

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH EDGAR C. WILSON

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KURT PIEHLER: This begins an interview with Edgar Wilson on March 2, 2004 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and ...

PATRICK LEVERTON: Patrick Leverton.

KURT PIEHLER: ... This is a follow-up of an interview that we had done with you ... [on] July 26, 2003. And its taken us a while to get back to you. And in the first part of the interview we had done with you we had, sort of, talked a little about your voyage over, but we really didn't do much in terms of your arrival into Scotland and your initial experiences of you and your ... men. Could you, sort of, recollect what it was like to be in Scotland, and in England, and later even, just before we started, also being in Wales?

EDGAR C. WILSON: The trip on the ship was really rough, and I was the only one that didn't get sick. Everybody was sick. Am I telling too much?

PIEHLER: No! No! Keep going.

WILSON: But on the last night, the ship had just made me dizzy all over. And I thought, "Well, I have been advised to get fresh air and food." So, I would go down for breakfast, and I went down the steps and on every step I had to find a place to put my foot without stepping on somebody's vomit. When I got into the dining room then, the British waiter came over, and he had a covered tray. And he said, "Sir"—there was only one other ... man in there to eat, but he said, "Sir, this morning, we have steamed lambs' kidneys," and he opened that, and the fumes came up, and I got up and ran!

PIEHLER: That made you sick?

WILSON: I couldn't eat anything. It smelled awful! (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Yeah.

WISLON: I got woosy! And when we got off the ship in Scotland, it was early in the morning, just after daylight, as I remember. And the beauty of the country—we went immediately from the ship to a train, and we were on the train to go down through Scotland into England. That was the most beautiful trip. It was a sunny day, middle of the summer, early ... July. And it was just a relief to see Scotland. With these fields, hillsides, grass. And then we got down to—I can't right now tell you what the city was.... But when we got there we were taken to a castle, and all the headquarters battery was in this castle. And we were there for about three or four days, and we were able to meet a few civilians. And ... in a pub or a restaurant at night there wasn't much food to be had. But ... I met a girl there that was really an entertaining and nice and respectable [person]. I later wrote her a little note, I think. But then we were there for about three days and nights. I don't remember the exact amount.

And ... we were ready to get on the way across the channel. But the artillery had first to go over into Wales to calibrate our guns, and that was an interesting people. Very conservative and with soul. And ... on the Saturday night we were through, and the next morning we were to leave.

But Captain [James] McBroom and I wanted to go somewhere just to relax a little bit, nothing rowdy. But, we asked the policeman on the street if there was a place to go just to enjoy an hour or two. We mentioned a pub, and he frowned, and he said, “No, we don’t allow those things here.” But he said if you want to go, if you’ll go to one of the political clubs they will welcome you and they’ll just treat you fine. And then we asking him where and what the name was. Well, now he says the Conservative Club, the Labour Club, and another one—I don’t remember. And the Conservative Club was right over here. (Laughter) Pointed to that one. He said, “All you need to do is just knock on the door and they will welcome you.” Well, they really did.

When we got inside, why—we had been advised ahead of time that if you offer some civilian a cigarette, now, your gonna get one back when he finishes that. But don’t offer him two because he can’t afford to give you two. (Laughter) Well I had given them the cigarette, and their conversation is so interesting. The way they talk just like an uncle of mine, my mother’s brother.

PIEHLER: You mentioned that at the end of the last interview.

WILSON: He talks—he’s dead now, but when he would talk his lips sort of pinched up. And his expression—it’s just wonderful. Well, this fellow that I talked to in the club that night, he finally said, “What do you drink in America?” Course he was talking about the alcoholic beverage. “I prefer a little bourbon occasionally.” “Bourbon?” (Laughter) And he motioned for one of his friends to come over and says, “In America they drink a drink called bourbon.” And he pronounced it a little different. But uh, it was just a very relaxing and enjoyable visit that we had there that night.

PIEHLER: ‘Cause it sounds like you really got to meet some of the English in there own terms.

WILSON: Yeah. Right.

PIEHLER: Or actually the Welsh, you might even be more accurate in that case.

WILSON: The Wales [people] were a different kind of people from the British or the Scotch.

PIEHLER: ... What did you notice about the differences between the three at the time?

WILSON: Their pronunciations of words is one thing there. They just sound different. Course, they might be just across the mountain from an Englishman. But their conversation is interesting, but ... it’s just a little bit different. (Laughter)

(Phone rings, tape paused)

PIEHLER: You were saying about the different, literally the different English languages that you heard.

WILSON: I guess they used the same words, but they were entirely different kind of people. I think that’s about all I can say about that.

PIEHLER: Yeah, yeah.

WILSON: But we were there—I guess we stayed at the club about two hours that night. And they had some games that we played and—but they all liked to visit with strangers.

LEVERTON: What kind of games did ...

WILSON: I don't remember, something with—not like a ping pong, but something similar to ping pong.

PIEHLER: Because you had—according to the morning after action reports for ... the 319th, the 2nd Battalion, 80th Division, you left on the 30th June 1944, from Camp Kilmer, and you were in England by ... early July 1944.

WILSON: From the desert we went by train to Camp Kilmer and we were there just ...

PIEHLER: Just a brief time. You mentioned in your earlier interview.

WILSON: It may have been three or four days, but—getting ready to get on the ship.

PIEHLER: ... You were, sort of, in route when D-Day had taken place already, the landing had taken place. What were your recollections of what you learned about the invasion at the time? And how, in a sense—what to expect now that we had actually landed? Because when you were in training we still had not actually landed, but just before you leave ... England ...

WILSON: While we were still ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I guess, ... [it was] June and July before you actually do get deployed?

WILSON: I don't remember a great deal about it. One thing I know they told us, we could discard our raincoats. They wouldn't—no, no they didn't say that we could—there was not—we were told that it was not at all likely that we would need to use a gas mask. And I think they took the gas masks up. They evidently had an agreement with the ...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

WILSON: But ... every man was issued a raincoat, and it was miserable to walk in a raincoat. Many of ... (Laughs)

PIEHLER: I'm curious, what made it so miserable [wearing] the official raincoats?

WILSON: Well, you're exercising, and the coat is heavy and it just burns you up. I'd say the majority of the raincoats that had been issued were thrown overboard before we got ... (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Before you even got to England. (Laughter)

WILSON: I don't remember whether I had one or not. I didn't throw mine overboard.
(Laughter)

PIEHLER: ... You mentioned having this experience ... at the Conservative Club. What about your men? How much contact did they have with civilians? Do you have any sense of that?

WILSON: Course, they didn't have much time. But—and, I don't remember. They had an opportunity to go to a pub, but there was very little food that was available at that time. Beer was available, that was about all as I remember it. But—maybe I shouldn't tell you this.
(Laughter) You may want to cut this out. But, uh, we were in a—this was ... near Manchester, a little—down near Manchester. We were in a castle, and the grounds were surrounded by a brick wall. Then here is a gate. And ... our headquarters battery had to put a guard on that gate, keep a guard on that gate. We went in for breakfast about the second morning, and our medical officer for the battalion said that—of course, Colonel Browning and all of the officers were there. You didn't go in at will, you went in when you were supposed to be there. But the medical officer came in and he said, "I had a funny experience this morning. At 4:00 the guard was coming off, and he woke me and he had to have a prophylactic." Colonel Browning said, "Well send him in. I'll give him a court martial for relief." He said, "No you won't." He said, "I'm the medical officer, he asked me to help him, and I gave it to him." (Laughter) But he said that the man said, "That for two hours he had walked that path. And from two until four—and this girl was begging him to stop." And he said, "I just took it as long as I could. When I came off duty, why, I got with her." Don't put that in there. But that was a strange thing. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: What—I lost my—after that story I lost my (Laughter)—um, you had majored in ...

WILSON: Let me tell you this if you will ...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

WILSON: We were near Manchester, within a couple of miles. Captain McBroom was the liaison officer that later was relieved and I replaced him. But he and I were good friends and he was interested in his church and all. We had both agreed that we would like to walk in this Sunday morning coming up and go into Manchester and go to a Church of England, we had never attended. So, we walked the two, miles and it was a beautiful day, but as we came into town an Englishman on his bicycle stopped to meet us. He was a World War I veteran, and he worked for the railroad. And he said, "I know you don't answer some questions, I'm not trying to get information like that, but just wanted to welcome you and later if you have time why you could come up to our house for tea." So, we told him we just might attend the church if we could, and he didn't say he'd go with us, but he told us where the cathedral was. We went up for the service, and then he had given us the direction to his house, which was just a few blocks. We went up and we had tea and two or three cookies. The interesting thing was that they gave us the tea and then they passed a sugar bowl with a spoon in it, but there was no sugar in that bowl! (Laughter) They went through the motion, and they didn't offer any explanation. But there was no sugar in the house probably. But he worked for the railroad, and he said, "Now if you'll give me your home address I'll write a letter and tell them that I have seen you. I'll not tell them

anything else, because I don't want to know anything else." And he did. And then we corresponded after I came home, after the war. And I have his picture ... on the patio where we had tea without sugar that morning.

PIEHLER: This seems like a very nice gesture, just to see two, sort of, Yanks walking ... along and just ...

WILSON: And then the day was ahead of us, and we saw the big hotel in the middle of town. We walked in and they welcomed us, and said that, "From two to four we have tea, go right in and help yourself." So we had tea and more tea. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I also know you're a coffee drinker so ...

WILSON: I am now. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: ... One thing I want to just back up, in terms of the cathedral, going to Church of England. What were your impressions of the ... service?

WILSON: It was interesting, and a little different from what we had been used to. We really enjoyed it. It was an inspiring service really.

LEVERTON: What kind of differences were there from the types of services here in America compared to ...

WILSON: I guess, the Episcopal Church services would be very similar to this.

PIEHLER: The veteran you met that invited you for tea, the tea without the sugar, he was a World War I veteran, did he tell you anything about his experiences? Because at this point you had not seen combat, but he had made it through World War I. Did he say anything to you?

WILSON: ... He didn't discuss his experience, except that he was a veteran from World War I. But now he had a very responsible position with the railroad—rail system, and I'm sure he had enough money to live on. But he and his wife were real nice people, and furthermore they had two daughters that were away in school. But they later came to Boston to visit some of their friends, and he had written and notified me that they would be in Boston. But I wasn't—I didn't try to contact them anymore.

PIEHLER: Did you have any—you had two great experiences, sort of, really getting to know some of the English. Is there any other contacts—any other of these sort of meetings that you had, or invitations extended?

WILSON: No, of course, we didn't have time.

PIEHLER: Yeah, you were not there as long as other American units.

WILSON: No, that's right. But the ones that we did see were interesting people, because they

seemed to be appreciative of the fact that we were there.

PIEHLER: I guess, one point before leaving England is you had read—you had taken a lot of courses and read widely in English literature. How is, sort of, the impression you had of England, and Scotland, and Wales in your head from all of the literature you had read and some of the history?

