

**Oral History Interview of
Elton Riggs**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
April 22, 2013
Lubbock, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Elton Riggs, who discusses his early life, being drafted into World War II, and serving in the Battle of the Bulge where he suffered frostbite in both feet. At the end of the war he married a young Parisian lady. At the time of the interview they had been married for sixty-eight years. After the war, Mr. Riggs trained on the G.I. Bill as a watchmaker and remained in that profession until his retirement in 1999. He also volunteered for the V.A. Clinic in Lubbock.

Length of Interview: 01:17:33

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Elton Riggs' early life and the various places lived	5	00:01:00
Going into the Army in 1944	11	00:08:30
Being transferred to Elsenborn and fighting on the front lines	13	00:14:00
What it was like to be under fire for the first time	16	00:19:00
Living conditions in the foxholes	19	00:24:30
Getting frostbite	24	00:33:00
The End of World War II	26	00:40:00
How Riggs met his wife in Paris and their marriage	29	00:44:30
Airplanes and machinery used in the war	31	00:49:00
Attending Midwestern after the war	35	00:56:00
Watch repair business and having his own store	38	01:02:00
Changes in the watch repair business from 1950-2000	41	01:07:30
Volunteering at the V.A., physical ailments today	43	01:10:40

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David Marshall (DM):

The date is April 22nd of 2013. This is David Marshall interviewing Elton Riggs at his home in Lubbock, Texas, and Mrs. Riggs, Sue Riggs, is also here so if you want to say anything along the way, that's perfectly fine also, but this is probably going to be maybe a two-part interview. But I wanted to start with you Mr. Riggs and see if you could give me your date and place of birth.

Elton Riggs (ER):

Okay, I was born February 20, 1926 in Morrilton, Arkansas.

DM:

Okay and you explained to me last time where that is. Is that a large town?

ER:

No it's a medium sized town between Russellville and Conway. It's about fifty miles from Little Rock on I-40.

DM:

And a little south of the Ozarks you say?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

Okay. How long had your family been in that area when you came along?

ER:

Since their birth actually.

DM:

Since theirs?

ER:

Since their birth. My dad was born in 1890. My mother was born in 1894.

DM:

What about their parents? Had they lived in that area? Does it go back generations?

ER:

I think so for quite a ways back.

DM:

Do you know what the family did in that area?

ER:

Farmers.

DM:

Farmers?

ER:

Farmers and carpenters. My dad was a carpenter, and he was a farmer.

DM:

That is really interesting. He worked with his hands like you, doing nimble kind of work like you later did in life. We'll come back to that. That's interesting. Do you know what he farmed? What kind of crops?

ER:

Cotton and corn and potatoes. I think potatoes were more or less for his own use, that sort of thing.

DM:

Were there any family stories that would be interesting to relate at this point? For example, did you have any family members that were the county sheriff or anything like that? Were there any stories that have come down to you from your family living in that area?

ER:

Not that I can recall.

DM:

Well let's continue with you then. You grew up—was this a farm that you grew up on?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

Did you grow up doing farm chores?

ER:

I did a few farm chores when I was very small, then we moved to the city Morrilton. And my dad

was doing more or less carpenter work then. He kind of graduated from the farm.

DM:

(Laughs) Was he doing construction, or what kind of carpentry was he doing?

ER:

He did construction and remodeling and that sort of thing.

DM:

Did he ever make furniture?

ER:

He made a few things.

DM:

Interesting because you also have a son Larry who made a real nice desk in here. This will all come out later on, but there's a trend here. (Laughs) So then you apparently went to school in Morrilton. Is that correct?

ER:

Yes, and we moved to Texas.

DM:

How old?

ER:

Moved to Texas when I was ten years old. And that was in 1936, moved to Midland. And we went back to Arkansas for a few years then came back to Midland.

DM:

There's a huge difference in Midland and western Arkansas.

ER:

That's right, a lot of difference. I'm telling you.

DM:

Why back and forth? What was the attraction to Midland?

ER:

Well there was more money to be made there, and my dad was kind of a traveler I guess you'd

say, and we was living in Midland when I was drafted into the service. Before that when I was a pretty small kid in Arkansas, we went from Arkansas to California in a 1926 Chevrolet Sedan. Five kids, my mother and dad. Took us sixteen days to get out there.

DM:

Oh, dirt roads.

ER:

Yeah we had a break down about every time we turned the corner I think.

DM:

Was he pretty good at repairing his own vehicle?

ER:

He did pretty good, yeah.

DM:

You could work on those old cars a little bit. All dirt roads?

ER:

No it was all paved.

DM:

Was it all paved back then?

ER:

Oh yeah. Actually I was four years old when we went to California. But I can remember it like it was yesterday.

DM:

Oh well it would be a big event. It would be something that you would remember.

ER:

Yeah seeing pictures of the big-arm cactuses.

DM:

Oh yeah the Saguaro cactus.

ER:

In Arizona. I remember seeing a picture of my dad pointing at one of them and I was standing

there with him.

DM:

Well now why did he go to California?

ER:

He had a brother, who lived in Morgan Hill, and he had a good job and he got my daddy a good job there in a winery. But he had I guess itchy feet or something anyway. We were out there about a year and a half and we came back to Arkansas.

DM:

And you said you went out to Midland twice. Was it for construction that he was going out to Midland?

ER:

No actually he worked for a roofing company in Midland. He's kind of a jack of all trades but maybe a master of none.

DM:

(Laughs) Well Midland must have been booming during that time. I'm not sure when the oil boom began there, but that would be a demand.

