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## Deur, Howard G Oral History Interview: Parents of Baby Boomer Generation

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2001 Oral History Interview  
Holland Area Veterans of World War Two  
Interviewee: Howard G. Deur  
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds  
July 18, 2001

GR: Howard, tell me a little bit about your background before the war. Where did you live?  
How old were you?

HD: I was born and raised in Holland. I lived in 14 West 18<sup>th</sup> Street and went to the Christian schools. We had about two and a half blocks to go to grade school, cut through the alley to go to junior high school and the high school. Then when I was married, we drew a circle where we'd like to buy a house. I did buy a house before I got married, up on 29<sup>th</sup> Street, a little place. But then when we got back from the service, our family started to come, and we got a bigger place. And then I lived on Michigan Avenue, right across from Evergreen Commons, 40 some years.

GR: Where were you when Pearl Harbor was bombed? What were you doing?

HD: I never forgot that. We lived up on 29<sup>th</sup> Street, I think it was a Sunday. We had family over, or somebody, and then we heard the announcement. I thought right away, "bad." Yeah, I remember that day.

GR: How old were you then?

HD: I must have been...it started in about '41, wasn't it? I was married in '41...I was born in 1914—I was 26?

GR: So you weren't married yet?

HD: No. Well, wait a minute. I was married when the war started. No, I don't know, I get mixed up. I was called up while I was single, but that might have been before the war actually was on. I was married, I remember that date.

GR: Did you have to go in for a physical or anything?

HD: Yeah, and I had flat feet so they wouldn't take me. But then two years later, I guess they were starting to need men more, so they started calling up the married men. I had a low number, and then I passed. I went to Battle Creek for examination. They wanted me to go into the Navy. They had a guy sitting there and he said, "You're in the Navy." I said, "I don't want the Navy." My wife didn't want me to go to the Navy because she thought no contact, you'd be gone someplace. So then the guy who was sitting behind the table from the Army...the Navy guy says, "Why don't you want to be? Tell him you can't swim." I said, "I can't swim." So anyway he says, "If that's the way you want it, okay." But the strange thing is, I went in the Army and then they put me in the infantry. There was three Holland fellows, three of us, that were sent to Alabama. We got in the heavy weapons section for basic training. It was a Harrington from Holland, and a Kouw, John Kouw. Then after I was in there a little while...boy, it was rough, because I weighed 128 pounds—I was a little guy—and carrying some of that equipment was terrible. They had a screening test and the guy says, "How'd you ever get in here? You aren't heavy enough." So then they transferred me to a rifle company. That wasn't the best either. But the strange thing is, here you go, you aren't fit, and then all of a sudden they put you...(laughs) Doc Winter said that to me years later—those days the doctors used to come to your house for services—and he said, "The government still does that. They'll take a man who has poor eyesight and they send him to school to learn how to repair watches."

GR: Can you tell me a little bit about once you left basic where you were off to next?

HD: Once I took basic training—I got out the last of August, September—they gave us I think ten days at home, and then I went to Fort Mead, Maryland. I stayed there a little while. They gave me arch supports, but then they gave me new shoes without arch supports, and I was held up a week or something. But then we went to a shipping point, and we shipped out of...what is it, right on the coast...oh, I don't know what it was. But anyway, we shipped over on a liberty ship, and we were eighteen days onboard ship. We went over with a big convoy, maybe a hundred. We landed in Casablanca. Some of the guys shaved their hair off because they thought it was gonna be hot. Boy, that first night in the desert, I used everything I had—I emptied my barracks bag and put my feet inside. That was something for Africa; I thought it was a hot place. It was hot in the days, but nights were cold.

GR: What were you actively doing in the desert?

HD: Just waiting for, to have a little training yet. They gave us basic training, then shipped us over as replacements. We had no opportunity to be with an organized division, or something, so we went over to replace the guys that would be killed or wounded. They moved us to the coast, to Oran, and we shipped off for Naples. I was in Naples just a short time, and a guy came down to the replacement depot there, and picked me up in a jeep. That was strange too, one man. He took me out, and I didn't know too much about the Army, just that little basic training, but he said to me, "You know, your getting in the best company in the division." And I says, "How's that?" He says, "Well, it's the best fighting company in the division." The guy that was in this company was Commando Kelly, and he was given the Congressional Medal, and that was the first Congressional Medal of the European war, of an enlisted man. It did say only enlisted men, I don't

know. Maybe it was the first of all. But anyway, we headed right for the combat zone, boy, was that scary. It was terrible. The first night we dug in and it was rainy. We dug a hole--miserable, miserable. Then we got shelled. So that was my first taste of combat. Then they took me up to a little place up in the mountains. There was a movie made about this battle too. But I don't remember, I just remember that they issued me a rifle. But the next day we were relieved, and I went back with the outfit, and we started training together, I was assigned to 36<sup>th</sup> Division L Co. 143 Infantry Reg.