WILSON: Oh, it made it interesting just to see where you were and all of the courses that I had had in Latin—I had four years of Latin and I had two years of German in college. And my history courses and—Shakespeare, I knew much of Shakespeare by heart at that time. As a matter of fact, one day in combat when we were doing the best we could, but we were not making any gains, and Shakespeare came through my head, “You will lose this wager, oh lord.”

PIEHLER: Your Shakespeare came back in the midst of combat? And that exact line?

WILSON: Yeah, Is that in King Lear or ...

PIEHLER: You probably still remember your Shakespeare better than I do.

WILSON: Anyway the King was just—it was just before he gave the order for a horse, “My kingdom for a horse.”

PIEHLER: ... And that came to you in combat.

WILSON: Yeah. And then going across France, and when we were moving fairly rapidly and had time to look at the country, it reminded me of—well, I had learned a lot about that country from Julius Caesar and others.

PIEHLER: Did you have any books with you while you were overseas?

WILSON: No.

PIEHLER: You didn’t take any—you didn’t have any access to any of the combat—the Armed Forces editions when you were ...

WILSON: What now?

PIEHLER: The Armed Forces editions, the paperbacks that they passed out?

WILSON: Very little, no. We got one pamphlet explaining the British people and how to work with them and talk to them, and what to expect, and the same for the French, but not much. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I ‘m curious, how useful were the pamphlets that you got for the French and the English?

WILSON: They were very useful.

PIEHLER: Yeah? You didn't find them a contradiction to the reality of ...

WILSON: No, they were pretty accurate in what they explained. I may still have ... one or two.

PIEHLER: ... It's interesting, 'cause some of it's really stuck with you over the years, because you still remember the cigarettes, what they advised you with cigarettes. "Offer only one 'cause they—it will be a stretch for them to offer you a second one if you offered them a second one."

WILSON: At that time, don't put this in there either, but on the 7th of October—when I had trained with the tank company, and then I was to be the tank commander and artillery observer the next day—the company commander had told us that, "I think you're ready if you want to take the day off, why do so." Well, we had just got word on the radio about Nancy, which was just a few miles down, a few kilometers—and so I told the driver, "Let's just go down to Nancy and see what it looks like." Well, they had just—the Germans had just surrendered to the 35th Division, which was on our right. And every few feet almost—there was a sign—no trucks, no vehicles, other than 35th Division and so Zwick said, "We have to turn around." I said, "No let's go until somebody stops us." (Laughter) So we got trapped in the middle of town, and here was—in the square was a lot of activity and we parked and right next to us was a photograph shop and the door was open. So we went over and they made our picture and that picture you have in the book that you copied. I had put on there probably September, but it was actually, I checked the date and it was the 7th of October.

But we got out, and there's a building—as we were coming down the walkway, there's a building that goes to the next street, and just as we got to that, why, this lady—she could have been a prostitute, but she was well dressed and very attractive. And as she came around that corner, she says "One cigarette please." She got three that quick! (Laughter) Because we had been in really rough combat for months—two months. But anyway that was an interesting experience. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: (To Leverton) Before we leave England do you have any questions?

LEVERTON: No. I was getting ready to ask a question about the day he was leaving, so.

PIEHLER: Okay. Leaving England could you describe ... going from England to France and how that—another voyage, a smaller one, but still another voyage.

WILSON: We were loaded on a LST, landing ship tanks, and our—the ones that work together were on the same ship. But we were given something to relax us in case we got sea sick, which we really didn't need, but I think we all took one, but that's all. This was on the 6th day. We loaded at night, and we left early that morning, and crossed to Omaha Beach. Which was—well, it was an interesting trip in the water and the ship. And landing, of course, the beaches had just been cleared. I knew that the 29th Division were in the invasion, and I knew that Edward Minton, who was one of my 7th grade students was in the 29th Division, and I thought—he was average, or close to average. But I knew, in reason, that he could not have made that invasion.

And I learned later that he didn't, he was killed on the beach. You want me to continue?

PIEHLER: Before you leave Edward Minton, he was in your class as a student when you were growing up? Or were you ...

WILSON: When I was teaching he was in the 7th grade, ... but he had ...

PIEHLER: Been held back?

WILSON: ... one of my early students. And he had finished high school and—I don't know whether he was drafted or whether he volunteered. But anyway—see, I taught for five years, and then I took a leave of absence for '39 and '40 so I could graduate in the spring of '40.

PIEHLER: 'Cause I keep forgetting, you could teach with only two years—now you need a four-year degree, but then you only needed a two-year degree to teach. Yes, because you didn't finish UT until 1940.

WILSON: Well, I started teaching with a certificate ... when I had two years of college work at Milligan. And then I was going to summer school.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm. I remember you saying that.

WILSON: And then I took a leave from the school system for the fall semester of '39 through the spring semester of '40 when I graduated.

PIEHLER: Before we leave Edward Minton, what else do you—what did you remember—you obviously remembered him when you were landing. What did you remember [about] him as a student?

WILSON: He was from a good family, and incidentally his sister still works—and I taught her too, she still works in the Regas restaurant [in Knoxville]—if you ever go to Regas she probably will be there.

PIEHLER: Oh, wow!

WILSON: And she was a little—she had two brothers, and I taught the two brothers both. And I taught her too. We have a little reunion.

PIEHLER: At the Regas? Oh, okay.

WILSON: But—am I talking too much?

PIEHLER: No, no keep going.

LEVERTON: Keep talking.

WILSON: We loaded, and Bill Zwick, I sent you his—he was the official jeep driver, he could do communications too, but he was the driver. And before we left in Wales, he said, “We’re going to France,” he said “Let’s put a name on my jeep: Vive la France!” “Oh, okay.” So we did. As soon as the jeep came off the ship and we had to go up an incline—but here came a fancy buggy with a Frenchman and his wife. They were driving their horse in this fancy buggy, and when he saw our jeep—he sees our jeep he says, “Vive la Amerique!” (Laughter)

Then, there’s a little bit between but.... On the lower river, we were to—our battalion was to guard the right flank, which went to the lower river. I don’t want to take too much time, this is—but anyway, as we approached the place—and I was in this area right up here (pointing in the air) up on a hill and over to the river. We had to find a place. So, as we approached two nuns saw us, and they wanted to talk to us. And one of them said that she had a sister that still lived in Canada and had not been able to contact her for two years. “Would I write her a letter?” So I did. Lucky enough, she gave me her address, and I wrote her a letter and told her that I had met her sister—not exactly where, and some hundreds of miles later I got a box of cookies in the mail from that sister.

PIEHLER: While you were still in Europe?

WILSON: Oh yeah. In France.

PIEHLER: In France. Which was a very nice gesture, both on your part, but also hers.

WILSON: Two other men were on this hillside where we were to go, one was a World War I colonel, retired, but he had to tell me his history. The other had lost a part of his leg in the present war. I don’t know whether he was working for the French or—anyway he was crippled. He had a leg off (indicates on his leg).

PIEHLER: At the knee?

WILSON: But, they were interesting people, and they wanted to tell us all that they could about the Germans, they had just beaten them lately. And then the priest walked by, and he wanted to talk to me, and I told him that, “Our responsibility was to guard the flank, the river,” and, “Where would be a good place for me to check out.” “The only place you can see across the river is from the steeple of my church which dates back to the 11th century,” he said. The Germans—“It’s all messed up, the Germans have used it as a—for their troops to stay and they left it that way. It’s not cleaned up yet. But you’re welcome to go.” So we, the three of us, went into the church. Went up the winding stairway, and here were three bells, good-sized bells, just room for us to get right under the bells. They were on a time schedule and would burst our ears drums every fifteen minutes! The only place that I could see was through the little slots all the way around. And I had to get up there and get my head through about like that (gestures).

PIEHLER: A very tiny slot.

WILSON: Yeah. And the next morning, early in the morning I was in position when one rifle was heard, and a shot that just missed my left ear. I backed up and I said, “I think that was

meant for me.” And by that time that machine gun was working on that steeple all the way around. (Laughter) I had my map board in my hand, and we all went down the stairway. But I got five holes all the way through my map board! Little pieces hitting us on the back. But ... that was interesting. And that was the first round that our artillery battalion fired in Europe. I missed one thing, telling you about the gentleman that came up that wanted us to go—wanted me to go down to his house. “It’s just down to the foot of this hill and we’ll have some tea.”

PIEHLER: This is in France?

WILSON: In France, right there close to the church steeple. And so when we got to the door, he started—he was talking real fast, like they do, and loud, giving orders to his wife and, “The American is here for tea.” I left—took my walkie-talkie and left. I could communicate with the other two men alright. But anyway I had tea there. But coming back to the steeple then, as soon as we got out I radioed back to the fire direction center and told them what had happened. And within thirty minutes I had some visitors, the S-3, and he brought one man who I still communicate with. He was in the survey crew, but he was one who—the people that he worked with didn’t get along with him too well sometimes. And I think they sent him up to me just because they didn’t want him back there. (Laughter) [Sergeant] Lester Schlager, he is a wonderful fella and made a good—he stayed with me, and after a few weeks I recommended that he could be a good forward observer and he was. He was a buck Sergeant, but I said at one time that he should be given a battlefield commission, because he was doing an important job and doing it well. But he said, “No, don’t say that.” He said, “I like doing the work, but I don’t want the responsibility.” But he promised to send me some more information. Later, after, something like ten years ago, he wrote back to the mayor of that town in France.

PIEHLER: Was it Angers? A-n-g-e-r-s.

WILSON: Angers? Yes.

PIEHLER: That’s the town that you had—you met the retired colonel, World War I colonel and the priest and the ...

WILSON: Now, Angers is the big city, but the church and the little village is a suburb.

PIEHLER: Is a suburb of ...

WILSON: But it’s right on the river. I had fired on their ... guards, they were posting the guards along the river. And I put time fire on them. I don’t know what happened to them in the trees, but I fired into the trees, and then it was the next morning when they ... ran us out of the steeple. I ramble, I’m sorry, but I ...

PIEHLER: But this also strikes me as—this is your first experience of combat.

WILSON: ‘Course, we were not really in combat, we were on the edge of combat.

PIEHLER: Although ... you may have been on the edge, but people are still trying to shoot you

... fairly successfully, actually, the way you describe ...

WILSON: Well, from there on through France as we skirted that area, and two battalions of the 80th were on our left, and they had got into some heavier combat for a few days before we did. And then going through France, the Germans had pulled out, but they were obviously strengthening their line across the Moselle River. And ... they would leave just a small crew, a machine gun nest or a few riflemen to hold us up, and you don't know how much is out there and so it delays you. They sacrificed all those men, because there was nothing for them to do, but to surrender or be killed. Then trucks were coming up behind us if it seemed clear ahead that we would go in trucks for a while. And in my case, my jeep driver and radio operator and I had our own vehicles. Except for those, maybe an hour or two occasionally, Kurz and I were walking right with ... the very front company. And we were there for the purpose of taking care of that plan.... But it was an interesting and pleasant experience for the most part until we got to Toul and Moselle.

