

This interview is being conducted on Thursday, August 13, 2015, at the home of Robert F. Schinderle. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Robert Schinderle, who served in the United States Army and is a veteran of World War II. Mr. Schinderle has learned 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 8-3-23 at Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. St. Agnes Hospital – the oldest child of my parents.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

I had two brothers and a sister. My brother was badly injured in an accident when he was riding a motorcycle, so he was never drafted. And my younger brother was just young enough that he missed the draft. My sister went to college and became a teacher and taught all of her working life.

What about your family – what did your parents do?

My father was an insurance agent and mother was a stay-at-home housewife.

What did you do before entering the service?

I was a student –

Tell me the story –

I graduated from high school; I had started college at St. Norbert. I completed my Freshman year and was in the second semester of my Sophomore year. during that year and a quarter that I was in St. Norbert College, I was a participant in the R.O.T.C. Training program –

Mr. Schinderle told me this before we began – it was around Easter of 1943 – they were going to discontinue the R.O.T.C., and as a result – what happened to you?

Well, I can't say for sure that they were going to discontinue all units, but they were going to discontinue the one at St. Norbert College. Because we had had a year and a half of Officer Training in the R.O.T.C. program, they inducted the entire class – all of the students who participated in the R.O.T.C. program at that time and they sent us to basic training as a unit. We of course were split up when we got to the camp for basic training, but we were close enough to each other that we were able to continue our relationships – friendships.

How many guys would you say were in that class – that all went into the Army.

Yep, all went into the Army –

How many –just roughly --

Let's see – 15-20 – probably 40 or 50.

Wow, quite a group.

Yes.

Okay, so where did you go for this basic training? Where did they send you?

You in particular –

To Georgia –

Do you remember the name of the camp?

Oh, boy – I would say to Macon, and I can't remember –

Okay, Macon – and how long were you there?

Three months.

Can you describe, like a typical day, of what you had to do in boot camp?

Regular Army training – boot training –

So, that was marching, and gun drilling –

Marching and gun drilling --

How about classroom instruction?

Not at that time.

Just physical –

However, since everybody had better than a year of college, they decided to give us the opportunity to request to be transferred to the Army Specialized Training Program – the STP –

Did you request that?

Yes, I did.

So you went to that program – what did they do.

I went to that and took their examinations that they insisted that we have. I had two – almost three years of German at school – so I thought they were going to put me into a German program where we would end up being assigned to duty in Germany as the war was winding down. However, that never came to fruition. They decided they needed engineers more than that, so they sent me to, along with a number of other people, to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, to study engineering.

And how long were you there?

That lasted probably a year and a half – never did complete the course. They decided they needed foot soldiers more than they needed engineers, so we were pulled out of there and reassigned. A group of us went to the 75th Infantry Division, who were on maneuvers in Louisiana at the time, and we joined them on maneuvers.

This is really your first real taste of military life, other than basic training – where did you live while you were studying at the Pratt Institute – where were you housed?

We had an apartment building that housed all of the students that were attending Pratt – they were 2 or 3 bedroom apartments and they would assign us to various locations in the building.

So you lived a regular life of a college student, more or less.

Almost; yes; very close to it.

Going to school – doing assignments and coming back –

Right.

So now when you finally got into maneuvers in Louisiana and had your first real taste of military life –

That's about right.

So how would you say you adapted to that – the physical regimen –

Well, it took a little while. But we got accustomed to it and we became a part of the 75th Infantry Division and learned to function as part of a military unit.

What were your duties there – at the 75th Infantry –

Well, I was – during my basic training it was determined that I would be a gunner on a 37 mm antitank gun and I trained as a gunner on that particular gun and spent a good portion of the time learning all the parts of it; putting it back together and taking it apart and all the other things that went into making a unit function. Things worked out quite well.

Did you stay there in Louisiana or what did you do –

No, we – the 75th Infantry Division was then moved up to a camp in Indiana – and I can't remember the name –

Camp Benjamin Harrison?