GR: So what was it like the first time you had to squeeze the trigger?

HD: Well, I don't know, you just fight for your life.

GR: Had there been lots of conversation behind the lines about what it was like?

HD: No. It was a strange thing—I went to a meeting...I joined this outfit in December of 1943, just before Christmas. In January, we were training and working out with our squads. I went to a chapel service, and the only men there were officers. I was the only enlisted man that came out. I was 27 years old, I had been married for two years, and a lot of these young guys—this was a Texas division, some of them were older, but a lot of these replacements hadn't been out of high school too long. I remember they asked me the question, "What do you think about killing? Being a Christian, how do you feel about it?" I'd never thought too much about it. I gave a foolish answer, I thought later. I said, "Well, I thought that if Christ was living today, he'd be against what Germany was doing. That we were a just war." And I felt that. I found that you just fight for your life. Then we went in the middle of January to battles near Casino. I don't know if you're acquainted with Italy, but anyway we went up to make a crossing, the first big battle was the Crossing of the Rapido River. I remember too, as we were going ahead...you said,

“What do you think about?” We were going up a railway track that would run from Naples to Rome, and the Germans had tore that all up with a...they say they put a big hook on there and pull the tracks and everything up. We really got shelled bad, and I know I was scared. Then when we went a little further, we had to cross an open field that was all mined. It was on our side of the river, so they had to lay tape through the field, and the Germans were firing across the river. At night they'd fire tracers, and you could see them. Every once in a while they'd send a man to run across the field, and they'd start firing, and you'd hit the dirt. But we had to get to the other point. That was a crossing that was one of the bloodiest battles in Italy.

GR: Was it strange to see the Germans on the other side of a field, or a river, shooting at you? What was that like?

HD: I don't remember seeing any. The first attack that we made was in the morning there. We went over that river...they were gonna put a bridge across. The training we'd taken was that we were gonna pick up these sections of bridge they made with wood, carry them to the river bank, the engineers would set them up, and we'd cross the river. But that didn't work out, they didn't get the bridges. So then the engineers had pontoon boats. There was kind of a little shelter, we had to crawl over a little rise and then by the water. This is something that I never forgot. There was a one star general, ordering the guys into the boats, and they had laid down smoke, and it was all smoke and covering. When he ordered guys to get in the boat, and I remember when I got in, if I remember right, it was the two engineers and one GI. But later I read a history of that, and they mentioned that same thing, and boy I felt like shooting them. It was terrible going across that river. The boats were being shot out. Our division wasn't in favor of that river crossing, but the

reason they did that crossing was that they were making a landing in Anzio. They felt that if we would make a crossing there, pushing them on the southern front, then the Germans would take men from there and stop the Anzio landing. But they didn't do that; they stayed right where they were. And they let them land in Anzio. At Anzio they didn't push out, they were there for a long time, with a lot of men lost. They didn't know that our division lost a terrific amount of men in the river crossing because it was really a suicide mission. We didn't have any heavy weapons. Nothing came across. I don't know if it was all riflemen; I didn't see a heavy machine gun across there. We lost an awful lot of men. That was the worst combat that I saw. And I never talked about this with my family, I never told my kids until lately. I was laying in the mud...an officer had come to our hole...they told us to dig in because the Germans will throw everything they got at us to try and push us back. I dug just a little ways near water, and the fellow I was with, he just froze, he wouldn't do a thing. And I told him, I said, "Dig." I was just reading an old letter, the guy got killed too. He didn't get killed there, and he came through it, but he got killed later in Italy. Then an officer came with a warning, he said, "Fix bayonets, we're attacking a machine gun nest." They laid down heavy fire, and I was laying in the mud, off the side of a road, and firing. The shells would drop so close, that I could almost reach them where I was; they didn't go off in the mud. There's been articles written about that. Some man had a Reader's Digest story, and I looked that up; I looked the fellow's name up. He was in K Company, I was in L Company. So he must have been in the same place.

GR: Why weren't they going off?

