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AN INTERVIEW WITH ELDRED SWINGEN

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PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Eldred Swingen, on August 11th, 2004, in the library of the Madison Club in Madison, Wisconsin. And yesterday we sort of left off, you were at Harvard and you wrote some of your recollections, and one of the things you discussed was, you were scooped up by the draft in 1941—the 1940 peacetime draft. Can you describe your reaction to being drafted?

SWINGEN: Yes. Well I thought it was inevitable. I resented the introduction ... the introduction of military service into my life at that time. We were still pretty much isolationist so the draft was sort of an invasion of the normal, intended lifestyle. But I recognized it had to be done and I went without protest or any significant—understanding my parents of course were unhappy to see me leave. I was drafted from the state of North Dakota, which was my legal residence. I went first to Fort Snelling and I was sent off to Fort Sill for Basic Field Artillery Training. My first organization was the Field and Survey Battery and then after that came the selection for Officer Candidate School. I was a product of the need for an expanded military with the officers that go with it. I remained at Fort Sill just as another symptom, or need for expanded Army. After a year of Fort Sill I joined the 905th Field Artillery Battalion, during its maneuvers at Tennessee. Would you have any questions along the way that you'd like to insert?

PIEHLER: Well, you reported in North Dakota, where was your initial induction?

SWINGEN: At Fort Snelling in Minneapolis- St. Paul, Minnesota.

PIEHLER: So you didn't report in North Dakota?

SWINGEN: The induction was really at Fort Snelling.

PIEHLER: Fort Snelling. One thing, just before leaving your civilian life, how did you like your first year of law school?

SWINGEN: I thought it was a interesting. The New York Times was the paper to read. The Boston papers or the Cambridge papers really were secondary. The war in Europe was going on and of course at first it was all Germany. The Allies were sort of fumbling around trying to get organized. And I remember even the ships that Roosevelt passed on to the British didn't mean too much. We had plenty of ships in the eyes of the common man and what's the difference. Let the Brit's use em. So.

PIEHLER: You had finished your law school. What was your favorite course in the required set of courses and what was your least favorite?

SWINGEN: My favorite course was Contracts. My least favorite was Evidence. Contracts come on the economic side of things, generally. Evidence comes in on how to avoid the testimony that you don't want inserted into the record, which is more or less a cat and mouse part of the law. And the attitude at Harvard was, "We must really support the British." Certain professors urged us to drop out of school and to join the Canadian Air Force. Those that were able-bodied enough. Or had vision enough to do that. That was not very ... there were very few that were enthusiastic

about that because most students figured that they better get down to business and couldn't regard Harvard Law School as a summer camp.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, and this in some ways a post war question I think, why did you not finish up at Harvard and why the University of Wisconsin-Madison for Law School?

SWINGEN: Well I was not satisfied with what I was doing and the gap between a short grass country boy and Boston, Cambridge and Boston Latin was very substantial. And my family didn't have any particular interest in seeing me as an only child, only grandchild, living, say in the East. "Get back home." And then there was a feeling that with World War I as a blueprint, that we would be involved. But there was no intent to do anything about it really, but lives were up in the air and I was in limbo because I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I still don't. I guess that if I had my life to live over again I probably should have gone to art school and learned how to draw then read all the history I could put together and become a political cartoonist. So I could take a crack at everybody. The law is indefinite, if you want any orderliness in your life become a CPA. Then you're forced into the reality of things rather than rather ... empty or perhaps ethereal thing of persuasion. Law is persuasion. 'Cause otherwise you could get a blueprint of the statutes and damn that's it.

PIEHLER: You said you were willing to serve because you were drafted and you were required to go ...

SWINGEN: Yes. I thought it was the duty of people to serve. And I disliked being thrown into a group where I would have to follow orders. Where I couldn't duck out and see a movie, read a book, or just engage in this interminable bull session that I learned to appreciate in my undergraduate days.

PIEHLER: Where did you do your basic training? And when did you apply and get into OCS?

