

This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, February 9, 2016 at the home of James Bell Funk. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Jim who served in the U.S. Army and is a veteran of World War II. Jim learned of the Veterans' History Project through me and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

Jim, when and where were you born?

Sunbury, Pennsylvania.

And the date?

April 29, 1925.

What were your parents' occupations?

My Dad was on the Pennsylvania Railroad.

What was his job there?

He was an engineer and brakeman.

And how about your Mom?

No, she didn't work at all – a homemaker.

What did you do before entering the service?

Well, I was going to high school – Sunbury High – and I don't think I had any jobs at all.

I had to do the housework when I came home.

So you graduated from high school?

No, they took me to the service.

Oh, you left high school?

Yeah.

What year were you in?

I'd gone in the Senior year.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

I had one brother, one sister.

Did your brother spend any time in the military?

I don't know, like, 'cuz he was living with my mother's sister – because his mother died and she wanted my mother to take him.

Okay, so you were a Senior in high school - how did you enter the service – were you drafted or did you enlist?

I was drafted.

So they took you right out of high school?

They took me out of high school.

Wow – did you choose the Army or is that where they put you?

That's where they put me.

How did the draft go – were you notified – by mail – and what happened?

By mail.

And where did you have to go ?

Down in Sunbury, Pennsylvania, down in the draft office there.

They had like a recruiting office –

Yes, recruiting office for draftees. They gave me an examination –

Examination and physical and all that?

Yes, before we got in they sent us home to wait for the call. They marched all the draftees down the center of the street in a parade to the troop train.

Oh, yeah?

Yeah – going on to the train.

How was the departure for basic training and your early days of training – where did they send you?

I went to Camp Grant, Rockford, Illinois.

How much time did you spend there?

Let's see – basic training – I don't remember – six weeks.

Couple of months or more than that? Well, what did you do in basic training?

Oh, everything – learn how to litter bear –classes, drilling in formation; went hiking with Packs on our backs; bivouacs, field training.

Oh, that's right. Did you go right into Medical Corps – how did you get into the Medical Corps.

That's what Camp Grant was; that was the Medical Corps Camp –

Well how did you get into the medical corps – they must have picked you – did you take tests –

Yes. That was the whole camp; they train you for part in the medical corps.

I understand. But who determined that you were going to go there? Did you tell them that you wanted to be in the medical corps?

No, they just put me in there – in the medical corps.

Really? – So probably based on tests that you took, or something.

Probably, could be. I don't know.

Okay, so that was a whole medical camp for training. So what did you do there –

Litter bearing you said –

We went on camp outs – with back packs, five-mile hikes; bivouacs, classes --

Bivouacs –

And then couple of miles with a back pack on my back, you know –slept in sleeping bags in tents --

Hiking –

Hiking, everything.

How about rifle training?

No. Climbing under the barbed wire, we'd do that – but we didn't handle no guns.

You didn't handle guns?

They wouldn't let us, no; all we done was medical exercises, treating classmates, putting bandages on in cold campouts

Medics don't carry guns –

We had medical training, exercises where you take the litter bearer to the tent, and stuff like that.

Oh, that's interesting – but you had to do all the other basic training exercises except for gun bearing

That's right – exercises.

Marching and everything else.

Most definitely.

So you were there during the winter time –

Oh, yes, yes; it was cold.

You must have been there for 2 or 3 months –

At least, probably, maybe, I'd say about two months.

So after your basic training is completed, then where did you go?

I was sent on a boat to Africa – a liberty ship.

After your regular basic training, did you have any specialized training?

No.

This was all considered probably specialized training.

Yes.

And did this training with medical – did that include classroom training too?

Oh, yes, yes; they taught you a little bit about small medical procedures.

They taught you medical terms and things like that?

Yeah.

So you went on a liberty ship to Africa – where in Africa?

Oh, God, I don't remember.

North Africa?

I don't remember, but from there we went to Anzio Beachhead; it was all bombed out when I was there –

Do you remember what year that was? What year did you go in? Do you have

Your DD214 – any papers?

Oh, in my wallet.

You've got the miniaturized laminated DD214 – we're going to look at it. Jim showed me this before – the little wallet-sized ID card that he carries that shows he's a veteran. It has a lot of information on it; he's getting it out right now.

Looking at the DD214 – Jim entered the service in September 15, 1943 and was Discharged February 1, 1946 and he was a medical technician. We will continue – from Africa you went on another boat and went to Anzio –

Yes, to Anzio.

And do you remember when you landed there – with the regular – or was it afterwards.

It took quite a few days, around ten days on the water.

Was Anzio already taken?

Oh, yes, yes.

So you were like replacement troops, afterwards.

Yes.

So what did you – did you go in one of those landing crafts?

No, we went right into the harbor.

You went into the harbor

As best we could; it was all bombed out though.