PIEHLER: So initially, by the time your division got deployed, there was the breakthrough, and so your initial experiences after Angers is a lot of mobility, of just, sort of, trying to ...

WILSON: And the purpose of George Patton's 3rd Army was to exploit the breakthrough as soon as the bridgehead was secured and we entered at St. Lo. And we were to move as fast as we could, but then when we came to a ...

PIEHLER: 'Cause in this after action report, summary morning report, there was one day, I think, the 29th of August, it lists here, that you traveled ...

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PIEHLER: It lists that you traveled that one day about fifty miles, which is a lot to travel in war time in the most ...

WILSON: That was very unusual to move that far.

PIEHLER: And it's at Toul, France that that movement stops for you and your division.

WILSON: The Moselle comes like that (pointing in the air), Toul is right here at that mark.... Pont-a-Mousson is over here. Our battalion stopped at Toul and had actually made a crossing of the river right there. But there were not many German troops in that.... But it was on the 15th of September, we were there and getting our bedrolls ready to go to sleep that night, when I got word that Pont-a-Mousson bridgehead was in severe trouble. And that—they told me how to go, so we took our jeep and we followed instructions in the dark. And the engineers got us across the river and then down to near Paulevue, France. Did I give you a copy of our maps? If I didn't I can give you one.

PIEHLER: I don't think you did. I don't think I ...

WILSON: Did I send you, or did I leave for you, a copy of the letter that I got from Colonel

Browning? Artillery Battalion? I'll give you one.

PIEHLER: I'm not—no, I don't think you've given us a copy.

WILSON: Colonel Browning was one of the best commanders that we had. And he was with the 905th throughout. But by the end of the war he just almost collapsed. I told him, I said "Colonel, if you have a need to send anybody to the Pacific I'll be glad to go." He said "Willie, I expected you to say that." But he said, "I've had all I can take." And in that letter ...

PIEHLER: Actually this might be a good time to even read it, 'cause it was addressed to you from John Browning. He was then living in 615 Ridgemont, San Antonio, Texas. And it was dated March 19, 1979. And he addresses you, "Dear Willie, I was surprised and tickled to receive your letter. I would have replied sooner, but Emily and I were on a trip and only returned a few days ago. Dan Minahan ... is a good source of information as he attends all class and military reunions. Unfortunately, I am a poor joiner and participator ... (tape cuts out) ... that you will be sixty-five on Oct. 29th. I want you to know that makes you four days younger than I and I am not bragging about it. I often remember the ... 905th fondly, it was a good outfit and I think it did a fine job. I am proud to have been a part of it. I kept a very brief diary while overseas, which while not permitted, did not reveal anything of importance to the other side. In general, I did not refer to specific people in it, but I thought I would make a reference to you. I looked it up, but on Sept. 16th 1944, quote, 'Wilson distinguished himself today,' unquote. I am sure I don't have to recall that day to you. I retired here in 1957 after twenty years thinking it might be better for the children to establish some roots in Emily's hometown. I went into the investment business for a number of years, but not too successfully. It was probably not a wise decision. I am now completely retired and not doing anything very constructive. Glad to hear you've done well and can now settle down to a well-deserved retirement, but still keep busy. Thanks for writing and my very best to you and Jerry. If you come this way don't fail to let us know. Most Sincerely, Jack." Well, I ...

WILSON: On the afternoon of the 15th of September. General Searby, who I considered a friend was where—he wasn't supposed to be there, but he had gone up [to] the frontline where the 318th infantry was. And the tanks were approaching, and he took a gun, a rifle and tried to shoot ...

PIEHLER: He tried to shoot a German tank with a rifle? (Laughs)

WILSON: He was the commander. Of course, they just riddled him. And the next day was the 16th. And we were close to him, and our—well, enough of that. But coming back to Colonel Minahan and Colonel Browning—were both artillery commanders 314th and 905th. Minahan attended all meetings. When I went to a division reunion meeting after I had retired he was always there. And when—I contacted him, and this was before I was retiring from my work at sixty-five, and Colonel Minahan—I asked him about Colonel Browning, and he said, "He has never attended anything since he came back home." But he had his address, and that's when I wrote to Colonel Browning. But when Colonel Browning told me in answer to my statement that I would be willing to go if he needed to send somebody to the Pacific ... he said, "Willie, I would expect you to say that, but I have all I can take of this." But he had made me, at that time,

the headquarters battery commander. And that's not the best job to have, but I got along fine. He obviously, he really had all he could take of it. He had done the best job that had been done. But it just killed him emotionally. And I know—one morning at reveille, he and his driver they drove in. They had been out all night together. But things like that do happen to some people.

PIEHLER: And he had been as a superb—and you recount him as a superb commander too, but the war had really gotten to him.

WILSON: He held up until the very end, and then it just got him.

PIEHLER: Did he stay in the Army after ...

WILSON: After ... his twenty years he got out. A West Point graduate with an outstanding record.

PIEHLER: Why do you think, despite what he had gone through, that he had ... [his] fill? Why do you think he made the Army his career?

WILSON: Well, I don't know.... He was really a gentleman. But he was on top of ... what the battalion needed to do. And I, at one time, had it not been for that Captain Miller—who was B barracks commander, but he relieved the officer that was working with my former ones. He came up and was ... responsible to me. It was one of the hottest fights that we ever had at St. Avold. And I knew that Charlie Miller could read a map, I knew that he would know where he was.... And he was making fire directions, giving a fire order, which I was having to relay, because it was not getting through to the ... fire direction center. But he said "We're getting machinegun fire on our right now from a certain place." Well, that certain place on the map was where the company, the infantry company on our right was supposed to be. They claimed they were there! (Laughter) So, the company commander said, "My men are on that spot." You can't put this in print either, but this is what happened. I was getting a message from both. They didn't hear each other, but I was getting both, and I was relaying Captain Miller. And when he gave that order—and I knew Colonel Bandy was right there, by there too. I knew that if he gave that word he'd probably knock you in the head. But I gave the fire direction—Miller's orders, and he immediately said "That took care of it." But that hit the machine guns.

Later that night about two o'clock, as soon as we had made our plan for the very next day, I sat down and wrote a commendation for Captain Miller, and recommended that he should have a Silver Star, because he really had saved the day in one of the most critical spots. It had been two weeks and I had heard nothing. So, I went back and Major Gossman, the executive officer, handles things like that. And I asked him if they had done anything about my recommendation. "No," he said, "Willie we want to treat all the battery commanders alike." And so we just come back, so I walked about a hundred yards over to Colonel Browning. And I said "Colonel, I made a recommendation for Captain Miller for the Silver Star, and I understand that it has not been acted on yet." But I said, "That's very important to me." He said, "Willie, it'll be taken care of immediately." And it was.

Later—I had been in contact with Miller periodically. He wanted to come to Pigeon Forge, but

he had so much business he never did get there. Once a year he would write and tell me, “I am going to be there a certain time.” And I wrote back and asked him if he would let me have a copy of his Silver Star Commendation. I would like to give it to the Center [for the Study of War and Society at the University of Tennessee] here. Yeah, he says, “I’ll make you a copy. I figured the infantry commander did that.” I said “No, I did it myself at two o’clock in the morning.” And so I gave it to—it’s somewhere in my file. But I am sorry, I ramble.”

PIEHLER: No, no. Your “rambling” is great. I want to make sure that—just so I can place it. What you’ve described is this what happened on the 16th, or was that something ...

WISLON: It was—It was ...

PIEHLER: A few days after ...

WILSON: On the 15th the Germans had pushed everything off the bridgehead.

PIEHLER: Yeah, and then on the 16th ...

WILSON: And General Searby trying to shoot the tank, [the] commander, and he got riddled. And then my crew and I in our jeep made our way around these little roads and got up across the river down to Loisy. Incidentally, Bill Zwick if you ever see him, he remembers Loisy and that he got back to see it on a division [reunion] trip once. We got into—and ... the regimental commander, Colonel Davidson had made his way across there, and was in the basement of a house, had my friend McBroom with him. But we got to his office in the basement of that house—I call it an office, and he told me one company—Sam Williams’ company, he was right down there on the edge of town. And he got a guard to come in—told him to take me and my crew down to Sam Williams’ place.

When I got there—and I’d never seen Sam Williams before, but he was a very capable fellow and I understand that he knew what was going on. He said, “There’s ... already a barrage coming in. Which means that troops will be following.” He said, “It’s not time for us to take off.” But as the guard walked us down there—and he was nervous, and he said, “There’s dead Germans and dead Americans all over the street, you have to watch your step.” We got down there. Sam was giving orders that it was not safe to start—for us to start moving up around Mousson Hill, through Caen, and so on. And the Colonel was saying that’s what the orders said to do. And he said, “Colonel, I’m not going to start my men walking up there until we see what they are up to.” And I broke into the conversation and said, “Colonel Williams, where do you want me to go.” He said, “I’ve got a squad out there by the cemetery, and that’s as far as you can go, but that’s where you oughta be.”

I got out there—it was just almost beginning to break daylight, but I got my—I had my walkie-talkie and Zwick had the radio ... with him. I got out there, and I got my field glasses just as—and I saw movement in the bushes up here. And then I saw a tank begin to come out of those bushes. It was on slightly higher ground than we were on. I had not introduced myself to the squad of infantry, and three of them were already dead. But as soon as I saw the tanks I called for a fire mission. Kurz came back pretty quickly and said, “We can’t complete the message,

they're not answering." Well, I saw that tank was just moving slowly, and he wasn't too far from us. Here was a hole that somebody had dug, maybe a German had dug. I dropped down in there. I oughtn't say this but—my mother was a very efficient person, and when I jumped in that hole thinking that we can't get communications, we can't fire because we—her face, not her body, but just her face with the big brown eyes said, "Get out of that hole and do something." And I got out of the hole that quick. (Laughter) And as I came out Kurz says, "I got him, I've got him." So, I started firing, and they realized that fire direction, and at the division that it was a pretty serious situation and that pretty soon then they lined up—I believe it was a total of five battalions that could reach us.

PIEHLER: Because basically, it sounds like, you were getting an attack, and there was only a squad there to ...

WILSON: Well, a squad was all that he had. He had others ... in the rear ...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

WILSON: But for two and a half hours with all of the—and there were infantrymen coming across that wide valley all. And two of the tanks were heading toward us, but for two and a half hours, all of the firepower that was available, I directed it. And frequently if something popped up I would fire on them first. Then I might say, "Repeat with fire round." And, "Repeat again, and again." We kept the fire coming constantly, it was a constant roll. And I—the tanker that was the closest that—I had hit close enough that I had damaged his track. And he got out and looked at it, and he turned around and looked at me. The distance that was between us was probably 100 yards at the most. But in cases like that it never occurred to me to take my pistol and use it because I had other things to do.

PIEHLER: What about him? Was he thinking of taking his pistol out, or ...

WILSON: Well, he didn't. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: But it's an interesting scene, because you're in combat, and it almost sounds like he's inspecting his tank like you would after a car accident. I mean, even though there's all of this shelling and—is that the scene that you're describing? That he's—you know, that you remember?