ER:

Yeah. It was then. You could hardly find a place to live. Any kind of shack you could rent to live in you was lucky.

DM:

Even as a child you must have noticed the big difference between western Arkansas and Midland. Which, you can tell me the truth here, we live out here in this area but did you hate to leave Arkansas or did you like Midland?

ER:

Oh I liked Arkansas but being a kid you know wherever I would hang my hat, I was pretty happy.

DM:

Okay, well you were probably coming out to Midland pretty much in the Dust Bowl days weren't you?

ER:

Oh yeah. It was dusty. Going to school you could hardly see out the side of the street. I think sometimes when I thought there was brickbats coming through.

DM:

And did you ever see one of these big storms roll slowly in?

ER:

Oh yeah, it was the worst. I've seen some here pretty bad but nothing like that.

DM:

Do you remember whether they were dark and rolling slow or if they were blowing hard and fast, because there were differences.

ER:

Seem to blow pretty hard and fast.

DM:

I think it was probably in an earlier period where people described these big black clouds that rolled slowly in. But well, that was a tough time to live out there. So you went back and forth a bit. Where did you end up going to high school?

ER:

I went to school in Arkansas.

DM:

In Arkansas, at your home town?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

Okay.

ER:

Then we came to Midland and not too long after that I went into the army, actually in 1944.

DM:

Okay. '44. Had you already graduated from high school at that time when you went into the army?

ER:

Yeah I was through; I didn't actually graduate.

DM:

Okay but you were done with high school at that time. Can you tell me about—as I recall you were drafted into the army. Can you tell me about that day and what you thought about all this because the war was pretty hot and heavy by then.

ER: Yeah, I was eighteen in February and two months later, April 26th actually, I was in uniform. When I was eighteen I registered for the draft, got my notice to come for examination. Then I got my notice that I had passed examination; report April 26th for induction, Fort Bliss, Texas.

DM:

Happened just like that didn't it?

ER:

Yeah and I went from Fort Bliss back to Arkansas again: Little Rock, Camp Joseph Taylor, Robinson, Arkansas; sixteen weeks basic training.

DM:

Sixteen?

ER:

Mm-hm, then I had a fifteen day delay in route and I wound up in Camp Shelby, Mississippi, joined the 69th infantry division, was there a short time then we went overseas with them. Landed in England, and they could hardly get replacements for the front lines fast enough so they pulled up a regiment of us out of the 69th. Took us on over, joined the 99th on the line. So this, I was with the 99th for about two months on the line.

DM:

Now when would this have happened? Do you remember about what month you arrived in England or in Le Havre?

ER:

Yeah we landed in South Hampton—it was close to the middle of December, in fact—

DM:

Middle of December of '44?

ER:

Yeah '44, and Christmas day they called out and they was calling a bunch of names out in the parade ground at this little camp. I was on the latrine duty firing the boiler for the showers, and I heard the noise out there so I listened. So I rushed over there and by the time I got there they called out Riggs. So I said, "What's this all about?" And about that time they said, "Those whose name I call, report to your supply room and get all your equipment." So we went and got our equipment, live ammunition and extra things like a steel helmet and all that stuff that we didn't go over with. We shipped out on to the front line across the channel. Made our way from Le Havre on what they call Forty and Eight boxcars. You can haul forty men or eight horses. (laughs) That was about the size of it too. It was three days going up that. We'd stop every little while, and when they stopped everybody jumped off those box cars. Then they start moving again; everybody would start running to catch the train again. Kind of made a little fun out of it you know.

DM:

When they first called you up and said—called out your name, what were you expecting was going on, on Christmas Day?

ER:

I knew it wasn't anything good.

DM:

Especially when they told you to go get your equipment?

ER:

Yeah, I knew they weren't gonna give us a furlough or anything like that.

DM:

What a way to spend a Christmas day. Now you box car-ed over there all the way to the front, or did you have to march in?

ER:

We switched to trucks that took us on up.

DM:

Were you already getting into foul weather? Into snow?

ER:

Oh yeah, and the biggest, the hardest winter they'd had in years they said. Yeah the snow was

deep.

DM:

I bet it was cold on those box cars too.

ER:

Oh boy, it was, and there were enough men in there, I think there were 37 men in a box car with full field pack rifles and full field equipment. Steel helmets so heavy they kind of tilt our heads.

DM:

Banging helmets with the person next to you? Did you start to hear rumors about what was going on? Did y'all know what was going on? You heard about the German break out?

ER:

Yeah, oh yeah. The break through—created the bulge in our lines.

DM:

Were your officers telling you or was this information just coming word of mouth?

ER:

Word of mouth. Sergeants in charge of us maybe telling us some of that stuff. But yeah they dropped us off in the middle of nowhere it seemed like, at an old brick factory, and we went in out of the weather for a little while. And he gave us chow, and we loaded up in trucks and headed on up for the front line. It wasn't too far away but we got to the little town of Elsenborn, and they put us on truck and took us on up to the front. Didn't think much about it, wasn't hearing any shells popping around. So everything pretty quiet that day for a while. We got up there, stopped the truck, a guy jumped out of the front with a rifle, dropped the tail gate and said, "Okay guys off on the double," he said, "Follow me and keep at least five yards in all. Hear anything coming in, you hit the first hole you see."

DM:

All of a sudden you were in the middle of it.

ER:

We were right there. So we got on up there. And they told us—my friend and I, our old squad sergeant from the 69th, was my squad sergeant for this one. He came with me. We got there, and they told us to cover such and such terrain between these trees and that tree with a machine gun. Dig in, and if you hear any incoming traffic just jump in a hole. Don't care how many is in it, get in it. So we just put our things to the side and started digging in.

