

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DONALD WENDT
Platoon leader, Army, World War II
2001

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Wendt, Donald, (1920-). Oral History Interview, 2001.

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: 1 videorecording (ca. 40 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Donald Wendt, a Marshfield, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service with the 90th Infantry, landing at Utah Beach, and his return to Wisconsin after the war. Wendt relates getting a deferment so he could finish his semester of business school, enlisting in the Army, and basic training at Camp Swift (Texas). He speaks of being assigned military police duty at Fort Sam Houston (Texas) and going into town on weekends to handle drunken soldiers. He discusses the mental and physical challenges of Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning (Georgia). He mentions having two brothers in the service. He states he was assigned as a platoon leader in 90th Infantry Division, 358th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Battalion, Company H. He describes the preparations for the invasion of Normandy including training with his machine gun platoon, isolation at Camp Newport (Wales), and waiting aboard a troop carrier for the two days prior to the D-Day invasion. Wendt comments upon wading ashore, problems with the terrain, and being wounded by German mortar fire. He mentions spending months in a hospital and then a rehab center in Birmingham (England). Due to his wound, he was no longer qualified for combat, and he mentions training transfer troops to use M1 rifles and hand grenades in England. After the war ended, he talks about trying to get enough points to go home by working as a finance officer in a replacement depot in France and attending the American University in England. Wendt touches upon returning to the United States, marrying, entering the Army Reserves, and using the GI Bill to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He mentions talking to 10th grade U.S. history classes about serving in the war.

Biographical Sketch:

Wendt (b. March 29, 1920) served as the platoon leader of Co. H, 358th Regiment, 90th Infantry. He was honorably discharged in 1946 as a second lieutenant and settled in Madison, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2001

Transcribed by Michael Kerins, 2009

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

- Jim: Alright, sir. Just let me get this goin'. Now, is it your preference to wear the hat?
- Don: Yeah, may I?
- Jim: Your choice.
- Don: My choice.
- Jim: It's just that we can't see your face as well if you're gonna lean forward.
- Don: Oh, that's, that's true, yeah, right.
- Jim: And so if you're gonna read somethin' –
- Don: Yeah, I'll tell ya, I'll tell ya. Yeah, right, I thought I'd wear my—I'm a charter member of the organization.
- Jim: What's that?
- Don: World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.
- Jim: I've sent them enough money.
- Don: Yeah, I have too (laughs).
- Jim: They keep saying this is, you know, just – then this and then they write me another letter. It's just as if I never sent any money before –
- Don: Yeah, that's right, yeah.
- Jim: I think I've sent 'em 20 dollars, I think, five times.
- Don: Yeah, yeah.
- Jim: Getting' tired of it.
- Don: Yeah.
- Jim: Okay, we're off and running talking to Don Wendt, and it's the 5th February, the year 2001. Where were you born, sir?
- Don: I was born in Marshfield, Wisconsin, March, 29th 1920.

Jim: 1920.

Don: Makes me almost 81 years old.

Jim: You're gettin' there.

Don: I'm one of those [laughs] that are dying off at a thousand a day.

Jim: We – those of us in your age group say we're circling the drain.

Don: Okay

Jim: [laughs]. That's the way we describe ourselves [both laugh].

Don: Okay.

Jim: So, and what were you doing in 1941, sir?

Don: I was workin' in a factory in – which I cover later, but – sorry – in Marshfield. The Roddis Lumber & Veneer Company – And I was a factory clerk.

Jim: Clerk?

Don: A department clerk, right.

Jim: So, you had registered for the draft in 1941?

Don: Right.

Jim: And you expected to be called into the Army?

Don: Right.

Jim: Did you wait to be called, or did you --

Don: I got a deferment. I got a deferment.

Jim: Because?

Don: Because I was going -- I had left the job at the factory, and went to Milwaukee to school the Business Institute of Milwaukee.

Jim: I don't know what kind of a school—

Don: It's a business school.

Jim: Just a business school?

