

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
FRANK FREESE
Morterman, 84th Division, WWII
1995

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Freese, Frank, (1922-1926). Oral History Interview, 1995

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (104 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (104 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Frank Freese of Madison, Wis. discusses his World War II service as a mortorman with Company F, 333rd Infantry, 84th Division in Europe. Freese talks about joining the Army Enlisted Reserve in order to finish college, basic training at Camp Wheeler (Georgia), the different types of people at training, and evaluates the preparation for battle. He describes the Army Specialized Training Program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and the demise of this program. Freese went overseas with the 84th Division, and details his first experience with combat including seeing his first casualties, first enemy dead, and first American dead. He also details military life touching upon issues like combat emotions, sleeping, and eating. Freese provides technical information about mortar fire and operating a 60mm mortar. He relates his involvement in the Battle of the Bulge including morale, attitudes toward replacements, and interacting with Belgium civilians. After the Battle of the Bulge, Freese and his unit moved through Europe, he mentions occupation duty in Germany, waiting to be shipped to Japan, and searching for contraband. He touches upon his return home, discharge, use of the GI Bill, veterans' opinion of ROTC, and studying on a campus full of returning veterans. Freese talks about readjustment issues and compares his homecoming and post-war adjustment to the homecoming Vietnam War veterans received.

Biographical Sketch

Freese (1922-1996) served as a mortar man with the 84th Division Infantry in Europe during World War II. He was honorably discharged from service after achieving the rank of sergeant.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, n.d.

Transcription edited by David S. DeHorse and Abigail Miller, 2002.

Interview Transcript

Today's date is August 25, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview with Mr. Frank Freese, presently of Madison, a veteran of the 84th Division in World War II.

Mark: Good morning. Thanks for coming in.

Freese: Thanks for inviting me.

Mark: I suppose we should start at the top as they say and perhaps you can tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Freese: I was born in Schenectady, New York January 29, 1922 and in 1940 I started college at Syracuse and I think I was in my second year when Pearl Harbor came. I didn't follow newspapers very much or world history, I was too busy keeping one chapter ahead of the professor in my school work so Pearl Harbor -- well I knew things were brewing--I knew about the invasion of Poland and I knew about a lot about the Germans and Italians, but didn't follow it very closely because I didn't expect to be involved in it at that time.

Mark: So when the attack occurred, do you recall your thoughts, especially as a draftable 19-year-old do you recall that this might have some implications for your life?

Freese: Up until Pearl Harbor, I didn't really expect us to get into it. I think I was pretty naive about all that. I used to have arguments with a political science major about whether or not we should get involved in the war or whether we would. I didn't think we had to, but then when Pearl Harbor came along, I knew we were going to be in and that it was just a matter of time until I went in. I didn't really have too much in the way of thoughts about it except that "Gosh, I won't be able to finish school now. I'll be interrupted and will I ever have enough money to go to school when I get done" But I wasn't worried a lot about going in, I figured everybody was going to go in and I could probably survive it as well as most people, so it didn't really bother me too much at the time.

Mark: You entered the service in 1943, did you stay in college up until then?

Freese: Well, ya. Sometime in 1942 I had to register for the draft and I think that was in the summer of '42 I registered for the draft and in the fall I began hearing words about something called the Army Enlisted Reserve. In the Enlisted Reserve you were supposed to be able to sign up to go to the Army but they would let you finish college and then in small letters way down at the bottom it said something about unless there is a national emergency. Well, naturally a few months later,

in fact in March 1943 there was a national emergency so the whole Enlisted Reserve was called up. I went in along with a big share of my fellow students at Syracuse. In fact, when we went to Camp Upton I think there were 200 of us from Syracuse that showed up there all at one time. We went through all the processing, Army general classification tests and tests for your ability as engineers and communications and in typical Army fashion, what they needed was not engineers or anything else--what they needed was infantry so the whole 200 of us were packed up and sent down to a camp in Georgia, what they called a IRTC, Infantry Replacement Training Center.

Mark: This was your basic training?

Freese: That was the basic training.

Mark: When you got to Georgia, it was Georgia right?

Freese: Yes, right near Macon at Camp Wheeler.

Mark: Had you been sworn in, gotten the uniform and haircut, etc.?

Freese: Oh, ya. When we went to the Reception Center at Camp Upton on Long Island. They didn't give you the haircut there but they issued the uniform, gave you all the tests and so forth and the physical exam and then when we got to Camp Wheeler, then we got the haircut, which was snip it all off. We already had the ill-fitting uniforms by then so we looked like soldiers, even though we weren't.

Mark: I went to basic training, and I recall a lot of four letter words and those sorts of things, screaming and yelling. Was that your experience?

Freese: You mean by noncoms?

Mark: Ya. Training instructors, drill instructors.

Freese: Well, our platoon sergeant was an old, tough, leathery looking Georgian who I could hardly understand. Very good platoon sergeant I thought and he was about half my size, but I wouldn't want to tangle with him. He was very tough. But I don't remember any swearing or yelling in your face, chewing you out, but they had me buffaloed, I went along with whatever the rules were so maybe I avoided some of that. There were corporals there and they would give you the devil but they weren't really nasty about it. They pushed you hard. You had to crawl when they said, "crawl" and run when they said, "run" but they weren't nasty about it that I remember.

Mark: In terms of your fellow trainees, did they come from specific geographic areas, did they come from specific economic classes? If you can just describe the men with whom you trained.

Freese: As I said when I went in at Camp Upton, I was with this group of Syracuse students and an awful lot of them ended up in the same training company I was in so I was with a lot of people who had been in college for two or three years and about the same level I was. There were some others who were not from that group, but mostly they were just average high school graduates, some of them had a year or so of college. I trained with them for about five weeks and then I got an infection in my thumb and ended up in the hospital. By the time I got out of the hospital, that group had gone on too far so I couldn't continue with them and I was sent to another company to start all over again. That company was mostly draftees or enlistees who were not people from college and they were from all over the country. Some of them were moderately well educated; some were not too well educated.

Mark: A fairly good mix of people.

Freese: Ya. Pretty much generally. I don't remember many of them being from the west but there were a lot of people from the Midwest and the northeast and the southeast.

Mark: How did they all get along? Were they still fighting the civil war for example? Some of the southern guys?

Freese: No. Mostly not. Most of them were interested in surviving basic training and getting passes when they could and going up to the PX and getting a beer, I think we got along pretty well. We didn't have any fights. There was one corporal who was kind of a nasty character. We had a fellow who was supposed to be an Eskimo, they called him "Fish eater" and he was not too bright and this corporal used to pick on him a lot. He picked on him kind of unmercifully and he picked on other people who were smaller than he was. He didn't bother the bigger ones at all. One night he came back to the barracks on a weekend. He was a bit drunk and the next morning they found him under the barracks with a lot of bruises and broken bones. There was a little revenge taken. Nobody ever knew who did it. But nobody objected too much except the corporal.

Mark: Did you get a pass? Did you get to go into town and if so, what did you see?

Freese: You didn't get a pass when we first went in. You had to learn your Army serial number, you had to be able to recite it, you had to recite your rifle number. I can still recite the rifle number of the first rifle I was issued in the Army. And, you had to learn your general orders for guard duty. You had to be able to -- if you wanted a pass you didn't get one for four or five weeks after you arrived there

and then you had to go in to the company headquarters and stand at attention and they asked for the fourth general order you had to recite it all to them or recite your rifle number. But, then the nearest town was Macon, GA which had two or three air bases around there, plus this Camp Wheeler, but it was not a big town to start with so when you got in there it was pretty much wall to wall uniforms. You did the usual things. You went into the beer halls or you went to a restaurant and got a different kind of meal. You could go to church or something and hope you'd meet some girls there, but usually there were 500 other soldiers with the same idea, so it was pretty much what soldiers do everywhere.