DM:

How do you do that? Are you actually digging with your folding shovels or something?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

How do you do that in frozen ground like that?

ER:

It wasn't easy. I had a little pick, but it wasn't much.

DM:

No it would only come up like—

ER:

Like digging in concrete.

DM:

But you had motivation to dig as fast as you can.

ER:

Oh yeah. (laughs) We cleared the snow off first of course and started digging in. Cox and I were digging together—the Sergeant. So we dug for a little bit mainly got the snow off. Then we heard the shells come in, eighty-eights.

DM:

Oh these are tigers aren't they?

ER:

They come a whistling in.

DM:

Now is this off a tiger tank?

ER:

No it's an artillery shell.

DM:

Its artillery?

ER:
Yeah.

DM:
Okay.

ER:
And then we heard 'em coming in whistling you know. Boom. A black spot in the snow over here, and they kept coming a little closer. And we'd already spotted a hole, but it was full of snow and so we took off running and jumped in the foxhole and kept our heads down for a while. Then a German fighter plane came strafing us. He strafed for a while and then stopped and everything was quiet so we got up started digging again a little faster.

(laughs)

DM:
I imagine. Now here you are in green, probably oak leaf camo or something, or green olive drab—

ER:
Olive drab.

DM:
But out there in the snow so you were visible?

ER:
Yeah. Yeah we just OD [olive drab] strap—spots all over the snow.

DM:
Did you have any tree cover around there? Spruce and all that grows in the Ardennes. Were you in thick timber at this time?

ER:
Not thick enough.

DM:
Not thick enough?

ER:
On a hilltop more or less. I mean, there wasn't any trees hardly to speak of. We had a tank gun

sitting pretty close to us, and anyway that was getting pretty near night and we hadn't near got the hole dug. So they marched us back down to the CP, command post, and put us back on trucks and took us back in to Elsenborn. And we spent the night in a barn loft with hay. Could see a horse running when the next morning the shells started falling around Elsenborn. The horse come running down the street, a little shaggy dog running on his heels. (laughs) He tried to get away from it. Anyway we went back up and spent the next night in a hole.

DM:

This is the first time you had actually been under fire?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

What was that like? Did you say, "Oh my, it's really happening," or did you just continue on with your routine?

ER:

We just went on about our business—whatever we had to do. I looked around to Cox and told him, I said, "Yeah I believe this is for real. This is not like training."

DM:

Was your training helpful? Were you prepared for this?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

Where you equipped for it?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

Okay. By that time in the war I guess maybe they had gotten things all lined out real well.

ER:

Yeah, we had, I thought, good training. Trained on all the guns and everything you know. Machine guns and everything.

DM:

If you can kind of take this in stride without just falling apart, that sounds like good training right there. Or I don't know that you would have any choice.

ER:

No you didn't have a choice. You just do what they say do and hope for the best.

DM:

Right. What about—is there—did you feel fear?

ER:

What?

DM:

Where you afraid?

ER:

No I was too scared to be afraid. (laughs) I was concerned, but I really, not what you call afraid. They keep you too busy to be afraid.

DM:

Did you see any guys who could not handle this emotionally?

ER:

Well there was a few that kind of acted up. One guy shot himself in the foot thinking he'd get home. I guess he did go back to his station, but I didn't see too much of that.

DM:

Ok now you were under fire from eighty-eights. What other kind of artillery did they throw at you in this area?

ER:

It was mainly eighty-eights.

DM:

It was mainly eighty-eights. Was there any kind of German tank activity in that particular area?

ER:

I didn't really see any. They were more back out in the woods I think.

DM:

Well from here what happened then? You were out in it, you were trying to dig in, did you pretty much stay in that area?

ER:

No we stayed there just for a few days till we kind of got organized, and then we pulled out and attacked, pushing the Germans back.

DM:

So you were heading pretty much East?

ER:

Towards the Rhine River.

DM:

Toward the Rhine. Did you have encounters? Did you actually see German soldiers during this?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

Can you talk about that?

ER:

Most of them I saw was when we had captured their machine gun nest and all their men. And of course when you get into the forest where there are a lot of trees, you get those artillery shells bursting above you, when it hits those trees the shrapnel comes right straight down. One of my sergeants—we was laying there in the snow when they started shelling, and our sergeant—squad sergeant, or platoon sergeant, when the shelling stopped we'd get up and started on and he said, "Go ahead boys," he says, "I can't make it." And he had shrapnel that landed on his boots. You could see where the shrapnel hit his boots in quite a few places so we called for the medics and the medics were not far behind us. It wasn't five minutes they was showing up. So they hauled him back. And then a little ways—we were rolling up a little ways to a machine gun nest that we took over—

DM:

Was it an abandoned machine gun nest?

ER:

No it was full of Germans.

DM:

You had to fire on it?

ER:

Yeah they finally decided to give up. There were seven of them I believe came right by me and some of them got in front. Being a machine gunner, I was back kind of behind the riflemen and just covered whatever—whatever target needed to be covered. And I came around the right side. They had a hand on top of their head and it was seven of them. And they took them on back, a couple of guys. Then we just moved on to the next place, keep it pushing.

DM:

Keep going.

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

And when you came up on a machine gun nest was there a particular strategy that you used? Would you set up a position opposite the nest with your machine gun? Would you try to get them under cross fire? Would they deploy the rifleman around? Was there any particular way to do it, or did you just go take care of it?

ER:

They—kind of go take care of it, unless your sergeant sees a spot where you need to be then you move over. Take it up from there. Then we went on.