HD: We used to say it was the Poles or somebody were working on them, and they made defective... I don't know. In that article, he says the Czechs, but I don't know where he got his information. I don't know, but the only thing I can answer would be that so many of them...they were firing them from what they called the "Screaming Mimis"—it was a three-barrel mortar, and it started up this grinding noise, and boy you knew they were starting to come. It would throw the fear into you; you knew what was coming. I fired then, my rifle was red hot. We laid down fire and they were gonna go forward and try to throw some hand grenades in there. They called for us to surrender too, some did, some were surrendered. But later in the day, our company sent Commando Kelly and some big guy from mortar, a heavy weapons squad, with orders to bring us back. I got back...I had to crawl back to the river, and I lost all my equipment. The engineers, they tie these boats together, these rafts, and they laid a board across them. Make a little footbridge across. The Germans had flooded that area of water, the Rapido River wasn't a wide river, but they flooded it so it was wider. There was quite a current there; a lot of guys didn't get back again, swept down. But I crawled across. I had nothing, well, I threw my rifle in, but I crawled across. I was hanging in the water and we got across. The first farm house we came to, we went in. I was soaked to the skin; we hadn't had anything to eat. That was in January, and it was cold. I remember this farmhouse, they had a fire going in the fireplace, and there were some GIs there. I took off my clothes and they dried them, hung them up by the fire. I asked for water. I didn't know Italian, but in Latin "aqua." They didn't have water but he gave me a canteen of wine. I always say this as a story to my kids, maybe that what saved my life. I don't know. Anyway, I got dried up, and then I reported back to our headquarters where we pushed off from, the company. They issued



me a new rifle. Then the guy says, "Pick a good hole. We expect the Germans to counter-attack tonight." So he gave me a new rifle and ammunition, I picked the best hole I could find with the most blankets. Sometime later I heard the report—I don't know how many we had in our company, maybe 120—there were only sixteen of us that were fit to fight. Some men straggled back later, I guess. I don't remember how long I slept there, but it was that wine that must have knocked me out, relaxed me. Some of the people were sent in because of a breaking up. So here I was, one of the lightest, and these big guys from Texas, and I got back. All I say is that I thank God for it. That was 16 out of there; now later some of those men... My squad leader, he got the Silver Star for two of us got back from his squad that were out there the full time. I never saw Johnny, from the time that I left the road to go across the river till I got back, and we were about 40 days—they said it was the terrible 40s. In those 45 days—I was just reading a letter—I hadn't shaved or a change of clothes. And the fear is terrible, these must have smelled terrible. But I was sent to an outpost, and we were on a little hill. This first night, they had a machine gun set up right on the hill and covering the water there where we were. I was in with a guy who was a machine gunner. I had fired a machine gun, but that's all. I really was a rifleman; I qualified as a rifleman, not a machine gunner. I never forgot this... I tried to keep my feet out of the water. I had an ammunition box that I sat on, and he was a big guy, and he put his feet in the water. One of us had to be on the alert all the time. Both of us were most of the time, but sometimes you'd doze off. In the morning, just before it got light, we'd take the machine gun, put it down in the hole, cover it with camouflage, and move back to the big hole. We had about, I don't know how many, but it almost seemed like five or six guys in that hole. There was no room, then, to lay so

you're doubled up against. I think that machine gunner was with me two nights, and then he was sent in. He had trench foot, that's what he said. I was out there for a few nights, and I was aching all over, wet, and miserable. I'd take my socks off, and I always carried an extra pair of socks. During the daytime it did warm up, and the sun came out, and it was nice. I'd lay the socks out and dry them in the sun. But otherwise I didn't have a change of clothes. I didn't have a razor, I didn't shave. We were there maybe five days or so, and when I came back in the morning I told the sergeant, "I got to get out of here. I can't hardly move." They were short of men, it was terrible, like I said there were 16 of us now, maybe they got a few more, but they didn't, in our company, have the guys. So he called them, and they said send him in. But I had to get back before it got light, because I had to run through a minefield. So I ran the little white tape in the field and got back. The captain, our medic, was a good guy, a nice guy. They took my temperature, and I didn't have a temperature. He looked at my feet; they were sending a lot of guys back because they had trench foot.

[End of side one]

GR: What did they diagnose you with?

HD: Nothing, I didn't have anything wrong with me. No fever. So he says to the guy, "Give this soldier a hot cup of coffee. Don't go out on the outpost." So then I was on guard duty back there. But then we moved into the mountains, and that was worse yet.

GR: Why is that?

HD: Well, this is winter, January, and we pushed the Germans off from the other side of the mountain. I think that our mountain was Mt. Casalone, right across in the next mountain was that Abby, this Catholic monastery. It was a big, old mammoth place, topped the

whole mountain—they call it Monastery Hill, I guess. We pushed the Germans out, and the holes that they had were made of rock, piled up stones. We moved in at night, and you'd pick a hole...I was with a Jewish guy, Dan Wilson—that's the guy who later got killed there. Anyway, the hole was too small, and we couldn't lie down together. He says, "We'll look for another." So I stayed in the one, and he went scouting around for another hole. He came back and said he found one, but there was a body lying right by it. So I said, "Let's take it." So we cleaned that hole, found this German blanket and we threw it over, and moved in there. The strange thing—this I tell my kids—that night, the hole that we had been in got blown apart. If we had stayed, it would have been the other one, but I always said that God took care of me, that's the only thing I could say.

GR: Did you spend a lot of time debating those topics in your own mind?

