

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Rufus Roberts
Mess Sergeant, Army, World War II

2006

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Roberts, Rufus, (b. 1917), Oral History Interview, 2006

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 52 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 52 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Rufus Roberts, a Sun Prairie, Wisconsin resident, discusses his service as a mess sergeant in the Army during World War II. Roberts was born on a farm in Monroe Center (Wisconsin) where his father traded horses. He recalls hearing the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor in his brother's workshop in Wisconsin Rapids in 1941. Roberts states he joined the Army in 1942 at Great Lakes (Illinois). He describes attending basic training with his brother in Camp Wallace (Texas) and glider training in El Paso (Texas). Roberts reveals he was taken out of the airborne unit when he was hospitalized with kidney stones. He expresses relief about leaving the glider unit because they suffered high casualties during the Normandy Invasion. Roberts tells how he became a cook in his new outfit despite a lack of experience. He describes at length cooking for 184 soldiers. He also illustrates how officers and enlisted men were treated differently in the chow line and tells a story of complaining to the colonel about a demanding lieutenant who always arrived late to breakfast. Roberts states he served as cook for nine different outfits. He shares several humorous stories about successes and failures in the kitchen including a ruined lemon pie and a clever conversion of burnt hotdogs into "Spanish Franks." Next, Roberts describes making the rank of mess sergeant and being shipped to Europe with the 145th Anti-Aircraft. He states his unit crossed the Atlantic unescorted and landed in Liverpool before moving on to Southampton (England), eventually landing on Omaha Beach in September 1944. Roberts comments the beach was clear when his unit arrived and that they lived there until December. He touches upon the challenges of cooking inside a tent in the damp cold. Roberts mentions the Americans stayed in German barracks, and he describes seeing craters and .88 millimeter flak guns in a German "pill box" or underground headquarters. In winter 1944, Roberts states his anti-aircraft unit marched to Paris, Luxembourg, Belgium, and Holland. He describes poverty and hunger in Luxembourg, revealing U.S. soldiers often got seconds in the chow line to feed hungry children. As cook, it was against Army policy for Roberts to give food to civilians. Next, Roberts was transferred to another unit in Germany. He tells how he worked with Polish POWs in the kitchen and how he traded soap for potatoes with local villagers. He touches briefly on segregation and regional differences when he mentions a Black truck driver from the South had difficulty handling the cold weather. Roberts states he was discharged shortly after V-E Day. He recalls one of his cooks lit a bonfire in celebration of Germany's surrender. Roberts returned to the United States in November 1945, shortly after Thanksgiving. He mentions he was a member of the VFW for fifty years but did not attend many reunions. Throughout the interview, Roberts refers to a collection of photographs from his time in the war.

Biographical Sketch:

Roberts (b. 1917) was born in Monroe Center, Wisconsin. His family lived on a farm and his father was a jockey and horse trader. Roberts joined the Army in 1942 along with one of his brothers and attended basic training at Camp Wallace, Texas. He was originally assigned to a glider unit in El Paso (Texas) but due to illness was transferred to another unit where he became a cook and later mess sergeant. Roberts served as a mess sergeant with nine different outfits including the 145th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Unit, which was deployed to England, France, and Belgium in fall 1944. Roberts also served in Germany where he recruited Polish POWs to work in the kitchen. He was discharged in November 1945. Roberts was a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars for fifty years.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2007.

Transcript edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

John: This is John Driscoll, and today is October 7, 2006. This is an oral history interview with Rufus Roberts, a veteran of the United States Army in World War II. And, when and where were you born?

Rufus: Monroe Center.

John: Monroe Center. And when?

Rufus: 1917, 21st of July.

John: Okay. And what did your family do? Farm?

Rufus: We lived on a farm, but we didn't farm it. Dad was a horse jockey. He traded horses. He did that mostly for a living.

John: Okay.

Rufus: Sometimes we didn't live very high of the hog, but we lived.

John: How about brothers and sisters?

Rufus: Five brothers. Well, there was five of us. Four brothers.

John: How about school?

Rufus: Not very much.

