

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

GOLDEN M. BARRITT

Combat Engineer, 117th Engineer Regiment, 42nd Infantry Division, World War I

1999

OH
210

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Barritt, Golden M. (1900-1999). Oral History Interview, 1999.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 2 videorecordings (ca. 40 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Barritt, a Maple Grove, Wisconsin native, talks about his experiences during World War I as a combat engineer in the 117th Engineer Regiment, 42nd Infantry Division. He discusses being stationed near Exermont, France, housed in pup tents with rolling kitchens. He had todo kitchen police duty about once every three weeks. Barritt explains that he was a sergeant but was stripped of his stripes after an incident in which he was considered AWOL so he finished his service as a buck private. He recalls eating a lot of canned foods including corned beef nicknamed, "Canned Willy," and canned roast beef nicknamed, "Monkey Meat." Barritt reveals that he was trained in Angers, France in an engineering replacement camp. He talks about the mud problem they encountered especially in Brest at Camp Pontanazen where they used "dart boards" to walk on. Barritt tells a story about the mud problem being so bad that their shoes froze overnight. He recounts stories of horses and mules moving heavy equipment and building bridges, sometimes without planking; making use of whatever they could find. Barritt touches on being trained to use gas masks and mustard and phosgene gases. He states that they had to lay a lot of barbed wire. Barritt discusses being thankful for the Salvation Army and Red Cross providing "goodies" and existing mostly on emergency rations in the field. He says that hot chocolate was a favorite item from the Salvation Army. Barritt remembers that he did not receive mail for quite some time because of a recordkeeping mistake. His brother was in the 32nd Infantry Division. When given three day passes, Barritt reports he went to Remagen (Holland) and Bonn (Germany). He recounts a story of being injured by shrapnel and a corporal being injured. Barritt says that the medics were very well trained, but there were no doctors with the division in the field. He describes an incident of a German pilot surrendering. Barritt explains that headquarters was always positioned about two miles back and went wherever the division went in tents. After the Armistice, Barritt was part of the Army of Occupation and was stationed in the village of Mayschoss (Germany) where he boarded in a private home. He talks about his experience with the family, his correspondence with one of the boys after the war, and the tight quarters as the entire squad was housed there. He remembers crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a ship called the "*Khyber*" and an incident with a German submarine torpedoing the ship. This submarine later sank the ship, "*Persic*." They landed in London and received a welcome letter from King George. Barritt remembers taking a train to Southampton and tells a story of a beautiful girl he met. He reports traveling from Southampton across the English Channel on a smaller boat and relates a story of rough passage. They landed at

Le Havre and Barritt describes taking a “40 and 8” French boxcar to Angers, France, to a replacement depot for the Engineer Corps. Barritt explains that he was originally in the California National Guard. He remembers an amusing story of an Italian “runner” for communications between headquarters being treated for an injured knee. Barritt attended a company reunion in Lodi, California. He was awarded the *Chevalier of the National Order of the Legion of Honor* in 1999 and presented with a Badge of the Order.

Biographical Sketch:

Golden M. Barritt (1900-1999) was a Maple Grove, Wisconsin native who joined the Army at age eighteen, serving with Co. D, 117th Engineer Regiment, 42nd Infantry Division during World War I. His military service included combat experiences during the War and afterwards, as a part of the Army of Occupation. Barritt returned to Barron, Wisconsin and married his wife, Francis Foss, in 1923. It was in Barron that he raised two sons, served with the Barron Post Office for thirty-five years, and was an active member of the American Legion for eighty years.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 1999.

Transcribed by David Berberick, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2008.

Transcription edited and abstract written by Christina M. Ballard, 2008.

Interview Transcript

James: I wondered if you might describe yourself in the field in France. I mean, you lived in tents, and then stay in one place or were they constantly moved, or—what was that like?

Golden: You know, that's a long time ago. It's hard to remember. I remember, uh, one quite a long spell where we were camped in pup tents on a—on a hillside, near a place called Exermont.

James: Did they have a special mess tent?

Golden: I don't believe so.

James: Did you cook in the field?

Golden: Well, they had what they called “rolling kitchens.”

James: Ah. They followed—they were with you, or they came up periodically?

Golden: Well, they followed along. Of course, a lot of the time they couldn't keep up with us.

James: How often did you have to fill KP [Kitchen Police—military duty assisting cooks]?

Golden: Oh, not too often. Maybe once in three weeks or so.

James: You were a sergeant. You shouldn't have had to do that so much as the other boys.

Golden: Well, I lost my stripes, you know.

James: How did that happen?