WILSON: You have a responsibility, and your responsibility is to stop what's coming. You know how to do—you know what it takes to do it, and that's the only thing uppermost in my mind. In—John McManus made one statement that I can't agree with; he said, "Fear was the primary ..." It was not—so far as me and the men that I worked with in the infantry or the artillery either, fear was not the controlling factor.

PIEHLER: I guess, could you say more about that? Because ... you were in the artillery, but you got to know the infantry very well. Why do you think fear wasn't the primary motivation, or what other factors did motivate?

WILSON: The infantry-artillery combat team is—it is a team. And that was drilled into my head at the field artillery school. And fortunately, I had been drafted six months to the day the war started and I never felt that it would start ...

PIEHLER: I remember your December 6th argument.

WILSON: But at the same time, the team that I was with—we had worked together in training and in maneuvers, and, in many ways—and we knew the infantry—we knew what the infantry needed. And we had—as a matter of fact, the infantry couldn't survive without a good artillery. The artillery certainly couldn't (laughter) survive without the infantry alongside. But I have to admit that fear never controlled my actions. And the men that I worked with closely with two exceptions—they would have fought forever for what they were doing.

PIEHLER: Is it because, in a sense, your job—I don't know how to put it. You really had to concentrate on the task at hand in terms of fire direction. Because, I wonder if you were in a foxhole—having interviewed a lot of combat infantrymen, and just from what I have read also in memoirs of others, you, sort of, have a lot time to think often and to worry. Where, everything that you described, particularly in the midst of battle is your trying to read your map and trying to locate where the firing needs to go and communicate. Is that just simply you're so busy?

WILSON: Well, that's right. And I was aware of the fact that if we don't get them first they would get us. And that was our job, to get them first. (Laughter) I hate to ramble on like this.

PIEHLER: Well, I'm also struck, because ... you earlier said when you faced this tanker where you disabled the track, and your opponent, I mean this other tank—this other German was standing within pistol range, but you were focusing on what you had to do [for] your firing support.

WILSON: That's right. When finally—two tanks had crippled, and they had went back over that little rise. And I didn't know where they were. But in one instant, all across that broad meadow, infantrymen that had been on their bellies and firing all got up at the same time. Somebody gave them an order to get up and retreat. And they started running ... and I put TOTs on them as long as I could see them. And when they got into the far woods that held them back for a while. And then I gave the order, "Ceasefire." Mission accomplished. And all of those guns that had been at a constant roar for two and a half hours cut off at once. And that was a funny feeling.

And right to the side of me there was a man that told me he was thirty-five years old and had two children. He'd like to see them again. He got up and said, "I've never seen you before. But I'd like to shake your hand." I said, "Well, I'd like to shake your hand too." The other seven that were left got up and stood there, and we shook hands and congratulated each other. At one time during the firing one of them spoke to me and said, "If you're talking to Captain Williams ask him what we're supposed to do, our Lieutenant's been killed." Sam said—I relayed the message, he said, "You take charge of them. They'll do what you tell them to."

And I think the one that had asked the question said, "Well, I'm about out of ammunition."

Well, I had to crawl over here—the medical man was killed, he and two others. But I went across to get their weapons and pass them down. As I crawled over that first aid man, I could swear that his eyes followed me as I crawled across him. (Laughs) He didn't move or say anything, but I could see his eyes. (Laughter)

LEVETON: Like, "What are you doing?"

PIEHLER: Was he alive?

WILSON: He was dead.

PIEHLER: He was dead.

WILSON: Probably his eyes didn't move, it was my imagination.

PIEHLER: Was this day—on September 16th, was this your closest call? 'Cause it sounds like you—most of squad didn't make it, and you only 100 feet from a disabled German tank. Is this the closest call that you had in the war?

WILSON: No, I had some others, but this is where my commendation was made. Zwick stayed with the radio. Kurz, who was the radio communications enlisted man. But he had called me on the radio after the first tank was hit fifty feet from me and knocked out, and the tank commander jumped out and machine gun bullets just ripped the bone out of his leg. At the knee, one of the men did give him—put a tourniquet on his leg, and the doctors told me later that they got him safely, and that he might make it. But Kurz then says, "I'm coming lieutenant! I'm right behind this tank!" And at that time that tank was hit. Many times I thought Kurz was gone. But that time when he said that, ... I thought, "Well that's the end of him." And he finally came on [after] what seemed like minutes, but it probably wasn't. He said, "That man hit our tanks." But he came on out as soon as he could. And he—I don't know what ever happened to him after the war. But Kurz and Zwick were the best enlisted men ever. And they stayed on the same job until the war was over. And Zwick had been very active in the veteran's hospitals and all, and going to division reunions, and so on. But I've asked him about Kurz, and he said, "I've not heard one word from him." He said, "We lived together through all the war, but I've not heard from him."

PIEHLER: It's interesting. I hope—some people have actually reacquainted from the web. We've placed interviews [online]. There's been some very interesting meetings come out of that. So, I guess, this is a good appeal.... You would like to hear from him it sounds like.

WILSON: I would. I'd like to see it.

PIEHLER: One question I want to ask—because, you mentioned it had never dawned on you pull your pistol at that one particular point. Did you ever in combat resort to small arms fire yourself? Did you ever have to shoot your pistol or another ...

WILSON: No.

PIEHLER: No, never?

WILSON: Never needed it. I always had my .45 right there.

PIEHLER: Yeah. But you never actually had to pull it.

WILSON: But I never—I didn't even remember I had it on me.

PIEHLER: I mean, you mention this one particular case where the enemy got pretty close, was there any other time that ... it might have been prudent to pull out your weapon, but you were just so busy that you can think of?

WILSON: A few times.... The—I can't think of the word right now, but there was a lieutenant who was the observer for these four little weapons that they had. Which are artillery, but don't have the range that the artillery has. But when we were attacking St. Avold ... they were just brutally—they were just destroying.... Actually we found out later that they had had a main headquarters in St. Avold. And they were getting all of their equipment and papers out—everything. And that's the reason they put up such a fight. But the Lieutenant who was the forward observer for whatever those little guns are, he was meeting us during that night, and the company commanders sitting around the table were all saying that, "I don't have enough men to even fire the next—another day." The medical officer was across the table from me and then right by me was this lieutenant. And he began to just wobble, and he just went down and began to mumble that 'they'll never get them out, they had went wrong, and they had left some of the injured men out there.' He said, "We'll never get 'em out." The medical officer got up and put a shot in his arm, and he collapsed. He said, "He'll be alright by morning, but ... you'll think he's dead." The next morning he came out of it alright. But during that day he had had to determine what was crawling right up on him. And a few feet away, he took out his .45 and shot a German in the head.

PIEHLER: At ... pretty close range?

WILSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And so he—it's striking that the medical officer picked out—sounds like that this was combat exhaustion, right away and treated it right away.

WILSON: And he was alright. I told one of our friends about that one time, and he said well, "We gave him a shot of so and so." And I don't know what it was, but anyway his only statement was—of course, it all just happened just instantly with all of the battery commanders and company commanders, and me, and the colonel, and the staff members around the table. But it had just happened that quick. And he had gotten up and just shot him and then said, "You'll think he's dead, but he'll be alright."

PIEHLER: Is this the same medical officer who had that experience in England you had talked about earlier? Is it the same ...

WILSON: No, that one in England was the artillery medical officer, this one was the infantry....

PIEHLER: But it sounds like you had two very good medical officers. Do you remember their names?

WILSON: Their names? I can't tell you right now.

PIEHLER: But they were really quite ...

WILSON: Very much so.

PIEHLER: They were very good at their job.... I think we might ask you before we—because I think there are some more battles that we need to ask you about, but I want to ask you some more mundane questions about life in the field. Particularly—because, you even said that part of the war, initially, was doing a lot driving in trucks, and movement. One basic question I like to ask is how often people got showers when they were on the line? How often did you get a shower once you were deployed?

WILSON: In France?

PIEHLER: Yeah. A shower.

WILSON: A bath?

PIEHLER: A bath or a shower. Not a helmet shower, not a helmet bath, but a true access to a shower. Or some similar facility—or private bath.

WILSON: We didn't have ...

PIEHLER: So you never had access to a shower? The sort of ...

WILSON: No.

PIEHLER: No. What about a civilian tub? Did you ever get access to one?

WILSON: A civilian what?

PIEHLER: A civilian bathtub. In a civilian home.

WILSON: After the war ended we did, yeah.

PIEHLER: So, you don't remember ever having a shower from the moment you landed in France? And you have a pretty good memory, so I ...

WILSON: No, It was—the only thing you could do was to take the liner out of your helmet and

get water in your helmet. And as the word went in those days, you washed up as far as possible and down as far as possible. (Laughter)

LEVERTON: How was the food?

WILSON: K-rations I liked. And with the infantry out, we were—we didn't have any food other than K-rations or C-rations. C-rations sometimes gave people dysentery unless you could really cook them. But K-rations were excellent. I had—I really liked K-rations. Of course, they're something to joke about with a lot of people, but I got along well with ... the K-rations.

PIEHLER: ... I should just go ahead and stop this [tape].

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Edgar Wilson on March 2, 2004 with Kurt Piehler

LEVERTON: And Patrick Leverton.

PIEHLER: At the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee. You were saying one thing ...

WILSON: I had in mind that the men that were putting the ammunition in that gun and keeping it coming, they have a real hard difficult job. When they did a good job at it, and I had time, a minute, I would call back and tell fire direction center to tell the number one gun crew that they did a good job. And I tried to keep them informed of what we were doing.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

WILSON: One young fellow wanted to come up and work with us. And he—they let him come one day, because he—because of the messages that I had sent down. And he wound up on a crew that worked—the forward observer crew until the war ended. But I remember when he came up and we were packing across territory, a machine gunner had done some damage to us. We were going right by his hole that he he'd working from. And the poor German was just bloody and just still trying to breathe, but I passed him on by. I had [Private Melvin] Thompson stay behind me to walk in my tracks, we don't know what might be here. But I passed by that machine gunner that had been hurt, and then I heard Thompson say, "Lieutenant Wilson ... he's in pretty bad shape, shouldn't I take care of him?" These were my words, I said, "I don't think he's worth it, but if you want to go ahead." I thought he wanted to see if the man needed some help. He started firing. He hit him some more. But he made a good man. But as we said before fear could be overcome. You could be aware of the seriousness of the situation but, if you're dedicated and want to do your job fear is not going to take hold.

PIEHLER: Well, something that strikes me from what you have written and also from your first interview is that you and the men around you had also received also lots of training. You had been a well-trained—your training hadn't been abbreviated.

WILSON: That was the good fortune. I was in before the war started. I got good basic training, that's not to say I'd never been cussed at before by those corporals that joined the Army during the Depression. They had to have a job though. He could walk right up and put his nose right against yours and call you some of the awfulest names you could ... (Laughter) But, it was funny to me.

LEVERTON: Did you have much interaction with local people in France, like, around Moselle?