No, no.

You didn't mention the name of a city or a camp in Louisiana – do you recall where that was?

We were out in the woods most of the time.

So you weren't attached to a real camp?

No.

Mr. Schinderle said that the camp was in southern Indiana.

Right.

He doesn't remember the name.

No, not off hand.

Okay, so you continued training there –

Yeah, continued training –

For about how long? Couple of months – by now it's getting on to 1945 – if you were in school in '43 and then went to school for a year at Pratt Institute – that had to be 1944 by this time –

We got down in there – yes. And we joined the infantry division –

So where did you go from southern Indiana –

The whole unit – the whole division – it was determined that the whole division was going to go overseas; and we went overseas and we spent a month in England or Wales, I should say –

Was that your first stop -- how did you get overseas – by what means of transportation?

Oh, on ships.

Okay, so from Indiana you went to New York –

New York by train –

Okay, train to New York and then you went on a troop ship?

Yep.

To Wales.

To Wales.

How was the crossing?

Oh, it wasn't bad; it was all right. It took us a week and a half or two weeks – a long time.

And we spent, let's see – when did we arrive in Wales –

Well, we don't need the exact dates –

No, but it was – let's see.

The most important thing is what did you do in Wales?

Continued training –

For how long?

We were in Wales for about – I guess we got into Wales – what time of year was it – it was in the Fall anyway –

That had to be 1944 –

We were in 19 – 43 or 44, I can't remember.

How long did you stay in Wales?

Oh, we got there October, as I recall it, and we were out of there by December. And we went overseas; we went to – where did we land in France –

By ship – you crossed the channel?

Yeah, we crossed the channel on LSTs –

What part of France was that –

The southern part.

What were your activities in France?

In France we –embarkation, to go over seas was completed on Sunday, October 22, 1944 (reading from a booklet) – United States Army Transport, Edmund B. Alexander steamed out of New York Harbor carrying the 291st Infantry to the destination to which it had pointed for 17 months – the European theater of Operations. Time aboard ship was spent with boat drills, inspections, movies and band concerts in the ship's recreation hall.

What did you do when you got to France?

We immediately went into combat. We were put into combat on Christmas Eve of 1944 – the Battle of the Bulge – and we fought our way up to within sighting distance of Bastogne – had a lot of casualties because of the firing of artillery shells by the Germans; they were using anti-personnel –

So you witnessed a lot of combat casualties –

Yes.

Friends of yours who died –

Yes, lots of friends – lots of friends were killed. We fought our way up to practically the hill overlooking Bastogne and then the powers that be decided that the airborne unit that

was holed up in Bastogne had to be rescued by another airborne unit, so we were pulled back. So then we moved –

How many casualties would you say that your unit suffered – roughly.

I have no idea; they never told us; they never gave us any indication --]\

What do you think – personally?

I don't know.

Many –

Many, many casualties, yes.

You couldn't estimate or guess –

No, I could not. I wouldn't try.

Mr. Schinderle is looking at papers – recalling certain instances – do you want me to read any of that into the record?

I don't know that you need to –

About what you said about your ship in that little booklet – that was interesting – about how many days you were on and things like that.

Where are your original records –

They are in a safety deposit box- my family has them –

That's good.

And they're gonna stay there.

Yes, because – this National Archives only accepts original materials, no copies.

That's fine.

How long were you in France fighting at the Battle of the Bulge?

Well, we went through the entire Battle of the Bulge and we were there – then we went from the Battle of the Bulge and were attached to the armored divisions of Patton. And we traveled with those divisions as they moved through France and into Germany –

So you saw a lot of action –

Yes, we did see a lot of action.

Did you find your German language helped you?

No, not particularly; it was a little bit, but not – I didn't have enough of a vocabulary; I knew the grammar, but I didn't have the vocabulary. That was my big problem.

And what rank were you during this time?

Let's see, I started out as a buck private –

While you were a gunner?