- Don: Business school, right. And I would have been called up on my birthday in March, but they gave me a deferment until July of '42.
- Jim: To finish up the semester then.
- Don: To finish up the semester, right. In '42.
- Jim: Okay.
- Don: And when I had finished the course I volunteered and went in the service.
- Jim: Oh, you didn't wait 'til they called you?
- Don: No, no, no, well I -- I didn't. I figured I was gonna to be called up very shortly (laughs), --
- Jim: Sure.
- Don: So I volunteered and went in the service.
- Jim: Still Army, though?
- Don: Yeah, and joined the Army in Milwaukee in July of 1942.
- Jim: Did they put you in a unit right away, or—
- Don: No, went to –
- Jim: Just sent you (??) to basic –
- Don: Went to Fort Sheridan in Illinois, --
- Jim: That's the standard.
- Don: Right, Fort Sheridan in Illinois, and then to Camp Swift, Texas. Camp Swift, Texas for basic training.
- Jim: That was what, about twelve weeks?
- Don: No—I can't remember how long it was. Eight weeks, maybe? Eight weeks, something like that (coughs).
- Jim: And then from there?

Don: Then I was assigned to the military police platoon of the 95th Infantry Division. And they were –

Jim: I was gonna say, where were they?

Don: They were down stationed at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

Jim: Had you had any training in being a military policeman?

Don: Right. I had not, no. I don't know why I was chosen. Maybe 'cause I was 6 foot 2 (laughs).

Jim: I was gonna say, if you were taller than average, that's probably why.

Don: Right, right that's probably one of the reasons, I guess.

Jim: And now you've gotta tell me what type of training does a military policeman have.

Don: Well, we had training in arms of course, and crowd control, traffic. We had to go to (laughs) nearby towns to – on Saturday night to – Friday, Saturday night to –

Jim: Fight the local boys?

Don: Fight the local boys (both laugh). Keep our boys in line.

Jim: Keep in practice, right.

Don: Keep our boys in line, too, right.

Jim: Tell me now, before we get too far away from this, your instructions were if we had an obstreperous solider you were gonna bring back home. He was too drunk to–

Don: Mm hmm.

Jim: You put 'em in a – and you had a car to bring 'em back?

Don: Jeep.

Jim: A jeep.

Don: I had a jeep – yeah, right. We were assigned two guys together, and we had a jeep available.

Jim: Were you prepared to handcuff him if he wouldn't behave?

Don: Oh yeah, if necessary, yeah.

Jim: Right. Did you have a billy club to bop 'em on the head?

Don: No, we wouldn't do that (laughs).

Jim: You were not authorized to do that?

Don: I don't think so.

Jim: I see.

Don: I don't recall but I don't think so. Handled 'em the best way we could – by talking to 'em, talking to 'em. Anyway, I started out as a private, and I worked up to a buck sergeant. And then I figured that the war was gonna last awhile and maybe –

Jim: This is before Pearl Harbor, though?

Don: No, no, this is '42. This is '42. And I thought the war's gonna last awhile, maybe I ought to see if I could get more schooling. I decided to go for Officer Candidate School.

Jim: Did you have to pass an exam?

Don: No, you just made application for it. I made application for signal corps, air corps—chemical warfare was it?—and infantry. And I got infantry. I figured that's probably what I was gonna get (laughs). And then I went to Fort Benning, Georgia. And went through the 90 day course there—we came out 90 day wonders. It's a wonder we made it through (laughs).

Jim: Was it a difficult course?

Don: Oh yeah, very difficult training, very difficult.

Jim: Physically or mentally, or both?

Don: Both. Both because—

Jim: Class all day—

Don: Classes, and then night maneuvers.

Jim: Had to learn a map, you had to learn to read a map I assume?

Don: Had to learn a map and a compass, right, how to read 'em both, learn to use both.

Jim: Right.

Don: Right.

Jim: Anything else you had to learn?

Don: Yeah. Just about all of the weapons.

Jim: You had to be familiar with everything that a GI would use?

Don: M1 – yeah, the M1 rifle, the –

Jim: Machine gun.