WILSON: Not really. You'd see 'em and you might use their house for a while at night, but most of them you didn't have time to get acquainted.

LEVERTON: Yeah.

WILSON: They knew that they were there, and they were not going to interfere with what we were doing.

PIEHLER: What about any—did you ever trade with French civilians? Did you or your men ever do any trading and bartering?

WILSON: I went into—before we got into the ... heat of it in the first few days, I walked into a little store and bought a little something, bought a handkerchief, which was something that I sent back to remember the family, and they were real nice to work with. But that's about as far as I... Along the Moselle, in that area we ... fought in that area for several weeks. The people probably would have been glad to stay with Germany. But they didn't have any choice. They were at the mercy of whoever's there. And ... you get the feeling when you talk to them that they might just as soon belong to Germany as to France. On—it's hard for me—not to change the subject ...

PIEHLER: No, no, go ahead.

WILSON: But beyond the Moselle River for several kilometers, there was a lot that we had to do. And at one time this—a smaller river that ran out like that (gestures), and the Germans were still on the other side. And right at that little point in the river up on a bluff there was a small town with houses. And right on that point my crew and I were sent out to a dairy barn—I was right at home in the dairy barn. But it had—the barn was built with solid concrete, and they had a barn loft with hay in it. But we were sent out, and they sent a squad of infantry with us to protect us. And we were to watch across the river—it was what we would call a creek here. But it was quite an interesting experience. We spent seven days there. And at night, the guard—the infantry squad would send one man every two hours during the night to stay outside to watch. The dairyman would come in and milk his cows and we became well acquainted with him. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Did you get any milk while you were there?

WILSON: I don't remember. But ... we had been given a twenty power scope, it had to sit on a little stand. We put—use that up in the barn loft. Watch across there. Nomeny was the little town across there and there was some activity in Nomeny. But we couldn't ever pinpoint

anything important, but we had to be there to watch it. One morning over here where there was a few herds of—a few cattle, there was a tree in the grass, and this German soldier just after daylight, came from behind that tree adjusting his trousers—gotten in a hole. It was probably not necessary, we knew what he was there for, and so I put a round of artillery right over his hole. The next morning—probably the next day, why, the priest was walking toward us from Nomeny. He came in and was directed to the guard and said he had a message for the commandant. So, I told him that I would see that his message got back to the commandant. He said, “That there’s really no Germans there doing any damage.” Well, I didn’t put up an argument and treated him respectfully. That was actually the day after—I better back up a day now. Kurz—the twenty power scope was pretty hard on your eyes, you can use it just for a little while. And Kurz said one day, “I’ve got him! They’ve got a scope in that window ... in that middle house.” Well, I checked it, and it was—you could see it. That’s where they were watching us. I’d fired quite a bit in the area so I just called for one gun. I thought we’ll try to hit that house. One round came out, nothing happened outside, but the roof and everything just blew up.

PIEHLER: So, you had a bull’s-eye on that house?

WILSON: So, I talked to the S-3 on the phone and ... I told him what happened and said, “I don’t know where it hit.” He laughed he said, “It went through the window didn’t it?” They had to haul several people out down to another building. Some of those things you don’t like to talk about much anymore.

PIEHLER: This just, sort of, waiting in the barn, was that the, sort of, the extent of you having to call in artillery, or did the Germans ... just eventually go quietly?

WILSON: They had suspected or learned where we had to be in order to see them. Uh, that night then, I called fire direction and told them that we’d been there seven days or eight I believe, and I said, “I’m okay, but I know the other men are getting a little bit nervous. I would appreciate it if you would replace them.” And they got their heads together and told us all to move to a different location. Here’s a street that goes this way and then out here it goes that way. (Pointing in the air)

PIEHLER: So, it goes sort of straight and then makes a little left.

WILSON: They told us to go back up the street and spend the night, and they would get somebody to replace us the next morning. And they had a holding area—nothing there, but just a few cows, and we got in there. Kurz, my radio operator, had found a German machine gun, a small one, but he was carrying it. And we were all sleeping in there between the cows and the hay—not under the same roof, but right next too it. And about two o’clock in the morning—the infantry always kept one man watching. He was in the door and they shot him right through his abdomen, with one shot. The minute that sounded, Kurz gave everybody orders to stay down! And he started firing that toward the door over the man’s head. But the Germans ... had left us. They didn’t—we didn’t see them. (Laughter) We haven’t got into my experience with the infantry commanders and others, but ...

PIEHLER: I guess, if you’re ready to move to that, please, by all means. It’s your interview too,

so—and we’ve enjoyed every digression you’ve taken or movement of the interview that you’ve taken.

WILSON: Well, I appreciate what you’re doing and I think it’s good that—the people that watch war nowadays, it’s different from what we did, see.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

WILSON: The infantry, the artillery move together. But when you watch what goes on—what went on in Iraq, it’s a different kind of equipment and everything. I personally, and I know many people would agree with me, maybe I shouldn’t say it, but the change in the military set up has not been too good in our opinion.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

WILSON: You take these weapons that move and one round can drop on a building and—it’s a different kind of war. And it’s—in our opinion it’s not the best. I didn’t say that did I?
(Laughter)

PIEHLER: But you were also saying you wanted to—you haven’t yet ... talked about the infantry commanders you served with.

WILSON: After the two and a half hour firing that I did there—I didn’t do the firing, I just directed the firing, but General McBride, the division commander, had shown up down at Captain Williams position, because that—if they had lost that bridgehead across there it would have been heck. But Kurz told Zwick—when he finally did make it up there, he said—the general came in, and he said, “I heard him tell Captain Williams to see that somebody recommended me for something.” Well, that didn’t please me as much as—what made me the happiest about that was ... the thirty-five year old soldier who wanted to shake my hand.

PIEHLER: Who had two children, you mentioned.

WILSON: Yes. He said that he had been through what they said was the worst in Africa. And he said, “I’ve never seen anything like this.” But I just tried to put that out of my mind, because my thought was they’ll expect me to do this every time. And I don’t know that I could.
(Laughter) But ... then after about two weeks my good friend McBroom was relieved, sent back. I never asked any questions about it, but after the war, I know, they did reduce him in rank and he went to some other outfit. And Sam Williams was made the executive officer of the battalion. And I was made the liaison officer—the artillery liaison officer with the battalion. Which was very similar to what I had been doing except if we had two infantry companies on line, there should be two observers, one with each of them. They would report to me, and I would send them where they belonged and see that they were taken care of.

One of the first experiences after I became the liaison officer—rumor had it that, they got a lieutenant they’d send him to every company and they don’t want him back. And then Corporal Zwick—he was the spokesman—he came to me that night, and we knew the fighting was already

heavy up front. And we knew what we had—what it was going to be, but he came to me and he said, “They sent that Lieutenant up here with two men that had never been on the front before,” and he said, “one of them is Peterson, who has been—served two years in the pen for helping in a murder case. And the other one was Farmer. And they both had come to Zwick and told him that they’re not going to stick with that guy, he’s a nut! So, I said “Well, we’ll do the best we can with it. I told him to send Peterson and Farmer over and I would talk to them first. And I had to. I told them that I understood that they were going to be with so and so—incidentally he had a national reputation in football. Probably, I don’t know, probably he had gone through and got a degree from OCS, or something, and hadn’t had much experience working with people. But I sat down with them, and told them I understood they were going, and I said, “I’ve never met the man, but I know that some people say that he loses his nerve.” But I said, “Now tomorrow is going to be a real dangerous day, and we got to do our job. And I want you to get him up there at this line—telephone line going through the woods. Follow that and you’ll get up to where he is. And if he doesn’t do the job, you just call me on your telephone and tell me what’s out there and about where it is, and together we’ll get—we can take care of it.

PIEHLER: And you told this to Zwick?

WILSON: No, I was talking to the two young men.

PIEHLER: The two young men who the word was not good about?

WILSON: Yeah, well I haven’t talked to him yet. (Laughter) But Peterson said, “Well, I’ve never had to do anything like that, but if you want me to I’ll try, I’ll do the best I can.” Well, I talked to the lieutenant then, he was just a nervous wreck. But I told him “I talked to your two men, and they’ll help—they’re gonna help you. And if you have any trouble just call me. If you don’t have the telephone why use your radio to talk to me.” But he didn’t make any promises, because he just was not gonna stay up there. The next morning, well, it was just terrific. And Murphy and I were doing our own runs, we had our—the two men plus the lieutenant were supposed to follow that line and correct it so we could get them on the telephone as well as the radio. But they never did. So, Murphy and I went up there together, we had to go through the woods. Shells were hitting in the trees and Murphy was—I had to hold him up, but he was one of the best that I ever had. He would almost go down ... but when we got up to the position, here was another ... barn with a big window in front, machineguns just fifty yards away that were firing. And I asked the company commander where the lieutenant was. “I don’t know,” he said, “I don’t care, he’s not doing any good.” And ... somebody else heard that—one of the men said, “He went down in that basement, last we saw of him.” And I said, “Bring him up here!”

They finally got him up there, but when he got up to the top step he was trying to run back down. And I said, “Come out here and show me what’s going on.” I said, “We’ve not been able to get you on the telephone or the radio either.” “Oh,” he said, “the radio won’t work.” I said “Murphy, check that radio.” Went right through clear as a bell. And I said, “Well, come around here to the front and show me what’s going on out here.” He said, “Don’t do that,” ... I got him and I walked right into the door and tried to get him to tell me what was going on. He wouldn’t do it, but I said, “Well now, lieutenant I want you to take your two new men and go back to the headquarters, and I’ll stay here and take care of this for you.” And that was what he wanted to

hear. They got most of the way to the headquarters before daylight the next morning, and the two men just left him. They wouldn't stay with him. But in the meantime I had called and talked to Colonel Browning and told him what I was doing. And he said, "Well, I appreciate what you're doing." He said, "I—we have sent him to several other companies on the front and they won't have him back, but they won't tell me why." And so he said, "This will give me something to act on." So, he was sent back. I'm uncertain where he went.

PIEHLER: He was kept in the Army?

WILSON: Probably, but in cases like that, that's behind you. Nobody talks about it anymore.

PIEHLER: So you don't really know whatever happened to this lieutenant?

WILSON: No, you're not interested in what happened. I am sure he was glad that he got relieved. That was one case of fear. And now the other case, which was not one of fear, but Captain McBroom's liaison crew—they were completely listless. And their sergeant—I just sat down with him, I didn't tell him I was coming to find out about him. But I just sat down by him to talk about the situation. And he was just so listless that he couldn't describe his problem. It was a religious problem. And he said, "I've not been brought up to see people killed, to be a part of this business." And I said, "Well, I haven't either, but that's our responsibility that we've got. We're here, and we've got to do what needs to be done." But he would never have done anymore good in the Army. And that night Colonel Browning called me to ask me how things were going. And I told him about the sergeant. I said, "I have asked them to clean their equipment, and all they do is take a dirty rag and rub it and they think it's clean." And I told him that he keeps saying that he can't go on with all this killing, he just doesn't understand it. I said, "Colonel—but I don't want to do anything that would hurt him. I think he's sincere but I believe he should be sent back through medical channels and let them decide what to do with him." The very next morning I had a new crew, and, oh, they were a good crew. And I don't know whatever happened with—to the sergeant.