HD: I used to not talk about it at all, but later... I tell you, I take a little pride in what I went through. All those days, all that time we were in the mountains, I never had a change of clothes. I did have extra socks that I carried, but we'd use snow to wash our hands, and I never shaved. I wore a little knitted cap, then the helmet liner, then the helmet, and we had such strict rules, that if you took that helmet off, like they say, "We'll shoot you." But I never got any hot food for I don't know how many days, maybe 20 some, because we didn't have no heater either. One of the sergeants had a little one, he burned gasoline or something in there; he was black as could be with it. You covered your hole over with a shelter half, and the Germans could look right down at us. We had orders in the day, if we were in the holes, keep down. If you had to urinate, you would use one of these ration boxes, and then throw it out. Food, we had K rations, I guess they came in like a Cracker Jack box, and when I just see that can of potted meat, I just get sick to my stomach. I

could take cheese. Then they gave you a big hard chocolate, which was good, if we could have had hot water it would have been a hot drink. But it was so hard, that you'd have to almost take your pick to knock it apart. By the time I went on patrols and we had a little...once in a while the Germans would be able to combat, but mostly the British were on our left flank, and I went on patrols to contact the British and some of them were in caves. They were beautiful spots. Nobody could get at them, they had guards set all the way in, and before you could go winding trails, they could pick you off. I went on a patrol when we were almost right to the peak, at the top of the mountain, and on the other side were Germans. And the lieutenant came, and I don't remember who he was, I didn't know, and that's the strange part of it. People don't understand that, we had men from the same battalion, but there were so few of us that they had guys from different companies. But they weren't people you know. But anyway, the lieutenant came, and it was snowing and just getting dark, if I remember right, and then he says, "Okay soldiers, we're going after a German soldier who just broke through our lines with a machine pistol." I forget how many we were, but I was the scout all the time, and usually I go forward. Why we did this, I don't know, but boy we could they get you cussing and moving forward and fire you. Then the shell dropped right in back, and I felt I got hit in the back. I said, "Something's burning." I had a raincoat on over all my stuff, and I laid there. We got the German, his body was laid there. Whether he threw a grenade, I don't know. I waited a while, then I crawled back, and that lieutenant was all shot, it was terrible. Then this buddy of mine, he was a BAR man, he didn't get to come back till later. I started to get pain in my jaw, that's how your mind worked. I thought I was getting lockjaw. They told you to take pills right away if you got hit. I didn't know what hit me, because I had a

burn, but then this guy came back, and he was one of the guys who stayed full-time up there with me. When we were relieved, we had French goons moving in. They said be very careful because these guys fight with knives. We had to get off the mountain and get back to the push off point or whatever it was, before it was light. If you were wounded, you couldn't get out of there—there was no way. They'd bring all of our rations up by mule train, and they'd get to a point and they'd unload. We'd have to go out and get it. We'd get maybe a can of water, sometimes it did get through, rations and ammunition. They brought up one time even a ... I took the Time magazine, and that was an overseas issue. But when we were going down, there was a wounded guy there, and we tried to carry him down. They took rifles and made a little... so they could carry him. I couldn't carry him; I was so weak I could hardly carry my rifle.

GR: You were probably losing weight even at that point.

HD: We didn't eat at last, but we got water. But to eat at last, I had to eat that cheese and maybe a biscuit. But anyway, we were going down, and our company commander was a Texan. He was a good guy, Zeke Robertson. At that time he might have been just a lieutenant, I don't know. He says, "Come on, Deur, let's show these young kids what the old men can do." It's like getting a shot in the arm. We knew we were gonna get down, we were being relieved. So we got down, and they had trucks that picked us up—troop carriers. I was on one of the trucks, and then Swaninger, the truck was loaded, so he was going on the next load. I got off, and I went with him. It was dark, and they had these trucks that had just these little slits of light you could see, and so the one would follow the other. Most of these drivers I believe were black. But then them winding roads, and this truck that I had been on, just ahead of us, slipped off the road, and rolled over into

the gully. So we stopped, and we tried to chop and take them guys out of there. We were straining to hold that truck. It was kind of muddy in there, and when they got them out, the truck never moved, it was settled in. But anyway, I always have told the kids there again. How do you explain that?

GR: Right place at the right time? So where did you end up finishing your tour of duty? Were you in Europe per se?