Don: The machine gun --the water cooled 50 caliber, 30 caliber, and the mortar. Mortar as well, right, right.

Jim: Plus the physical training, too?

Don: Yes, right.

Jim: Did a lot of guys drop out?

Don: Yeah, a few of 'em didn't make it. Can't remember how many in my company that didn't make it, but there were—

Jim: Mostly for the book learning, or both--they couldn't hack it physically?

Don: A few couldn't hack it physically. But it was pretty tough with all of the classwork –

Jim: Sure.

Don: And so forth, too, right.

Jim: Yeah, I'm sure.

Don: Right. My brother, my younger brother, Ted, had gone to Fort Benning before I did, and he got his commission in April. And then I got my commission on May the 12th –

Jim: '43?

Don: In '43 right.

Jim: Okay. So what did they do with this –

Don: And then from there, well, we all were given leave after we were finished the course at Fort Benning. And I was on leave, and visited my hometown Marshfield, and then also came to Madison where my high school sweetheart lived, and we became engaged before I went overseas. And then I went out to Camp Roberts, California to a placement center out there. And there I had an opportunity to visit my brother Bill who was in the Navy. He and his wife were –

Jim: Oh, you had two brothers in the service!

Don: Two brothers in the service. There were three of us. And thank the lord we got—

Jim: Were these older?

Don: One older, and one younger. Yeah, Bill was the older brother. And he was stationed at -- and his wife were living in, San Francisco. And he was stationed at Treasure Island—Treasure Island Base. So we got to see him briefly. And then from there, I was assigned to -- I went to Camp Barkeley, Texas, and was assigned to Company H, Second Battalion, 358th Infantry Regiment, 90th Division. And that's the unit that I went into combat with. I was assigned as a—

Jim: 90th Division.

Don: 90th Division. I was assigned as a platoon leader right.

Jim: Okay.

Don: And shortly after some training there in Texas, we went to California, by rail, to Camp Granite and we maneuvered out there in the California and Arizona deserts. And our division did so well maneuvering against another division that we were picked as one of the divisions for the Normandy invasion. Which is good or bad (laughs).

Jim: I suppose that's an honor of dubious –

Don: A dubious [both laugh]

Jim: Value.

Don: Value, That's right. So after we finished our maneuvers there, then we went by rail from California clear across the country to Fort Dix in New Jersey.

Jim: That was what seemed to be the common jumping off spot.

Don: Right. Well, we were there for a short time. Our division regiment and our division was in regimental review for the secretary of war. I remember that. And then we from there we went to Camp Kilmer [New Jersey] where we got ready for overseas movement.

Jim: In your division, were most of these guys from the Midwest, or were they from all over?

Don: They were from all over. God, it's interesting. The 90th Division insignia was T-O. A "T" and an "- O". And when it was activated in World War I, the men were from Texas and Oklahoma.

Jim: Ah!

Don: So they called it—

Jim: Oh, that's a National Guard outfit.

Don: Yeah, the National Guard and so it was called -- but then when, like you asked, we had fellas from all over the country in our division in World War II. So rather we couldn't call our Texas-Oklahoma, anymore so somebody got the idea that the T-O would stand for Tough Ombres. T-O: "Tough Ombres". Right. So, that was what the division was known as. The Tough Ombres, right.

Jim: So, off we go to Europe. Tell me when you arrive.

Don: I did have a chance -- with my wife, my future wife, Alta came out to visit. One weekend, where she was there for a week, one evening we went into New York City with a friend of mine and his wife. And we went to Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe restaurant and nightclub in the Paramount Hotel. And then we got ready to go overseas. And we boarded the John -- what was the name of it? M.S. John Ericsson, I remember which was a sister ship of the Gripsholm, and we got out about three days and we had to come back because we had engine trouble. And we were in port for another three days, and then we headed overseas. I remember we landed on Easter Sunday, April the 9th, 1944 in Liverpool, England. From there we were billeted in several camps in England before -- well, we were getting ready for D-Day.

Jim: Now stop for a moment.

Don: Okay.