DM:

It was all kind of on the run it sounds like.

ER:

Yeah we were moving pretty fast.

DM:

How much time did you spend in any one foxhole or trench? I guess there weren't any trenches in this—

ER:

Our first position up there we had a foxhole, they called it, about a four by four, a place that had timbers across it and dirt, and we had a long firing trench in front of it and the dirt piled up in front and you shoot over that. And we moved out from that because we were more or less on the

go most of the time. Sometimes you stopped for the night, and you couldn't dig in so you just lay down on the snow.

DM:

How do you sleep under those conditions?

ER:

Oh we didn't much.

DM:

How much sleep do you think you could get in one night, freezing out there in the snow? Could you get any sleep?

ER:

Sometimes. Hardly any at all.

DM:

Doze off for ten, fifteen minutes?

ER:

Yeah your bones—you feel like your bones are bumping together. Jumping out and bumping together it's so cold.

DM:

Where you shaking from the cold?

ER:

Oh yeah. Yeah.

DM:

Was there any means of warmth? You mentioned something before. Can you describe that, how you might get a K-ration?

ER:

Oh yeah sometime we get a C-ration can and pour a little gasoline in it and let that gasoline burn in the foxhole and of course you don't have any kind of fire or light at night, but it kinda warmed your hands and then you put your mittens back on. But that, wasn't much of that.

DM:

How about food? Did you at least have adequate food?

ER:

Food? What was that? (laughs)

DM:

Because you were on the move. How do you supply all of these guys on the move like that?

ER:

We had mostly K-rations, a little box with a can of cheese and package of crackers and maybe a fruit bar, a little can of drink that you mix with water, it may be lemonade, it may be coffee. So it was wet you know. Sometimes we didn't have K-rations. I remember one time they said, "Say, they got hot chow up on the hill." And so we went up there and got in the line, and I got about—I guess there were about three or four in the line and they said, "Sorry guys it's all gone." So I went back to my gun position, and I think the next morning we probably got a K-ration, and we hadn't had one in several days.

DM:

Can you describe the difference in a C-ration and K-ration?

ER:

A C-ration was a little can about the size of a Vienna Sausage can, you know like the kind you buy here. And it may have hash, maybe hash, it may be beans, it could be anything. Just opened it up and if you hadn't got a way to heat it, just eat it with a spoon out of your mess kit. Just pretend like your full and go on.

DM:

Did the C-ration come with crackers or anything?

ER:

No.

DM:

Just that? Just a can.

ER:

Just a can.

DM:

What about the K-ration then?

ER:

K-ration had sometimes a little can of cheese about half the size or less than half of the size of a Vienna Sausage can and sometimes a fruit bar, sometimes a chocolate bar and a package of crackers to eat with cheese or whatever you happened to get.

DM:

A gourmet meal compared to a C-ration, but still not hardly anything. (laughs). Especially with the kind of energy you were exerting. What about water supply? Here everything's frozen.

ER:

Yeah, well sometimes there'd be a jeep come up behind with water tanks on it, big water cans, pulled it with a sled.

DM:

Pulled out with a sled?

ER:

A jeep would be pulling a sled behind it with the water. And if they had hot chow, they'd have the hot chow on the sled. Sometimes they'd pull one of those sleds with a Weasel. A Weasel is a track vehicle.

DM:

Half-track?

ER:

No it's a whole track.

DM:

It's a whole track?

ER:

About eighteen inch wide, and it was a light vehicle and it would go over the top of the snow pretty easy. It was made by Studebaker. We had one of those and I believe it was just before, or maybe it was just after I got there, and he ran over a mine and blew the Weasel, the hot chow and the driver up.

DM:

Oh my.

ER:

So from then on we didn't have much food.

DM:

Did you carry your hip canteens?

ER:

Yeah, had a canteen.

DM:

How long would it take to go through one of those? That's only a quart of water—maybe two quarts, I can't remember.

ER:

It's about—probably almost a quart.

DM:

Yeah. When you're going across the country like that, how long does it take to drink all your water up?

ER:

It all depends. You kind of know you're not gonna get any more for a while so you kind of just sip on it once in a while.

DM:

Did y'all try to melt snow or anything?

ER:

Yeah we melted snow. I remember one time when we were going through the Ardennes, there was a stream of water. I don't know how it was flowing as cold as it was, but I filled my canteen up with it not knowing how many dead Germans were [inaudible].

DM:

I tell you what—that would be a dangerous spot, a water supply.

ER:

Yeah. I was only up there about two months before I got my feet frozen.

DM:

You were up there on the front for two months?

ER:

Mm-hm.

DM:

Golly. Always pushing toward the Rhine at this point, how far did you get?

ER:

I got pretty close to the Rhine but then my sergeant, Sergeant Cox from Mississippi, I was with him from the time I got to Mississippi on up to the front. So I found out later, much later, through some 99th division papers I get every two months, I found out through that that Cox got killed. He went across the Remagen Bridge across the Rhine to do a mop up operation, snipers and so on, and he got shot and killed out there.

DM:

And you found this out that much later?

ER:

Years later.

DM:

And this was a person you knew pretty well on the front. He was your—

ER:

Yeah he was my squad sergeant. Yeah we had a squad sergeant, had a first and second gunner and two ammunition bearers. So I came back, went back through quite a few hospitals, two in Belgium.

DM:

Well can you tell me about the frostbite and how that all came about? I remember you telling me earlier but if you wouldn't mind repeating that: how you came to know that it was frostbite, because your feet were hurting but you didn't know at first as I recall. Can you tell me that story?

ER:

I couldn't feel it. Yeah, they were frozen.