John: Not very much. And, do you remember what you were doing on Pearl Harbor day?

Rufus: What I was doing on Pearl Harbor Day? Just about. I was in Wisconsin Rapids, in my brother's workshop, and I remember just knocked for a loop. Kind of spoiled your day.

John: Yeah. And then when did you go into the Army?

Rufus: I didn't go in until 1942.

John: Okay. Where did you go in?

Rufus: Great Lakes.

John: You were in the Army?

Rufus: Yeah. And from there we went to Camp Wallace, Texas. Basic training. When I got through basic training, my brother and I went together through basic training. My younger brother, next to me. And then we went to Camp Cleveland, Texas, about thirty-five miles, forty miles from Camp Wallace. And then we were there, and the next thing you knew, they transferred us overnight to gliders.

John: Oh, God.

Rufus: Then we got out of there. I was in the gliders. And when we shipped from there, to El Paso where we were training in the gliders. And then we never walked. We had to run every place we went. Went to chow, you'd run. Went to the bathroom, you had to run. Then we'd run down the hill about a mile, to the obstacle course. Run that twice, and ran up the hill again. Everything was running. Just before I got out, we took a walk. We walked ten miles on blacktop roads and back. And that was in the first week. And then we took the same one. And I got nine blisters on my feet. But there was a little lieutenant, he was limping worse than I am. And I said, "I can go just as far as you can." Made that twenty mile hike. When we got back, just gotten back from the hike, and all of a sudden I started getting crippling pains. I couldn't stand it. And I went to the dispensary and he told me I had a stone in the kidney.

John: Oh, hell.

Rufus: So they sent me to the hospital and this old Army doctor took it out without giving me an aspirin or a thing.

John: Oh, man.

Rufus: Yeah, that felt good. And anyway, I was in there for about five days in the hospital. In the meanwhile they packed up and left me. That is when I got out of the airborne.

John: That was a fortunate move. I think.

Rufus: Yeah. That was very fortunate, because when I got overseas, I asked about the outfit and they told me most of them got picked off the first night. And they quit the gliders after they found out too many crashed. Everybody went to the paratroopers. Then I landed in an outfit. And the first sergeant and I clicked right from the beginning.

John: Smart move.

Rufus: I don't know why him and I got along so good. But anyway, we waited for our new men to come. So one day I was washing dishes and next day I'd clean the bathroom. And recreation room. Next day, KP again. So one day I said to him, why don't you make me a cook, sergeant? And he said that was a good idea.

John: Okay. Did you know anything about cooking?

Rufus: No. Just what little I'd cooked at home. Fried an egg or two. But I cooked about two weeks as a go-fer. Head cook would holler, "I want this." And I'd get it for him. Then they sent me on a fourteen day furlough. I come back from the furlough, my first sergeant, I mean my first cook, he was sitting there with his bags packed to leave. So I had to go in as the first cook and I didn't know if I was coming or going. And anyway, the first cook on the other shift he said, "Never ask the mess sergeant anything, because you'll be sorry if you do. You get in any trouble, come see me. I'll help you straighten it out." Anyway, I remember the first night, first day, I mean, I made for supper, I had stew. It was terrible. I am a taster, you know. And I couldn't eat it myself. And I went over to the sergeant and he was playing pool. I said, "Can you come over after a bit." He just kind of grinned and said, "Yeah. I'll be over as soon as this game is over." He said, "What's the matter?" I told him, "You could put a skunk in there and you couldn't get the smell out of it." He said, "Don't worry, I'll show you how to doctor that up." Then he went in the warehouse and he came out with a can of this and a can of that. He got to throwing it in there.

John: This is great.

Rufus: It turned out pretty good. Next day I had roast chicken. So them days you had to clean, most of the time you had to clean the innards out of them. Well, anyway, I made it.

John: How many men were you cooking for?

Rufus: A hundred and eighty-four.

John: Okay.