HD: The next combat we had, we went to...I think it was in June, we got back, this was the first of March, and then we trained for amphibious landing. We landed where Anzio was, all that time Anzio was still a small landing spot. If you ever want to read history, they didn't break out, and they lost a lot of men. I've got pictures of a railway, a great big, oh man that's unbelievable the size of that gun that they could shoot into the place. But anyway, we landed at Anzio, and then the push out from Anzio came, and we ran on that, our division. The Germans started retreating. Our division...one night—I was in the second time, I was in what they called headquarters company—well, I had been in the hospital, and so I was in headquarters company. I got back and the company commander said he'd like to keep me back till I felt a little better, but they needed every man they had, and I didn't have no trouble. But anyway, the division walked all night, and we had single file. If I remember, we were kind of leading off that, there was an Italian civilian that was kind of taking us through the...In the morning we had surrounded Velletri, which was...the Germans, a lot of them were captured there. Then we fought them up to Rome. There was no fighting in Rome, but our division was...General Clark, he wanted Americans to take Rome.

GR: What was it like to walk into a famous city like Rome, as a fighting man, instead of a tourist or any other visitor?

HD: The people were real good. They threw flowers at us and handed us wine. When we got through...they didn't leave us in the city though. They moved us through. I had one night that we slept in an old furniture factory, that we were in a building. Otherwise, as far as barracks and that for the rest of the war, I spent two years overseas, and I slept in tents all the time. When I was at headquarters company, of course, I did the same thing. I was a scout, but I went on a lot of patrols. If there was an old farmhouse there in your position, headquarters got in the house. They'd have guards out, we did too. But then we went on, and pushed up above Rome. That was good fighting, we captured a lot of Germans and a lot of Poles and Russians, I don't know what they were. Our Air Corps was tearing up their supply lines. I don't know how far we went up into Italy, and then we were relieved. Then we went back and we took a ship to southern France.

GR: Tell me a little bit about these prisoners when you encountered them. Did they say anything? How did they look? How did they act?

HD: Well, some of them (takes out German pistol to show Geoff)... I sent it back, and then later I sold it and sent it back to the kitchen. But I kept this, and when you said you were coming, I kind of looked up some of my stuff. Let me tell you something, this is about all I got that I got to save. I never was issued a lot of... maybe I should get more. I went to the hospital in the last of July of '44, and then we were ready to make the invasion of southern France. I had taken all that amphibious training, and then I had problems. Anything I ate—I don't know if it was dysentery, or what it was—but as soon as I ate warm food, I'd have to run. The medics would give me sulfa pills. I kept taking that

sulfa, and that wasn't good for me. But anyway, I never went on sick call, but I just was running to the aid station, and said I need some pills. I was getting pretty rough. One day in the morning, right after breakfast, I ran over there and I come in that place, and our captain, who was a surgeon, he wasn't there, and it was a different officer there. So I just asked him for some pills. He said, "Hey, what's going on here?" "Oh he takes pills, he's got some problems." He asks, "How long has this been going on?" "Quite a while." "You can't do that, send this man into the hospital." So I went to a field hospital, and I got in there, and then they sent me back to a general hospital. Then while I was in the hospital, they made the push.

GR: Have you ever looked upon that event as a grace?

HD: Yeah, because I tell you, this Swaninger that I was with, he got killed in southern France. He was a BAR man. BAR men, they always figured the Germans wanted to get them. Just like a lieutenant wouldn't be wearing his insignia, he didn't want to get shot. But anyway, just lately my sister called, "Howard, do you know a man in Detroit named Swaninger?" I said, "Sure I was in the Army with him." "Well, some relative of his saw your name in a letter or something and they wondered about it." Swaninger was from Detroit—he was a young guy, went to the University of Michigan and he was gonna be a writer, and he was in student newspaper so he could get into the basketball games and football games—that's what he said anyway. All the letters he wrote home his mother saved. Then I wrote them a letter telling them what I thought when he got killed. When I got home, she invited me to come to Detroit with my wife. We were quite busy at that time and Detroit was a long ways from us, and we got a baby that was just born. So I didn't get there. But she wanted me to come down and see them. But now, those letters



had been saved. So this guy came and talked to me with his wife, and I don't know what connection they were, but some relative. And then they asked if I would like to read them. She brought me a shoebox, and I went through those letters—brought back a lot of memories, because he had a good way of writing, strange for me. Some of the things that were happening at that time, the dates, I know it was happening and how he was feeling. Both of the trips up I was with him he was a BAR man, but the second time up, I was in headquarters company, and he was still in that squad. He wrote in that letter, that he felt that a BAR man don't last. The way they run the Army, in this war, the Second World War... I was in the line for 40 days, the only way I could get back would be if I was wounded. And then you go up again. They just put another replacement. If you were there five days, rest camp, you'd go back, they did have rest area—they sent me to a rest area—but not while on combat. Because the six of us had stayed out there, that's what I didn't tell you about, six of us stayed up there the full time, and Swaninger and I were from one squad. When they made the awards, my sergeant got, that was quite something. But I don't know where he was. But then the second trip, when I was headquarters company, I was happy I got away from him. We'd go on patrols, and he would always say okay and that was my job as scout, so I went ahead with a guy from Tennessee—Robby Robertson, nice guy—but then he would stay back. And then I had an infection in my leg, the first time I was up, and we were taking training for amphibious landing. The boats dropped us off in the water, to the beach, and then we'd push in, we were supposed to push in a mile, for maneuvers. I had a bandage on my leg. We'd come to kind of a little creek with a bridge over it, I forget who the guy was with me, but we walked and went over the bridge. There was a high officer watching these maneuvers and he jumped