Well, describe it, if you can, all bombed out –

Yeah; it was destroyed, the harbor. We had to get in along side of it then went on trucks – they put us on trucks

And where did you go with the trucks?

We went into somewhere – don't even know what town we went into; can't remember that much.

Was Italy liberated already when you came in?

Part of it; they were moving up –

But where you landed, that was taken already.

That was taken, near Naples. WE were camped outside of Naples.

And what did your company have to do -- what company were you with?

I was attached to the 34th Division, I think it was the 169th Medical Unit, attached to the 34th Division, called the "Red Bull Division."

So what was your job there –

Well, we had to go out at night –

And what did you go – just patrol –

Yeah, patrol, and once in awhile we got shelled and had to head for cover –

Did you tend to any injured men during this time.

Not in the field; Not there, no, no; only when I got back to where I was stationed.

Where were you stationed? Was it just out in the field or was it an Italian Camp or an American Camp.

It was an American Camp; it was outside someplace like in a farmhouse. We had to dig foxholes for two

And your whole division or your squad was there?

Yeah, yeah – not the whole division, just the 169th medical unit.

What did you do – just keep going on patrol –

Well, the second time I went out on patrol, we got shelled pretty bad and I got shook up because my foxhole mate was killed and I was hospitalized. I was just 18 years old and my nerves went to pieces so I was put in a hospital – in Caserta, Italy. (phonetic)

Was that a town – Caserta?

Yeah, yeah, there was an American hospital there. And I was in there, I think maybe about a week and then they transferred me to the A M F – I think it was – and they put me to work in a castle, which was set up like a dispensary – and I was in there until I came back home. I didn't see much action at all – except being shelled on patrol --

So you were like dispensing medications –

Oh, yeah, yeah, gave shots and everything – minor surgeries.

So you took – go on –

Treated minor wounds, opened up wounds and treated boils –

How about fractures and things –

Gave them shots too –

Did you ever set any fractures or take x-rays –

No, they had no x-ray machine over there, no, not in the place we were at, no.

They all come in just for, like this stuff here – small wounds, blood tests, shots --

But they came in after battle or were wounded – and you took care of them.

Some of them, yeah.

And how long did you stay there?

I was there probably a year and a half. I was there when they hung Mussolini.

Really? Did you –

I didn't see it; they wouldn't let us see it; they raised cane in that town, I'll tell ya.

And that hospital was in that town – Caserta?

Caserta – it was in a castle.

In a castle – in Caserta.

Yeah, winding steps going up; we had a beautiful place up there.

Like a stone castle.

Yeah, yeah, stone castle.

So you actually lived in that castle –

Yes. Sergeant made meals and one Italian sister – nuns slept there and everything; 'cuz people come in during the night. – Drunks come in.

Did you treat both Americans and Italians?

Yes, yes and also Germans.

What did they come in with?

From prison camps; had to give them blood tests and everything.

Oh yeah – were they in bad shape –

Just went ahead and give them a blood test – prisoners in the camps might have got infected, you know; they always had guards.

So what was the highest rank that you achieved?

A PFC – that's all. I was just about ready to go up to a Corporal but they shipped me out.

You were there throughout the end of the war.

Yep.

Where were you when the war ended?

I was in Caserta, Italy

How was it – tell me about it.

Boy, I'll tell ya – everybody – shooting guns in the air and everything else. And I think we had three medical technicians and we had one Colonel in charge of us; he was the main doctor.

He was an M.D.

Yes, yes.

So that's what you had, one doctor and the rest medical technicians.

Yes. Some was Staff Sergeants and some was Corporals and I was a PFC.

Okay, so now the war was over; that was 1945, right, August of '45?

Yeah.

But you continued on working there –

Yeah, still worked there.

How long did you stay there afterwards? You were discharged February 1946.

That means you were there a couple of months after the war ended.

Yeah, I was there, oh, a good six months, I think. They got a lot of people coming in with bad news, you know, stabbings, injured from fights; the MPs were bus.,

What were your emotions relating to combat and witnessing casualties?

It was upsetting; some – yeah, just Italians fighting, stabbing – we knew what had to be done.

How about American boys – did you see any American guys who died?

Yes. This is when that syphilis was going around and we had to treat that.

Really? And how did you treat it at that time?

Give them penicillin –

Shots or medicine, or both?

Just pills, penicillin pills and shots; they had gonorrhoea and everything else – all the venereal diseases.

Wow – okay, not too many war wounds – it was those kinds of wounds.

Yes; and they had boils and other things, cuts –

Dysentery?

Oh, dysentery – it's the food over there; some people will eat that – or drink some of that wine and it poisoned you – get them into the hospital real quick. Once in awhile I'd ride in the ambulance to take them to the hospital.

Did you drive it sometimes?

No, I didn't drive at all, no.