Mark: Was this your first trip out of the northeast? I'm interested in your impressions of the south. It sounds like it was military and really wasn't much of a southern tour for you.

Freese: I'd never been more than 140 miles from home before I went into service, so the whole thing was a big adventure to me. I had been studying forestry when I went into the service so I was quite interested in southern forests, but we went to Camp Upton in March and it was cold! You stayed in these 12-man squad tents and it was ice cold. You froze to death. Then they put us on the train and we traveled about three days to get to Camp Wheeler and when we got there we got off and it was nice warm breezes blowing, there was a military band playing out there and it really felt like a great improvement over Camp Upton, but in a few days we began to get acquainted with a few things like chiggers and ticks and Georgia clay and try to dig holes in it and it lost a lot of its glamour in a hurry. I got to hate Georgia after about a month down there. The people I liked pretty well. I couldn't understand them at first, but we got along fine. I didn't get to see much of the south except right around the camp and the bus trip between camp and Macon, and of course, Macon was not particularly a normal southern town at that time, it was an Army town, which kind of warps everything.

Mark: As for your actual military training, if you would describe that to me, how much of it was rifle training, how much of it was drilling ceremonies, how much of it was in the classroom.

Freese: A lot of it was taking kind of physically soft civilians and getting them into condition for something or another so a lot of it was marching and running and physical training and a lot of it was military discipline learning who to salute and when to say "Sir" and the usual kind of military rigmarole that you have to go through before you're a soldier, but we did get training in weapons, particularly rifles and we learned how to take them apart and put them together which we could do blindfolded after a while. We used to have races with each other taking them apart and putting them back together to see who could do it the fastest. We had to qualify with the weapons, particularly the rifles, so we did have some training on the rifle range.

Mark: Did you have the M1's or old Springfields or what?

Freese: When I got there they had the M1's by then so we didn't have to work with the 03 and that was fortunate. But the M1's had been used a lot for training so they were pretty well worn when we got them.

Mark: As you look back, did your training prepare you for what you eventually encountered?

Freese: I think the training prepared you very well for the mechanics of being a soldier. The routine and discipline and the nature of the weapons and I think if you were in a technical field like engineering or ordinance or artillery or a cook and baker, I think Army training was excellent. I think you knew how to do that job. If you were in one of those technical fields it wasn't too much of a change when you went overseas except the conditions were maybe more unpleasant. But for infantry training, I don't think there is anyway they can train you to prepare you for what you are going to encounter when you get in combat. We knew about shooting the weapons and all that, but nobody can prepare you for the emotional shock when you hit combat. Unless you want to kill off half the trainees. I didn't go directly from basic training overseas as many people did.

Mark: You went to the ASTP.

Freese: Yes. You're familiar with the Army Specialized Training Program?

Mark: Describe how you got into that. You had to be selected for that.

Freese: Well, when I finished basic training, I was called in to see some colonel I'd never seen before. Scared the hell out of me. But the colonel apparently they go through this AGCT scores and your record during training and when I went in to see him he said, "According to your AGCT score, you're qualified for OCS (Officer Candidate School) or for a new program called ASTP" and I'd never heard of ASTP so he described what it was, a training for engineering and he asked me which one I thought I'd be interested in assuming I could make it into either one and the engineering sounded to me like something I'd really benefit from after the war, I'd learn something useful since I was in Forestry, the engineering part would be quite good so I told him I was interested in ASTP. The qualification for that was you had to have a score of 115 on the AGCT and we always pointed out to the officers that you only needed 110 to get to OCS which didn't endear us to them at all. So anyway, I ended up going to ASTP and then I was at Virginia Polytechnic Institute for six months.

Mark: That was it -- six months.

Freese: Ya. At the end of the six months, the whole program was broken up pretty much all over the country. There were a bunch of schools that had these programs and apparently the replacement problem in Europe just got to be too much for them so where can we get a lot of men in a hurry, well we've got all these college kids in the ASTP. There was some complaint from parents and other troops about these college students in their campus fox holes. But anyway the program was broken up and the ones at VPI the whole bunch were put on a train, shipped to Camp Claiborne, LA and assigned to the 84th Division. We had a bunch came in from other schools too. In the Division I think there were something like 2000 to 3000 that came in and of course when they came in, all the cadre had already been selected. These were people who had already been with the Division when it was at Camp Howes, Texas and when they were on maneuvers so all the ASTP people came in they were the privates on the bottom of the thing and they were all in mostly the combat positions. Since the Division probably only has about--the Division may be 18,000 people, but only 4000-5000 are in the combat sections and almost all of them were these ASTP people so it was a pretty well educated division compared to most. There were other divisions that were similarly built up, 102nd Division, 99th, 106th; a lot of those divisions that went over in the fall of '44 were filled with ASTP students.

Mark: So when did you get to Louisiana?

Freese: April 1, 1944.

Mark: And you left in September. What took place in the meantime to get the 84th Division ready? What did you do, maneuvers and training and that sort of thing?

Freese: We did a lot of training, mostly we did marching. But we would go out on one or two week field maneuvers where we'd be living out in pup tents and running up and down the hills making like we were at war. Something like that. I don't remember that we did anything particularly different from what I had done in basic training. I think it was more to train the officers who would come in from OCS on how to handle troops. I was assigned to a mortar squad and I don't ever remember firing a live mortar round until I got into combat so the training wasn't all that complete. I'd fired a dummy round when I was in basic training and that was the only mortar round I'd ever fired until I got into combat.

Mark: How was morale at the time? Were you anxious to get overseas? Were you fearful of it?

Freese: Not especially anxious I wouldn't say. Nobody said "Let's go!" We wouldn't have minded leaving Louisiana because we were there from April to September when it was the hottest and there again, there were four or five Army camps, Camp Beauregard, Camp Livingston, Camp Claiborne, all right around the

Alexandria area, plus two air bases so it wasn't a very happy situation. Some of the smarter soldiers would take off and go in directions other than the town of Alexandria but I wasn't that smart and didn't know where to go.

Mark: So you finally took off for overseas in September. Can you describe how you got to Louisiana to England?

Freese: We went from Camp Claiborne by train to Camp Kilmer which was kind of a gathering place for people going out the New York port of embarkation. Then we stayed there about a week until the whole Division had gathered and then we went to New York and we were put on a bunch of different ships. I was on the S.S. Alexander which was an old German liner and I heard that we were supposed to land at Cherbourg but at that time there was too much traffic at Cherbourg with supplies and everything so we ended up going up through the St. George Straits and into Firth of Clyde and landing in Scotland and then we came down from Scotland into England to a camp near Winchester. We stayed around there for about two weeks, again, until the whole Division gathered and we did training marches but mostly it was just to keep us occupied. It wasn't really training in the true sense. Then we were shipped down to Southampton and got on another ship and went to Omaha Beach. Omaha Beach of course was not a lot of shooting at that time. Thank heaven it had already been done.

Mark: It was all over by that time.

Freese: Yes. We went in on the little Hagan cheese box boats and waded ashore but of course, nobody was firing at us by that time, but we could see all the signs of it. All the German pill boxes were still there, the barbed wire entanglements up in the hills, big guns sticking out of the pill boxes so it was an experience to land there even without being shot at. We stayed around there, we camped there for a couple days in pup tents until the Division had gathered and then we were put on trucks and shipped up to the northeastern area. Northeast of Aachen. to the 9th Army which is the one we were assigned to when we first got there.

Mark: This was when the 84th first ran into combat.