Golden: Uh, I was sick with the flu, and instead of reporting on sick call, I remained in my, in my barracks. And, of course, I was marked AWOL then. So I lost my sergeant's stripes.

James: You got them back, though, didn't you?

Golden: No.

James: Never did?

Golden: No. No, I finished up as a buck private.

James: [unintelligible] say, a typical meal that you were served in the field from that [unintelligible] that mess tent—wagon.

Golden: Well, it was whatever they happened to have, and they would dump everything in one kettle and make a stew out of it. [James laughs.] [unintelligible] one thing that we had an awful lot of was canned tomatoes, and I had so much of that I still can't look a tomato in the eye. [James laughs.] Now some organizations had a lot of salmon, but we didn't have too much of that, so it was more or less a freak [??]. And then we had our canned rations. Well, principally corned beef, which was called "Canned Willy" or "Corned Bill." And we also had an "O"-shaped can that contained canned roast beef, and we called them "monkey meat."

James: [Laughs.] Didn't taste very good?

Golden: Oh, it wasn't too bad.

James: Okay. Did you have any training in France, or was all the training in the United States?

Golden: No, I had some training at a place called Angers. It was—see, I was in the Engineer Corps—and it was in Engineers Replacement Camp. There were people there that had been in the front and became sick, came back. And then they were sent to Angers for reassignment. And then also us new soldiers that had just came over were there for a time.

James: Tell me about the mud. Everybody talks about the mud in France in the First World War.

Golden: You know, the—there was a lot of—a lot of mud, but the very worst place that I recall was just when we were ready to come home—at Brest. It was called—a place called Camp Pontanazen. And they had so-called "dart boards" that you could walk on that was supposed to keep you out of the mud, but they didn't do too effective a job of it.

James: Well, what'd you do? If you stepped in this mud, then you just had to stop what you were doing and clean it off, or you'd just forget about it and go on?

Golden: You'd just forget about it. And I recall one time—this was after the Armistice, and we were on our way toward Germany—and we always took our shoes off at night when we laid down. We'd lay our raincoats on the ground, as sort of a ground cloth. And then we'd lay our blankets on them. And I recall one time when it was quite cold, and we got up in the morning and shoes were frozen. So we had to build a fire before you'd put them on.

James: That was a tough day, a tough day. Tell me about horses. Did the horses move all your heavy equipment?

Golden: Uh, to quite an extent—horses and mules.

James: Did you have to deal with these animals?

Golden: Did you read my form the night before Christmas?

James: Yes.

Golden: In there it tells about 40 horses and mules, so [unintelligible] was hard. They'd never drink on that long Christmas eve. [James laughs.] And what you'd call a picket line they'd tie all the horses onto a long rope that was stretched, oh, probably about two feet above the ground. And whoever was on guard had to watch that they'd didn't get their feet over that line or get tangled up in it.

James: Were the horses easier to deal with than the mules?

Golden: No, I don't think so.

James: They say you have to lead a horse, but you couldn't lead a mule.

Golden: [Laughs.]

James: What about that?

Golden: Well, I guess that's probably true.

James: They're pretty stubborn.

Golden: Yes.

James: They say they didn't get as sick as often. Did you have any problems like that?

Golden: [unintelligible]

James: They say they didn't get sick as often the horses.

Golden: Well, that's probably true.

James: Did you have many trucks? Were there any trucks? Did you have many of those France?

Golden: Not too many.

James: Mostly you'd use the horses and mules to pull the heavy equipment. Is that right?

Golden: That's right.

James: They say you had bridging equipment up—that you had when you were building bridges? All that heavy stuff?

Golden: Well, you know we had to—had to make do with whatever we could find to build those bridges. A lot of times there wasn't any planking or anything like that to build it with it. We had to use whatever we could find.

James: You mean you'd cut the trees down?

Golden: Not a lot—some.

James: Did you ever encounter any gas when you were in France?

Golden: Uh, yes—briefly.

James: Mustard gas or—?

Golden: Well, there were two types of gas. There was mustard and then there was what I think was called phosgene.

James: Phosgene, yes. They were different.

Golden: Yes.

James: You had your gas mask with you at all times?

Golden: Oh yes. We were trained to perform our functions with the gas mask on.

James: That wasn't easy.

Golden: No.

James: It's hard breathing through those, eh? How about barbed wire? You laid a lot of barbed wire?

Golden: Yes, quite a bit.

James: How would—did you handle that? To keep from getting stuck yourself?

Golden: Well, you just had to be careful.

James: Well, you had to spend a lot of time in the field doing those kinds of things. I was thinking you got pretty tired. If you were away from camp, did they bring the food to you? Or did you have to go back to camp for it?