- Jim: So you said to somebody, “What’s goin’ on? Are we gonna jump right into France, or is this where we’re going, or--?” You know, what did you learn from higher authority?
- Don: Not very much. I remember that we did a lot of, took a lot of twenty-mile hikes to get ourselves ready physically, and really weren’t told very much.
- Jim: Well, you were second in command of a company or commander of a company?
- Don: I was a second lieutenant in charge of a platoon.
- Jim: Platoon.
- Don: A heavy weapons platoon. Machine gun platoon.
- Jim: That’s what I was going to get at next.
- Don: Machine gun platoon.
- Jim: What did the kids say to you? “Hey Sarge,” or I mean “Hey Lieutenant, are we going to war or what’s gonna happen?” What can you say to them really?
- Don: Well, not too much.
- Jim: Because when I find out somethin’ I’ll ya”?
- Don: That’s right because we didn’t know very much what was gonna happen, that’s right. But I remember that when we got to Newport, Wales, we were sealed in the camp.
- Jim: Well, then you knew you were going to cross the channel.
- Don: Then we knew that this was getting close and that it would be just a matter of days.
- Jim: You were just sittin’ there, you didn’t do anything?
- Don: Nope. Then from then on because —well, we were given maps and checked our equipment and things like that.
- Jim: Right. Now, did you have meetings with your platoon and you show ‘em the map, and an area down by the beach?
- Don: As we got information from our captain, why then we shared it with our—

Jim: What beach were you gonna head to?

Don: Utah. Utah Beach.

Jim: And so you knew all about it and you were prepared –

Don: Yeah.

Jim: As well you could be?

Don: Right, right.

Jim: But you sat down with your platoon, though –

Don: With the sergeant, with the sergeant --

Jim: So you wanted to be sure all the kids knew what the hell was going on, right?

Don: As much as we knew, we told 'em. But we didn't know very much about what was gonna happen, that's for sure. And this was on -- we loaded up on the 4th of June.

Jim: Your heavy weapons unit carried what was that, the 81--?

Don: No, that was a water-cooled machine gun. 50 caliber.

Jim: .50s.

Don: .50 caliber water-cooled.

Jim: That was the weapon of your platoon?

Don: Of the platoon, right.

Jim: Now the platoon, how many of those?

Don: Four. I'm not sure.

Jim: Right. What were the other guys in the platoon? They're just riflemen? Assigned to protect those four guns?

Don: There were other – there other, right, they were riflemen, mortar – there were mortar platoons – mortars as well, right.

Jim: Okay.

Don: But like I said, we loaded aboard ship on the 4th of June.

Jim: And you had to sit out on the water.

Don: And we had to sit out, right. But originally D-Day was scheduled for the 5th.

Jim: 5th, right. Everybody had to sit.

Don: But the weather was so bad in the channel, they decided – Eisenhower and the rest of his staff decided to postpone it for one day when his weathermen told him that there might be a break and the weather might be a little better.

Jim: That's a well known story.

Don: Yeah, right. It wasn't (laughs). It was still pretty choppy out there.

Jim: I'm sure that everybody got awfully restless sittin' on that goddamn ship an extra day.

Don: Yeah, you're right.

Jim: Jesus. How did you keep those kids under control?

Don: Well, they played cards or some just sat. Some read.

Jim: You weren't worried about the morale of (unintelligible)?

Don: Some prayed. Some prayed. No.

Jim: Not particularly?

Don: Everybody was trying not to be too afraid, I guess, too.

Jim: Right. That would be the problem (??).

Don: (laughs) that would be the (unintelligible), right, right.

Jim: Well, you're going into an unknown situation.

Don: That's right. That's what it was, right. So we then so we were in the, what do they call it, rendezvous off of Cardiff, Wales for a day, I suppose it would've been. And then on the 6th of June -- of course over the loudspeaker on the ship we heard Eisenhower's speech –

Jim: Give the message, right.