Freese: We got into combat in November of '44. Some of the units were -- one of our regiments was detached and was assigned to the 35th Division which was up on the line and a company from our battalion was assigned to the 30th Division up on the line so they got there a little ahead of the rest of us but most of us ended up going in the 17th or 18th of November, got into the shooting war.

Mark: Describe for me if you would, the baptism of fire as it was called. Some of the events leading up to it and going up to the line and then becoming engaged.

Freese: Of course, we had been encountering signs of war all the way across the bombing in London and what we saw at Omaha and going through St. Lo seeing knocked out tanks along the way so we'd seen some of the effects of war but I think the first time we realized that things were going to be a little different was when we were going by truck we traveled all one night somewhere in Belgium, I don't know where except that it snowed on us while we were traveling along. In the morning we pulled into Aachen and the truck stopped, apparently while somebody up ahead looked for the right road to take and all of a sudden we could hear the sound of artillery being fired and that was our first sign that we were pretty close to the war. It kind of made everybody stop and think about what was ahead. Then we moved from there into Deer Galeen, Holland and I assume from your name you are Dutch, and we were among Dutch people, which we liked very much and they liked us too. They were the most sanitary people I've ever seen in my life. The woman from the house next to us scrubbed the sidewalks twice a day.

Mark: You ought to see my office! It's--we're not all that way!

Freese: Well, I didn't see any man scrubbing sidewalks. I gave them a bunch of bars of soap I had that I couldn't figure any use for and boy, I thought she was going to kiss me she was so happy to get that soap! But there we were within seven or eight miles of the line. We could hear artillery constantly and then finally on the 17th of November, our company was told that we were going up and the Division was going to attack this town of Geilenkirchen which was kind of a funny arrangement because we were right next to the British and the British 30th Corps under General Brian Horitz had been assigned to take Geilenkirchen which stuck like a thumb out into the American line only he said he didn't have enough manpower to do it so either General Simpson of the 9th Army or Eisenhower generously said, "Well, you can have the 84th, they just arrived." This was kind of unusual because the Army always tells you that new divisions are assigned to quiet sections of the line to get them accustomed to combat like the 106th and the 99th in Ardennes. We were thrown into what many considered the nastiest section of the whole front at that time. So we went by truck up into from Galene at night and we drove into a border town Marianburg it's right on the Dutch-German border. We got in this town, of course it's completely dark and we're in this truck with the tarp over the top and not knowing what was ahead of us and all of a sudden artillery opened up and we didn't know it at the time but it was an American artillery outfit that was within 100 yards of where we were. All this loud noise.

Mark: It was outgoing though.

Freese: It was outgoing but we didn't know it at that time. And, we didn't know where the holes were to jump into so everybody just sat there frozen stiff and then a Mexican fellow, I'll never forget what he said after the artillery had stopped

firing he says, "Wow, they're playing for kips now!" He meant "keeps" of course. That kips expressed the whole thing completely to us. Then we detrucked and we were lined up alongside the road and we started marching up this road with a 5 yard interval between men, the usual stuff and all around the horizon we could see this flash of artillery shells going off and we could see tracer bullets going up in the air and it was pretty hairy experience, particularly when you didn't know whether you were in danger or not. At the time we were still about a mile or a mile and a half from the front line, but to us that was far closer than we wanted to be! The direction we started walking was the direction where all that artillery was flashing which was pretty unpleasant. We finally ended up our company in a little town of Frielemburg which was in Germany along the Wurm River and it had all been shell blasted by both the Germans and the Americans and so we were assigned to one of these blasted houses and they put us, the people who, we were in the cellar of the house or in a barn next to it but somebody had to stand guard and so we put one man out on guard, which was our first stupid mistake. I remember standing out under the archway of this building and there was all sorts of metal creaking and rocks falling and you hear all these noises in the dark and you don't know what's going on and I don't know if you can remember how you felt when you were about five years old and you walk through a woods alone at night, well it was the same way you felt there. Didn't know what was happening. It was very scary. Then the next morning when it got daylight, you could see what was going on. We found out that the back yard of our house with its stone wall had all been knocked down. We had no guard back there so a whole German battalion could have marched into our building. We just had one man standing out front not knowing what he was doing. We had orders to load some stuff into a jeep into a trailer and we were working around that and all of a sudden a little mortar shell came in and landed about three houses down the street from us -- it hit the roof. That kind of woke us up a bit. But it was a small shell, it didn't really scare anybody very much and so we kept working another fellow and I were watching a little Cub plane flying by -- one of these artillery spotters. As we watched it go by we saw this little black thing come down and hit the roof of our building and burst in an orange [END SIDE A, TAPE 1] flame and black smoke and when we looked around there was our platoon leader, Lt. was on the ground with his ankle full of shrapnel and one of our sergeant's machine gun sergeant with a big hole in his back and shrapnel in there and four other fellows also had small wounds, but those two were our first casualties. From then on we figured things were going to get nasty.

Mark: And they did I take it.

Freese: And they did. It didn't get any better. Fortunately, our battalion was put into Division Reserve at that time and the first battalion of our regiment attacked Geilenkirchen and the 3rd Battalion passed through them and went up the Wurm River Valley to attack some other towns up there and for a few days they

kept shifting our battalion back and forth about a half miles behind the front lines. We were still within mortar and shell range and we got machine gunned a few times from a distance, but we didn't take any more casualties. We went from one place in the line to another and I remember seeing the first dead German as we marched out of one town. We'd gone across this field and in this hole was a German. The hole was too small for him to fall over so he was just kind of leaning over the front of it. Then a mortar shell had hit right in front of the hole and he had a machine gun and it was off to the side all torn to pieces and he was just lying there dead and that was our first dead German. A little beyond that we came to a field where we were told there were mines scattered all over the field and we started following the tracks of a tank figuring that it would have touched off these mines and it did because about half way across the field there was the tank with it's tread blown off and a hold about 75 mm. in the front of the tank. Next to it was a dead American with an 84th Division patch on so that was our first encounter with a dead American. We were put in some zig zag trenches, we were still in reserve, but we stayed in these trenches which were all full of water and German material, hand grenades and helmets and stuff like that and I found a beautiful leather boot and thought, "Gee, that's a nice boot." I picked it up and it still had the leg of the German inside it. Another fellow found the other boot with the other leg inside of it. The thing that shocks you is not so much that you're seeing somebody else that's been killed, but you know damn well it could happen to you too.

Mark: So in combat when you're not in reserve, when you're actually engaged, as a mortar man where are you and what are you doing and how much in danger are you?

Freese: You're very much in danger. It depends a little on what your officers know about combat. Ours didn't know very much so our first attack, we followed about 50 yards behind the riflemen who were up front--'cause the riflemen were the ones who got the most. They got killed and wounded the most often. They took the worst of it. Mortar men were safer because they were behind the front row and machine guns or rifles opened up on the front line troops they were less likely to get to the mortar men, although we were in the flat country rear and it didn't make much difference because--it varied from 50 to 100 guys. You followed them. What should have been done is the mortars should have been put into a defilade position down in a gully somewhere or behind a building to fire support fire over the riflemen. But for some reason the company decided the mortar men ought to follow close in behind the riflemen and then start firing if needed. Well, you don't fire a mortar round in a bare open field, not if you want to keep mortar men alive for future use. Also, when the enemy shot mortars or artillery at you, they didn't usually shoot at the front most troops, they fired back in among the things. For one thing if you shoot at the front ones, you only get the front ones whereas if you shoot behind then you disrupt

communications and you are in among them so you're most apt to cause damage.

Mark: Harassing fire.

Freese: Ya. Right. So I think that we got about as much of that as the riflemen did but we didn't get as much of the direct small arms fire as the riflemen did and we didn't take the casualties that the riflemen did, but we took a lot of casualties.