DM:

Numb?

ER:

I mean yeah just no feeling. It wasn't like my feet were wet or anything like that. My feet were

dry; we had boots they snowpacks: rubber bottoms and sixteen inch leather tops.

DM:

Felt lining you said?

ER:

It had about a half inch of felt inner sole, and I had on boot socks and all that.

DM:

How many pairs of socks?

ER:

Oh about three or four. The last pair I put on were the boot socks. We pulled back to reorganize our company. Went a little ways and lieutenant wanted to check everybody's feet because there was so much of that going on up there. And I went down to his hole where he was and they had some heat down there—it was back behind the line some ways, and he told me to pull off my boot and I pulled my boot off and it seemed like the instant that heat hit my foot it started swelling and hurting. So he said, "Put your boot back on," and I said, "Sir I can't get it on." He said, "Take it with you." So I walked in the snow with foot one foot bare, and I got up there and got in the hole and Cox came up there in a few minutes, jumped down in there. And I was holding my knee and moaning and groaning; if I hadn't been so big I would have cried. But he said, "What's wrong Riggs?" I said, "My foot must be swollen," I still hadn't pulled the other one off. I said, "My foot's swollen; it must be frozen." So he looked at it and he said, "I'll be right back." So he came back in a minute with the other gunner, and they got on each side of me and hauled me down to the CP and he put me on a jeep and sent me into Elsenborn, almost back to Elsenborn.

DM:

How far away was that by now?

ER:

I don't know. Quite a long ways because we'd marched—the snow began to thaw out some, and we marched in the darkness all night. I was walking with my machine gun, slipped in that mud and you could hardly tell it was a machine gun when I got in the daylight. It was covered in mud. Anyway, they put me on a jeep and sent me back to Elsenborn. It was almost dark and they had a bunch of us in a barn, this whole big room area covered with soldiers and most of them had frozen feet I guess. The next morning we made our way on back to Ypres in Belgium in an ambulance. We were there for I believe it was two nights. We went from there to Liege, Belgium to a general hospital. We was only there for a couple of days or so; put us on the hospital train. The whole train was filled with wounded, and they sent us to Paris. In the 62nd General Hospital

in Paris and was there for like maybe a couple of weeks and the flying weather wasn't very well so as soon as they got flying weather, they sent us out to the airport and sent us to H Evacuation Hospital. And I think we were there either one or two nights—then loaded us onto C-47 planes. I think about 24 litters on the plane and flew I think a little over an hour to southern England.

DM:

This was Salisbury you think or somewhere in that area?

ER:

Yeah around Salisbury. And I was there for two months and finally got to where I could walk.

DM:

How did they treat that? What did they do?

ER:

They only thing they did was—I think something for the pain mainly. They put you on a bunk, and you got a white collar on the foot so the feet couldn't touch anything. If your feet touched the sheet or anything the pain was severe. But it'd go like that for most of two months.

DM:

That seems like it would be hard to sleep during all of that—in that much pain.

ER:

Yeah it was.

DM:

But no kind of salve, no nothing? Just gotta heal itself as much as it will. Did you see amputations? Did people—were they amputating a lot?

ER:

Yeah some had toes removed, some of them feet. Of course, I didn't actually see it, but it was in a ward. I guess probably the wards had thirty men or more in just one ward. And after that when we finally got to where we could get around a little bit sent us to a reinforcement depot. And I was in two of them. One at Birmingham, England, and one over near Portsmouth, and then from there we went by ship across the channel to a reinforcement depot in France.

DM:

Where was that?

ER:

It was Fontainebleau.

Sue Riggs (SR):

Fontainebleau.

ER:

It's about nineteen, twenty miles from Paris I believe. And I happened to be there when President Roosevelt died. That was in the first part of April of '45, and we had a formation. Called everybody out and had a memorial service for the President. And I believe it was that same day or the next day I went to Paris, but I had limited service on account of my feet, sent to the military police. So I was in Paris I believe it was about six months, maybe a little lower. And the war was over while I was there, and then when the war was over they broke my company up. My company was 77th military police service company and we were scheduled to go to China, Burma, India area. We were scheduled to go over there in September of that year. Supposed to sail out of La Havre as a combat military police. This would be directing traffic near the front or whatever we had to do. Take care of prisoners, that sort of thing. But they broke our company up and sent us to a MP [military police] battalion which was stationed on the outside of Paris.

Where was that?

SR:

What?

ER:

Where I was at the 709 MPs. Anyways outside the city Paris. Then we were transferred to Germany, Frankfurt, for occupation. And my company, Company B I believe it was, we were sent to a little town about seven miles out of Frankfurt and we were the police force for that city.

DM:

Do you remember the city?

ER:

Hochst. H-O-C-H-S-T, Hochst, Germany. It was a fairly small town, a lot smaller than Frankfurt. So that's where I spent the rest of my time until I got home.

DM:

You were in Paris on V-E Day pretty much?

ER:

Mm-hm.

DM:

What kind of celebration? How did y'all react when y'all heard that news?

ER:

Oh the place went wild. I was walking patrol with another guy—

DM:

MP Patrol?

ER:

Yeah MP Patrol out on the streets, which wasn't good for me on account of my feet, walking. I just did that a short time, and then I went on sick call. Told the doctor why I was there, and he said, "Check the bulletin board, that'll change." So I checked the bulletin board, and they put me on motor patrol.

DM:

Oh okay.

ER:

So I didn't have to do any walking there.

DM:

But for a brief moment there you thought you might have to go the Pacific theatre?

ER:

Yeah, we were scheduled for it.