While I was in Europe, we had a casualty of our staff sergeant, who was the squadron leader, so I was made squadron leader and I was made a staff sergeant and I continued through the end of the war as a staff sergeant.

So that was your highest rank achieved – staff sergeant.

Yes, staff sergeant. We fought our way all the way up to the Rhine, along with Patton's troops, and other divisions that were assigned in that area – as a matter of fact, stood guard on the Rhine for about 2 ½ or 3 weeks while the engineers built a pontoon bridge over the Rhine so that the heavy equipment – tanks, heavy artillery – could move across and we were their protector for about 3-4 weeks. As soon as they had the Remagen Bridge under control and were able to move on into Germany, we moved with them and stayed about a day behind them all the time.

So you were continually a gunner during this time.

Oh yeah.

And you never used your engineering that you did have –

No.

You were just a gunner; the other engineers were building the bridge.

That's right. The Corps of Engineers worked with the bridge –

I'm sure there were injuries involved – casualties involved with that too.

Oh, yeah.

How did you feel about that? What were your emotions relating to combat or witnessing casualties?

You just prayed to God that you didn't get hit – that you were able to continue to function and do what needed to be done.

Right. And you were how old, at that time – 1943 –

20, 21, somewhere in there.

So you were a young guy. Most of the men there were young men too.

Oh, yeah.

As you were going through the countryside did you witness a lot of destruction of homes and things of that nature? Farmhouses --

Oh, yeah. We moved around quite a bit. We started out just north of Paris and went up at Liege, Belgium – then we came back – then we moved down -- and fought in the Bulge and were very involved in that.

How many men were with you on your gun?

It was a 10-man squad.

And you were the squad leader?

I was the squad leader, right.

And other men had to put the artillery in –

Artilleries were behind us –

Oh, well what do you call what was loaded into the gun – just shells?

Yeah, shells.

Other men put the shells in and did you shoot it?

Uh, I was directing it; we had a gunner and an assistant gunner and then the – there were ten men in a squad and I was the leader of the squad – and I would pick the spot where the gun would be set up and how it would function – and what our routes of fire would be –

Right and how about distance – did you gauge the distance to where it fired?

Yes, yes. We were fortunate; we only fired once or twice at tanks; we were there to stop any advance of German tanks; while the artillery was doing an excellent job and the infantry was such a group that they were able to -- provide us enough protection so that we were not under severe –

Bombardment –

We went into combat on Christmas Eve and we fought up to the stroke of -- let's see, with the start of the New Year – this was '45 now – with the stroke of midnight, every gun in the corps sector opened up with the three round time over target on the German area. Nazis who lived through that experience probably never will forget the 75th's New Year's Eve greeting. Our baptism of fire really was on Christmas Eve in 1944 – and then we fought on into 1945.

Right. What are you reading from? What is the name of your booklet? Oh, it's like a little remembrance issue of the 75th Infantry – and he is reading little excerpts from it – a small pamphlet.

(Reading) “Around the first of the year, the Battle of the Ardennes had been a defensive fight for the Americans. Every effort had been directed to stopping the Germans. A new chapter was about to be written – the 289th and the 290th RCTs were battle-tested. Many of their veterans were sick from the cold and needed a rest but there wasn’t time to pause. On January 14 a terse message was received by the 75th – ‘your division attacks tomorrow; H hour is 0300’.

Did someone put this little pamphlet together after the war – did you get it at a reunion or something that you went to?

It was given to us before we were discharged –

That’s quite an old document – with a little map inside.

This showed up where we were – where we crossed the Channel to LeHavre –

Oh, I see –

And then moved across and went up this way and came back into Germany – came back down --

So this shows you every route you traveled during the war – your unit – the Fighting 75th Division – Route of the Fighting 75th Division from December 1944 to May 1945 –

Right.

And it shows going from – from England – Portsmouth, England to LeHavre, and then to Vetot – V-e-t-o-t - I guess that’s in France –

Yep.