Mark: And so what are your targets out there? Are you told to just fire or are you looking at specific...

Freese: Well, this is one thing in our training that I think was deficient. I don't know if you are familiar with S. L. A. Marshall, he's a military historian and he pointed out that Americans were trained to fire at fixed targets. We had a bull's eye and at 200 or 300 yards you shot at the bull's eye so most American riflemen were reluctant to fire unless they saw a target. You didn't see targets much in the war. They were in holes somewhere or in buildings and you very seldom saw a German and if you saw him you didn't see him long enough to set up your rifle and take aim and put the sling on the way they taught you in basic training. What Marshall insisted and what Patton insisted was that you should use marching fire, that is you just get everything firing at the area you're going to and presumably in mortars we would pick out, we were supposed to pick out targets, but we could never see any targets, particularly when we were up close to the riflemen because we were laying flat on the ground to keep from getting hit. What we should have been doing, if we had a place to fire was fire at the area where the enemy was, not necessarily at a single individual, but at a village or a bridge sight or at a ditch or someplace at the other side of the hill. But, we didn't learn that until later on.

Mark: If you would describe the mortar to me. You're the first mortar man I've interviewed so described what is the actual piece that you're firing, what sort of range does it have and how effective is it?

Freese: I was in the 60 mm mortar which is in an infantry battalion you have three rifle companies and in each rifle company you have a weapons platoon which has two machine guns and three 60 mm mortars. They're just a little thing. The mortar men carry the whole thing. You carried the barrel and the base plate and the tripod and it's what they call the high angle fire weapons designed to shoot over hills and over buildings and the range of the 60 mm mortar was, I think maximum, about 2,000 yards but effective range was about 800 or 1,000 yards and it fired a little 2 pound shell which would hurt personnel but wouldn't hurt much of anything else.

Mark: Like a tank for example.

Freese: Well, a tank you wouldn't chip the paint off. We had to fire at a tank one time, which I thought was a suicidal way of treating mortar men but the mortar has an extremely fast sensitive fuse and you have to be careful when you set it up that there are no trees above you with leaves or twigs because the shell is immediately armed as soon as it leaves the barrel. It has two safety's. You pull a pin out when you drop the shell in the barrel and then when it leaves it has a setback safety so that when the shell hits the bottom of the tube it fires and it goes the other way in a hurry and there is a setback safety with a little slot in it and the safety pin slides out and slides along side of the barrel until the shell clears the barrel then the safety pin goes out and its armed within a few feet of leaving the barrel so if you get any twigs above you it will go off and when it gets at the other end it goes on very quickly and doesn't vary itself like an artillery shell would a foot or two on the ground it'll go off right near the surface of the ground which means that shrapnel from it spreads out more evenly than if a shell buries itself you get a cone and dispersion which goes upward, whereas a mortar tends to go out flat. In the same infantry battalion you have a heavy weapons company which has 81 mm mortars and they're the big ones which usually if anybody carried them they carried the barrel and the base plate and the tripod separately because they were all too big to carry the whole thing or else they transported them by jeep and they had a greater range, but I don't know what the range was of those. They could do a lot more damage than our 60's could. I think the 60 was left over from World War I because they hadn't figured out that it was pretty much useless because you were too close to the enemy to fire the thing most of the time.

Mark: So you were also involved in the Ardennes campaign and you went all the way through Europe up until VE Day. If you would describe your impression of German capabilities and what were the most effective weapons, what was and was not effective and did this change in the short time that you were there? As you got deeper into Germany did the German resistance get less effective or did they remain tough fighters to the

Freese: When we first got there, this was right after the push across France when the Germans seemed to be disintegrating, but when we got to them the Americans had stopped because the supplies couldn't keep up with them and the Germans had a chance to reform and also they were in the Siegfried Line. When we got there we were right in the middle of the Siegfried Line where these pill boxes with walls four to six foot thick of reinforced concrete and the division we were in was a mixture that was an infantry division which although they may not have as good as the Africa Corps, they were still good troops, they weren't the scraping of the barrel by any means and there was also a M.S.S. Panzer Division mixed in with them. The Panzer Division was generally kept a little behind to be shuttled from place to place whenever things got too hot so we were running with some very good troops and the place that they were everything favored the

defense because we were in these flat open beet fields which were very difficult to attack across and no place to hide. On top of that it was November and that November it rained 28 out of the 30 days of the month. So everything was mud. You dig a hole and pretty soon you're sitting in a puddle and tanks, we had the 2nd Armored Division right next to us but the 2nd Armored Division couldn't get off the road. The minute they got off the road, their tanks bogged down and became targets for the Germans. I thought the Germans, I didn't know much about military science but they seemed to have things figured out very well. They had their men positioned very well and they may not have had as much artillery as we had or as much infantry or as much of anything else but they used it very well, I thought. Their tanks were far superior, particularly in static positions like that, to ours because they had better guns and they had heavier armor so our Sherman tanks were pretty vulnerable. In fact, the Germans used to refer to them as Ronson Lighters because they used gasoline but went up pretty easily if they got hit, whereas the American tanks were Sherman's with 75 mm guns and if you hit something like a Mark 6 Panther or a Mark 6 Tiger, the 75 would just bounce off it like a ping pong ball. They could be knocked out by hitting them in the side or the back but that was pretty lucky if you got a shot like that.

Mark: And so as time went on, did they start to disintegrate as you got farther into Germany?

Freese: They didn't disintegrate. We didn't get very far for one thing, that first month. We were trying to get through the Siegfried Line to the Rohr River and we advanced maybe a mile or so and wiped out most of the Division in the process. So the first month we were in we didn't really advance very far and I saw no signs of the Germans disintegrating in that time. But then the Bulge broke and we were pulled out of the 9th Army and sent down to the tip of the Bulge, the area around Marsh and Theme and Haughton and then of course there we ran into--it was--the Germans were beginning to run out of steam by the time they got there but we ran into top divisions, the 2nd Panzer Division and the 116th Panzer Division. Those were both really high class troops, but they were running out of gas by then so we managed to stop them there and then after they had been stopped at the tip of the Bulge, we pulled around to the north side and we had to drive in from the north side to meet the 3rd Army coming up from the south side, to meet at Houffalize and there, I always said that the fighting in the Bulge was better for us than it had been for Geilenkirchen. For one thing, we were in a forest where you didn't feel as though you were naked as we did in those beet fields. Also, the Germans were pulling back so they'd leave delaying action, they'd leave troops, a company or a platoon with tanks or something like that and you'd get into some nasty fire fights and then you'd get tree bursts, but the resistance wasn't as solid as it had been up around the Geilenkirchen sector and then after the Bulge was finished we stayed there about a month and the end

of January we went back up to the Geilenkirchen sector which all of us dreaded because we figured it was going to be the same old thing over again.

Mark: Things hadn't moved very much apparently.

Freese: Not very much because, you're probably familiar with the Roer River dams that the Americans didn't take until well into January -- well, the Germans still controlled those when we went back and the British had started a drive Operation Denabul or something like that from up around Roermond to the Reitzfald Forest and we were supposed to cross the Roer River and meet them but we were supposed to start on the 10th of February but the Germans wrecked the dams on the Roer River and flooded the Roer so we couldn't start until the 23rd of February. While we were in the Bulge, the 102nd Division that replaced us on the Roer River and they had advanced up to the Roer in our whole sector and they had taken the pill boxes which by that time didn't have men in them in most cases because the Germans had pulled a lot of troops out to go down to the Ardennes, they had pulled a lot behind the Roer River and were also fighting the British up north of us. So when we crossed the Roer then we began to notice a difference in the kind of troops we ran into. We ran into older men and young kids and the Germans were obviously disorganized. Once in a while you'd run into good troops who would put up quite a fight in one place, but a lot of times you'd run into these so called Foksderm troops which were secondary -- they could still shoot, a kid 16-years-old can still shoot you and a 60-year-old man with a Panzerfaust can still knock out a tank if he wants to stay around. So it wasn't like driving the mice out of the barn. They were still dangerous and the German artillery was still there so you could get a lot of casualties but it wasn't as miserable and as grinding as it had been in the Geilenkirchen area when we first went in. When we went in that Geilenkirchen sector, there were some British, we were attached to the British 30th Corps, and there was some older British officers there who had been in World War I and they said that the area and the fighting there reminded them of trench warfare in World War I and on the American side there were troops from the 29th and 30th Division which had been in since Normandy and they said the fighting in that area was worse than anything they had at Normandy so it was pretty miserable stuff.