DM:

Like so many of you guys that were over in Europe. Guess what the war is not quite over. Sure glad it didn't last too much longer.

ER:

Yeah, they invented those atomic bombs that [made it] probably less.

DM:

Yeah well that's what they say alright, that it would have taken a lot of lives to finish that.

ER:

But they saved a lot too.

DM:

Now did y'all meet during this time. It was about '45?

ER:

Yeah during my time in Paris.

DM:

Yeah, can you tell about that. Do you mind telling about that?

ER:

Yeah. I had one of my buddies was getting ready to go out on the town that night. And he said, "My girlfriend is bringing a friend of hers with her. She wanted me to bring a friend." He said, "Why don't you go along with me?" I said, "Naw, I don't think so." I said, "I had a blind date in London one night, and the girl was old enough to be my momma." (laughs) Of course it wasn't so, but I went with him. I said, "I'll go. Where we gonna meet them?" "The subway station just near their home." So I said, "Well if I don't like the looks of her, we'll pretend that I was just on my way with you that far, I was going someplace else." He says, "Deal." So he hadn't seen the girl either. And we got to the station, started up this long string of stairs. He said, "Oh there they are at the top of the stairs." I said, "Which one's mine?" He said, "The one in the red coat." I said, "I'll stay." (laughs) So I've been staying for over sixty-six years.

DM:

That was a critical decision wasn't it? (laughs)

ER:

Yeah when I came home we weren't married yet but I think about seven, eight months?

SR:

About a year almost.

ER:

I don't think it was quite a year I sent after her, and we got married down in Midland, and we have five kids and nine grandkids, and eight great-grandkids. Got 'em strung out all over the country now.

DM:

And all from that that critical decision there in the subway.

(laughs)

ER:
Yeah.

DM:
Can you tell me, Sue, about your father's permission? The letter?

SR:
Yeah, my father said, well he'd rather see me happy here than unhappy at home. So there wasn't a question about it.

DM:
Can you tell me about—was it the county clerk that—?

ER:
Yeah so my pastor and my dad went with me to the court house to the county clerk's office to get the license. She asked, "How old is the girl?" I said, "Seventeen." I robbed a cradle. And she looked at my dad and said, "Are you the dad?" He said, "No I'm his dad." And I said, "Oh she's from France." I said, "I have a letter of permission from her dad." So she took it, looked at it and turned it over and looked at it and I said, "Oh it's in French." She said, "Well I guess it's alright, or he wouldn't let her go."

(Laughter)

DM:
Wouldn't you like to still have that letter. It's probably still in the courthouse.

ER:
Yeah she stapled it onto the application or whatever you call it.

(Laughter)

DM:
That's a great story. Next time when I interview her I will get her to tell about coming to the U.S. and all because that's interesting.

SR:
[Sue shows a photograph.] That's all five of them.

DM:
Oh there it is, the kids.

ER:

Yeah that's our crew.

DM:

Is this one of your anniversaries?

SR:

A wedding.

ER:

The wedding for the girl in the middle.

DM:

Oh okay, nice bunch there.

ER:

Oldest one is the boy on the left.

DM:

Is that Larry?

ER:

Yeah then Betty between us, then Eddy, Denise and Yvette.

DM:

Very nice. Good group. Well then you came back to the—well before we get into that let me ask you another couple questions about the war. In the course of this push toward the Rhine, I understand the Luftwaffe was getting to be in pretty bad shape. Did they continue to strafe your positions or were you seeing them fairly frequently?

ER:

Not too much.

DM:

Not too much, okay. Fortunately by that time in the war they were—did you see a lot of American planes patrolling?

ER:

Oh yeah. I saw B-17s going toward Berlin. I mean as far as you could see in any direction, B-17s. I mean the skies were full of them.

DM:

That's a lot of fire power.

ER:

Beat all I'd ever seen.

DM:

How about strafing fighter planes like—oh what was it P-47s?—did you see any kind of strafing planes that they—I know they flew them over France a lot during the German occupations.

ER:

Airplanes?

DM:

Mm-hm

ER:

We didn't see too many.

SM:

Just bombing crews, bombing squadrons mostly?

ER:

Yeah like those B-17s.

DM:

Did you happen to see any kind of German tank activity during this?

ER:

No, not really.

DM:

Probably farther south.

ER:

Most of the country we was going through, I don't think tanks could get through hardly. Trees were so thick.

DM:

And I know they used tanks for the break out, but I don't know how much they used it after that. Also when you saw the wounded, those who were wounded for example by shrapnel, since this was dense forest—I've always wondered if splintering was a problem. When you have these artillery shells bursting in the forest it seems like you would not only have shrapnel but also wood splinters and everything else flying. Did you ever see any indication of that?

ER:

I didn't see any. Of course they get wounded when we're on the push—we just keep going and the medics took care of it, take them back.

DM:

Did you see a lot of German soldiers being shipped back after that first seven that you saw out of the machine gun nest? Was there a stream of them?

ER:

Yeah just every once in a while there would be a nest of them or a sniper or maybe an individual or two of stragglers wanting to be captured I think.

DM:

But they were small groups typically?

ER:

Mm-hm and I saw, I guess they captured him ahead of me, and it was an older, it seemed like an older man, soldier, and a kid sitting on a rock or something that had been captured and they were waiting to be taken back to back. That kid looked like he wasn't over fifteen, just a little old boy. Then, on their buzz bombs—I saw the buzz bombs, quite a few of those coming over our place, and you could see 'em because they didn't fly very high. And one day I saw one that sputtered a little bit and black smoke went up and his nose dropped down and went right straight into a little old town over there about two miles I guess from where we were. I don't know why they wasted it on a little old town—that Belgium town. I guess it might have been some kind of military stuff that they wanted.