And then A-u-m-a-l-e – and then AuMain –

And then we went up into Belgium –

Wow – Belgium and then you went into Germany – and there’s a question mark at the end – what does that mean?

We didn’t know how far we would go.

Oh, you didn’t know how far –

We went as far as –

Rutenberg –

That could be – because we spent time in Belgium –

Then you went all the way back down to – Rhineland – is this all Germany – going down here – or part of France –

Yeah, we went through France –

Wow – so how long did this – oh, this is December '44 to May '45 – this is the whole time that you spent in the war

On the continent.

On the continent, right. That's an interesting little booklet; it's good to have that to keep you – Mr. Schinderle also has some photographs of himself –

Those are nothing – just –

Well, you gotta have them – 1944 – home on leave. And where did you live – was this in Wisconsin?

Yes, Mayville.

You spent a lot of time in Germany – how about friendships formed and camaraderie of service? Do you still know any men –

Just one that I've been in touch with over all the years.

And who is that?

A guy who lives, I don't know if he's even alive; I don't know if I heard from him this Christmas. He lives in – his name is Henry Vanden Brink –

Where was he from?

He was in the State of Washington, if I remember. Because once we got into the 75th Division we got shifted around so that we were not together as a unit anymore – the boys from St. Norbert –

I'm sure that you were split up.

We sat, while things were being done and while we were waiting to get into Germany – we sat on the Rhine, on the bank of the Rhine River, while the engineers were building the bridge and stuff, and we crossed bridges and went along with the units as they took the bridges across the Rhine and moved on into Germany. Then we went into Germany – we went into Patter horn – looks like the farthest point we got into – this would give you an idea - we went through the Ruhr Valley – we fought through the Ruhr Valley.

During this time how were your communications from home – how did you stay in touch with friends and family? Or did you?

You were lucky if the mail got through to you once a week.

How long do you think that it would take a letter from home to actually get to you – how long would it take?

Oh, anywhere from a week to ten days.

Oh, that's not too bad.

Not too bad; really wasn't.

I would think a month or something.

You could consider it about a month.

I've never seen a tiny, little paper booklet like this with pictures of the team – they're marching through the snow – the soldiers – some are sitting up on tanks.

That was – that is the same picture that – we slogged through the Battle of the Bulge – this was part of the Battle of the Bulge. And our problem with that was that our camouflage equipment and winter clothing never caught up with us – so we stood out like sore thumbs. And the Germans could pick us off –

Especially in the snow –

Yeah, that's it. We were brown and they were white. They had all their equipment and their camouflage was white, so it was very difficult – especially in the first – well, the first week when we went in – 'cuz we went in on Christmas Eve and fought through continuously until the first of the year and then there was a huge snowstorm, overcast, that lasted about 4-5 days, and the Germans were totally protected because they were white.

And where were you for these 4-5 days – did you have to sit on your gun?

Hoping to God you could dig a foxhole and –

Foxholes – you had nowhere to go – freezing cold

That's right. Nowhere to go and we stayed and fought and dug your foxhole –

How could you dig a foxhole in frozen ground.

Yeah, not easy.

Wow –

Not easy because you didn't have equipment to do it.

Wow – a lot of hardships you endured – during that time.

You can see here – what some of it looked like.

Mr. Schinderle has another book called, "A Combat Diary of the 291st Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army." This is a larger pamphlet with photographs – black and white photographs in it.

It was the –

Mine sweeping in Belgium – they're showing different troops en route to Holland from France – looks like a cattle car –

Yeah, we did. We traveled in cattle cars – right.

Wow – interesting combat diary – very interesting.

By the time May came and you were at the end and ready to go home – that was 1945, but the war wasn't ended yet, right?

No.