Mark: I want to come back to that but I have some other topics I want to cover. The first involves the sort of -- the morale of the troops in combat and everyday life in the trenches. What kept you guys fighting, how often were you on the line, describe your food and sleeping conditions, those sorts of things.

Freese: Miserable would sum it up pretty well. I don't think morale was very high and if you read regimental after action reports, they always reported troop morale was high and everything was fine and up the line they assumed that all the troops were gung ho about this whole thing but most of the people on the line would have been happy to find any way they could to get somewhere else and

we did have a few men who accidentally shot themselves in the foot or in the hand.

Mark: Quote unquote you mean?

Freese: Well, you don't know. I had a friend, who was accidentally shot in the leg, I'm sure that wasn't intentional. It was somebody cleaning a 45 next to him. So, replacement. But there were others who were shot in the hand by their own rifles and was it an accident? Nobody knew, but everybody suspected that it wasn't accidental. Oddly enough, it was usually not the men who had been in the company a while, but replacements who would come in just a few days before.

Mark: That brings up an interesting point actually. As replacements came in, because people were being rotated in all the time as casualties took people out. How did the new guys sort of fit in? How were they integrated to the unit?

Freese: I think infantry replacement must have been the dirtiest job in the whole war. When we went over we went over with people we had trained with and people we'd gone to town with and got drunk with and all that. So we knew all the people we were with. In our first attack, our company went from 160 men on the line down to about 40 in three days. When we pulled back off the line and when I say pulled back we were about a half-mile or less from the front line. We were in a shell-torn village and within range of shells, but we got replacements in and mostly we didn't welcome them in, introduce them and tell them what they were going to run into, we just kind of ignored them and stayed with our own -- the people we knew and the replacements were assigned to a squad so they knew their squad leader, maybe, but most of them, people I talked to, didn't even know what company they were in, they didn't know what Division they were in, they hardly knew anything about where they were. They were just bewildered sheep when they came to us and if they stayed around long enough, then they got to be part of the company and we got to know them like we had the other fellows, but until then, as I say, they were just lost and we didn't do a hell of a lot to help them out, because we were too worried about ourselves. I remember talking to one fellow who came into our company when we were in Belgium, he came on the 29th of December as a replacement and they told him "We're going to put you in with this older guy who's been around" so they showed him where his hole was, his defensive position we held and he went out and got in the hole with this guy and he found out this "old hand" had arrived the day before!

Mark: And so this process of getting guys integrated took about how long do you think, until he became at least semi-familiar? A couple of weeks? Months maybe?

- Freese: Well, ya. If they were in your squad, maybe in a week or two maybe you'd know who they were and if you took a new position and dug in for a defensive position if they ended up in the same hole with you, you got to know them because you were sitting in the hole with them all day and all night so you'd get to know them. By then, they were the old hands in the company to you. If they were in another hole you probably never did get to know them. Unless you spent actual time with them, because when you pulled off the line into a rest area, which was usually a cellar in a blasted village, you didn't spend a lot of time paying games, you wrote a letter home, something like that, or you slept most of the time. So you didn't socialize a lot. You didn't talk to people a lot. You were just--you were just too damn tired to do most of these things for another thing you were just too turned in on yourself to spend much time worrying about this poor replacement that came in. It was an unhappy atmosphere for any replacement to come into a company. I'm glad I wasn't one.
- Mark: In terms of eating and sleeping maybe you can tell me just the basic things that people do when these processes are interrupted during combat. Perhaps you can describe sleeping conditions and what sort of food you were eating at the time.
- Freese: When we went into an attack, we were usually given one or two K-rations and hopefully we would take the ground that we were supposed to take and dig in and then we'd be in a hole, maybe two or three fellows in the same hole. You'd just stay in that hole and during the daytime you'd keep your head down, you'd sit in the bottom of the hole, which was usually mud and water, and you'd just sit there and smoke or try to sleep. At night, usually you'd have one man standing up keeping watch and the others would be sitting in the bottom of the hole. You didn't make the hole big enough to lie down in because if it was that big, there was more chance of shells or something coming in on you. So you just sat there crunched up in the bottom of his hold. If you stayed there more than a couple of days, usually they'd send carrying parties back to some town maybe a half mile from the front to pick up supplies and ammunition which they would then carry back up to the front, you'd get some more K-rations. So when we were on the line our diet was solid K-rations. One or two K-rations a day. When we pulled off the line and were sent back to some village or some other outfit replaced us on the line, then the cooks would bring up hot meals which I think were probably C-rations cans that they opened up, but it was hot food which was a big improvement over the K-ration. When people talk about getting tired of Spam in World War II, I always figure they weren't in an infantry outfit, 'cause I never saw Spam in the war. Spam came in a can and you had to have something to carry it and the infantrymen, everything he had he carried himself so "10 in 1" ten men, ten meals in one can or something like that. It had good food in it but we never had them because you couldn't carry the things. If you were in a heavy weapons company where you carried your weapons in a jeep, or if you were in some headquarters company, where you had trucks carrying stuff, you could carry that sort of thing, but if you were in the

line company, K-ration was what you carried and that's what we had most of the time if we had that. If we pulled back off the line to a rest area, usually they were within a half-mile of the front and usually in a beat up village and we were in a cellar, then you slept on the floor of the cellar, if there was hay barn nearby you might bring in some hay and put in on the floor and that was it. You'd sleep in the same clothes you slept in when you were up on the line, unless they got a change of clothes brought up to you.

Mark: Did that happen very often?

Freese: When we fought up in the Geilenkirchen sector, right at the end, we had one spell where we were up on the line for nine days sitting in holes and when they pulled us back we went into a rest area. a town back in Wallback, Holland, and that was a mining area of Holland. Then we got clean clothes and that was about the 18th or 19th of December. We got showers, which were wonderful. That was the time while we were there we were told to pack up. We went down to the Bulge. I didn't get to take my clothes off, not necessarily to get clean clothes, I didn't get to take the ones off that I had on until the 15th of January so I had the same clothes on for that whole month. Fortunately, it was Belgium and very cold so the odor didn't build up too much [laughs].

Mark: So if you see Willie and Joe cartoons, they always have a beard and always kind of scruffy, that's fairly accurate portrayal.

Freese: They were in Italy, which was even worse than Europe, I think. That pretty much describes it. I don't know if you're familiar with that Malden cartoon that he won the Pulitzer Prize for but it was an American leading some German prisoners and the Germans got baggy uniforms hanging down and their slouched and their bearded and heavy-eyed and the American leading looks about the same. You couldn't tell one from the other. The captain is "Fresh spirit of American troops flush with victory are bringing in hundreds of battle-weary German prisoners." You looked at it and couldn't tell who was the winner and who was the loser there. That was pretty much the case. There may have been other times on the line when things were a little cleaner and a little neater, but then it wasn't. It was just mess all the time. And living in mud. **[END SIDE B, TAPE 1]** We had German dirt in our skins from the time we were in the Geilenkirchen sector and it was after the war before the dirt began to disappear from our skin because you could scrub it with a brush and it was just embedded in you because you were living in mud constantly.