Johnny, that we didn't go right across, we should have. He was mad. We got back, a couple days we were out in the field, and we got back, and the first morning we fell out. They needed some guys for kitchen detail or something. And he says, "I got two guys." I reported to the kitchen, and I never had, well, in basic training I did, but we had prisoners of war, maybe not at that time, but otherwise the prisoners of war would do the dirty work. But anyway, I reported to the mess sergeant, and he says, "Deur, all you got to do is throw a slice of bread on their mess gear." Everything was outdoors. So I did that. The company went out, and they were just taking speed marches in the mountains, and they had to carry an extra pack on their back with rations, and some of them had to carry water and ammunition. The mess sergeant says to me when I was through with serving, "If you want to go to your tent and write letters, we'll call you, but I want you to go pick up some rations." Two guys would sleep in little pup tents. I went and picked up rations, and at the end of the day, this company came in. It was hot, it was terrible—that was in summer, must have been July—and this old John he came through the line, and he didn't say boo to me. That was a big break I got. That was pretty rough, carrying that much.

GR: What were you diagnosed with finally?

HD: I never really found out. They don't know, but I had that trouble afterwards, all my life. I found that if I eat acidic food, like pineapple, that it would affect me. But then I think I might have had dysentery too, but not eating anything...

[End of side two, tape one]

HD: [Continuing] The nurse in the hospital, she was a Kammerad—the family had a shoe store in Holland. My brother was in school with one of the boys. So I went to see him. This guy had like a cold...the Army didn't give us any break...the guy didn't feel good,

and he couldn't talk. They sent him into the hospital otherwise they gave him sulfa pills or something. So, he got there, and I went to visit him. He told me—his voice was gone, like in a whisper, like the voicebox was bad—they tried every which way, and then they put him under. Then he talked. He wasn't writing home at all. He was married and lived in Iowa. He was really down. Then I talked to that nurse, and she said, "Maybe if we would put him on the boat, his voice would come back." But he couldn't do anything about it. He had no control over that. I was with one guy, Erikson—this guy was an atheist—he was an artist, and he had this trigger finger. I met him in Africa, later I was assigned to a different outfit and they sent me back to Africa to 5<sup>th</sup> Army headquarters, and then I ran into him. I never knew this, but he had a finger like a trigger finger—couldn't open it. I talked to a party about that who said maybe that would come back if he was out of combat. I don't know.

GR: As an 87 year-old veteran, who is able to at least talk about what happened, is that hard for you to do that, even now?

HD: Sometimes; I never joined any vets or anything.

GR: Why is that?

HD: I don't know. Maybe it was because Vets was kind of a drinking organization, and I wasn't in that class. I've always said I wouldn't take a million dollars for what I went through, but I wouldn't do it for anything in the world. People can't understand, nobody can understand, what war is and how you can come through that.

GR: Can you tell me a little bit about the civilians you encountered in both continents? Were they poor? Were they there at all in the fighting zones?

HD: No. I was just reading a letter, and they had it in there. One morning, we were laying in a ditch—we didn't dig, but we were kind of in a little ditch, the two of us, on an outpost—and some Italian people came. I didn't know who this guy was, but he knew a little Italian. And this woman was a girl of about 18 years-old or so, kind of a short little woman, and she wanted us to come to the house. I didn't want to go; I didn't know what she wanted. Anyway, he went. He came back with three or five prisoners. The Germans were retreating then, and these guys took their uniforms off. I thought they were Russian, but I don't remember, but anyway, he brought them in as prisoners. They wanted to be captured, they wanted to get out.

GR: Did they talk a little bit about America? Had they received a lot of propaganda?

HD: I never talked to any of these. Later, after I got out of the infantry, I was sent back to Africa, just a short time, and I was assigned to 5<sup>th</sup> Army headquarters. Oh man, they lived like kings. But most everything was moved to Italy. Then they assigned me to an ordinance base depot. Boy, I never knew people could live like that. I didn't know much about the Army, while you're in combat, you learn this—your whole world, like when we were on that mountain there, those days you don't hear nothing, one day is the same as the next. I had a little book, and I would draw a circle around another day. But they were all the same. While we were on that mountain, they bombed that abbey. Here we were sitting, 260 planes go over us; they just wiped that out. The world didn't think that was very good because that was a big Catholic shrine. Later after the war, I went there for a trip, in this outfit I was with they give us, not a jeep but a little truck, and they let us go back. We went over, and it didn't look the same. Location, what I saw. When I think

about it some time, you think boy oh boy, like you see the river, what you could do there before. Everything's strange.