- Don: Give the message to the troops. Right, and we moved – we were still we were about this – the large – I forget the name of it now – large ship, and another several regiments of the 90th were aboard another large ship.
- Jim: Oh.
- Don: I can't remember the name of ours [unintelligible]. Anyway, the one that was blown up I think was the Susan B. Anthony. And it was blown up – it hit a mine. It hit a German mine.
- Jim: Oh! Part of your division?
- Don: Yup. Right.
- Jim: What kind of a part? I mean a third, or a fourth or a --
- Don: Several regiments, several regiments that were aboard this big transport ship—it hit a mine. But there were not very many casualties as I can understand. They were able to get on other ships, and they also had firefighting equipment ships in the channel there too. But the ship was sunk, though. So I was thinkin' I could have been on that one. Anyway, some sources say that the 90th division landed on Utah Beach on June 7th and 8th, but this one book that I have here (papers shuffling), *D-Day*, the official book of D-Day, indicates that the 358th regiment of the 90th division, which was my regiment, landed *on* D-Day. Time got so ran through into each other, so we didn't really know what day it was. And I remember, we waded in, but we were not shot at—that we followed the fourth division in. Utah Beach, the fourth Division went in first. They had some—opposition, but not a lot. They had some casualties there. But they were able to move right in, it wasn't anything like Omaha. And they were able to move right in, and I recall wading in shore, not being shot at. And it was, I thought after noon. So this would indicate that --
- Jim: This was in the afternoon when you landed?
- Don: In the afternoon of D-Day when we landed. Our regiment.
- Jim: Did you have trouble keeping your platoon together?
- Don: No, that wasn't any problem, no. We were able to march right on in on the shore (??).
- Jim: And how about your supplies? How about these machine guns?
- Don: Weapons—

- Jim: Were brought in by what?
- Don: They were carried in.
- Jim: This is heavy machine guns?
- Don: Yeah. Right, right.
- Jim: OK.
- Don: Right, and we -- I'm not sure just how far we went in, but we made camp for the night. And I remember German planes coming over, and an observation plane. Bedcheck Charlie I guess they called 'em. Yeah, Bedcheck Charlie they called 'em. At one point you asked before, what did we know about where we were gonna go and so forth. We had an idea where we were gonna go, but we didn't know what we were gonna run into when we hit the hedgerow country in Normandy. We had not been told, and we hadn't had any exercises in England or back in the States in fighting in that kind of terrain. Stephen Ambrose, in his book on D-Day [*D-Day* by Stephen Ambrose], and also *Citizen Soldier* [*Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany* by Stephen Ambrose], indicates that there was a pretty big SNAFU on the part of intelligence—S-2 and G-2—that they didn't know what this terrain was like.
- Jim: Tell me how it affected you. That is what --
- Don: Well, I wanna mention that the aerial photographs showed some fields divided up like that, but they thought—according to what Ambrose said in his book—that it was just little rock fences like they had in England.
- Jim: They didn't understand there were mounds of earth underneath (??).
- Don: Mounds of earth, and bushes and trees. And high.
- Jim: How did you deal with those?
- Don: Well, as far as when we first came up to them, there we were, stymied. And what do we do when we're trying to figure out what to do? And the Germans had all of these hedgerows—all—
- Jim: Covered.
- Don: Covered. Zeroed in.
- Jim: So this is your first experience in combat was dealing with Germans on the other side of the hedgerows. Is that right?