SWINGEN: Well ... Basic Training was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, which was one of the two Artillery Centers, the other being at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. And it was pretty much routine, with some little bit of instrument and survey thrown in. The instrument and survey people were people that were chosen because of their so-called IQ. Mine wasn't great, I had too many reservations about the questions that were asked. And probably I was not as bright as I pretended to be but I was bright enough to be picked and when you were in the instrument and survey section it was presumed that you had gone to OCS. I 'd never petitioned or volunteered for it, I simply flowed into it. The ninety day wonder is a rather pathetic creature, half-animal, half mama's boy and then showing possibilities of being to write home decent letters.

PIEHLER: You were an only child. What was it like to be in the barracks—you said you did dislike your loss of freedom but also. what was it like, particularly when you were still an enlisted man, to be in these barracks with this full range of people?

SWINGEN: I didn't enjoy it. Because it seemed that the dominant ones were the loudest talking, though I could speak up and the—it just seemed like we were kind of prisoners of, not of war necessarily, but prisoners. We had ... it was kind of a confinement, an orderliness, and we were

treated like you treat bales of hay on a farm. Tossed around the hayloft, with the thought that they may ultimately become useful in some way. That evades your basic question somewhat but it's about as good as I can do.

PIEHLER: What are your recollections of your sergeant, the first sergeant that you had as an enlisted man?

SWINGEN: I thought that they were good people, that they were tired of doing their job and didn't particularly enjoy fellowship. They had in turn to be under officers that were probably just trainees too. It seemed like we were just overwhelmed by trainees and I often thought how it would be to be a private in the German army where there were some experienced—you always felt, or I always felt, that I was dealing with inexperienced people all the way. That probably led to a kind of respect that wasn't full or complete. And—but the country, the idea of the U.S. army was the big dream, the odds of the obvious thing that counted.

PIEHLER: You ended up in artillery, that was where the Army placed you. Where did you hope the Army would place you when you enlisted or did you even think about it?

SWINGEN: I didn't think about it. I knew that I probably would have made a lousy airman, because even though my vision is supposedly good I have some problems so I felt that I would probably be diving the aircraft into the ground. Maybe that was imagined, maybe it was just a way of saying I love the air arm but I may not be very good at it. I thought that I would probably be in an administrative job and maybe that was the best that I could do in serving my country. I didn't ... I had no illusions about being a war hero. I thought the jobs had to be done and that was it. And again the objective, serve this great country of ours, with all its problems.

PIEHLER: What was the most difficult thing you found in basic training? And what was the easiest?

SWINGEN: The tediousness. The waiting. The make chatter. The basic boredom.

PIEHLER: I've often heard the expression, "Hurry up and wait."

SWINGEN: Yes. The boredom of it all, which was a reflection on me. Of course you take a young man who doesn't quite know what he wants to do in life but knows that he has opportunities. And then being sort of tied down to an indefinite and perhaps even a fatal ending. Then comes the Valhalla part of it—to die in battle. It's probably heroic for the country or the service but its hell for the individual.

PIEHLER: You mentioned yesterday that your mother was very protective of you growing up, how did your mother take all this, your whole military experience?

SWINGEN: She took quite stoically. She took it like an inevitable thing and she did nothing, or did nothing to discourage me or say, "My poor boy is out there, not living well or not even living." It was kind of a hands-off thing. And expecting the worst, she had a gold star in the window and that's about it.

PIEHLER: You had mentioned in your pre-interview survey, your father never served in the military.

SWINGEN: No. He uh—I probably ... Because of my birth in June of 1917, America entering the war in April and I think he had some notice toward the end but then World War I was not as long as other wars. And so he had no military service. He had a brother that died in the service, from non-combat ...

PIEHLER: Did he die of the flu [Reference to the global Influenza outbreak of 1918]?

SWINGEN: I think that's what it was. And then I had another uncle, Alfred Theodore Swingen, who served in France and I think he had a jolly good time of it. I never did question him on how many Germans he had disabled or with that and chances are he didn't even learn to speak the soldier's French.

PIEHLER: Was it at Officer Candidate School that you met Edgar Wilson?