Was your time up – were you able to go home or did you have to stay till the war ended? I mean what was your duty – once you're in like that

Since we came so late, we were the division assigned to send everybody home. So we were in what were called Redeployment Camps, and we would process anywhere from a battalion to a division a week and get them lined up, check all their records, make sure that they would be paid on time, that the records were up to date as to where they had fought – did they get their ribbons that they were supposed to have for the areas they were in – all that sort of stuff – all the paperwork that needed to be done. And our division was – we were in Camp New York –

And where was that actually.

Sweeps (phonetic) S-u-i-s-e-p-p-e-s, France.

And that was called Camp New York.

Camp New York – we were outside the city of Suisepes, which was about 50 miles from Paris. It was a former French Army Camp.

So you were there from May 1945 until –

Until I was sent home.

When did you get discharged?

I got discharged in February of 1946.

So you were there quite awhile.

Oh, yeah.

So that's where you were when the war ended, in Suisepes?

Right. No, we were still fighting – we were in combat and it was later, a month or two later that we were assigned the job – the whole division was assigned the job of sending troops home. And each unit, like a battalion, would be set up somewhere to run a camp, and usually they were camps that were already in existence.

So in August of 1945, when they dropped the bomb, where were you?

August 45, I didn't get out until 46, so I would have been in the redeployment camp.

So you would have been in Suisseppes, probably.

Yeah.

How did you return home from Suisseppes in February of '46?

I went through the redeployment process and was put into an artillery unit because I had enough time in to go home. And we traveled to LeHavre and boarded a ship in leHavre and came home –

A troop ship?

A troop ship, yeah, right.

And you landed in New York?

God, I don't even remember; I don't know if this gives it or not. – where we landed – I can't answer that off the top of my head. I don't remember.

Somewhere on the East Coast – if you're coming from Europe – most likely.

Once you did land in this country, where did you go – where were you sent?

I was sent to a discharge center in the Chicago area – that would have been –

Fort Sheridan?

Fort Sheridan, yeah.

So you must have gotten to New York and then sent home by train to Fort Sheridan

Yep, that's right.

You weren't married at the time you were in service?

No.

So how was your readjustment to civilian life, once you got out?

Well, I thought I was going to go right back into college because I got out in late February or early March and I immediately reapplied to go to school and was told by the powers that be that I was about two weeks too late. They had already started the semester and they wouldn't put me back in, even though I had good grades, but they said no, you would never catch up. So I went home and went to work. I worked in a cheese factory – in Wisconsin, and I applied to Marquette under the G.I. Bill and I went to school in the Fall of '46.

Did you finish your schooling at Marquette?

Yes.

You got a Bachelor's Degree?

Got a Bachelor's Degree from Marquette and I met my wife there –

In what subject?

Business Administration.

You met your wife at Marquette.

Well, she was working at the Veterans' Hospital because she was a nurse in the Cadet Nurse Corps and had her own story. So she was assigned to the Veterans' Hospital in Milwaukee – actually has a post office box of it's own – Wood, Wisconsin – it's in the middle of Milwaukee; it's half way between Milwaukee and West Allis. She was finishing her training there and we met – when I was at Marquette finishing – the Peoria Diocese of the Catholic church assigned a priest to be a coordinator for health administration for hospitals in the Peoria Diocese. In order to get that training he had certain courses that he needed to get at Marquette. He was allowed to live in University Housing that was approved. He was functioning as a civilian, in effect.

After living there for some months, he realized that there were a group of 5 or 6 girls; he was the chaplain for the nursing school. He played Cupid, sort of, and got a picnic together – he would bring the girls if the guys should show up – so we did and that's how I met my wife. That blossomed into a long-lived relationship.

You're married 65 years now –

Mrs. Schinderle – 66

Have you had any contact with fellow veterans over the years? (turn tape)

I have belonged to the American Legion for a long time, and just recently when I moved here (Senior Star at Weber Place) – I dropped by membership. I am not now a member of any veteran's organization.

How did your wartime experience affect your life, do you think?