- Don: Right, right.
- Jim: So what did you figure out?
- Don: I was back away. And the captain called up for [us] to deploy the machine guns from my platoon. When I got up to this hedgerow where they were, must have been only maybe five minutes or so, in comes mortar shells. And I got hit.
- Jim: Ah! My goodness.
- Don: And that was it.
- Jim: My goodness. Tell me where and how you were wounded.
- Don: My shrapnel hit me in the back and went all the way through my lungs. All three lobes of the right lung were penetrated. Some shrapnel hit me in the back in the left side, and some shrapnel hit me in the left arm.
- Jim: One explosion?
- Don: No, they were, “boom, boom, boom, boom, and boom!”
- Jim: Oh, I see. Several.
- Don: Right along the line. Like I said, they had it all zeroed in. And they sorta waited until we had moved up
- Jim: Sure. Give ‘em somethin’ to shoot at.
- Don: behind the hedgerow, and then “boom!” Then they came, and they had, every field, they had cross fire from machine guns, so I didn’t get that far to experience of, what to do, or how to deal with that. Because that was it then.
- Jim: Was that your first day?
- Don: That was my—like I said, we went in on the sixth, and this happened—wounded—on the eleventh of June. So I was --
- Jim: I interviewed one guy who was shot on the first day.
- Don: First day. Yeah. Was he at Omaha? (??)
- Jim: He arrived at the Omaha Beach at eight o’clock, he was wounded at 11:00, and was back in England by 4:30 in the afternoon and the war was over.
- Don: Is that -- That was over for him. It wasn’t that --

Jim: Wow! His name is Scott Stevenson, and he lives in Tomahawk.

Don: Oh, okay.

Jim: A German got him (??).

Don: Oh, OK. I had a little bit longer than that, about a week and one day is all I had.

Jim: So what did they do? Tell me about how they cared for you.

Don: I went in to shock. And I don't remember—

Jim: From blood loss, right.

Don: Right. Too much about what happened. I remember—I guess they gave me some morphine too. A shot of morphine. Put me on a stretcher and put me on a jeep. But then after that, I don't remember. I woke up in a tent, and I had had surgery—this is like a MASH unit—an Army evacuation hospital, and they had done surgery on my lungs. They sewed up the pleura around the lung, and I --

Jim: So you had tubes draining out your chest.

Don: Yeah, tubes. And I was—what'd they call it—aspiration?

Jim: Yeah, right. They used to plug 'em in up here.

Don: OK. Is that what they call it, aspirating? The nurse I remember -- they get the blood—, to pull out the blood. Okay. Are you a medical doctor?

Jim: Oh, yeah.

Don: Okay, I wasn't sure what the “doctor” –

Jim: That's why -- Oh, yeah. On the hospital shift, I was on the chest ward.

Don: OK, you were. Right. I found out later that the surgeon that operated on me in the 'vac hospital had been at John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. And that he evidently was a very good surgeon. I then was transported back to England. I remember when I got to the shore, waiting for a ship to take me back to England, a large group of German prisoners of war were bein' loaded up on another ship to be shipped over to England, or, I dunno, maybe to America. To America, maybe (laughs).

Jim: How long were you in the hospital in England?

- Don: I was in the hospital and in a rehab center from June until—September?
- Jim: September?
- Don: October?
- Jim: By that time they had the tubes out?
- Don: Yeah, right. I was in the hospital in Birmingham for maybe a month, month and a half. I'm not sure.
- Jim: Birmingham, England?
- Don: Birmingham, England. And then in a rehab center.
- Jim: In England, or back in the—
- Don: In England, in England. No, in England. And altogether about four months of rehabilitation. And evidently, the powers that be thought that my injury was severe enough not to send me back to combat. So they kept me in England. I was assigned to a (coughs)—excuse me—I was assigned to a unit that was training replacement troops. Especially during the Battle of the Bulge, when they needed infantry quickly, badly, quickly.
- Jim: So your training consisted of doing what to these units?
- Don: There we were training –
- Jim: Showing them the machine guns again?
- Don: No, this was primarily—the unit I was working with—with the M1 rifle. Carbine. They had the mortar and hand grenades—the use of the hand grenade as well. I remember we were getting clerks and air corps—they were transfer—
- Jim: Pulled out the guys from ASTP, is where you pulled 'em out.
- Don: Yeah, right. A lot of different ones. In England, but a lot from other units. Cooks
- Jim: Everybody had to turn to when the Bulge came.
- Don: Cooks. Right.
- Jim: The Army misjudged the number of soldiers they'd need.
- Don: Oh, yeah. Right. That's right, and we had a –

Jim: They were one division, or two divisions short.

Don: Right. We had to try to make an infantry soldier out of these guys (laughs) within the matter of a few weeks.