SWINGEN: Yes. That's my recollection, though many and many parts of that are hazy because Willie was in the forward observer service, a liaison officer at the end and I didn't see too much of him. He, after Loisy, was returned to the U.S. as sort of an effort to show that our troops were doing something. And it was an ideal choice but he was away from us, as I recollect, for much of the Battle of the Bulge. It was well-deserved in his case that he be away and he was—well I had all of this pride in him and normally people would say, "Well how come Willie goes? Why can't I go too?" Well I had done nothing to deserve for merit. And the Army had to do something with people that were worthy because you couldn't expect to pull a Silver Star out of the jar every month you know. I got two Bronze Stars largely because I served without anything spectacular, just got up, shaved, stayed out of the way, did a few things need fully, was willing to do odd jobs, as I will tell you later.

PIEHLER: You alluded about being a "ninety-day wonder" and you hinted that it's a peculiar mix of qualities and experiences. What sticks out about the specific things you learned about becoming an officer?

SWINGEN: Well you had better clothing. You had to learn to be more responsive in saluting. You had to watch yourself a little more. Obviously there were many of us that were not trained for leadership qualities. It comes to very few. I think once you get beyond that of a staff sergeant, you've got just the power to delegate. But the G.I. ... corporals do wonders in wars. As do sergeants. 'Cause they are the doers. The officer corps tends to be more of an order, order giver. But you have to have a chain of command. 'Cause you can't have a general taking roll call.

PIEHLER: Of the group you were with in OC, how many didn't make it or did you all make it?

SWINGEN: I think everybody made it because of the need. It was kind of like a country school where you can't make any differences so you pass 'em just like apparently they do in the system now. People going to high school that can't read. It was odd—that was almost a parallel. Though

the oddballs that were kind of disdained by their fellows were no-no's, they were taken, they were eliminated even though they were bright boys. There were a few, as we would call "fags" about and they were eliminated by the brutality of people or for one reason or another. The ...

PIEHLER: Were they eliminated in a sense by military discipline? Were they court-martialed?

SWINGEN: No. I know of no one that I know who was court-martialed because it was a delicate subject. They were either beaten by someone and they were disabled or medically they were removed from the unit and then god knows what happened to them. I think sometimes they get the message though—there are a lot of obviously very sensitive fellows and the very sensitive found it hard to adjust to this rough and tussle thing. And the Army has a place for bullies. An army will attract bullies. As a matter of fact the Army will go out of its way to secure bullies because sometimes they are the sons of bitches who will tell you that you'd better get with it. And 'cause refinement is out. War is a tough thing. But necessary.

PIEHLER: Where were you when Pearl Harbor took place?

SWINGEN: I was in the last stages of Basic Training. And I remember seeing some of the people at Fort Sill leaving on the Pearl Harbor day to be discharged, called back. The sorriest lot that I've seen, but I did see them really being at the altar or at the station set to take off and then, "Wait! hold it!" (Laughter) And that was of course humorous to many and uh some of us would say, "Well it serves them right. They don't deserve ... They've got to stay." Cause they ...

PIEHLER: So they were literally ready, they thought this was ...

SWINGEN: They said, "I've done it. I've had it. Goodbye, Sucker." To those of us sitting, or standing there or being able to see their departure. So war, or war service is a series of tears, fears, and laughs.

PIEHLER: Had you expected war against Japan? I mean it was clear you were very conscious of the war coming with Germany.

SWINGEN: Complete surprise. A complete surprise. Had not been aware of anything other than the fact that the Japanese had been involved in combat wars, everything from the rape of Nanking to all the other things, the atrocities, but they were alien to us. The primitive middle western mind says, "Oh they're different. That's different, we don't pay any attention to it." Though obviously anyone who has studied would be able to see that they, our little yellow brothers were on the march.

PIEHLER: So you were in basic during Pearl Harbor and then you went into OCS?

SWINGEN: OCS, yes.

PIEHLER: When did you join your first, your unit?

SWINGEN: My first unit in the field was the 905th and I joined it in Tennessee, actually, out of Murfreesboro.

PIEHLER: And it was commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel Browning.

SWINGEN: Yea. John Browning.

PIEHLER: You're a young "ninety-day wonder." What was your sergeant like?