DM:

Some what?

ER:

Military. Some of our military stuff.

DM:

I wonder how much of that was just to demoralize people. You know you're being bombed by us. So buzz bombs you saw them fairly frequently?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

Was it a daily occurrence?

ER:

Just about. And of course they just flew like a plane and then there'd be two bombs because it's a projectile. I think they launched a bunch of those out of Holland or somewhere over there over to the U.K.

DM:

Over the channel, yeah. But you didn't—when you were over there recuperating you didn't see any of that did you? You were out of harm's way pretty much over there at Salisbury and up that way?

ER:

Yeah I got a leave to London. A friend of mine and me, we went together and one Sunday morning—we was there on a seven day leave—one Sunday morning, we was in this hotel. It was a hotel that was taken over by the Red Cross—soldiers stayed when they came on leave. We was there, and I was laying there in my bunk sleeping. I should have been up I guess already, but it wasn't that early and all of a sudden, Boom. And it shook the bed, and this particular one landed about eleven blocks from where we were, right on the edge of Hyde Park. And there's another one just a few minutes—maybe two or three minutes after that landed there was another.

DM:

Were they V-2s you think?

ER:

Yeah. We took a car trip. Several guys rented this—this guy in his car, I guess it connected with taxis or something. Anyway he took us on a drive around London and he drove us to Hyde Park where that bomb hit. And there's a big crater where that thing hit just off the road a little bit. And this street went around the park and big buildings over here, apartments and stuff I guess but nearly all the windows and lights were blown out. The concussion on those things was great.

DM:

Yeah they did some serious damage. Well back here in the States—was there anything you wanted to add about the war?

ER:

I can't think of anything right now.

DM:

We may think of something later. But back here in the States you ended up at Midland, you got married—oh this was later though. No you were already—when you first got back what did you do? Did you go—I know at some point you went to Midwestern. Was that G.I. Bill?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

Did you do that right away or did you do something else?

ER:

I went after we—oh we'd been married a while, a couple of years. Let's see, Larry was five months old when we went to school. Anyway, I went to school, and he was born in '48. And I'd like to say we went to school when he was five months old. He was born in March—April, May, June, July, August. I guess we're in school in August at Midwestern, and we was there two years.

DM:

And what made you decide on Midwestern, Wichita Falls?

ER:

I came up here to Lubbock from Midland and went to the V.A. [Veterans Administration], and I was trying to decide on what I wanted to get into. Of course her Grandpa was a watchmaker who worked in Switzerland, and I was kind of thinking about that you know and I was talking to the guy at the V.A., some kind of—I don't know what his position was but he was supposed to help guys get into a job that they—anyway. He said, "There's a good watchmaker school in Wichita Falls." At Hardin College it was then. It changed while I was there to Midwestern University. Anyway he said, "There was a guy from Denver City that was in here. In fact he went up there to check the school out, and he's supposed to be back in here today." Or maybe he was already there somewhere in the building. Said his name is Willie Gail. So he said, "You better stick around and talk with him." So I did. Just a little while I saw him and talked to him. And he had been up there, and liked what he saw, and he was gonna start school in the next month or two. So

I decided to go up there and look it over. I did, so I joined up too.

DM:

Another one of those critical decisions. Waiting around to talk to him there at the V.A.

ER:

Gale finished school a short time before I did. He went back to Denver City, and he put in a jewelry store. Did real well I think for several years until he retired. He has a daughter up in Missouri, southeast corner of Missouri. She wanted him to come up there where she could kind of see after him you know. Kinda like our move is if we make it. So he moved up there, and once in a while I volunteered at the V.A. here for about twelve years, and once in a while I'd see Ed's son. He was a veteran too, and I'd see him at the V.A. clinic and he was living in, guess still is, living in Eastland, Texas.

DM:

Okay. I think it's interesting that you were here at the V.A. soon after getting out of the Army, and now later on in life you've helped with the V.A. a lot. Worked out there at the same V.A., I guess. Maybe not the same location, or was it the same location?

ER:

No, it was down here and on 29th Drive and then they built a new building in '93 or 2003 I believe over there.

DM:

So you were at Hardin College for how long?

ER:

Two years.

DM:

Two years and it was learning the watch trade?

ER:

Yeah. School of Horology.

DM:

Was it watch making or watch repair or both all rolled into one?

ER:

It was watch repair.

DM:

Watch repair. Did you ever have a chance to talk to Sue's—was it her grandfather, father?

ER:

Grandfather.

DM:

Grandfather. Did you ever have a chance to talk to him—at all?

ER:

I never did see him.

DM:

Never did see him? Wouldn't that have been interesting? Talk about techniques and how he did it and how you did it. But okay so you—

ER:

I think he actually made parts for watches didn't he?

SR:

Do what?

ER:

I think your grandpa made parts for watches didn't he?

SR:

No they had a parts factory in the village.

ER:

And her brother worked with him. Henry—Henri.

DM:

Do you know what year you graduated from Hardin College?

ER:

1950.

DM:

Then did you come straight to Lubbock after that?

ER:

Mm-hm.

DM:

Okay, did you go straight to the Myrick building at that time?

ER:

No I went to Zales. I was with Zales about sixteen years. So when we came here first—I mean when we went to school first, Larry was five months old. When we came here, Betty was five months old. (laughs)

DM:

But you worked for Zales and then you launched out into your own business?

ER:

Mm-hm.

DM:

How was that—starting your own—did you have a cliental by then?