PIEHLER: So the sergeant, in a sense, rubbed off on the crew. His ambivalence ...

WILSON: Yeah, the leadership.

PIEHLER: Leadership

WILSON: The lack of leadership.

PIEHLER: And you thought it was genuine, that he—it wasn't just fear, it was ...

WILSON: It was just an emotional thing. It wasn't that he was afraid himself. But I think it was a good thing that he was relieved of his responsibilities there, because he was not doing the job. I never asked, and never heard what happened with my personal friend, Captain McBroom. But he lived in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and after Jerry and I were married I received a call from him. He wanted to come to see us. We enjoyed a good visit, but I didn't ask him any specific questions about that.

PIEHLER: And he didn't volunteer any, it sounds like.

WILSON: No, but he just indicated pretty clearly that he thought he was mistreated. He was blaming the colonel. But working—in the book I think you made a copy of, pictures and all, everybody in that—everybody in that picture had visited the Center for the Study for the War and Society; every one of them plus Colonel Leake and Captain Godby, who spent two nights with me and had conferences with Chuck Johnson [founder of the Center for the Study of War and Society]. They came from Fayetteville, next to Camp ...

PIEHLER: I—yeah—Fort Bragg.

WILSON: Fort Bragg, yeah. But ... Chuck Johnson took a lot of time with us. And Leake was the one who really kept track of everybody that had ever worked with—got us working together. But during the war I had to work pretty close with him all the time. He was the S-3, and I frequently was with him when—he would send the chaplain or somebody into this big house on the hill here, because they have a table we can put bigger maps out. And so after Weimar—I hope you've read that ...

PIEHLER: I read about Weimar and I want to ask you about that.

WILSON: I wrote that pretty—it's as accurate as it could be.

PIEHLER: I also want to ask you about the Battle of the Bulge, I also read the ...

WILSON: About what?

PIEHLER: The Battle of the Bulge, your unit's role there.

WILSON: Of course, I was not there. I was at home or on the way home. And I've been with some of those men since—it was quite an experience. One thing, when you read Captain Harmon's report, Harmon—he admits that his feelings toward Colonel Bandy goes back farther than we think. He just did not like Bandy, but now Captain Leake, colonel now, was—but he says Harmon is wrong about that and he tells everybody that Colonel Bandy did real—with what.... But Bandy did a very good job as a battalion commander, partly because he had Captain Leake to tell him. He could see what was going on and keep him informed. Harmon's wife—I still get an e-mail from her occasionally and she's doing quite well. She was an Air Force nurse and she—at Yalta I believe it was, she had to see that the head of the Air Force—I can't remember names right this minute. But he had had a heart attack and they didn't want the Russians to know anything was wrong with [him] And she was told to see twenty-four hours a day [that] his health is—but she is a wonderful person, a very fine person.

PIEHLER: Now, we've talked at length about your experiences on the 15th of—in the middle of July—the 15th and 16th of July. We also talked about the barn. When was the incident at the barn, the concrete dairy barn, roughly?

WILSON: That was following our successful approach in saving the bridgehead across the Rhine—across the Moselle—on out some several kilometers. But that’s where it was. I think we can find it on these maps that I gave you.

PIEHLER: It was pretty close, pretty hot and heavy in July—In the middle of July, in terms of—but you said that wasn’t your closest call. You had other closer calls?

WILSON: Now, July we were on the ship in July. And in England.

LEVERTON: September?

PIEHLER: Oh, excuse me, *September* 15th—my, my—I don’t know why I keep thinking—September. You mentioned in September that there were other close calls. That wasn’t your closest call. What was your closest call?

WILSON: Well, there were many of them.

PIEHLER: But is there any one that really—if you would say—where as one combat historian said to me, “You should always ask a veteran what their most vivid experience was.” ... or were there other vivid—‘cause you’ve described a pretty harrowing scene in the middle of September.

WILSON: The—only one day that I was the combination tank commander and forward observer. We had three days to train with the tankers. And when Colonel Browning called to tell me that he wanted me to do it—he said, “This is unusual that they had requested a forward observer to come down and train as a tank commander for about three days before we make a stab out to one of those villages, one of those little towns.” And he said, “I have told him that we’d send Captain Hatch.” And he said, “I got a call from the general, General McBride.” Said, “I don’t want Hatch out there, I want Wilson because he won’t lose his head under fire.” I said “Well, (laughter) I’ll go.” When I went up in to report to the tank commander—who was a captain—he sat down and looked at me like I’m looking at you right now. And he said, “I told them not to send anybody up here who’s gonna lose his head, we can’t risk a fifty thousand dollar tank.” Not much nowadays, but that’s what they cost back then. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Fifty thousand was a lot of money then, I mean students might not appreciate ...

WILSON: He said, “I told them that we can’t risk losing a fifty thousand dollar tank because someone doesn’t know how to do it.” And he said, “I got the message that you would not lose your head in that tank.” And so, what do you say in a case like that? “I’ll do the best I can.” But, it was a wonderful experience, it was a wonderful experience! We had everything so planned. They—intelligence division had told us that the Germans had planted mines all over the valley that we needed to go through. We decided to use smoke to start with. It has never been prettier than it was that morning. The smoke shells came, and you had to be right in the edge of that smoke to see anything ahead of you. But the breeze—it wasn’t a wind, just a slight breeze—was holding it or moving it as we wanted to move. One rifle round hit the front of my tank once and I crawled down in it for a little while. The executive officer, first lieutenant, had this lead tank and I was behind him, one here, one here, and the company commander. Well, the

lieutenant in the lead tank, he knew about what they said about mines, and he just plain stopped. And the company commander said, “Lieutenant! Move that tank! Move that tank! You keep moving. (Laughter) If you don’t move I’m gonna shoot you in the rear.” (Laughter) But he never did move, and I don’t know what his outcome was, but ...

PIEHLER: But he was a tanker, I mean, this lieutenant?

WILSON: He was a regular.

PIEHLER: He was a regular. You had had quite a lecture too about losing your head. (Laughs)

WISLON: Well, yeah ...

PIEHLER: I—let me just ...

-----END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE-----

WILSON: ... the day before that, now, was the day that I got to make the trip down to Nancy. Which was the 6th of ... October.

PIEHLER: 6th of October?

WILSON: 6th of October.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm. And, it sounds like, they were able to pull units off the line to practice this ... for three days. I mean, you did three days of training.

WILSON: Yeah. At that period the river, the Moselle River was supposed to be safe. And conferences coming down from the top to all of the officers concerned was, “We are going to be here a while, but we don’t want the Germans to know that we planned to be here a while. We’re going to be here until we can accumulate enough ammunition and fuel to take us the rest of the way. We’ll make a stab at one of these little towns every day. Keep ‘em guessing.” And that’s what we were doing. So ... the tankers had been, like the rest of us had been, secretly holding onto that mood that were not going go right now, but we’ll make a stab here and there.

PIEHLER: It also strikes me as what you have just described—this three days with the tankers, that this was also an effort to really get combined arms warfare down, because you had had a lot of experience with the infantry, you know, the infantry [and] artillery, and this was the third sort of experience that you had. Is that a correct—am I reading that this was really—you’re part of that experiment that really works for combined armed warfare.

WILSON: That’s right. And they planned for that one stab out there. Well, that day—when the day was over they had—their mission was accomplished for the one village. And the smoke and all it was interesting the—there were Germans, riflemen in a hole. And when they would dig a hole there wasn’t any dirt around it. You couldn’t see it until you got right on it. But as my tank came up, the expression on that man’s face as he threw his gun out! (Laughter)

PIEHLER: He just threw his gun out? He didn't even bother ...

WILSON: He was really, really excited. But at the end of the day that little stab was finished. And the next time I ran into that tanker commander he said, "I wish I would have had you a couple of days later. I needed you more then, than I needed you that day."(Laughs)

PIEHLER: But that would be your only time with the tankers?

WILSON: That was my only experience. And it was enough.

PIEHLER: But it also sounds like you could have done that role again. Is it correct to say you learned a lot about coordinating artillery fire with the tankers?

WILSON: Yeah, it was interesting to me that the crew—I think there were five of them counting me in the tank. The drivers down here, and then they've got the radio operator and the machine gunner. And they seemed to accept me all right. That was an unusual experience, and I don't think it ever happened anywhere else in our division.

PIEHLER: In your division.

WILSON: One time deal. But when Colonel Browning quoted the division commander and the captain quoted him too, you know, it made me aware of the fact that I've got a reputation that I've got to live up to. And I don't know whether I can or not. But never once, never a time did I let fear keep me from doing my job. And the people in the infantry and the artillery will tell you the same thing because that Moselle experience and the reputation that they all gave me was responsible for it. Every time that I went into any situation that I had to be right and I have to keep—I'm nervous now. I'm nervous before then, but I learned to control my nerves.

PIEHLER: Which is a hard—you told a lot of stories about people—it's not an automatic thing, because you've said there are a number who couldn't for various reasons.

WILSON: But staff sergeant—the staff sergeant that I really got acquainted with after our small group started meeting together "Rack" Harrell—Rack was his nickname, Thomas, I think, was his name. And he was a staff sergeant and he was in charge of the INR platoon and some of their work was done after dark so they would work their way into enemy lines and get—hurry back before morning, what might be out there. But Rack Harrell, he reminded me of this—I remember the incident exactly [and] when we were in Dallas he talked to me about it. He said, "Do you remember when we were there looking down on one town?" He said, "You were in a hole that the Germans had left there, and I could get down in it and still see." And he said, "I was in a little puddle hole really about fifty feet away," and he said, "We were talking and we were getting some fire all over the area." He said, "We were talking and you said 'Why don't you come over here and get in here with me.'" He came. He no more that got down in my hole until a round hit right in the exact spot that he had left. And that's a fact, and I remember at the time, but I didn't know his name.

He became a very wealthy man, he did a lot of work with bull fighting and everything else. But he was from down in Georgia—down in close to the Florida line. And he bought a lot of property and evidently had good political connections too. And he got some property and put some houses on it that his wife is still running. And probably—I think he said he left one piece of property to one of his sons that he had bought for less than a 100,000 dollars. And his sons, when the highway was coming through, the super highway, he got right over a million dollars for it. But he said to me in Dallas last time we met up there. He said, “Ed, I’m glad you missed the Bulge.” He said “We had gone three days without closing my eyes and I went through a house there, and here was a bed with—one of those feather beds.” And said, “It just looked so good that I just fell over on that bed and slept for one to two hours. I began to wake up and there was something in the bed with me. It was a dead woman.” Those that went back on one of the tours through Luxemburg, he told the lady about that and she says that was Frau so and so. She had been dead for about a week.

PIEHLER: And that’s how tired he was that he would ...

WILSON: He didn’t know she was there until he slept for a couple of hours.