Mark: Did you look at photographs of combat soldiers from World War II? One of the things that has always amazed me is there'll be one guy fighting and the other guy sleeping. Is that really possible? Could you really sleep in that sort of situation?

Freese: Well, you got so when you were up on the line if you could get to sleep, you would hear gunfire, not necessarily close gunfire. If the guy in your hole was firing a gun you got up fast, but there may have been machine gun fire somewhere along the line or there may have been mortar shells coming in along the line, but as long as they weren't very close, you just kind of ignored them. Unless you heard a lot of fire that seemed very close then you would get up but I don't think that you would have one guy fighting and another guy sleeping in close proximity to each other.

Mark: A couple of other things that we've touched on already, I want to clarify a little more. One of them involves the Allies. You had some contact with the British and perhaps some other groups, Canadian or something like that as well, if you could describe something--(*switched tape sides*).

We were talking about Allies and your relationships.

Freese: Our only direct contact, when we were in England of course, we would meet other troops, British and Canadian and some Australian. We got along fine as individuals. But in combat, our only contact with the British, we had two contacts. The first was when we were with the British 30th Corps around Geilenkirchen and they were on one side of the Wurm River and we were on the other side and so we didn't see them too directly, but we'd see some of them around and they seemed like good troops to us, 'cause we were just fresh in combat at that time and these guys we figured had been in the war for umpteen years. We didn't know that infantrymen don't stay in the war for umpteen years 'cause most of them were just like us they'd been there a couple of weeks. But, they seemed like veterans as we kind of looked up to them. But, we didn't have too much direct contact with them because we were fighting with our own units on one side of the river and they were with their units on the other side. Of course, when something would get screwed up like a town would take a hell of a lot of fire in our sector coming from the British sector, we'd say it was because the Limeys were having tea and didn't move up. Well, they were probably moving up as fast as we were but the British had advanced to a town opposite us and they got a lot of fire and they said it was because the Americans didn't advance, were too timid advancing. The British, there was a British author, Ken Ford wrote a book about the Battle of Geilenkirchen and it covered the 43rd Wessex Division which was the British unit and the 84th Infantry and he had quite a few comments about the British and the Americans, but one comment the British made was that our officers didn't get up to the front enough, they tried to fight the war from back in Headquarters and they criticized the American officers for not taking care of their men enough and the British always tried to get hot food up to their men and in some of Montgomery's memoirs this is mentioned quite often. The important of getting hot food up to the men and also of letting them see the higher commanders up among them so that they don't feel like they're out there doing it all by themselves. So there was a lot of

criticism of the Americans by the British for that reason. Every American you ever interviewed probably complained about the British stopping for tea. Well, they seem to do that a lot but I don't know that they ever stopped in the middle of the war, but in the Bulge, the British weren't much involved in the Bulge except they were behind the Meuse River holding the line there in case the Germans got past us. Then after we had stopped them around Marsh and we supposed to move around to the north side, the British came up to replace us, 53rd Welsh Division came up and they were to take over the defensive position we held in one little town and as we came out of the town they came up the valley with all their lorries with lights on. We never traveled with lights on, but the British all had their headlights on coming up this valley. That struck us as rather peculiar and then when they got up to where we were stopped, they did stop to make tea then before they went up in the hill. Of course, their British lorries with their lights on drew artillery fire, which naturally landed right on us. We kind of cursed the Limeys out a bit. When they stopped to brew tea we were talking to them. We got along fine with them. There wasn't any antagonism. We didn't try to start any fights with them--we didn't try to start any fights with anybody at that stage of the game.

Mark: You discussed the Dutch lady you ran into, did you have any other contacts with some of the native peoples of Europe? French, Germans?

Freese: We had contact when we'd pull off the line. When we were up on the line we were just across the Holland border in Germany and there were no civilians left. The Germans had made them all move out so we encountered no civilians whatsoever at that stage of the war, but when we'd pull off the line we'd go back to the Dutch towns, we went back to a little town of Wallbach after we'd been on the line for about nine days and the Dutch people all came out on the street as we got off trucks and invited us to stay at their house. Two or three soldiers would be invited to each house, which I thought was the height of hospitality 'cause we were covered with mud from top to bottom and Willie and Joe would have looked like poster boys compared to what we looked like and we must have smelled about as bad as we looked. So, the fact that these people would invite us to stay in their house impressed the hell out of me as great hospitality. Then in Belgium, we didn't see too many civilians because a lot of them figured the Germans were coming and went back and pulled out. But I met a lot of Dutch people since then and the Dutch people in the Ardennes area, if you tell them you are an American soldier in the Bulge, they practically--they would give you the house and their daughter and anything else. They were so grateful for what America did. So I always have a fondness for what the Dutch and the Belgian people. I didn't have much contact with the French except after the war while on leave in Paris and of course the kind of people a soldier gets in contact are usually the ones who are fixing to make money off the soldier so they aren't the highest quality people. The French weren't as popular in many cases but that was our fault as much as theirs.

Mark: How about the Germans, as you went into Germany?

Freese: After we crossed the Roer, then we began seeing civilians. Mostly they weren't very happy to see us, but they weren't openly hostile--they didn't throw rocks at anything or us. Since we were armed and they weren't. Mostly they would just stand and look glum when we went by and not too happy to see us. After the war we got on a more social scale with them and some of them were quite pleasant but a lot of them resented what the Americans had done, which I can't blame them. We were the enemy and we were occupying their country and if we moved into a town we would tell the civilians they had to get out of their house and we would take it over as long as we were going to be there so it wasn't the happiest situation for them, but the Germans, I don't know, they seem to be a people who--they're obedient--they respect authority and we were authority at that stage of the game so we didn't have much problem with them. There were a few younger people who, I think, had been indoctrinated as Hitler Youths or something who kind of had a chip on their shoulder and they were pretty cautious--and of course the kids, you get along with kids no matter where you are.

Mark: Were they much fear of sabotage or anything like that behind the lines as you are going through? I get the impression that didn't happen at all in your experience.

Freese: Well, I wasn't behind the lines so I didn't worry too much about it, but while the war was still going on, if you were in a rear area, most of the jeeps would put up this iron bar, piece of angle iron with a little crook at the top and this was supposed to be in case anybody strung piano wire across the road. There were some reports of things being strewn on the road to cut tires, but by the time we got into Germany where you would have expected much of that stuff, it was obvious to the Germans that the war was over. We were moving very rapidly so I don't think much of that actually went on. There was this thing during the Bulge of Scorzini's troops that were supposed to come behind American lines -- we only encountered one man who we thought might have been one of Scorzini's troops. He was a fellow we found in a factory when we took over a little town and he was kind of moaning as though he'd been wounded, but we couldn't find any wounds on him and he didn't have any dog tags on and he didn't say anything so we packed him up and sent him back to the aide station. We always wondered whether or not he had been one of Scorzini's troops that had been sent behind to disrupt American communications, but that was probably more of a psychological thing than an actual damage that they would do.

Mark: So VE Day you were where?

