaker and she had that tissue paper – making, you know,

Right, making patterns.

Yeah, but she didn't – the mother used to cut out pieces of tobacco –

Oh, really, to roll tobacco?

Yeah, it was really something. But that - I was really surprised when she come to visit me. I didn't know. I didn't know she was coming or nothing –

She visited you in Chicago?

I told her where I was working and that and she come to that bar where I was working.

Wow – and where was that –

In Chicago

On the North Side?

Yeah, on the North Side. Stadium Liquors, they called it.

Is that where you went back to work when you came back from the war?

Yeah.

So you adjusted pretty well once you were back home.

Oh, yeah.

The highest rank you achieved was Corporal, is that right?

Yeah.

They made you a corporal because you were a prisoner of war?

No, no, not for that. I was entitled to it. I was up to Sergeant but that didn't go through, you know, at the time.

How about emotions relating to combat and witnessing casualties, did you do any of that – did you see casualties when you were at Anzio?

No.

You were captured fairly quickly. How about witnessing destruction – places in Italy – did you see a lot of that?

No. When we went to visit the Pope and all that and then some of the guys from the Third Army, they invited me to go with them, they were gonna take me for dinner, and they put me in a jeep and we got there and they took me for dinner and then I had to really – I had my dog tags with me but I was in civilian clothes, and I had to show them that I was a G.I.

Right, right.

So I had dinner with them and they give me some bread and some chocolate candy and that so when I got back to my apartment, I gave this to this couple. They had a little girl and a little boy named "Beano" -- I don't know what his name was, really.

Who was this couple? Where you were staying in Rome?

That's where I was hiding out with this family.

Oh, so that was like after you got clear, you went back there.

Yeah.

Okay. You did a lot of interesting things. So where were you when the war ended?

I was in Rome. No, wait a while --

Well, Europe got hit in June '44 but then in August '45 Japan got hit.

In June you were still in Rome.

Yeah.

When you came back home you went to work at Stadium Liquors.

Yeah.

And did you stay there – you kept that job for awhile?

Yeah.

How long?

Up till I got married.

Oh, okay, and then did you get some other job?

No, no, I stayed there. After I got married I worked for Continental Can Company –

Continental Can on the south side or north side?

On the south side – on 38th and Ashland. And that's where I got a remembrance (indicating his hand).

Oh, yes, I see. Frank has three fingers on his left hand – the middle finger, ring finger and little finger, are partially amputated to the knuckle. So that happened at Continental Can.

Yeah.

Regarding medals received and honors awarded, Frank has all his medals in a glass-enclosed case, with his photo included plus medals and ribbons.

This is the Prisoner of War Medal.

Prisoner of War Medal – okay.

The Bronze Star, and this was the 45th Division – and the Airborne – Paratroopers – and this is the 4th Division.

Did you say you were going to school for the Paratroopers?

No, I was attached to them.

Oh, you were attached –

I didn't do any jumping.

But you were attached to the Airborne.

This is my Combat Badge.

The blue bar with the long gun on it – very nice. What's this with the ship on it?

American Medal, Good Conduct Medal – I was a good boy.

Very nice. You have an outstanding history – how do you think – do you have any contact with fellow veterans today?

No.

Are you a member of any veterans organizations?

Oh yeah – Prisoner of War, American Legion, VFW – all three of them I joined.

Are you a lifetime member?

Yeah.

How do you think your military experience affected your life?

Well, I just had to get accustomed to it, that's all.

So you took it in stride.

Yeah, I had a lot of friends, and that's something they used to tell my Mother, don't worry, he'll be back.

Were any of your friends captured or prisoners?

No. I have some that were killed out there.

Oh. Buddies your age who were killed?

Oh Yeah, -- used to have a good baseball team, softball team and some of the guys that played ball with me never came back.

Wow! Makes you feel sad thinking about them.

Sure.

So what would you say are your life lessons learned from military service?

What did you learn from being in the service.

Learned to behave.

Ha, ha – you got to travel around; to see Europe and stuff.

Yeah, and I played ball in the Army.

Oh, you did? Was that before you went overseas?

Yeah, and when I came back.

You're a baseball player.

Yeah, I played ball with the –

Softball?

Hardball -- that was with the Army. I think I played third base.

Okay.

Third base and I pitched.

Okay, so you were active in sports – anything else besides baseball?

No, I played a little basketball, but not much. And a little football; everything a little bit but mostly it was baseball.

Okay, I think that's it. Is there anything else that you want to add to it?

No, just happy I was home.

I'm sure you were.

The only thing I missed my Dad by one day.

That's too bad.

Yeah, if I would have – if they wouldn't lie – if they would have flew me in instead of putting me on that Liberty Ship, I would have been home.

Yeah, that's too bad. But I'm sure your mother was happy that you were alive.

Oh, yeah; it helped her out quite a bit.

So you couldn't write to your mother when you were living at this couple's house in Rome –

No, I could never

You couldn't notify her that you were actually alive.

No.

So all that time she thought you might be dead – well, she knew you were missing in action.

That's all.

That's hard to live with that for a year.

And then I - when I got liberated I figured well maybe I'll get a chance to call –

Yeah.

But I never did get a chance. I figured I'd surprise them, you know, that I'm home.

Then I got the surprise – that my Dad was gone.

How did you get notified about your father?

When I come home –

Oh, you didn't know at all when you were overseas.

No, I didn't get – the blinds were down and all that.

But I mean the Army didn't notify your mother –

No, no – I was on this Liberty Ship

Oh, yeah.

21 days. I wish I knew sooner. I would have made sure, got in touch with the Red Cross, you know, and they would have probably made arrangements.

Yeah, that's too bad. So, okay, you served your time and you did a good job and you're back home. Congratulations on your service, on your return. I appreciate the fact that you had this interview with me and I thank you very much for your service to our country.

Thank you.

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