Rufus: From a hundred and eighty-two to a hundred and eighty-four. And my best buddy was a major. He come in. "Roberts, got time to make me coffee and toast?" "Yeah." And he come in there about seven o'clock every day and I'd make his breakfast for him. And anything I needed, I'd tell him and I'd get it. He said, "Cooks do not have to shut their lights off at nine o'clock." Sometimes it would be eleven o'clock before you would get out of the kitchen. You know. Anyway, we had this one lieutenant that come in every day just as you were the busiest. I don't care if I wasn't busy, and he come in and asked if I had time to do this. You

know. But he just opened this curtain up and hand me the plate and say, “Two, sunny side up, toast and coffee.” That was all right. Only thing it made me mad because if I was making bread or something, you arms were all dough. And you had to clean up and make that for him. So one day I said to the colonel, “I thought the officers ate same as the enlisted men.” He said, “You mean me?” I said, “No. But I have one lieutenant, no matter how good you treat him, hands me his plate through this curtain and says, ‘Two eggs, sunny side, coffee, toast.’” He said, “What time does he get in here?” I said, “I don’t know. Anywhere from ten to eleven.” He said, “What time is breakfast?” I said, “Six o’clock.” He said, “What have we got tomorrow?” I said, “Scrambled eggs.” He said, “You put it on the table at six o’clock tomorrow.” Six o’clock, here come the major. He sat down and he sat there with his newspaper and he read, and pretty soon this guy come in. He pulled the curtain back and said, “Eggs, sunny side, and toast.” I walked out and got his plate, and just as I took his plate, the major looked up and said, “I think breakfast was six o’clock this morning. I think we had scrambled eggs and toast. There they are.” And he sat down and drank a half a cup of cold coffee, and I never seen him again.

John: That is good. That is really good.

Rufus: Yeah, it’s nice to have a friend at the top.

John: Absolutely. Great. Then, where did you go?

Rufus: Well, I went to nine different outfits. I don’t remember where I went from there. I got sent to a new company, and the guy over in this new company and I hadn’t cooked much. Couple of weeks. And this come on a Sunday dinner, and we had lemon pie. And of course all the officers brought their wives for Sunday dinner. And the recipe was wrong. And I never made it. So I didn’t. It said to use lemon rind for color. Finally, I give after about two dozen lemons and I made it. And when I turned in the egg whites, yolks, I found out where the color comes from. Well, anyway, put out the Sunday dinner. Here come all the officers and their wives, and the lemon pie I made. It looked good. Meringue on it. You took one bite, and got lock-jaw. Oh, it was bitter. Pretty soon, here comes the mess officer. And he said, “Who made that lemon pie?” And, of course, all the guys hid. And he came up and he said, “Roberts, I ate a lot of pie in my life. That was absolutely the worst I ever ate.” So there were a lot of crazy things.

John: Great.

Rufus: At the same time, middle of the week, we had a rule that if you put anything on the stove, it had to be ready to turn the fire on. If it didn’t have water and stuff in it, you didn’t put it on. Well, anyway, we had to boil wieners for dinner. It was getting late so we turned the fire on. The mess sergeant had put them on. And he

was nowhere to be seen, and we kept smelling something. Can't be the wieners. They can't burn in water. Anyway, when we found them, they were burned about half way up. Left with just gooey, just sticky gooey. We had no substitutes. You know. So I put them in hot water and tried to wash them. That didn't come out. So we had to take towels and wipe each one of them like that. And I made the sergeant, he said, "What are we going to do?" I said, "Just change the name to Spanish Franks." We cut them all up, and then I made a real strong sauce, and put them in there. Pretty soon here comes the same officer back again. He had such good compliments on the pie. He said, "Who made them Spanish Franks?" Of course, they all ducked. He walked up and he said, "Roberts, I ate a lot of Spanish Franks in my life, but them were absolutely the best I ever tasted." I couldn't. You know how you turn. I couldn't hardly hold it.

John: Oh, man. That is super.

Rufus: Then a couple of days after that they shipped me out. And there wasn't a thing in there. The tables was all broke down. And I was trying to cook and help the KPs with stuff, and I burned every danged thing. Then here come my good major. He came in with his wife. He came in and he said, "We have the best cooks in the Army," he was telling her. Then, just a few days later, they broke that outfit up and they sent me to, I don't know what you call it. The other place where you send everybody.