Jim: I'm sure they weren't thrilled with this opportunity.

Don: Not at all.

Jim: I'm sure that must have made it more difficult for you.

Don: Right, right.

Jim: To train 'em, --

Don: Correct.

Jim: When these guys didn't want to do that at all.

Don: That's right. Knew what was happening and where they were probably gonna end up. That's right.

Jim: Yeah, so I'm sure they were lousy students, hoping to flunk the course. (Laughs)

Don: Not too good, not too good (laughs). That's right.

Jim: So how long did you do that?

Don: For about three months, maybe. Something like that. And then I got a good assignment. Maybe they figured they I'd get a little reward here. And I was assigned as a finance officer for a replacement depot in Paris, France.

Jim: Hey, hey! That's a cushy job.

Don: Which was a pretty nice assignment.

Jim: Finance officer?

Don: Finance officer.

Jim: I don't see anything in your background that says finance. How did you set the—

- Don: I don't know how I happened to get the assignment, but I only had it for a couple of months I guess. They had a point system, and you had to earn a certain number of points—seventy points was it?—seventy points. So I didn't have enough points. If I had gone back to combat, and would have gotten more points for being in combat, but I didn't go back to combat, so I was kept over there until I had enough points. So I heard about there was an American university in Shrivenham, England. I applied for it, and I got to go there for three months.
- Jim: When did you go there?
- Don: That was in the end of '45.
- Jim: After the war?
- Don: Yeah. This is -- I'm still over there and still trying to get enough points to come home. From Paris, I went back to England and went to the Shrivenham American University.
- Jim: Oh. Well, that must have been interesting.
- Don: For three months. Now that was a pretty --
- Jim: I bet you really enjoyed that.
- Don: That was a nice assignment because I took some courses in business,—business courses. Follow-up on my studies that I had had at the school in Milwaukee before. So I did have a few good assignments after D-Day.
- Jim: So tell me about how long you were living in Paris.
- Don: That was only a couple of months.
- Jim: Couple of months?
- Don: Couple of months. Right, right.
- Jim: Well, that must have been pretty --
- Don: Don't remember too much about it --
- Jim: Oh, I see.
- Don: But I remember don't remember too much about it. I remember sending people back as well as replacements up, and check the things they were bringing back.

Different guns, German guns, whatever. And of course paying the troops when they went back home.

Jim: When you were a finance officer, did you go out to where the soldiers were, out in the field?

Don: No, no. They came to the replacement depot there in Paris.

Jim: And you would issue money to a company basis?

Don: Individuals as they were going through.

Jim: I see.

Don: Individuals as they were going though, yeah, right. So eventually, I got enough points. I got seventy-one points. I was in England, and I came back to France again to Le Havre, and boarded a ship.

Jim: Lucky Strike.

Don: And came back (laughs). Maybe it was. I don't remember. That was one other camp --

Jim: That was what Le Havre was called, Lucky Strike.

Don: It was Lucky Strike? OK, I'd forgotten.

Jim: That was a jumping off place to go home.

Don: Yeah, right, right and came right back in New York Harbor after being overseas for almost two years. Then came back to Wisconsin, and was on leave for seventy-some days. Because I had accumulated a lot of time.

Jim: Then you got married. I know you got married.(laughs)

Don: Accumulated a lot of time, but before that, I was at Fort Sheridan. Fort Sheridan, yeah. I had developed hernias, so I had a double hernia operation at Fort Sheridan before I got out of service. I was on leave, and then finally got out, my discharge, on July 21, 1946. I always like to say I was in service for four years, and one day (laughs). That one day. One day. Oh, that's right. And then I -- there was one question about -- I did join the Reserve. I had gotten my commission appointment as a first lieutenant by this time. While I was over in England, about the time I was training troops, I got my appointment as a first lieutenant. And joined the reserve—well, I'll tell the rest of the story before I get to that. Alta and I were married in August of '40--. Got out of service in

July, we got married in August, and I started school at the University of Wisconsin here in Madison.

Jim: Using your GI bill.