PIEHLER: Why did you miss the Bulge? What had happened?

WILSON: We talked about Stavold, and I was the liaison officer. But ... that night one of the company commanders—I don’t remember his name now—he was sitting and he said, “Colonel, this can’t go on.” He said, “I’m at less than half strength already and we had to withdraw tonight and leave some of the injured out there. And the only replacements we’re getting don’t know anything about firing a gun.” Because it was a well-known fact at that time that the government thought the war was over. It was just a matter of getting on into Berlin. And so they were sending all the replacements to the Pacific. And all the companies and all the infantry units across the whole front were losing men every day that they couldn’t replace. They were sending up clerks and cooks and people that wouldn’t last a day.

PIEHLER: So, this was in November? When did this ...

WILSON: That was in early December.

PIEHLER: Early December. It’s very pronounced, the ...

WILSON: But then when the next day, after that, that situation around—whatever the name of the town is ... I am getting foggy, but ...

LEVERTON: Is it Luxembourg?

PIEHLER: Stavold, S-T-A-V-O-L-D.

WILSON: Yeah. Alright, the next morning troops went into the Stavold, and there were no Germans left. But until midnight they were just on a street. On one side of the creek they were and on our side we were. But then when that was over they had withdrawn far back, and we had

to take a few days of rest they thought for the first time. Then we had been in a resting position, and Colonel Bandy—that Harmon didn't like, but he said, "Now you don't have much to do, but you don't let people rest. You gotta keep 'em busy, give 'em some training, do some athletics or whatever." And that wasn't true in some of the units, some of the 317th regiment were just sloppy looking. (Laughter) But ... don't tell them I said that. (Laughter) But he saw to it that we took a bath half way up and half way down and kept our minds busy on something. On the 11th of December we had got the word after the Stavold—that situation, we had got the word that General Eisenhower said that were going to select certain people from every unit on the front, on the front line now not from the back. And give them a trip home for a month. They can be home for Christmas.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

WISLON: And ... our division—the entire division—was allowed one Field Artillery lieutenant who had been on the front with a minimum of two combat decorations, and two men, enlisted men—some of these men had been in Africa and Italy, but from all across the front. And I was the one lieutenant from the 80th Division Artillery. There were others from the infantry—the infantry was allowed more and the combat engineers were allowed one. And that—I got acquainted with one, he was from Nashville and quite an interesting fellow. But anyway we were to be—we had to go back—we got the word to go back—to our unit on the 11th. And the next day we would go to Paris and then we would get flown by air to New York, and if we wanted to go back to our home, okay. If we wanted to go to Hawaii we could, you have thirty days.

PIEHLER: Thirty days once you got back to the states or ...

WILSON: Yeah, after we got to our destination. And I was the one selected—the one officer. It was an interesting group, when we got back to Paris and were put up at the hotel—and everywhere we went a letter from Eisenhower came along to the unit, that [stated], "These men—this was an unusual group. They are to get first class food and accommodations. They must have sheets and pillowcases and a bed to sleep in." That [letter] followed us.... And when we got to the hotel, why, they said we should check in every two hours, because nobody knows when the planes would be ready for us. Oh, we were there five or six days, and suddenly they said, "You're to go down and go on a boat, ship—take you to England." And when we got to England, there was an old World War I—probably a colonel. It was right funny, because everybody in the group were combat men. We had just come from combat, and we hadn't been used to all of the niceties and things. But this colonel got all the group together, and he said that he didn't approve of the way we were acting, and he said, "I just want you to know," and he was talking to combat men now.

PIEHLER: And some officers among—I mean you were an officer too.

WILSON: Well, yeah. Both of us—all of us in there together. He said, "I got orders you had to have mattresses, sheets, and pillowcases. We didn't have that here. We had in all this fog to send clear to Scotland and get that down here, and I want you to know you've got 'em." (Laughter) It didn't bother us at all, but now that was his talk. And after—see, we stayed there

for—it was the first day before we knew anything about the Bulge. It had not been publicized, but that’s the reason that we were held up that long before we got to England.

PIEHLER: And then how long were you in England for?

WILSON: We were in England another six or seven days and then we got on the Aquitania.

PIEHLER: So, you didn’t fly in the end?

WILSON: We didn’t fly, no.

PIEHLER: But they didn’t cancel your leave home.

WILSON: No, no. The thing that—when I got home—this was an unusual thing, and they’d heard of other stories and people, friends would say—well, part of the order was that we would go back after the thirty days. We would go back to our unit in the same position—but, “Well what are your plans?” I said, “Well, I’m going back when my time is up.” “Oh no you won’t go—they won’t put you in that kind of business anymore. They’ll send you down to Florida or somewhere.” (Laughter) And you know that ...

PIEHLER: That was the scuttlebutt.

WILSON: Well, that disturbed me, because I had been aware of the facts. I had learned what had been happening over there. And those were my people I knew. I would rather have gone with them. I say that honestly. I would rather have been there than been on the way home. When I got back, Colonel Browning—I had gotten him a bottle of his favorite booze and brought it back to him. He said, “I—you’ve been on the front too long, I want to put you in the S-3 office.” And I hesitated, but I looked at him, and I said, “Colonel, I—if it’s alright with you I’d rather go back to the infantry.” “Well,” he said, “Well, I expected you to say that.” (Laughter)

PIEHLER: He knew you fairly well it sounds like.

LEVERTON: What was your reaction when you found out you were going to be able to go home for a month—your initial reaction when you found that out?

WILSON: I had the same feeling then that I had later. I belonged where I was, and I felt that I was needed. That’s the best friends that I’d ever had—I’d worked with, and I really didn’t want to go. But orders are orders. When they say, you’ll go.

PIEHLER: So, this was really an order too, this wasn’t just a ...

WILSON: After we had been in England for two or three days the engineer from Nashville and I were just sitting and talking. He said, “Do you ever notice the change in the expression in everybody’s face since we ...” Well, I guess, we’d relaxed some since, I guess. And I said, “No, I hadn’t thought about it, but I think I can see it now.” Most of those people had earned—many of them had earned Medals of Honor. And one of them who had a Medal of Honor from the 1st

Division was showing us in a room there in England, one morning he was showing us some of the guns that he was bringing back. Shot right through his own head. Those German guns all had a hair trigger we all knew that, but it killed him right in front of us all.

PIEHLER: In demonstrating, he hadn't made sure the gun was empty?

WILSON: No. On the way back—we went back after our thirty days on the Queen Elizabeth.

PIEHLER: So, you've been on the Mary and you've been on the Elizabeth.

WILSON: On the Mary and the Elizabeth and the Aquitania, which was the third largest at that time.

PIEHLER: I'm curious coming home—because this is so rare for World War II soldiers to be able to come home on leave if they're deployed overseas. What was the reaction to people you encountered, say, first when you got to New York, and then when you got closer to home? I mean ... [a] returning soldier [when] people are still going overseas. You're in a very small group. And also you're not wounded, so you're also—do you have any stories about encounters on the street or train rides or a similar—you had a great story about meeting Harry S. Truman. (Laughter) Are there any similar stories during that thirty-day leave?

WILSON: Well, the Knoxville Journal wanted to have a story—see, when I got that word on the 11th day of December. The Associated Press got the message, and they sent [it to] our families and our newspapers in our hometown that we would be home for Christmas. Well, it was up into January before we actually got home. But the Journal came out and got a story, it's—I went to the library here and looked it up one time. It's still on the front page. That date would have been in January.

PIEHLER: In January, that they did the story on you?

WILSON: It wasn't too good of a story, but that depends on who writes it down. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Well, do you remember what the reporter asked you when you were interviewed? Anything stick out about that encounter?

WILSON: That I really don't remember. He—no, it was a lady that came to see me. She was obviously staying clear of any combat questions.

PIEHLER: She didn't even ask you about ...

WILSON: No. I don't remember what she asked me, but she didn't ...

PIEHLER: It was clear she was even dancing around combat, the way you're describing it. Did anyone ask you about combat? Or, what did they ask you? What were you surprised they asked you, and what were you surprised they didn't ask you?

WILSON: Well, ... close friends wanted to know, and I could describe some things to them, but I don't remember what the questions were now, but a few of them wanted to know what we actually did in combat.

PIEHLER: And how honest were you about what you did? I mean were you as frank then as you are now about what was happening?

WILSON: I think I guarded myself a little better then I have with you. You know how to get people to talk, and I don't know how to quit talking! (Laughter)

PIEHLER: You also had, as a combat soldier, a rare insight into, sort of, what was going on at home. What was your sense of the America that you were seeing versus the America that you had left? Even though it hadn't been that long ago you had seen a lot of combat.

WILSON: You know, the population supported the war. And you could feel they were behind the military. I don't know how we will ever get back to that.

PIEHLER: So, you felt a real sense that in January '45 the country was behind you?

WILSON: Oh yes, absolutely. Sure did. Now the Associated Press had sent that out the very day that I was notified. The family and the newspaper got the word that, "He'll be home for Christmas." They didn't get another word from anybody until I called from New York when we landed there. And I told them it might be another day or two before I get there, but that was all they had ever heard.

PIEHLER: That was it? So they didn't know what—it sounds like they didn't even know what happened to you.

WILSON: No, that's right.

PIEHLER: Did that make them—I mean, were they anxious then? Did your—what did your parents say?

WILSON: My father had died in 1940, but my mother and my two sisters and my brother who still lives in the Knoxville area—I think they were glad to see me.

PIEHLER: They were glad?

WILSON: Of course, we—from New York we went down to Atlanta, and we were released there. I got a train to come back to Knoxville. I got here early, before daylight. And so I didn't call home anymore, I just got a cab. And when I walked in, in uniform, my mother and Helga, my sister Mildred, and Wayne Smith were having breakfast. So, it was a pretty big reunion. And my sister's son was there too.

LEVERTON: Did you do anything special during the thirty days that you were home? Was there anything in particular that you wanted to do besides ...

WILSON: Well, I had to go fishing with my brother. (Laughter) I don't remember whether we caught any or not but we ...

PIEHLER: You did go fishing?

WILSON: Well, we fished one day at least. It was a wonderful experience, but it was—I still had the feeling that I shouldn't be where I am. I should be in the middle of it. And when I got back over there, after we had got on the continent, the situation was moving pretty rapid. And it took, it seems like, four or five extra days before we ever caught up with them. But when—and we were tired, but then I got close to where the field artillery was supposed to be—that's where they said they are at the last report—and when those guns all fired it just thrilled me to death. I felt like at home. I don't make any sense I'm sure, but ...

PIEHLER: No, I mean ... a lot of World War II veterans have said that they were very close to their units. You even had an out, when you came back the colonel was going to kick you upstairs a little bit to headquarters and you turned it down.

WISLON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Do you have any—after you got back from leave, did you have any more close calls? What were the close calls coming back?