John: Replacement depot?

Rufus: Yeah. And then I was there a couple of days, and then I got transferred to my outfit.

John: What was the outfit?

Rufus: 145th Anti-aircraft. And then I got there, and they come out and said, "What are you supposed to be?" And I said, "Well, they sent me out as a mess sergeant." And they said, "Sorry, we already got a mess sergeant, but we need a cook bad." So I had to go, and before I even got my clothes in the tent, the mess sergeant came and said, "Will you take over because I haven't been here for three weeks." Then I went and saw the dirtiest kitchen I ever saw. So that first night I didn't get out of there until eleven o'clock. You know, I had all the KP's hating me already. I couldn't work in that. Didn't bother him any. Then the next morning, the first morning the damned alarm clock didn't go off. So here I was, this guy come and shook me and says, "Who's on duty?" I said, "I guess I am." "Well, they're calling the men out in ten minutes." So, instead of getting out there at four o'clock and getting stuff ready, you know. Well, anyway, I grabbed my towel and went down to the bathroom, and washed up. And went up and I shook my mess sergeant. And I told him my alarm clock didn't go off, and I needed help. He got up, never

washed his hands or a damned thing, just come up to the kitchen. “What you want me to do?” “You just take the coffee, you make the coffee, and I’ll do the rest of it.” So I got a case of eggs and put them out there, and bread. Anyway, I fried the eggs as they come through the line.

John: Okay.

Rufus: Very interesting.

John: Oh, it is.

Rufus: People don’t realize what you go through.

John: That’s why it’s so important. Yes.

Rufus: Well, anyway, we went overseas. Five days without an escort, during the war. And they crowded so many in there that you had to sit on your legs. You couldn’t lay down, you couldn’t sit up.

John: Do you remember the ship? The name of the ship?

Rufus: S. S., it was a United States fast luxury liner, and then they made it over into a troop transport. I think it was the *Arizona*, one of the western states, is all I remember.

John: Well, that’s good. That’s great.

Rufus: When we got up in the morning, there was a big cruiser on each side of us. They had been with us all night. Running in circles all night because there was submarines spotted. And we made it in to Liverpool, England. And we sat on the boat from Friday night to Sunday morning. Sunday morning, took us down, loaded us on trains and went to Southampton. Laid on the docks and just about froze to death. Oh, it was cold and damp. And that ship sitting there all loaded, all heated and everything. Next morning they loaded us on the ship and we went to, what the hell was the name of that beach? Where we lost so many men?

John: Omaha Beach? Utah Beach?

Rufus: Omaha Beach. It was all clear when we got there. Lot of ships that they had sunk. English Channel can be the roughest water there is. When we went across it was just smooth like glass.

John: You were fortunate, yeah.

Rufus: When we pulled over into France, there, and we set up our puppy tents. And we stayed there almost Christmas time before we pulled out of there. Trucks. And it rained every day. And the trucks, they hooked chains onto it and pulled it into the motor pool, and hooked on, and pulled it out. Clear up to the fenders, you know. Well, we had just a tent-like, not even a standard, yeah, I guess it was a tent. That we cooked in.

John: All outdoors?

Rufus: Yeah. Night, oh it was cold. Damp cold. It wasn't so cold, but damp cold. And it would go right through you. And we had cooks, at least we had a stove. And then we'd go out there and go to bed, we'd have to take all of our clothes off. Put on our long underwear, and put our OD's on, or fatigues. Roll up in our big overcoats. And we only had that one blanket. The guys that weren't around a stove all day, they didn't freeze as bad as we did.

John: Yeah.

Rufus: And we stayed there until sometime in December. We landed in September. We moved into Normandy Beach, German barracks in those days. They had stone walls, about eight to sixteen feet. Path. If you, you couldn't imagine how our bombs in them days, they weren't as big as they are today. And their pill box, where they had all their equipment for their .88s.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

John: Okay. Pick that up. There were still bodies when you landed?

Rufus: No, there were no bodies. All the equipment was there.

John: You mentioned the bombs hitting sixteen feet of concrete.