SWINGEN: The sergeants were pretty good. As a matter of fact they were the cement that held the thing together. They too didn't have a lot of experience but they were pretty competent. The first sergeant that I ever had was a staff sergeant called Eddie Lam, who was a better man than I. Every time I thought about *Gunga Din*. And he was affable, good looking, and I thought he could teach me what to do. You see a 2nd Lieutenant is like a baby trying to find it's mothers breast, it just don't really know whether to poop or go blind ... To use an indelicate term. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Was he regular Army?

SWINGEN: No. He was a draftee but had come in before, learned fast and learned how to, learned the manners and the procedures. There were other sergeants that I thought were quite good. There were some that were brown-nosers as we call them, trying to curry favor, but by and large a pretty good group. Colonel Browning was a West Pointer, proper, small in stature to the point where he may have exhibited some Napoleonic qualities. But no problem. The rest of the field grade officers in the battalion, Oswald and Link, were National Guard. They were really not military people, though they were more interested in securing good saddles for their horses back home than the common welfare. But of course how does one adapt to the chain of command? We had a wonderful division artillery commander by the name of Serbie, who was killed in battle. Shot by a German sniper, small arms fire so to speak, in France and it showed the artillery was added, and he was up really with the forward observers and I remember his funeral. We would get all dressed up and to take our pinks out of the bedrolls, our pinks were rolled up in kind of a circle, they had a great crease in them. So it looked like Hopalong Cassidy when you got in them at first 'cause they were spread all over. So anyway we go through a funeral and then get back to work. The division commander was a fellow by the name of Horace McBride, referred to as an old crab. Pretty good officer, but you know what does a commanding officer have to do with a lot of untrained people? And here the enemy, what remained of them, were pretty well equipped and trained and disciplined. They were survivors mostly, that we came in contact with. So I talked to 'em. Go ahead.

PIEHLER: Well going back to the Tennessee unit, you sort of came into an existing unit, a National Guard unit.

SWINGEN: Yes. And then we stumbled around in the hills of Tennessee and learned how to salute without sticking our thumb in the eye. And it was interesting. And we gradually took on some semblance of a unit. At least we were being able to march well. We got the guns, the guns were, the guns didn't go into the ditches anymore, we got the things moving about. And then too

we started to make some friendships. But it seemed that you confined your friendships to a very few. Now Willie is almost political in his friendships, with the people I know he picked. Because he bridged the gap between the artillery and the infantry—the regiment. As a matter of fact he had more friends in the regiment than he had in the artillery battalion. So ...

PIEHLER: After the Tennessee maneuvers you headed to Camp Phillips in Kansas.

SWINGEN: Yes. That was just an interval of getting us out to California. Or Yuma.

PIEHLER: Yuma, Arizona.

SWINGEN: Arizona, the Cama area, where we did have some firing of consequence.

PIEHLER: So that's where you really did fire?

SWINGEN: Yea, we really could use the howitzers and the weapons. And we lived in tents, the conditions were more wartime there than anyplace else, punctuated by our occasional chance to get into L.A. Get aboard a nice Pullman, get to the Biltmore and L.A. and live it up for a few days. Always thinking civilian, never thinking military.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, because growing up, you had seen before, before going to Law School, you had been New York World's Fair, you'd been to Chicago, but you'd been largely the Upper—The Great Plains, North Dakota, Minnesota ...

SWINGEN: I was about as provincial as you could be.

PIEHLER: What did you think of all these—you got to see a good chunk of the country in a very limited span of time, Tennessee, Oklahoma, California, Arizona, and then you had been to Harvard for a year.

SWINGEN: Well I had been an avid reader of the National Geographic magazine, and when the colored pictures came, I was pretty able to identify. And being a reasonable student of geography in addition to my first love, history, I wasn't wowed by anything. A desert is a desert, a forest is a forest, a plain is a plain. I always thought, "how could you grow crops in the desert, what good is it? And where are the minerals that are so touted?" "So I was not a thoughtful, happy fellow necessarily. More or less, saying, "This is it."

PIEHLER: So none of the places you saw, were you ever tempted to go back and live there?