Golden: Well, whenever those rolling kitchens could keep up, why it was brought to us. But a lot of time we had, like I said, we had to exist under emergency rations—canned beef and corned beef hash, things like that.

James: You ate that cold.

Golden: Yes.

James: And drinking water? What'd you do for drinking water?

Golden: I just can't remember. It was so long ago.

James: Did you ever see anybody from the Salvation Army over there?

Golden: Oh yes. You certainly did. And we were very grateful to the Salvation Army. They talk about the Red Cross, and the Red Cross supplied us with some goodies. But they always charged for it. Whereas whatever the Salvation Army gave to us, it was always free.

James: Yes.

Golden: So, for that reason, why, you'd find that your average GI had a very warm spot in their heart for the Salvation Army.

James: What would they bring you? For instance, give me an example of what—

Golden: Hot chocolate was one favorite.

James: These ladies would come right into the field, out in the mud?

Golden: Oh yes.

James: That was very courageous. How about mail? Who brought you the mail?

Golden: You know, that's a kind of a funny thing. In my experience I didn't receive any mail for about four months. Due to some mistake in the record keeping, after I got home I got some mail back that was marked—see I was in the 117th Engineers, and I got some mail back that had come to the APO serving the 117th and it was marked, "Not in the 117th." Some mistake in the record keeping.

James: So it got to you eventually.

Golden: Oh, I got some after I got home—months afterwards.

James: I think everyone has had that experience who was overseas—getting mail two and three and four months late.

Golden: Yeah. The first mail that I received was from my older brother, who was in the 32nd Division. And it was the first mail that I received after I went out on the field. And he was—this was after the Armistice was signed—he was stationed about a day's ride away from where I was. And I got a weekend pass and went up and visited him.

James: Did you get into Paris at all?

Golden: No, I didn't.

James: If you had time off, where would you go? What city?

Golden: What do you mean, "Time off?" We didn't—

James: Well, they say—

Golden: We didn't, we didn't have any time off.

James: If you had some, if you had a three-day pass, where did you go?

Golden: Well, uh, Remagen [Holland] and Bonn [Germany] are two of the places that I remember.

James: Did you learn to speak French?

Golden: Pardon?

James: Did you learn to speak any French?

Golden: Very little. A few words.

James: And I also understand that you were wounded slightly. Is that—tell me about that. How'd that happen?

Golden: Well, we were out laying some barbed wire, and the enemy started shelling us. And one shell hit quite close and shrapnel hit the corporal in charge of our detachment, so that he had to go to the hospital. And I had a very, very slightly wound right at the base of one thumb with a piece of shrapnel. But I had it field dressed and never missed a day of work [laughs].

James: [Laughs.] The medics were pretty good, were they?

Golden: Oh yes, as a rule.

James: They seemed to be well trained?

Golden: Yeah, I think so.

James: You had one or two for each of your little squad that went out, or company?

Golden: We had one medical corps attached to our company.

James: But not a doctor?

Golden: No.

James: So a doctor never looked at your wound, then. Tell me about the airplane, the German pilot who surrendered to you. [Golden laughs.] That's really an unusual story.

Golden: We were working on the road one day, a group of us, and this plane came down. Of course, we ran over there to see what happened. And the pilot got out, and he extended his wristwatch. He had evidently heard that the Americans like souvenirs, and he extended his wristwatch. But we didn't take that, but we did take his Luger pistol and turn that into headquarters. They were actually—the enlisted men were forbidden to have those Luger pistols. They had to turn them in if they got a-hold of them. But I do know of one or two cases where soldiers were able to hide them and bring them home.

James: Do you know why the pilot landed his plane? Was it shot down, or—what was the matter with that plane? Did you ever find out?

Golden: No, I never did. But we—we just kind of assumed that he wanted to give himself up.

James: Oh.

Golden: Just from his actions and so on.

James: I see. You sent him back, did you, with a guard?

Golden: Yeah, we sent him to headquarters.

James: How far away from headquarters were you?

Golden: Oh, a couple miles or so.

James: Did that headquarters move often, or did it stay generally in one spot?

Golden: That moved. Wherever the division went, why they went.

James: Was the headquarters in tents or in buildings that were nearby?

Golden: Tents, as a rule.

James: After the war—Armistice was signed, you moved into—you were part of the army of occupation, is that right?

Golden: That's right.

James: And where did you live then?

Golden: I was stationed in a little village called Mayschoss. It was on the Ahr River—A-H-R River. In France we were on the Aire River—A-I-R-E—so they're kind of similar names.

James: The family that owned that house—would they move out? Or would they stay there?