Rufus: Yes, the pill box where they had their office underneath. Sixteen feet. One of our bombs went right through sixteen feet. Right down in there. They probably wouldn't have landed as easy as they did if that wouldn't have went through that concrete down there, because on top of that hill, they had about three acres and there must have been fifty, or better, .88s set up, and run off that pill box.

John: Oh, wow.

Rufus: Then, we pulled up at Christmas, and we went to Holland. Not Holland, Paris. Got through Paris. The streets were just full of women, but they went so fast through there that we didn't lose a man. You didn't dare jump because you could kill yourself.

John: That's probably why they drove fast.

Rufus: Yeah. Then we pulled up. We drove all that day and that night we pulled into Luxembourg. And the Germans had already taken the gun position we were supposed to go to. So, they turned us around in the middle of the night. Got us out of Luxembourg, and we drove all night long. We had seven rounds of ammunition per man. So, anyway, they got us out of there or we'd have lost all of us. But, anyway, we kept going. I can't remember the name of the town where we stopped. It was nice. And I think we stayed there a couple of days. But anyway, the little kids would come and eat out of your garbage cans. Now, a lot of the guys would come and get seconds, if there was anything left over. And then feed the kids. But, being a cook, I didn't dare to give them anything. Because if they seen me giving them kids, I was giving government food away. Well, anyway, they would come and eat out of the garbage cans.

John: That winter of 1944 was the coldest winter on record that year.

Rufus: It was cold over there. I know that. Then, anyway, we stopped and set up there. And it turned cold. And a colored guy broke down right there. He was hauling. And you could tell he was from the South. They weren't doing very good down South. Well, anyway, he sat in that truck out there, just shivering and shaking. I'd go out and get him. Come on in to the barracks and warm up. And get him warmed up. And he'd get uneasy and go back and sit in his truck. And I said to him, I said, "Here, take the mess kit. Go through the line. Get food." No, he didn't want to do it. So, I said, you sit there in our barracks, and I'll go through the line and get you food.

John: That was good.

Rufus: The room we had, we had a little fire in it, so it was fairly warm. He just didn't feel right. He'd go sit in that truck and shiver. And once in a while he would come and get warmed up.

John: Wow.

Wife: There were no blacks in your troop at all? You were all white?

Rufus: Yeah, in them days. They kept them separate.

John: That was the Battle of the Bulge right then. Around Christmas. In Luxembourg. Holland.

Rufus: Yeah. When we pulled up to Huy, Belgium, I don't know who it right. They

pronounce it Huy. And that, I never could figure out why. Of course, I didn't try. Why we set out ninety millimeters on a side hill. Because you never set a ninety millimeter on a side hill. And we found out later that we were set up for anti-tank. Anyway one airplane came over trying to get the main bridge. And we got that. And they got the tanks stopped thirty-five miles from us.

John: Yeah, they almost made it to the port. Yeah.

Rufus: It wouldn't have taken them much longer to come thirty-five miles.

John: Yeah.

Rufus: If they'd have knocked out that bridge, I don't know how we would have got across that river there. We'd probably all got wiped out. I couldn't swim. I could swim to about the middle of that window.

John: Me, too.

Wife: Did you tell him where you had the Polish? Where you had the Polish worker?

Rufus: That was after the war. We got KPs. We got to use Polish KPs.

John: They were probably grateful for the job, for the food.

Rufus: Anyway, I got transferred to a different outfit. I had to take my KP's back to the camp to get rid of them. And then when I got to the new camp, I had to go back down and try to find them. But the main one I wanted, somebody else got him before I did. He was a mess sergeant in the Polish army. So I come down one time with my clothes, I wanted to wash them. He seen me, and he said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I am going to wash my clothes." He said, "Sergeant no wash clothes." He took my clothes, washed them. Anyway, we wasn't getting enough food. Hungry. But some of the truck drivers, they broke into a German warehouse, and stole a bunch of soap. So I told this first sergeant I needed an interpreter. And a Jeep. So I could go and see if I could get some potatoes. So we went to like the next town, was a little village, you know. The burgomaster, the mayor, they call him the burgomaster, and I said to him, "I got three pounds of soap. I'll trade for a hundred pounds of potatoes. And if there is anybody around here that has more potatoes than they need, I'll be back tomorrow." And I was looking for probably a couple hundred pounds, or so. And got back, and I had twenty-two hundred pounds of potatoes. Well, anyway, when you got potatoes, you could fill the guys up. So many different things you can make with potatoes. Fried potatoes, and raw fries. Mashed potatoes, just anything to fill them up.