SWINGEN: No. I remained kind of citizen of the world rather than that. I said, "What's over the mountain?" And I probably lost a lot of ground in my powers of observation as a result. But then a soldier should make—should have powers of observation for survival purposes. For duty purposes he can practically have blinders.

PIEHLER: You mentioned in some ways you felt, even after all this training, in some ways you were still learning on the job. What was the most effective, of all your training, from basic to

officer to all these maneuvers? What was the most useful and what, when you were actually gone into battle, did you wish you had, in a sense, more of?

SWINGEN: I think maps to a soldier are like a bloodline. And if you have a fascination with maps—I have a footlocker at home of my war maps. Maps that are capable of 1:20,000, typically used as firing charts. And for recall, for routes of travel, because the war in Europe for us, the 905th, was mostly chasing the enemy and maps of course were absolutely necessary. And these maps were something you could study and you could speculate and you could see the planning which was going on and it was your introduction to where the other units are, “Where are we and heaven help us, where is the enemy?” And I thought the map situation was great. That tied in even with the basic training I had in Instrument and Survey. And that stands out. It stands out—the maps stand out more than the men.

PIEHLER: Really? I know Willie, his second interview; he did bring some of his maps. He too had that. And I get a sense that is more of an artilleryman’s ...

SWINGEN: Well it’s a matter of coordinates and locating where you are and there’s a part of investigation and a part of planning and communicating. Like lets—okay, you ask a question, “Let’s go to the map.” I was in the command post and my job was that of an S2 [Intelligence Officer]. I replaced a Yale Law School Review man, who was eccentric. Always squatting like a Potawatomi Indian all the time. I don’t know if he had a bad back, or an irritated colon, or what he had. But he was bright, alert, and had suggestions and seemed to get along fairly well with the colonel. And in a sense I don’t know why I replaced him.

PIEHLER: So where’d he go?

SWINGEN: I don’t know.

PIEHLER: Was he replaced in France or before?

SWINGEN: He was replaced just after we got into France.

PIEHLER: Just after France? But you don’t know why either?

SWINGEN: I don’t know why I never asked. And I did see him in New York after the war on our honeymoon and he was, he had a fine job with one of the leading Manhattan law firms ‘cause he was ... Law Review out of Yale That gives you a little leg up. And he was engaged in a research that took him internationally to India and China, working for some firms that were selling products. So he was part law, part searcher, part economist. But he was still eccentric. He was not one of the regulars. He wouldn’t—lot of difference between him and Willie. Willie would fall in and be a part of any group. This man that I replaced was more or less avant-garde. Whatever that means.

PIEHLER: One of the things I’m so struck in doing these interviews is ... the sort of amalgamation of people from all different parts of the country, also then going to different parts of the country. Of the different—both officers and then the enlisted men you ran into, who were

some of your favorite fellow officers and who were some of your favorite enlisted personnel? Was there any type you really didn't like?

SWINGEN: No, I got along with all of them. And I don't have any that I disliked. I liked the enlisted people. The non-coms [Non-commissioned officers]. And I made friends out of all of them. I had a driver as an S2. I had a driver assigned, a Greek boy. Who was a specialist in getting eggs, he could find eggs where there were no hens. And he told me—and we'd get to be fairly friendly and I said, "Forget rank. What do you think?" Socrates, I called him. And he said, "I think you got too much education." And I said, "Socrates, you're probably right. I don't know what the hell to do with it but I'm stuck with it." And, "What are you gonna do when the war's over?" He said, "I'm going back and joining the family business." I said, "You're lucky, I don't know what I'm going to do."

PIEHLER: What was his family business do you remember?

SWINGEN: Food service. He was a rotund fellow. But he could simply get food where there was none. It's just kind of how good certain people are at doing things. Some people could—are scavengers, some people can make you laugh, many can make you cry practically. And have this individual talent. That was rampant through the whole unit. You had—if you got to know somebody, and I treasured the times when I could talk with people. The officers, in some of the batteries, were by and large a pretty good lot. We had one officer, a captain, who was a graduate of West Point. He showed a little overtone of military nobility. Good man, but a little more officious than everybody else. Most of the rest were willing to spit on their hands and go to work. I don't know. It's so hard to put your mind to incidents. Willie has a recollection that is pretty detailed about certain people. And he never wanted to hurt anybody's feelings. He never wanted to call anybody a bona-fide son of a bitch. That would be an anathema to him.