Freese: We were sitting along the Elbe River. We had got up to the Elbe and the Army commander--we were within 25 to 40 miles to Berlin and the Army commander, General Simpson wanted to cross the Elbe. He felt that we could have gone in to take Berlin. The British wanted to take it for, I assume, political reasons, but Eisenhower apparently had made the agreement ahead of time that we would stop at the Elbe as a dividing line because the Russians were coming the other way pretty fast and that if we'd run into each other, we'd be liable to start a war with the Russians, not realizing who they were. Besides, the occupation zones had already been decided on and I think the higher commands figured there was no point in our taking territory and losing men and then having to give it up to the Russians anyway. The British felt that it would have been politically important for the British and Americans to take -- Montgomery certainly wanted to take Berlin. Simpson wanted to cross the Elbe River and there was all indications that we could have because the Germans, by that time, there were German commanders offering to join the American Army to fight the Russians. They were sending over leaflets saying after us you get the Russians, sort of thing. We could have gone to Berlin, I'm pretty sure of that. I didn't want to go because I didn't want to die at that stage of the game. I didn't want to die at any stage of the game, but particularly then!

Mark: Did you get to meet the Russians at all?

Freese: The Russians, for a while when we were along the Elbe River Germans were swarming down the other side of the river, both civilians and soldiers and a lot of them were coming across the river to surrender to us and we kept watching for the Russians and we could hear their guns in the distance. Then after maybe a week or so, Russian troops showed up on the other side and I never went across the Elbe to meet them but some of them came across to our side. We met them but we couldn't talk to them very well. We showed them our weapons and traded cigarettes and that sort of thing.

Mark: Did any sort of impressions about their fighting capabilities? Morale, that sort of thing?

Freese: Well, no. Not from the ones we met. We only met a few and they weren't fighting at the time but my impression was that if you were in the Russian Army and survived, you were a fighter. I've talked to German veterans who said the Russians were the best soldiers because if you put them in a place and told them to stay there no matter what--they stayed there no matter what! No German would do that and certainly no American would do it. I think their system was a lot more brutal than ours. They fed men in and let them get ground up and I don't think they considered the welfare of the men or anything. They just sent masses of men in and took the consequences.

Mark: So after the shooting is over, what did the 84th Division do? You were on occupation duty for at least some time.

Freese: Of course, we had to move out. In the Elbe I think we may have been in the -- I don't know if we were in the Russian or the British zone at that time and so we had to move out of there and we went down to the town of Hannau, Germany where we stayed a couple of weeks and we took a bunch of Russian displaced persons up to the Elbe River to turn over to the Russians and then we moved down near Mannheim and we were on occupation duty.

Mark: What's involved with occupation duty?

Freese: Up until VJ Day we figured what we were doing was just sitting there waiting for ships to take up to Japan. But we would go around and raid towns looking for contraband or hidden weapons or something like that which we never found, but sometimes we would go through a town and check all the identification cards that the Germans had to make sure there weren't an SS or any high powered Nazi's hiding there and we never found any of those hiding there either. We guarded some bridges and stuff like that and I got sent on a detail one time of guarding a train load of ammunition and explosives which there were six of us on this train which was about a half-mile long and would have been very easy for somebody to slip up and throw a hand grenade in one of these box cars and touch the whole thing off. You did things like that. Little jobs. Guard duty sort of things. We also had athletic programs so that we formed a swimming team and football teams and track teams.

Mark: I would imagine you got barracks to sleep in by now.

Freese: No. We slept in German houses most of the time. When we were in Hammel the displaced persons were in the German barracks and we just told the civilians to move out or we moved in with them and we took the houses over. We did the same thing in other towns that we were in. There may have been some troops in barracks but there were too many American troops for all the barracks and besides, they wanted us spread out. They didn't want us all concentrated in one place. We were in a little town of Illisheim, which was probably about half the size of Middleton and other troops were in other towns similarly.

Mark: If you would describe your trip back to the U.S.

Freese: We were in Illisheim for a while and then Ladenburg which is between Heidelberg and Mannheim and then we took a train from Ladenburg and we went to Camp Phillip Morris, one of these cigarette camps that were set up for GIs to be shipped home and we had to sit around there for two or three weeks and then we got on another ship about the size of the one we came over on, this is the George Washington which was another German ship that we'd taken over.

It turned out that that was one of the roughest January's they'd ever had. The captain of the ship said he'd sailed on the Atlantic 50 years and the weather was the worst he'd ever seen. It was really stormy and we were hearing tales of these little liberty ships that were in distress nearby all the way across. But, again it took about ten or eleven days to cross the Atlantic and I was one of the fortunate ones who was not subject to sea sicknesses. It was pretty miserable on that ship. Particularly so because we were in the holds, way down at the bottom of the ship--an officer in a stateroom but I don't know if that was any better. You can still get sea sick up there. Down in the hold you were with hundreds of men packed in very tightly and sea sickness is kind of a contingent sort of thing if one guy starts heaving, everybody starts heaving. It was unpleasant but it was kind of an experience too to see what the Atlantic could be when it was really nasty.

Mark: You landed in New York I take it?

Freese: We landed in New York and then we were all shipped to Camp Kilmer and at Camp Kilmer they divided you according to where you'd come from originally. They didn't divide you physically on the spot, but if you were from Montana, all the guys from Montana and Wyoming would be shipped out to some camp out there for discharge. I was from New York state at the time she they just shipped me down the road to Ft. Dix which was from where all the people from that area were discharged. So we stayed at Ft. Dix about a week and went through all the paperwork and processing and getting discharged.

Mark: And you went back home.

Freese: No. I just went up the Hudson River 140 miles to Schenectady. [chuckles] Didn't mind leaving at all!

Mark: It's at this point that a lot of veterans will stop telling their stories but there's a lot that happened after the war as well. So I want to cover some of the post-war adjustments to civilian life a little bit. For example, you had access to the GI Bill. Have you used it?

Freese: Yes.

Mark: You went back to college?

Freese: I hadn't finished college so I went back under the GI Bill--I probably could have gone even without the GI Bill, parents weren't rich or anything, but they could support me with help from the work that I did at school, but the GI Bill took the load off of them quite a bit. For a lot of GIs it was the only way of going to college. So we got our tuition paid and we got books paid and then we got a monthly payment for food and that sort of thing.

Mark: How was campus different before the war and after the war. I've spoken to a lot of vets who went to the UW here and I even spoke to one from Syracuse. How were things different?

Freese: Of course the campus was covered with vets. Three quarters of the people you saw around there were wearing GI clothing of one sort or another and they used to stand around the quadrangle making fun of the poor kids in ROTC who were marching around making fools of themselves.

Mark: I get the impression that wasn't very popular among the veterans -- the ROTC program.

Freese: They were amused by it mostly. A lot of our troops had been in ROTC before they went in service so they knew what it was about but they just got a laugh out of it. These kids marching around tripping over their own feet and screwing up in the manual of arms and everything. It was a big joke to us. Almost everybody, particularly in Forestry School which was almost all men -- there were a few women who started in when I was in service, but most of my classes were men and almost all of them were veterans, so you weren't unique or anything if you were a veteran on campus at that time. Nobody talked much about it, it was just the way everybody was. Part of the whole rigmarole and one of the professors I talked to afterwards said that the change was bigger for them than it was for the students because they had a lot of students that they'd had before the war and then they had the same students after the war and they said that before the war these students would sit there and anything they lectured these students would take down and they accepted everything as gospel. But after the war, when they got these GIs there, they said it was easier to teach in a way because the GIs didn't sit there and take everything because they would question. If they didn't agree with you they'd start arguing with you. I didn't take any military history courses, but I imagine a prof in that would have got a real argument out of a lot of these people. This prof told me it was quite a change for them and they had to adjust to this new system. In a way it was easier because when you taught them something you didn't have to wonder if they were getting it or whether or not they understood it because if they didn't understand it they would tell you, whereas before they just accepted everything. That was a change in the way college life was. But, I only had one year after when I was still at school.

Mark: That was it. So you didn't go to graduate school right away.

Freese: No, I got a job up in Canada for a year teaching up there and then I got a job with the Forest Service Alabama. There wasn't the kind of adjustment you hear about with Vietnam veterans.