GR: Did you have a hard time writing back to your wife Grace during these times?

HD: I wrote my wife everyday, if I could. One time—January, the first that we went—they had these little V-mails, I wrote, I don't know what I wrote, maybe 5 or 6 of them. We were moving up, and I dated them ahead so that she would get mail. But I was listed as missing in action for 2 days. I could have been killed, and she'd get a letter, and she'd say, what goes here? I didn't want her worrying. She wrote me everyday. She saved every one of those letters from basic training.

GR: Grace held on to those? Do you know why?

HD: I don't know, she probably appreciated them, I guess. But anyway, now, those letters, I had them in an old bread box. When we moved, I thought they stayed there. But then, my daughter, she said she had them in Hudsonville. I did weed them out some, because basic training and stuff. It was wonderful, all those days that I was writing her. Some of them were censored; it's strange when you writing a letter to your wife and you know that somebody else is going to be reading it.

GR: So that affected kind of the way you wrote?

HD: Yea. I was careful what I said.

GR: Did you have a code set up with Grace?

HD: I tried to but it didn't work out. She took it just the opposite of what I thought. Like this fellow, this Swaninger, Don, he had a little code with his dad. I couldn't figure it out, but I could feel it when I read the letter that he was trying to tell him...he would always bring up some relative of his, and he was trying to tell him something. But he got killed in

southern France. In those letters he was starting to think, he got out of the BAR, and then they took him back, and while they were waiting for another drive, they put him in an office and he was studying and writing, said they were going to give you an award. He got a Silver Star or something. And then they interview people you were with and what happened. He would say, how he kind of was upset about it. This bothered him. You can imagine, this guy had a lot of combat time. Then they made him a sergeant. This Robison, who I went on patrol with, Robby, he was still with me, he made sergeant and he came home. That was strange too, we had fun with that guy. He couldn't write, couldn't write a letter. And he'd get mail; he had a girlfriend back home, course I was older than these guys. A lot of them were just out of high school. We'd sit in the tent there and we'd kid him about it. And I would write a letter to that girl and I laid it on.

GR: Did you read it back to him?

HD: Yea, we did. I would read it and all the guys would hear how he was winning the war. In some ways like that you had a lot of fun. What happened to me too—my youngest sister, when she was born, my mother died a month or so later. She was married and while I was overseas they had their first baby boy born. So I got...it was a form deal, like they send out for birthdays or something, like a telegram. I think I was in a hole with some guy, I forget who it was, but anyway, they got that to me. It says, "Baby boy, mother and son doing well," or something. And I says, "Look here," I says, "Baby boy." Congratulations. And I says, "Yeah, but I've been overseas over a year." (laughs)

GR: So where did you finish the war up at Howard? What part of Europe were you in?

HD: I went back to Italy and I was stationed in a bombed out area of Italy—a big ordinance depot. I worked with...I had about 8 or so Italians. We kept records. But when I got back

to Africa, this was something, they said that at one time they had, I thought they said, about 1,000 French women—this was French Africa. This is a big depot, but I'd never been in anything like this. Oh, the meals, everything, was unbelievable. But they had a dance and they put me on guard duty. I was going to say that Combat Infantry Badge that was the only thing that I had, I was proud of that. You got that if you were combat infantry. If you ever look at these big Generals, they get all the ribbons. You see that one on top? Cause you earned this, you served, and you went through combat. I got a couple of them, but I got a couple bronze stars. I never knew too much about that; I never asked. When I left my outfit, I kind of lost contact, and then I come in at Ordinance. These guys in the Ordinance didn't like us too much, because they were taking them guys to take our place. Some of the older men didn't. When I look at any pictures that we took, I was wearing that. But otherwise I didn't get... My grandson, he's interested in that and I might ask for—I don't know what I was entitled to—but my grandson is kind of interested in it. Don't mean much to me. I enjoyed that. I still lived in a tent and we were in an area that...we used to laugh about it. There would be an air raid, and all these guys would put their helmets on and run. It was like in Naples in the Harbor there. The Germans planes would fly over, but they had a working agreement—they wouldn't drop anything if we wouldn't shoot at them. (laughs) There was no trouble. But after the war, there was a group in Italy that wanted to overthrow the government. So then we all had to carry a rifle all the time. I took pistol training. Because I had been in the infantry, whenever there was anything where you had to have guard duty, or they wanted a parade, you guys go. Because some of these guys didn't have any training in weapons or in marching.

GR: They would have been out of place.

HD: They treated us good. I never had any trouble with them. We had a good bunch of guys.

GR: So was it hard for Grace with you being overseas so long?