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PIEHLER: What do you remember about your voyage over? You went on a stripped down version of the QE 2 [Queen Elizabeth II]. Or the Queen Elizabeth I guess.

SWINGEN: Or the Queen Mary.

PIEHLER: Queen Mary, okay.

SWINGEN: And I remember it as being jammed in, the zigzagging and the amount of vomit in the stairwells. So much vomit. And I could never recollect, I could never understand why they couldn't get it cleaned up. At least there should have been enough healthy, non-sick people to clean it up. But that may have been more of a British function than a U.S. one because it was a British ship. We had mutton. Well I was raised so that mutton was for the very cheapest people. It was the kind of food served to prisoners that you hoped would die. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So this sounds like, not even for you as an officer, not the most comfortable journey?

SWINGEN: No. It was not comfortable. But then again we were told about the wolf packs and what a U-Boat commander who could sink the Queen Mary would certainly get the Iron Cross four times over. And ... but when you were able to cross the Atlantic you got the idea that you were on the winning team. 'Cause then when you got in and you saw what was taking place in the build up. Of course you say, "Well Germany is a big country, but look at it on the map! And look at the fighting that's obviously had taken place on the Eastern front." Of course by the time we got in the Russians had pretty well driven the Germans out of their area and were ready to pounce in. But the crossing, getting back to the crossing, it was in a sense uneventful and in contrast with the return home on a liberty ship, where the food would slide from one table, on a table to the table next. And mal de mer [sea sickness] was in everybody's mind. Except for the vomit in the stairwells it was pretty uneventful. We lived in kind of chicken coop quarters but that's alright. Good God you can't expect to sleep in a Simmons mattress in any part of the war, coming or going. So it was routine. Stayed out of one another's way. Got into Glasgow, or Perth or Clyde, or someplace like that. And then taken by train down into the Midlands, and getting this lousy British weather, people coming down with colds. Routing training. And doing nothing except waiting for the time to go to the coast of France. Things were secretive. But the invasion took place on the 6th of June and I don't think we got into France until the 1st of August or about that. So there was a big interval, a big build-up. But between the British, who are more or less careful, and they should've been, they'd been taking a pounding for years, and the need to build-up we didn't have a very big bridgehead when we got in. And we didn't have it until after St. Lo.

PIEHLER: One of the things, I want to make sure I ask, because we don't have a lot of time today, what's your most vivid memory of combat?

SWINGEN: Well we were shelled a number of times and diving into, not a foxhole, but a ditch where we knew we were under some kind of enemy fire. And then hearing the wounded cry out, actually hearing one soldier, one enlisted man in our unit, calling for his mother. The old classic thing but it was, it reminded me of so many things. The ... but then again the thing that stood out was we've got a one-sided war. Somehow this arsenal of democracy has provided us with so much material that we've got it made. Now it's just a game of chess, of moving the troops around by inexperienced officers, to close in on these straggling Germans. And so it went. It was easy for Patton to make these dashes of fifty, sixty miles a day when there was nothing out there. When they were there, they singed us. And it seemed to me that we put on a show on the idea that we had an equal enemy out in front of us—that only occurred in the Battle of the Bulge. And then we were scared to death when we met equal forces or maybe even superior forces.

PIEHLER: Well I've read that particularly on the 24th and 25th, you had, your division had quite a slugfest with the Germans, the 79th Volksgrenadier. Do you remember—does that stick out? That push?

SWINGEN: What was the location?

PIEHLER: It was in the southern flank of the Ardennes.

SWINGEN: Yes. We had ... we were in Luxemburg, and there was a big pounding there and we had, I think I was alone in the command post for part of that time. Everyone else was dug in with

bazookas along the road. And German armor was coming at us. And then, of course I'm trying not to interpose too much of the *Battle of the Bulge*, this fantastic movie. Which I think is maybe close, at least theatre wise, to what was occurring. I'm trying not to impose that on my own, what I saw. Of course again, I never even saw a single German soldier except when they would surrender to me. And I'd come back with them sitting in the front of my jeep.