Mark: I was trying to come to that, but maybe we can just talk about this now. Did you have any sort of psychological effects of war? Nightmares, etc.?

Freese: Not serious. I had a few dreams when I would dream something was happening that had happened during the war and then wake up kind of shaken, there were a few of those but not a lot. One incident I remember. We had a little camp in the Adirondacks and had a dirt road running into it with grass growing in the middle and every spring we'd go up and work on the road, my father and I. We were working there one day and there was a farm about a half-mile away and there were some kids shooting a 22 there and we could hear them shooting, that didn't bother me much but apparently they bounced one of their shots off a rock and it came over us and like that--I was flat on the ground. I didn't think about what this was or anything--it was just the reflex action. I was flat on the ground and my father was standing there and he was just dumbfounded. He didn't say anything but that was about the extent of posttraumatic stress syndrome. A few dreams and that incident. I think we had an advantage over the Vietnam veterans. When they finished their tour, they came directly back. They came back and they didn't have uniforms on, nobody was there to meet them, nobody knew they were a veteran, and they flew back so it was kind of a shock to them. With us we sat around in Europe for several months after the war ended so any stress we had kind of dissipated there and then when we came back, we all came back at once. We were discharged at once and we just wanted to get the uniform off and forget about it. I think the transition back was so sudden for Vietnam veterans that it was a lot harder on them, plus the fact that their war had a mixed reaction in this country. Pretty unpopular in some areas.

Mark: And it dragged on for years.

Freese: Right. And, they weren't as convinced that what they were doing was worthwhile, and the lack of support from home didn't help any. I felt very sorry for those guys. It didn't hit us the same way, I don't think and I don't remember any veterans that I knew that had a lot of troubles. A lot of them drank, but a lot of them drank before too. They would have done the same thing if they'd never been in a war. The language was four letter words, three or four per sentence and they had to kind of clean that out after they got home, but there wasn't any real deep problems that they had.

Mark: I want to go back to some of the GI benefit type of things. There were other benefits other than the GI Bill. For example there were home loans. Did you

Freese: I never participated in any of that. I didn't get married so I never had to buy a home. The loans that they provided, other GI benefits, I didn't--the college thing was the only one that I took advantage of.

Mark: So when it came to working for the federal forest service, did you get GI points?

Freese: You had to take a civil service exam and you got five points added to your score. There were a few people at Syracuse in my last year there who hadn't been in service and they figured that they were really at a disadvantage not getting that five points.

Mark: And were they?

Freese: Well, I suppose if they were competing for a federal position, they probably were slightly at a disadvantage. We figured they had the advantage from not getting shot at for three years, so it kind of evened out. It was a slight advantage. I'm not sure as to how much difference it made as to who got jobs and who didn't.

Mark: So when it came to your professional career then the war didn't interrupt that.

Freese: It interrupted my education and it may have in a way helped it because when I started college, it was the Depression. Everybody was wondering if they could get a job. We used to admire people who had jobs where they were earning \$1200 a year. This guy's got a steady job making \$100 a month! Imagine that! **[END SIDE A, TAPE 2]** So that's what we figured we were faced with even after we got out of college and people were talking about, in Forestry school, some guys talked about the border patrols taking on people and paying them \$100-150 a month. And those were fabulous jobs 'cause they were steady jobs. After the war, the whole economy changed and jobs were much easier. I started at \$1800, which was pretty good at that time, I thought. But you didn't have the economic worry that students had before the war. From that standpoint, things got better for us after the war.

Mark: I just got two more things I want to cover. The first involves veterans organizations. I know for a fact that you've been involved in some of the 84th Division reunions and that sort of thing. Are you a member of any of the major groups like the Legion or the VFW or were you at any time?

Freese: No, I never joined any of those because when I went back to school, they were not very active on campus. We had a whole bunch of GIs and they didn't want anything to do with the war and they remembered their parents or their uncles going to these big drunken conventions and they had a kind of a cynical attitude toward VFW and American Legion so there wasn't much joining of that. Then when I went to Canada, there were Canadian veterans organizations, which I wasn't invited to join and probably wouldn't have joined anyway. So, I didn't get exposed to any there. Then when I went with the Forest Service, I ended up down in Alabama where I didn't know many people except the people I worked with none of whom were veterans. I didn't really have much contact with veterans groups through most of my career. I just never got interested in it.

There was a friend of mine whose father had been in the VFW and he wanted me to join that, but his son had been in the service but had never gone over seas and wasn't eligible so I felt kind of funny about joining the VFW when my friend couldn't join so I never did join that either.

Mark: So when it came to the rail-splitters then, when did you get active in that?

Freese: I just forgot all about the rail-splitters and everything else. I had no contact with them through most of my career and I retired from the Forest Service and all of a sudden I heard from my old platoon sergeant. This was in '85 and they had been having reunions of the Division and they had one in Milwaukee one year and I went down there and there was only one fellow from my company and I didn't know him. So, I didn't get too much interested in it, but I did get on their list and began hearing about it. They had a reunion down in Springfield, IL about '85 and the newsletter that came around told about people from each company. My old Lt., the guy who got hit in the ankle the first day, had been there and the machine gun sergeant had been there and quite a few people I'd know had been there and so I wrote to the platoon sergeant and began corresponding with him about this and I got interested in it. The next year they had a reunion in San Antonio and I had a nephew who was a Navy F14 pilot training other pilots down at Kingsville or something like that down near Corpus Christi so I figure I'll go down and see him and since that's right near San Antonio, I'd stop at this reunion. At the reunion I met a lot of people that I'd known in the company and I had been interested in some of the things that had happened in our company. Like our first attack we had a whole platoon that got out of our area and got captured and I never knew why that captured, why they were where they were, what had happened to them or anything and so I was interested in finding out more about this and I was interesting in writing a history of the company. So I began going to these reunions primarily to find out what had happened to people that I had lost contact with since November 1944 or December or January. I began meeting them and getting more and more information so I just got interested in it from that standpoint. It was interesting.

Mark: So for the reunions you go how often? Do you go every year, every two years?

Freese: Well, I've missed a few of them since '86 but I've gone to several of them. If I can get to them I like to go just to -- I wrote a brief outline history of the company which I had all the dates and places we were and some events that I remembered, but I wanted to get others in the company to tell me something about what they remembered of it. It turned out that most of them either didn't remember much or what they remembered was incorrect or they didn't want to write about it. I never did get much information from them so I ended writing a journal of my own experiences, but I wish I'd had more from other people.

Mark: I've just got one last thing and this will make it apropos to our Wisconsin Veterans Project and that is if you describe how you ended up in Madison.

Freese: I was working for the Forest Service and I was in research doing forest management research and in the process I had to make use of an experimental design of analysis so in order to learn more about it I took a year off, went to Iowa State and studied Bureau Statistics, then I went back to the Southern Forestry Experiment Station which was where I was working at the time. But, a fellow I had worked with there had in the meantime transferred up to the Forest Products Laboratory here and he was the head of a division here and the lab needed a statistician and this fellow knew that I was trying to get out of the south because I didn't like the heat or the jiggers and that sort of thing so he offered me a transfer up there. So I came up and I worked at the Forest Products Laboratory as a statistician until I retired.

Mark: That's what I suspected when I saw Forest Products Lab on here, I figured out.

Freese: I'm glad I did. I like Wisconsin. I like the north for one thing, and Madison I like because of the University and there is quite a lot of interesting things. I like New York state and I always said I would move back if they had 15 million fewer people, but I like mountains. I like the Adirondacks, but I like Wisconsin because its a lot of forest land and as I say because Madison is a nice town.

Mark: That's all I have. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Freese: Nothing I can think of.

[End of interview]