John: Yeah.

Rufus: I don't know who our mess sergeant was. He seemed to have someplace where he could disappear to. After the war was over, and then they broke us up. I went on as a mess sergeant to-- I can't even think of the name of it. But I got discharged.

John: While we are waiting, what did you feel when you heard the war was over? What was that like?

Rufus: I tell you what we done. I was sick the night we got the message, so I didn't get out of bed. But the cook, he wasn't a cook but he was a helper. He got everybody out of bed. Couldn't dress, in your underpants you'd get up. And there was a field in the middle of the little town we was at. And he got five gallons of gas, I don't know how many gallons of gas. And he put it all over the ground, and he lit it. And he danced around this bare naked, or in his underpants. I suppose he had everybody in town out there looking. To see what was going on.

John: And when did you come back from Europe?

Rufus: When the hell was it? November. When is Thanksgiving?

John: November.

Rufus: About the 28th. Something like that.

John: Was there any talk about shipping you fellows to the Pacific?

Rufus: Yeah, there was. We were all trained to go. And we were going to go around the Equator. So it would have been two months on the boat. And then the war ended. If it lasted two weeks longer, we would have been on our way.

John: Wow. If they had had to invade the home islands, that would have just been a blood bath. And then, what did you do when you came home?

Rufus: What did I do?

John: When you got out of the Army?

Rufus: I worked in the body shop.

John: Okay. When you got out, you had the GI Bill. Did you ever use any of it? Education? Buying a house?

Rufus: No.

John: Did you ever join the organizations? The VFW? The Legion?

Rufus: I belonged to that, the VFW. For fiftysome years.

John: Okay. Did you ever get together with anyone?

Rufus: Never saw anybody again.

Wife: You had that accident after you came back, remember? When they lost all those records.

John: Oh?

Rufus: They claim they lost all the records.

Wife: He had a truck rolled, wasn't it?

Rufus: Tipped us over.

John: Anyone hurt?

Rufus: Yeah. So, they had a record of it somewhere. One guy got his neck broken. And one guy got all of his front teeth was in the stock of his rifle. Everybody was bruised up pretty bad. And the kid with the broken neck caught up the next year, overseas. But the guy with the broken shoulder, they never could keep it in. I don't what they done with him. I supposed they'd have to operate some way. So it would stay in there.

John: That is interesting. Something I ask every one of the vets when I do the interview here: You were a young man. Your whole life was ahead of you. And then, suddenly, bang. They took you out and sent you off to war. What did you feel about that?

Rufus: Really, nothing. You knew you had to go, and that was it

John: That's what most of the guys say. This is tremendous. This is an incredible story. You've got quite a collection of photographs here.

Rufus: This is anti-aircraft.

John: Oh, yeah.

Rufus: Here is where we went. Here is anti-aircraft, and field artillery, were all the same. It's all in there. I got a letter from the colonel. Here, down here, is my Pfc. And

my staff sergeant.

John: Well, okay. This is a remarkable story. We were talking earlier, when the write the books, they don't get things like getting the Polish POW's to do KP, and sleeping in in the morning and having to make breakfast. That's the real story of what really happens to people. That's why these interviews are just so important. Okay, well, I'll tell you what. Go ahead.

Rufus: This is a picture of the Siegfried Line. You talk about ninety-five percent of the people, the Siegfried Line, they won't know what you are talking about.

John: What I'll do. I'll take this back. And turn this in to the Archives, and then they'll send me a copy of the tape. And I'll transcribe the copy. I'll type it up. And then they'll send you a copy of the transcription.

[End of Interview]