WILSON: Well the Weimar [incident] ... was an interesting experience. And Rack Harrell that I told you about, one thing he told me, which we didn't know at the time—I mean, the colonel didn't pass this kind of information on. But Rack Harrell—the farmer had approached the colonel and said, “We think that the mayor of Weimar—if you'll work with him—well Rack Harrell—nobody else was told this, but Rack was dressed like a farmer, and this farmer took [him] into Weimar, and Rack told me—Rack is the only one who ever told me this, but I'm sure he was right, he said, “We were on a balcony,” and he said, “the third door down there,” he knocked on the door. The mayor answered. He said, “I went down to knock on the door, and I don't know whatever happened to that farmer. He wasn't there anymore.” But then the rest of the story is just the way I wrote it.

PIEHLER: Yeah, and we could just add that into the transcript. It's a very interesting story, because you said the mayor of Weimar was really trying to engineer the surrender of the city so that it wouldn't be destroyed. Which took some—and you describe in the story some of the maneuvering that occurred.

WILSON: And then that morning as we—the lady's black limousine led the way with one German tank behind her, and then Colonel Bandy and me and a soldier here and a soldier on the other side and the others led that way. It was really a thrill, but when we get to the top of the hill where we could look down, why, here were—a hundred is what they said—but over all that area is what looked like German soldiers in uniform. And this G.I. said, “Just look at the sons of bitches all over the place, just running loose.” Colonel said, “Soldier, soldier, they're not soldiers, they're civic police there for our protection.” Now, I'm gonna quit rambling in a

minute.

PIEHLER: Well, we thought we would do just ... another follow up, because we know where you live, and I think there is a few more stories floating around, and we want to ask you what happened after the war so we might take a break today. But you had something else to say though, I don't wanna ...

WILSON: Well, I'll make this as brief as possible. We went from there—we were—the mayor wanted us to go see the place where they had all the Jews. Whatever you call those things.

LEVERTON: Concentration camps.

WILSON: The concentration camp. He said, "It's only five kilometers."

PIEHLER: The mayor pointed this out to you?

WILSON: Yeah, he wanted us to go see it while we were there. But our orders were to keep going through Gera, and on over to Chemnitz, and we proceeded. But when we got to I believe, Gera—the brief one I've mentioned—I think it was Gera where we could see some industrial plants here. One of 'em [with] smoke still coming out the chimney, and up on the bluff a nice big house. And so Captain Leake, Bandy was behind us somewhere, but Leake told the chaplain to, "Go up to that house and tell them that we want to use their house for just a little while." Well Bandy was with us, I don't think he said—well, anyway when we got up there the word had already got out that everybody would turn in their weapons, guns, knives, anything like that to be destroyed. Everywhere we go that happened. But when we got up to this house, beautiful house with a view of the whole town. And coming in the door, we could see over on this side was a glassed in place where they had an elderly gentleman in a black suit, white shirt, sitting there with his back to us. He didn't get up at that time. But the colonel and I were walking side by side and we saw that. And then both accidentally turned our head, and here was a life-size painting of a German officer with a sword. And it was so real that just like that Bandy and I both jumped, we thought it was real! And as we settled down the elderly lady came down with that sword in her hand, tears running down her cheeks. She said, "My son was killed in Africa." She handed the sword, Bandy said, "Take that thing, and put it—and hide it!" (Laughter) That was a fact.

PIEHLER: Well, there are one or two questions even in this interview I wanna make sure—I think I'm gonna get a long answer, so I want to start ...

-----END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO-----

PIEHLER: This continues and interview with Edgar Wilson on March 2, 2004 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler ...

LEVERTON: ... and Patrick Leverton.

PIEHLER: You wrote in one of your accounts about what happened to you in the military. You

wrote about the end of the war, and you wrote about having to create a prison camp. You had some SS, not hardcore SS, but Waffen SS. I think it was an engineering unit—create a prison camp, and I wanted to ask you—‘cause one of the things that struck me was, you recalled a very dispassionate attitude towards these soldiers.

WILSON: I was hoping you read that.

PIEHLER: Yeah, I was very struck by that.

WILSON: See, I was the field artillery representative with the infantry. The day the war ended I’d go back to the artillery. And the artillery had been informed that an SS engineer battalion—a battalion is what they used—had surrendered and the four of us would be in charge of—let them do all the work, they had their own equipment too—to build a camp for twenty to fifty thousand prisoners. This was in Austria, close to the mountains. I was the S-4 responsible for getting food and whatever we’re supposed to supply to them, I had to get it there. Our C Company CO was to be the commander. He was the head man. He was also a West Point graduate, but he went directly to the Army from—he didn’t have any experience after West Point, but he was a real fine officer. So, the other two—I forget who they were right now, but we met them, the group, the SS engineer group at the railroad station. And had them—had trucks to take them. There were only 279 of them, which would have been an awful small ...

PIEHLER: Battalion. (Laughter)

WILSON: But we took them to the area assigned to us, which they were to cut the trees, do all the work. And I was to deliver the food. But the food could be only from German warehouses. Now, you don’t have to quote me on this, but that’s one of the ridiculous things. You don’t take 279 men and work them fourteen hours a day cutting logs and sawing and do it without food. We were in Austria at the end of the rail line, and the food that had started up that way was nearly all gone when they got to us. One day, the only thing I got to feed those men was a bag of onions, molded.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

WILSON: But, whatever they got would go into the big soup pot that would hold fifty gallons. And they put wood under it and fire it. I don’t guess things like this ever did get in print. But after a few days the men were—all of them had been wounded nearly in battle against the Russians. But they were looking weak. They were falling out. The lieutenant was a young man—I wish I knew what became of him I would like to see him again—but he wanted to talk to me one day. And he said, “I may never get to tell anybody this, but I’m keeping notes on the food that we give. And it’s in my little hut down here where I sleep.” But he said, “If you’ll just let me get in that jeep with you and go to some of these farm houses we could get some potatoes.” And I said, “Well lieutenant, regulations won’t let me do that, but I understand the problem.”

When I went back to the artillery that night we were living in a castle that belonged to so they said to Hitler’s first man. But anyway, I ate supper with the staff, and then I wanted to talk with

Major Gossman, the executive officer, privately. And I told him the situation up there, and he had little nip, and he was receptive, and he listened to what I told him. And I said, “Now major, I can’t continue this. Something has to be done or else, I had called the division S-4 and explained it to him.” And he said, “Why do you care, they’re your enemy.” I said, “Yes, they were our enemy, but they’re doing about twelve to fourteen hours of hard labor everyday.” And he said, “We have to go by the rules and the rules say only food from the German warehouse.” So, I explained that to Major Gossman and he understood every bit of it. He reached for the telephone and told somebody to send the mess sergeant in. The mess sergeant appeared and he said, “Do you have anything that you’re not using food wise.” He said, “Oh, we’ve got a room full of it.” And I think I brought up the question—what about—“are you peeling potatoes.” “Yeah.” Well, the major gave him instructions the next morning to bring me potato peelings and anything in our supplies that we’re not using. Gallons of powdered milk and all sorts of stuff and even a few candy bars that come in a C-ration, and a whole lot of potato peelings—they’d already been washed and peeled, but they had some meat on em.

PIEHLER: Well, also the peels actually contain stuff. I mean they’re actually nutritional.

WILSON: Yeah. Yeah. Well, and the major told the mess sergeant, “Not only tomorrow morning, but every morning as long as were here take them anything.” So, that was delivered to us the next morning, and the lieutenant was happy. The men started whistling while they were working again. And I’m glad you read that about the one young man that I talked to that had a medal. That is a fact.

PIEHLER: ‘Cause you—you said you were a patriot. I mean, you had done your duty.

WILSON: I think—he probably thought I would keep those things, but he had taken his medal off and handed it to me first and then he reached in his vest pocket and he brought out the order in the name of the Fuhrer, ‘so and so recognized for his bravery and his actions in combat against the Russians.’ And then, I think, I took him by the hand and shook his hand and congratulated him for having served his homeland.

PIEHLER: But these are people who a few days ago might have tried to kill you. Which is—I guess—how were you able to detach yourself so—I mean, to go from their trying to kill you, you’re trying to kill them, to real mutual respect? It sounds like they also respected you.

WILSON: They were cooperating with us a hundred percent. They respected us even when they were starved. McHale in my small army unit had a similar experience. He was on the division reunion tour over there, and he saw an article in some paper that a German soldier in World War II had written about the American soldiers. And it was something like this, that, “we did what we had to do, they did what they had to do. We can be friends now.” McHale—I think he would let you have a copy of his correspondence.

PIEHLER: Oh, that would be great, that would really ...

WILSON: He’s given me some, and I can’t find it all. I don’t have a secretary. (Laughter) But McHale got his address and wrote him about the poem that he had read, and said, “I agree with

you we ought to be friends now.” You know the rest of that? I don’t know whether I told you or not. He invited Mac and his wife to their home, which was close to Munich. “Come over in October and join the fest, Oktoberfest.” And they did. He said, “It was a little house that we didn’t have much room to play in it, but ...” And they’ve corresponded since.

PIEHLER: Since then.

WILSON: Now, there are some people that might not agree with that. I think James Pointer might not, but I don’t know.

PIEHLER: I’m struck, because a lot of professionals—you very much strike me of the attitude of a professional soldier. I think professional soldiers often think that way when meeting other professional soldiers. But I also know the reaction really varies.... I’ve seen the full range with veterans I’ve interviewed. One observation, it may even be more than an observation, but it strikes me, you’ve described some very horrible scenes, even the scene where you were getting ready to go on leave the guy who shoots himself in the head because he’s showing you weapons. How were you able to detach yourself so well, in many ways, because, I mean, some people might have even just seen that scene in the barracks when you were coming home and that might have—I don’t know how to describe it—but it might have really marked them. But you—it strikes me in how you’ve been able to describe—you were able to detach yourself from what you’ve seen. Is it something you were conscious of, or did you have to learn it, or has it been the passage of time?

WILSON: I had studied a little psychology in the college, but when you get in a combat condition you have to sort of go crazy in a way to do what has to be done. That’s a psychological adjustment that you gotta make to do it. But it has to be done. Now, I guess, that’s the reason I decided that I didn’t think I ought to be a teacher anymore, because I had adjusted to a different kind of—and when I had taught in the veterans’ farm trading program, I had twenty men always. And most of them had similar experiences I had, and almost every one of them turned out to be excellent men and excellent workers at whatever they did. I hired two of them to work in the fertilizer plant when I was—and they did a fine job until they retired at sixty-five.

PIEHLER: So, the war really did change your life, because you might have stayed as a teacher?

WISLON: That’s right.

PIEHLER: I mean, you never know what might have happened, but it was a very conscious decision not to go back to teaching after the war because of what the war had changed?

WILSON: That’s right. But I—you know, I think one of the finest things I know is just exactly what you’re doing, and using people like they’re gold.

PIEHLER: Well, I ... kept you longer than—you’ve given us another great afternoon, and is there anything, Patrick, that you wanted to ask just as a—that stuck out?

LEVERTON: Um, yeah, I'm good. It was an excellent interview.

PIEHLER: You, again, probably didn't think you would be here as long. Which ...
(Laughter)

WISLON: These ... these maps ...

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

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