A very good question. I think it taught me leadership; it taught me to work well with other people, and it helped me to focus on what I want to do. I knew by the time I got out of service that I wanted to get my degree. I wasn't sure what it was going to be in exactly, but then I got interested in accounting, I went back to school, I started to take the CPA exam. I had one section of it that I didn't pass, I guess, when I took the first exam, and then we decided to move to Peoria from Milwaukee and I never came back to Wisconsin

to complete it. So I went into Hospital Administration and got very involved in that and I've been in it since 1950.

What hospitals did you work at?

St. Francis Hospital in Peoria; Mercy Hospital in Chicago; Provena St. Joseph Medical Center in Joliet – and I was the CEO there from 1966 to 1986.

Twenty years – congratulations.

I usually worked in large hospitals. Peoria was about a 500+ -bed hospital. Mercy was between 300-400; and Provena St. Joe was 500 when I was running it.

Your life lessons learned from the military – you said that already – focus, leadership skills, cooperation –

How to get along with people.

Is there anything else that you wish to add to this story –

No, I don't think so.

It's been a very full story and very interesting interview. I thank you very much for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

One thing we didn't mention –did you receive service medals, honors and awards received during your time in service.

Well, the service combat ribbons for each area that we served in; Combat Infantryman's Badge – think I got it 3 or 4 times – because of the activity we had. But those are basically it.

And your highest rank was staff sergeant.

Staff sergeant.

If there is anything else you wish to add to the story, I will give you a draft copy of this interview and you can make any corrections needed and add anything you would like to add for the final draft, okay.

Very good.

So thank you very much for this interview; it was very interesting. I appreciate it.

Very good.

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This is Fran Prokop. Today is September 29, 2015 – I’m back at the home of Bob Schinderle. Although he has finished his interview, he has recalled some incidents that he would like to put on the record so we are here to do that. Go ahead, Bob.

Okay, thank you. My throat is not good today so I’m hoping this won’t be a problem for you. The one thing I thought about after we finished our discussion was the period between Christmas and New Year’s when we were sitting on the grounds overlooking the area where the units were trapped – I need to look at this.

Bob has some notes that he wrote after our last interview that he is checking to help his recollection.

Between Christmas and New Year’s the skies were so overcast that no aircraft were able to fly. There were no air strikes at all during that particular week – almost a week in 1944. New Year’s was 1945 – the week between Christmas and New Year’s in 1944 – there were no air strikes. That was a problem for all of us because we were hoping for air strikes to help us contain the Germans.

On the morning after New Year’s, the clouds broke and the skies were clear; we were just yelling and happy to see the air force out in force. When I saw “out in force” – I mean In force. The skies were so full of bombers and fighters that you could barely see the sky. It was an absolute full-blown attack – air strike – against the Germans. And they, I don’t know, I’m sure other people will have recorded this much more accurately than I’m trying to record it because I can tell you we went – everybody just yelled, screamed and hollered – we were so impressed with the amount of air support that we were receiving that it was just – made everyone feel we can win this thing and let’s do it and get it over with – that’s just about what happened. Because the numbers of planes were fantastic; you could barely see the skies through the number of planes that were flying above; and they did a tremendous job of softening up the German ground troops that were there and made it possible for the Bastogne people to be rescued and freed and they, of course, helped in breaking up the German units that were there. Patton’s units and we joined – and carried on through the rest of the war as a part of the armored divisions that Patton was commanding. But that was something that always impressed me. I never thought about it very much but just listening to this and thinking about it, I know that this needs to be recorded. It is important that they know how great the Air Force was, coming in and

striking with strike after strike, after strike, with planes that – you couldn't count them. There were so many in the air; it was absolutely fantastic.

Probably a turning point.

It may have been – may well have been. Because that was – Patton was moving forward and he then gathered – the Army was put together with Patton heading it up, moving through Germany and we followed Patton practically all the way across Germany. Okay.

Thank you again very much, Robert; it was very interesting to hear your story. And thank you for your service.