PIEHLER: So you never experienced small arms fire?

SWINGEN: No small arms fire.

PIEHLER: You did experience counter-battery?

SWINGEN: Counter-battery yes. When we were ... a couple of times we took a few rounds. But again ... it was ... it was just kind of like a round up. Either we were good enough or had enough people or material so that we ran the show. Germany was beaten after St. Lo. The rest was mop up. Now some will say that we had these battles, of course to the individual soldier who was in combat, these firefights are just the same as a massive clash of arms. But the Germans didn't have anything to fight with that was comparable to us.

PIEHLER: Did you really think this at the time or was this something you thought of retrospectively?

SWINGEN: I thought that we had—anytime you drive fifty miles in a day, you'd say, "Well what's the enemy like? We don't see him?" Of course the—we were always behind the infantry. We were mother's little boy so to speak. You didn't have to strap and try to pit pocket the enemy like the movies showed.

PIEHLER: I'm curious 'cause one of the things you had said yesterday, that the Lou Ayers *All Quiet on the Western Front* left a very vivid impression on you as a young boy and as a young man.

SWINGEN: Yes, I felt sorry for the Germans.

PIEHLER: What was it—when you were actually in combat how did you reconcile your sort of cinematic vision of what war was like with the reality of war, and your particular type of war?

SWINGEN: I thought it was a mechanical process. I thought it was something that was designed. I thought that individual heroism would occur rarely, like with Willie. That's why I keep referring to that all the time. I didn't have occasion to talk with any of the people. The forward observers would sometimes report back that there was fight and maybe we would lose a member of their team or maybe we'd come across a pile of Germans. And they were everywhere because our graves registration committee, or not committee, but a group, could not get to them. We were of course primarily interested in our own, seeing that our own would get the best. But the Germans would die, blood would drain, they would whiten, ashy like and lie there. And the people from the middle west like me who had never seen anybody dead except their grandparents in the casket, that was quite something.

PIEHLER: Well you had seen your young friend.

SWINGEN: Yes. I had seen them but for some reason I was so young that I didn't react ... People live and they die. Actually the frontier was probably should have been stiffened me more than it did. So ...

PIEHLER: One thing, you had talked earlier yesterday, before we got started about Willie, this very remarkable thing—now I did interview Edgar Wilson about his experiences in the cemetery. When did you learn about what had happened to Willie?

SWINGEN: Oh ... quite a time after that.

PIEHLER: So not during the war itself or was it even after that?

SWINGEN: No, during the war. Just I suppose a matter of days afterwards and Willie is the kind of fellow that you really don't believe things until you hear it from him. And I literally had to pull out of him what he had done, even asking him again and again to put it in writing—he's too modest to do that. Real heroes I guess don't thrive on publicity. And actually there were a number of things—we had taken some losses and a soldier, whether he's an officer or enlisted man, does—there's no time to go literary. Now that's why what you're doing is important, it makes some sense out of these wanderings of fellas like me. Even though we can't recite with any precision what was going on. I had written up notes on things and when I went back to go through Europe from the beach, Utah, to the end of the war, based upon map coordinates and maps that I had kept, I asked the War—the Department of Defense, "I'd like to take a look at the records for my own notes." "They'd been destroyed by fire," they said. I don't know if that's believable but maybe so. Maybe there was an awful lot of this so called blatherskite or maybe designed to be disposed of, they had to keep some kind of records and uh that's a loss that our own government couldn't care for some of these records so ... there's a limit to things.

PIEHLER: How often did you write home and what did you write your parents?

SWINGEN: Well I still had some letters, the evening letters that I wrote for my parents, that were pretty much staid. And I was aware that you couldn't give out too much information, though as it turned out we could have blabbed all the way from here to southern Norway. But it was pretty much just "Love and affection, your dutiful son, Dear Mother and Father." And very little reference to the war except "I'm eating well, sleeping well, I've got dry socks." Which is, I suppose, written home by most soldiers.