Golden: They stayed there, and the—it was supposed to be against the rules to fraternize with the—with the natives, and—but that rule wasn't too generally observed. The father in this home never would be friendly. He resented our presence there. But the mother and the two boys we made friends with them. And I corresponded with one of the boys long after the war was over.

James: Is that where most of the soldiers went—to private homes? Most of the soldiers in your company?

Golden: Yes. They were boarded in private homes.

James: In, in—this was in France?

Golden: No, it was—

James: It was in Germany?

Golden: In Germany.

James: Okay. Right. Did they—did they move or did you stay in that one spot?

Golden: Oh, we stayed in one spot there for about five months.

James: Did you bring them food from the, from your supplies—the family? They were probably pretty hungry.

Golden: Well, the principal thing was they had a quite a shortage of coffee, and I would bring a mess cup full of coffee after each meal to the mother. She really appreciated that.

James: But her father—her husband didn't though.

Golden: No, he wouldn't have anything to do with us.

James: He wouldn't talk to you?

Golden: No.

James: Okay. Did you eat there too, or not?

Golden: Pardon?

James: Did you eat with them, or no?

Golden: Uh, no, no.

James: Well, the food must have improved after the war was over and while you were in occupation.

Golden: Yes, it wasn't too bad.

James: Okay. Well. Did the Army pay these people, while you stayed in Germany? Did they get any money for putting you up?

Golden: That I don't know.

[An unidentified woman joins in the conversation, with some relationship to James McIntosh]

Woman: About how many?

James: How many people were in that house?

Golden: Well, our entire squad of eight men were in one room, in the largest room in that house. It was a room probably 12 by 16 in size, the largest room in the house. And our entire squad of eight men slept in that room.

Woman: On the floor?

James: On the floor, right.

Golden: Yes, right on the floor. We had a space of about two feet wide and eight feet long [laughs] for ourselves and our packs, so there wasn't too much room to move around.

Woman: [unintelligible]

James: So, for your 99th birthday, what did you do—other than have the big event. Did you have a special meal or—?

Woman: Maybe [unintelligible]. Ready?

James: [unintelligible] [Laughs.]

Woman: What—what did you mean when you do [unintelligible]?

James: Was is—this book was made up by who? Who made this book?

Golden: Becky Sayer [??].

Unidentified man: Sayer [??] [unintelligible].

James: [unintelligible] Oh, that's a nice picture.

Golden: Yeah. And on the other side is the one 80 years before [??].

Woman: Can I get that on tape [unintelligible]? Closer, closer.

James: Try not to get the reflection. If you see a reflection, I'll move it. You see—

Woman: You can move it back a little. I see a reflection.

James: Yeah, see that's a—

Woman: That's good. Okay. Turn it around.

James: I'm turning it around. That's when he was 18.

Woman: Oh, okay. Good. Got it.

James: I think you're better looking now.

Golden: [Laughs.] I don't know about that.

James: Oh, and this is the award—this you have to zero in on. Be sure you can read that now. Be sure it's readable.

Woman: There's a reflection.

James: Well, I'll just turn it [unintelligible].

Woman: Okay. I see—all right, there. No reflection. Okay, cool.

James: We got—read the whole thing. Don't get any closer, 'cause, uh—

Woman: [unintelligible]

James: We got to read the whole thing, so—

Woman: I know, but in order to read it—

James: All right. I'm not moving. Okay?

Woman: Okay.

James: All right. [unintelligible] We have that, and that. This picture—nice picture. We don't need anymore of this Kim [??].

Woman: Okay. I'm [unintelligible].

James: [unintelligible] you couldn't see that anyway. It's a—

Woman: No.

James: See if you've tried—try on this. Don't record until you can see it without a reflection. That's the official document. If you think you can do it, then do it.

Woman: I can do it.

James: All right, then do it.

Woman: Very good. That turned out well.

James: Yeah, you turned it out to be a scroll [??].

Woman: Yeah, right.

James: Okay, do that page.

Woman: The whole page?

James: Yeah, the whole page.

Woman: I got a reflection—

James: Start off—

Woman: I can't get close.

James: Start off that, and then zero in the words, okay?

Woman: Okay. Reflection.

James: In the program—

Unidentified man: Program [unintelligible].

James: —where he got his reward, a poem, “In Flanders Fields,” was read by Golden, and we'll see if we can talk him into doing it again here for us. Hold on.

Woman: Starting.

James: Can you do that?

Woman: Read that for us?

James: Can you read that for us?

Golden: I don't need to read it. I can recite it.

James: You can recite it?

Golden: Yes.

James: Fantastic. Do it.