Don: In September using the GI bill.

Jim: We all did that.

Don: Right, right.

Jim: Great bill.

Don: Right. That was one of the greatest pieces of legislation that Congress ever passed. I got my bachelors degree in American Institutions, went into teaching—I got my teaching license—and graduated at '50. And started teaching in Oshkosh. [I] Taught there for two years. And I made application for the Madison system. And then was able to get in the 1952. And I taught at Old Central High School, which was right back over here where MATC—

Jim: I'm a Madison native. I've been here all my life.

Don: You've been here all your life, OK. I taught at Central from 1952 to '63. First couple of years, I taught some English course in general English, but then it was history, social studies. Problems of Democracy. And then we had classes in economics, political science, and sociology. And I taught history as well.

Jim: Did you teach these kids what it was like to be in combat in Europe?

Don: Not while I was at Central. But then I went on to school and got my master's degree in school administration, and when they opened up La Follette High School out on the east side, I applied for and got for the job as assistant principal. August Van -- Augie Vandermeulen was the principal, and I was the assistant principal when we opened up.

Jim: I've met him.

Don: He's a great guy. And there, several of the history teachers asked me to—when they would cover US history and World War II—they would ask me to come in and speak to their classes.

Jim: At what level? History is taught in fifth grade—it's one semester in the fifth grade, and I don't know about high school.

Don: In high school it was tenth grade.

- Jim: A semester?
- Don: Tenth grade. A year course in history. US history. I think it was the tenth grade. A year course in US history.
- Jim: Well I'm interested in how the students responded to you, that's what I'm trying to get at. Tell me about that.
- Don: They were very interested. 'Cause you can read about the story, about the war, but to listen to someone who was actually there made a great impression. I had (coughs) developed a slide show.
In 1974, our daughter and her then husband were stationed in Frankfurt, Germany, and we went over to visit them.
- Jim: He was or she was?
- Don: They were living in Frankfurt. He was in the military, and they're now divorced and she's remarried. So, when I went over there, our daughter Gail said, "would you like to go back to France?" And I said, "Yeah, that's one of the reasons I'm here." So we rented a car, a Mercedes-Benz, and went traveling in Europe, and went to Amsterdam and someplace, and ended up at Utah Beach. So I went back there thirty years later. And our daughter wrote an account of it when they came back here, she went to school in Virginia, and she wrote an account of our trip. Our "Daughter Recalls Trip to Normandy."
- Jim: That's you. Is that you? (Laughs)
- Don: There I am.
- Jim: You were better-looking then.
- Don: Better-looking then (both laugh). Younger-looking then, too. And she wrote a very good article. And this was printed in the Wisconsin State Journal on the Fiftieth Anniversary of D-Day. And I went in and talked to—I forget his name now—and left a copy of her account. By the way, she got an A on the essay (laughs) that she wrote for this class. And he was quite impressed with it too. So he put it in the paper. At that time, I was still thinking that we went in on the seventh of June, but this source says that we went in—and I thought we did too—went in on the afternoon of June 6 on D-Day.
- Jim: Did you join any veteran's organizations?
- Don: No, I haven't. I have not been a great joiner, so I haven't.
- Jim: Most guys have the same experience [unintelligible].

Don: Last year [2000], on D-Day, I was asked to give my talk on D-Day and my military experience to Veteran[s] of Foreign Wars here in town. I forget which—out on Lake Street. I've given a talk on my military experiences and D-Day to a number of other groups. Church groups, and Kiwanis not too long ago, a Kiwanis group as well. So -- I guess that pretty much covers my story.

Jim: Well, it's a good story –

Don: This article was, like I said, very well done. I was gonna – well, maybe not. I was gonna share a part of it, but –

Jim: I can copy that stuff?

Don: Yeah.

Jim: Good.

Don: Yeah, right. Well, I think I've got a copy of this.

Jim: I can just copy it in a second here.

Don: Yeah, I think I've got one. Let me take a look here and see.

Jim: All right. Let me shut this stuff off.

Don: Right. Okay.

[End of interview]