HD: Oh sure, she lived alone for a time. I had bought a little house when I first got married, I had it bought before we got married. She worked a little, and when I went overseas, then my sister and her husband—he went in the Army but he never got out of basic training or anything, he had a problem. So then we rented our house to them, fully furnished. Had the whole house, everything right there and she took wonderful care of it. Grace moved in with her folks. But it was hard. You don't know what to expect. I never wrote much about...I never told Grace a lot of things. Sometimes there would be some guys together and we might talk about something that she had never heard about. She did say to the doctor, he asked one time when the babies were being born, and my sister-in-law is a nurse and she was in the room. And the doctor asked her, "Was your husband in the war?" "Oh sure!" just like I won the war. (laughs) Her sister told me about it. It was a good experience.

GR: Do you participate in parades and stuff, the community events for veterans?

HD: No, I never did. I always talked about it, but I don't know. I figured I served my...when we were together, some of the guys used to say that when they get back they would take a leak on their helmet every morning. (laughs)

GR: What was it like when you heard that Japan had surrendered finally?

HD: Oh, that was wonderful.

GR: Had you been pretty well up-to-date on that part of the war too?



HD: Well, my grandkids all took me to see Saving Private Ryan. Then the other day, my granddaughter—she’s a nurse in Holland Hospital—called me, and said “Gramps, would you like to see that picture Pearl Harbor?” She was going to take her grandmother too, from the other side. I says, “Yeah, I’d like to.” She had some passes that somebody gave her at the hospital. Anyway, I saw that. That Private Ryan, my sister gave me the movie, the tape. But I’ve never played it again. I saw it, I start, but I never did. All these war pictures, everything goes kind of smooth. But I find that, it can be the most snaffoed mess that you ever saw. Because for Southern France, I was picked to carry, maybe it was for Anzio, I don’t know, I think Southern France. I had to carry a pack of explosives, but somebody else had to carry part of it. And boy, when you hit the beach and the one gets shot, nobody is in the right place. I never had training that I really felt like it worked with the whole area all together. Lot of men, they’d change. You go through one battle, and it’s quite a change. I tell the kids this story, that we were in Italy and we were ready to go to the drive on Rome. We were in a Catholic cemetery and we had a chapel service. Our chaplain—guys were sitting on grave stones and helmets—he says, “A lot of you men won’t get back.” There were quite a few guys there. Quite a few guys came; they had a communion service. And the last song was God Be With You Until We Meet Again. But, when you come back, there were three of us. The chaplain, a young friend of mine from Iowa, and the chaplain brought his little organ out in the open, he was going to sing, have service together. Then something, just before the battle, guys were interested and then we’d come back.

GR: Did you see as much church attendance after the battle?

HD: Not much. That was the worst I heard, was that Rapido crossing that night. The guys were just crying, "Medical, medical." Guys were getting shot and wounded. And "Holy Mother Mary, save me." But I guess maybe that's life.

GR: Thank you, Howard.

[Recording continues.]

HD: When we'd move, we'd take over holes of Germans, and their bodies there. In fact, the Germans gave us a truce at Rapido River. They sent over 45 medics to pick up the dead and the wounded. The German officer, all dressed up beautiful, I didn't go across, but they had what they called the grave, or some ordinance that the Army does. They go over and pick up the bodies and the wounded. Then they took movies of that, the Germans did. Later we heard they'd showed also that they had the men that were captured, they marched them through Rome. What I was going to say was, in the holes, I'd find, in one particular place, they had these little, when somebody dies, they make these little 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and when they were born. And there were cards of these little pictures of German soldiers. I couldn't read it in German, but I knew what it was. It was the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm or something like that, Bible text, when they were killed at that time. I thought that at the time even, God, it's so strange, here we are killing these guys and they were killing us and here we may be all Christians. I guess everybody had the same. Of course, a guy sits in an airplane, he's flying over and he's killing lots of civilians. I didn't see any killing of civilians. I did see were there were some trigger-happy, like people were; we had them surrounded. Why shoot them? The same guy when we had these prisoners all lined up, he could talk Polish, and he was talking to some guy and then give them cigarettes. So strange how we... But really, in combat, what you're doing is fighting for your life. I

don't know if I ever really thought... I was scared, oh man I was scared. But I don't think I ever thought that when I was fighting that I was going to get killed. I didn't think about that. Some maybe did, I know they did because they were in fear, and some of them ran. I was older, so I should really...In everything I did, my basic training, when they told me to do something, I did it. I didn't goof off or anything. And I never got into trouble. I always said, these guys would get to know your name for any detail... I tend to my business and I was treated good. I think that some guys got breaks in some ways. They always said, "Don't volunteer for anything." My buddy went in with me. They asked if anybody could type and he volunteered, and he started working in the office and later they sent him to officer's school. He made lieutenant and he lived in the U.S.A. during the whole war.

[End of interview]