Golden: [Reciting]: “In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly,
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

“We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie,

In Flanders fields.

“Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.”

James: Beautiful. Thank you. One last—
[End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Start of Tape 1, Side B]

James: —remembrance I want you to tell us about: the ship ride across the English Channel that was so rough.

Golden: Well, we went across the Atlantic Ocean in a, uh, an old English boat called the Khyber, that originally had been used to ship cattle from Argentina to Great Britain. And while it was scrupulously cleaned, the smell still remained [laughs] from the cattle. And anyway, when—after we landed in England we, uh—when we were twelve days out from New York, a German sub surfaced and sent a torpedo that narrowly missed our ship, but it hit a vessel adjoining ours called the Persic. And we were told at the time that the Persic limped into port, but I later found out that the ship did actually sink, and the survivors were picked up by the English navy.

Anyway, we landed in the port of London and received a form letter from King George welcoming us to the British Isles. And then we went by train to Southampton. And I remember an incident in Southampton when a beautiful, young English girl fell in step alongside of me. And she told that her—she called him her man—I supposed, assumed that he was her boyfriend—had gone to France several months later. And she hadn’t heard from him for about six months. So she assumed that he had been captured by the enemy. And anyway, she wanted to be my girlfriend. But, fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, we came to an area that was restricted, so she couldn’t go any farther. So that was the last I ever heard of her.

James: Did she tell you her name?

Golden: I don’t remember. I don’t remember if she did or not. But anyway, from Southampton we went across the English Channel in a much smaller boat. And it was a very rough passage. The soldiers were all below deck, and everyone got seasick. And the smell was so bad that I went up on deck, on the upper deck, to escape from that. And I guess I would have been washed overboard if it hadn’t been a good railing surrounding the deck.

And so it landed at Le Havre. Went up that steep cliff that I think in World War Two became famous as Omaha Beach. And we ascended that steep cliff. On the top we took a “40 and 8”—you know that—it was a French boxcar about the third of a size of an American boxcar. And had printed on the side that was “40 Hommes et 8 Chevaux,” which meant “40 men or 8 horses,” which is supposed to be the capacity of the car, though I think that it would have been pretty crowded to fit them all in that space. We went by train then to a city called Angers. That’s spelled A-N-G-E-R-S, but it’s pronounced “On-jay.” It’s southwest of Paris. And it was supposed to be a Replacement Depot for the Engineer Corps.

And I got the flu while I was there and didn’t report on sick call [??] one morning. I stayed in bed. And as a result I lost my sergeant’s stripes and was demoted to private.

I was originally California National Guard. And so after the war I went out to California to visit the old gang. I remember we had a—you know, in those days there weren’t any radio, and telephone communications were not reliable, so they had attached to our company a man that they called a “runner.” He took messages from one headquarters to another. This fella happened to be Italian descent. His name was Evo Graffina [??]. And one time he reported on sick call, said that, said that he had a lame knee and so he couldn’t perform his duties. And the medic kind of thought he was faking to get out of duty, so he—this medic, by the way, his stock and trade was a bottle of iodine and a bottle of CC pills—and he gave the wop a handful of CC pills, and the wop came back to the company, and he started rubbing those CC pills on his knee.

James: [Laughs.]

Woman: [Laughs.]

James: What was that term, “CC?” Do you know—what does that stand for?

Golden: Castor [unintelligible] Compound—it’s a laxative.

James: Yes. [unintelligible] Fantastic.

Golden: [Gap in tape] –a reunion of the company at Lodi, California. And I remember on the invitation it said, “The wop is gathering your grapes.” [Laughs.]

James: [Laughs.]

Woman: [Laughs.]

Golden: Meaning, of course, that he was laying in a supply of wine.

James: Right. Is he still alive?

Golden: Not to my knowledge.

James: Is there anyone left in your group?

Golden: As far as I know, I'm the last survivor.

James: How about the division? How many you suppose are left in the 69th?

Golden: Well, that's—that's hard to say. I was told that there were only four people in the State of Wisconsin that received this decoration and only fourteen in the entire United States. [On April 9, 1999, Golden was made a "Chevalier of the National Order of the Legion of Honor" of France and presented with a badge of the Order.]

James: That's amazing. That's wonderful.

Golden: So I'm pretty proud of it.

James: Did you know Andrew Small?

Golden: Pardon?

James: Do you know Andrew Small? S-M-A-L-L? He's in Schofield.

Golden: No, I don't—don't think so.

James: He's 107!

Golden: Oh.

James: And we're going to see him tomorrow.

Golden: Uh-huh.

James: Okay.

[End of interview]