PIEHLER: What was it like to censor letters? Did you ...

SWINGEN: I had some of that to do and I found that the only thing censorable was sort of an encoding of letters that some would write to their girlfriends. The letters back to mom and dad were pretty straight ... So love and affection on a high level. But I couldn't make out the codes on the others, which I had, I concluded was due to some attempt at sexual aberrations. But nothing that I had to cut out and leave big slits. But that was one of the duties that I had, cut out

things. Not too many because—‘course there were, there were some that were married, letters to their wives—course that would be riddled with questions about how the kids are if there were any or what I’m doing or deliberate attempts to indicate that they were on the straight and narrow. “Saw a pretty girl in the neighborhood riding in my Jeep going forty miles and hour.” That kind of thing. Course you never would recite what happens at night or how many VD cases there were in the battalion.

PIEHLER: Since you’ve raised that, how many cases were there and how much of a problem [was venereal disease] ...?

SWINGEN: I never bothered myself with that, though there were a few cases and—we lived in kind of a Victorian attitude, that we don’t talk about that ... Neither do we really want to talk about anything that might veer onto gay or lesbian chatter.

PIEHLER: So it occurred but you didn’t really talk about it?

SWINGEN: No, no. Don’t talk about it. Occasionally within a platoon, or the equivalent, a section of the military, there’d be some cleaning up to do. And some poor devil would be always injured, couldn’t be that stupid, he had to be beaten. But if he didn’t want to go on sick call that was, that was the end of it. And I am trying my best not to overdo that because it seemed like you always had enough to think about. So you didn’t really put any social reflection on it, what your fellow people were doing.

PIEHLER: I unfortunately have a two o’clock shuttle run, but I want to just ask ...

SWINGEN: Two o’clock shuttle?

PIEHLER: Yes, so ...

SWINGEN: Oh you can’t even have lunch then.

PIEHLER: Well I’m happy to have lunch at the airport, although I could probably a quick lunch, whatever you prefer.

SWINGEN: Well should we finish—is there anything more?

PIEHLER: Let me just ask, because I’d love at some point to do a follow-up, but let me ask, this is your first—it is a war, so in asking this question I—what was your impressions of Europe?

SWINGEN: Europe was architecturally a find. I attribute that to those, even damaged buildings. Largely churches, the unfortunately the synagogues pretty well destroyed or even obliterated. Many of them obviously works of art. The cathedral alone was damaged, was interesting. But the churches were largely museums. You’d see only little old ladies in black attending services. Nobody else. Just a museum.

PIEHLER: Did you go to any services?

SWINGEN: I went to one service, which was a Ecumenical thing, and ... it was kinda like, almost like *MASH* when this Father Mulcahy does everything from Jewish to Catholic to Protestant, the whole range of things. And I guess that if I were to have my choice I probably would become a Buddhist, with the little I know about it. The search for something that fits is about all I can tell you.

PIEHLER: Well I'm looking forward to resuming this. I'm either hoping to come up to Madison though I know your friend Willie would love you to come to Knoxville. So ...

SWINGEN: Well we intend to get to Knoxville and I've been over to the Center.

PIEHLER: I know, under my late predecessor.

SWINGEN: Yes. And I think kindly of that. I think Willie has introduced me to something that is worthwhile that is why I even said, "This idea is so good that it should be franchised." Now that's a crass way of putting—saying it should be everywhere. I think that it gives a veteran a chance to speak out on how he feels about war and society. I think they go hand in hand. And I think it's a great, it's the greatest opportunity for a conservative to speak out because there are so many that would stamp out the military, even though there's a need for it, everyday.

PIEHLER: In closing today's session I hope—I'm looking forward to interviewing you hopefully sooner rather than later and ...

SWINGEN: Yes I hope that this morning, because I came at you with problems that I have, that are facing me when I leave you. And I feel like I've short-circuited you.

PIEHLER: I ... things—as they say things happen and I fully understand and there is no need to apologize. But let me thank you again.

----- END OF INTERVIEW -----