So you saw a lot of destruction as far as farmlands and barns and things like that

Oh, yeah.

How about buildings in the large cities –

Oh, Naples was tore apart.

You saw Naples ruined –

Yes. Naples and Anzio; the best thing was the Isle of Capri – that was beautiful; they didn't touch that. The Germans didn't touch that; didn't bomb it or nothing. They made an agreement they wouldn't touch it.

Naples was bombed though.

And then we seen a cathedral in Italy and that wasn't touched.. But, you know, I didn't enjoy myself. They took us places on I eave, so you wanted to see stuff. I sent a lot of pictures home and could never find them when I come out – especially when I left home. I wanted to take everything, my uniform, my mother threw it out – everything. They wouldn't allow pictures but I took them, but I didn't have nothing left.

How about the guys that you worked there with – did you ever keep in touch with them after the war?

No, I didn't. I wanted to forget the whole thing – especially when I had a nervous breakdown and put in the hospital – and I had to go to the doctor when I got home too – to check on me. They cured me of it - it took a long time though, I'll tell you.

So you had psychological problems, like PTSD –

Yeah, yeah.

They would call it that today – PTSD.

Yeah.

So when you were in Italy, how did you communicate with your family –

I sent them mail.

Just mail. Do you know how long it took for a letter to reach you from the states?

Over a week; sometimes two weeks before I'd get mail; used to send me cookies sometimes – took a month to get over there.

Oh, really – one month for cookies – packages.

Packages, yeah.

Were your letters censored?

Oh, definitely, yeah. I used to try to send pictures home and they were – she didn't get them. I was out – happened to be in the field there with soldiers, and I seen them – saw bodies in the truck –

Really

Laying in the fields, dead –

And you took a picture of that?

I got a picture or two and I sent them home, but my sister never got it.

They took it out – yeah.

But I saw it –

How did that make you feel?

Uh

Men and women both?

Just soldiers, Americans and mostly Germans. Americans they'd pick up and put them on litters and put them in the ambulance.

But the German soldiers they didn't –

Just pile them in the truck – the Germans done that; we didn't do that.

But where did they go?

They were prisoners of war – out in the field – cleaning the fields up. It wasn't fun.

No, I'm sure it wasn't. Did you ever go to the Vatican to see the Pope.

I went through the Vatican but he wasn't there.

But you did go?

Oh, yeah, what a beautiful place.

Like one trip there.

Oh, yeah; they wouldn't let you in but for two hours in there – it was a beautiful place; nothing touched; no bombs or anything.

They spared the Vatican.

Just like the Isle of Capri – what a beautiful island that was, oh.

So how did you get back home from Italy?

On a liberty ship –

How long did it take you to get across the water?

Let's see, I imagine about ten days on the liberty ship.

And how was the crossing, the trip itself – do you remember it?

Hah, a mess; a mess. People were throwing up all over, geez.

And how did you guys sleep – did you have hammocks?

Hammocks, on top of each other.

Like five high or –

Yeah, and sometimes they would heave over the side – you don't want to be low guy

So it was not a pleasant trip –

No, no; we had to go back to service in New York – cleaned up to get on the train to New York.

So you landed in New York –

From there we went to Mechanicsburg, PA by train.

You were from Pennsylvania so they took you closest to your home town.

And we were there about two days, maybe, doing nothin' you know,

So it was not a pleasant journey.

No, no food, and then we were always eating C-rations –

Oh, really, on the ship?

Yeah.

You mean they didn't cook on the return trip on the ship?

No, they were jammed in there; they wanted to get them home –

Wow, like a thousand men in there –

More than that.

I don't know how big those liberty ships were.

Can't remember the year.

Well, it had to be '46 –

There was a lot of them. I went over in a liberty ship and came home in one.

So how was your reception by family and friends. You weren't married at the time – you were a young boy.

No, I wasn't married; it was crowded. In Mechanicsburg we just got off the train and marched to the camp; they fed us real good the day we got in; then we got discharged.

Did your parents come down to pick you up or anything?

No.

How did you get home – to your actual house?

We took a troop train home – about 60 miles – the train stopped across the street from my house.

How nice – right in front of the railroad track.

The train runs right through the center of town – the railroad track.

How was your readjustment to civilian life?

It took about almost a week to actually, you know – people wanted to talk; ask me questions and I didn't answer them. And then my grandfather died about the second day I got home, so had to go to a wake for a couple of days.

You were lucky you got home in time.

Yeah, yeah. And of course they wanted to go out and celebrate and I got sick; that's the only time – the last time I ever had a hangover. I never drank after that. – Cuz I got sick on the red wine over there –

Well, that was home made wine, too --

Gross – like poison wine too, yes. I never got sick but – eat the food then drink the wine – you get sick - inaudible

The farmers would bring in food from around the fields there–

They'd wash our clothes too – we were on duty at least 10-12 hours a day; then another couple of guys would come in and stay overnight and we'd sleep. We had to make our own breakfast in the castle.

And how did you do that – what did you cook on?

They had stuff; they brought stuff out – the PX brought stuff over for us to fix, yeah.

Well, you didn't have C-rations there –

No, but we had some every once in awhile; but it was an experience.

Oh, yeah, sure, especially for an 18-year-old boy; you grow up fast.

Yes, I did. But then I come home and I didn't get too good a reception from my mother. I came home, went in the front door and I wanted to go out that night with my buddies and she wouldn't let me go. I said no, ma, I want to go anyhow. She got mad; didn't go home for two days – She was strict – uh!

Well, that's how things used to be a long time ago.

She was strict; I couldn't do nothin'. I'd come home from school and that's where I'd be.

She had a fit when I got drafted. My uncle was on the draft board too.

He got you in there probably to get away from her.

Oh, yeah.

Do you have any memberships in Veterans Organizations today?

I've got the American Legion; no VFW, just American Legion. They're going to give me a flag and stuff like that.

What did you do when you came back home – get a job?

Yes, I did. I couldn't sit home too much. There was a grocery store looking for help – I think it was called Wise's – they hired me as a bagger or a stockboy. So I was there and worked about a couple of months. Then I met a girl; she was real nice; but things didn't work out. So I just got upset and left Pennsylvania and went to Chicago.

Oh, really; you left home and got on a train and came to Chicago.

Yeah.

Wow – so did you know anybody in Chicago?

I met a girl at the USO in Chicago; she lived in Downers Grove. I went to her house and her parents didn't like me so I just got a hotel, rented it for a couple of weeks and got a job at the Burlington Railroad in the office on Jackson Boulevard – big building in Chicago – used to be an office boy – checked records for employees, ones that retired – pulled all their records out –

So you worked in the office at Burlington -

That's where I met my wife – went out on a blind date – her name was Muriel Erickson; she lived in Downers Grove. She worked at Burlington for four months – on the railroad

they post jobs on the bulletin board and you have to bid on them. I bid for the railroad yards; worked from 12 midnight till 8 in the morning.

Did you still work in the office?

No, I worked out in the yards – the trains would come in and we had to tag the train.

So what was your job title?

Just yardman – I was there for almost a year, and then I went to Ben Franklin.

A Ben Franklin Store?

Yeah, that was in Wheaton; I was assistant manager there; then I went to Chicago and I was an assistant manager there at a Woolworth Store.

So did you stay with Woolworth?

No, I was there about six months because they were pretty strict. I had to take a train every day all the way from my home to Chicago; it was getting expensive. I didn't make that much as it was. So one day my wife says, "Jim, why don't you take the post office exam; they're hiring." So I took the test and I passed it and worked there 26 years.

Oh, the Post Office – so you're a federal employee; so was I.

I was in the foreign mail for awhile; I liked midnights – doing magazines and stuff like that and the mail. And then there was a job for a window clerk and I was there about ten years as a window clerk.

So you worked different jobs in the Post Office.

Oh, yes. I was walking in the snow. A carrier for two years.

And you retired from the Post Office.

Yes. So that's it; I didn't do much of anything. I moved to Addison and bought a home there, and went back to the Ben Franklin Store for about six years, after the post office, as a manager. One morning the owner came in and said he was moving to Colorado –

he threw me the keys to the desk and walked out; it's your store, he said. (untranscribed portion).

You had a lively career going back and forth to jobs.

Oh, yeah.

That's pretty much your life story. How do you think your military service affected your life?

It affected me a lot; it made a gentleman out of me.

What were some of the things they instilled in you – like life lessons you learned in the military.

Help all people – running a grocery store – be nice to people. In the Army it's a lot different, you know, they cuss at you sometimes, if you don't do things right – what an experience.

Most people now, if you live through it, you came out, not smelling like a rose, but you came out a better person for it.

I'm surprised they put me in the Army; I only weighed about 145 or so, but I got in the Army, got a little weight on me –

They kept you, so --

Sometimes you're eating outside. Sometimes you're eating out of your helmet; what an experience.

Actually you didn't have any battlefield experience; you were in the hospital.

Yeah, I didn't want to see what I saw; especially sitting there with a shell landing next to you – 18 years old – you wonder if you're gonna make it, you know.

Yeah, okay. I guess that's about it. Anything else you want to add?

No, it was just an experience; really an experience for an 18-year-old. I learned a lot. I learned a lot.

Okay. Well, thank you, Jim, thank you very much for allowing me to do this interview and thank you for your service to our country. Thanks.

At least I done my share.

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Mr. Funk passed away in May of 2016. His daughter Melody, and son-in-law James Darrow, live at 1053 Heron Circle, Joliet, Illinois 60431 -- 630-802-1212