ER:

Yeah, I quit Zales to put in my own shop, and they didn't replace me. But they asked me if I would do their work.

DM:

Oh that's perfect.

ER:

I said sure. So I started out doing their work on Monday. I moved out on Saturday.

DM:

You just can't beat that.

ER:

Had a Zales account in Amarillo and I think one in Midland at that time. And I had a store in Levelland, wasn't theirs, but another store and just two or three pawn shops here in town I did work for.

DM:

So in the watch repair business you mostly work for—or you get work from these stores or do

you also have a walk-in business of individuals?

ER:

Once in a while. But the location that I was in wasn't much for retail.

DM:

Okay. Now Lubbock, was it a good location for that kind of work?

ER:

Yeah I got all that I could do.

DM:

Always? Through the years?

ER:

Yeah, having so many stores kept me jumping to get them out sometime.

DM:

How much competition did you have? Was there stiff competition in town?

ER:

For trade work. No there wasn't much competition. There was a few guys that I knew that did trade work, but they had their accounts and I had mine. It worked out pretty good.

DM:

So there was no kind of having to elbow and fight for clients and all that kind of thing.

ER:

No I knew all the guys that were watch makers that was in that business.

DM:

By the way, you told me how many years you spent in watch repair but could you tell me again?

ER:

Fifty-one years.

DM:

Starting in '50 or thereabouts?

ER:

Yeah. Actually I retired from my shop down there. I retired Christmas Eve of 1999.

DM:

Okay. But you still do this kind of—similar kind of work—well I don't know if it's similar but to me it's very nimble fingered type work. Building ball point pens and working and doing the woodwork. You do the acrylic work too—I mean the forming, the fashioning of acrylic into pens and making canes and this kind of thing. And by the way I'll mention for the recording that there are photographs of these products, and I'll have them at the Southwest Collection. So this is for researchers who listen to all of this later on. They can say, "Oh good, well lets go take a look at these pens."

ER:

Yeah I make fountain pens, ball point, roller balls, and perfume pens. They call them pens where you dab a little perfume behind the ear, well the ladies I guess. And I make them out of acrylic and different kinds of exotic woods and deer antlers, and I don't happen to have one made of deer antlers but I've made quite a few of them.

DM:

Very interesting.

ER:

I enjoy it.

DM:

By 1999—let's say 2000. By 2000 was the watch repair business changing? You know, the reason I ask is there are so many products that are coming out these days that are disposable products. People buy them, they use them a while, throw them in the trash. Was that starting to impact on your business? Did it ever?

ER:

Didn't seem to.

DM:

You might have really been in at a good time, because I don't know how watch repair is now. I really don't know. But I do know that there's that tendency in products.

ER:

Uh huh. Yeah, that makes sense.

DM:

People don't have a microwave repaired anymore. They throw it away and then buy another microwave.

ER:

Yeah we threw one away a while back. It was still working. (laughs)

DM:

You know what I'm talking about.

ER:

It was still working but stuff like that she wants to get rid of. I call old Stan, he's the manager of the DAV [Disabled American Veterans] thrift store. I have a bunch of stuff every once in a while. He lives up here on twentieth so he says, "Well I'll pick it up in the morning on the way down." So something that's usable that he can sell and make a little money. Get it to him.

DM:

That's right. Well from 1950 to 2000 can you tell me about any changes in the watch repair business? Did it change much or was it pretty much the same thing? Getting your business from these stores?

ER:

Pretty much the same thing.

DM:

Same kind of equipment?

ER:

You'd have—new stuff came out. In fact the Bulova Accutron, that's a movement with a tuning fork. That came out after I got here. Quite some time after.

DM:

So you had to learn this I guess?

ER:

Bulova had classes come here with an instructor. Meet at some motel or something you know, bunch of guys at tables, giving us some of the low-down on that stuff.

DM:

So a new watch comes out and you get new training so you know how to deal with it. That's

another thing. I wonder if it's changed because I think a lot of manufactures now don't really want their stuff repaired, they'd rather sell something new. But at least then they were working with repair people to—

ER:

Of course, some people like to buy nice watches: Rolex, Patek Philippe.

DM:

Did you work on all these fancy models?

ER:

Yeah Rolexes and Vacheron Constantin and old high powered twist watches.

DM:

Sometimes you were holding something in your hand worth a few thousand dollars or maybe several thousand dollars?

ER:

Yeah could be. I saw all kinds of them.

DM:

Did you ever—had atomic watches come out yet? You know these that pick up a signal and they adjust to the atomic clock up in Denver, all that kind of stuff. Had it come out at all yet?

ER:

I'd seen atomic clocks, but I didn't work on clocks.

DM:

Didn't ever have to work on that.

ER:

I had as much watch work to do. I didn't have time to do clocks. Clocks take a lot more time.

DM:

Right. Well it sounds like you were in at an interesting time and a lot has changed since then. I know because people look at their cellphones now too. That's so often in place of a wrist watch.

ER:

That's the correct time.

DM:

It might have been a good time to retire.

ER:

Yeah it might have been.

DM:

I mean for someone starting in 1990 and trying to have a fifty year career they would face a very different kind of world it seems like. You also volunteered at the V.A. as we were talking about.

ER:

Yeah I volunteered at the V.A. about twelve years.

DM:

What would you do there?

ER:

Well first of all, when I first started, I drove a van from here to Amarillo every week and sometime Big Spring Hospital. I did that for twenty months, and I hauled the veterans up there and back. And after twenty months I retired from that and started helping at the clinic, until I got to where I couldn't do anything with my hands hardly, no grip. I was working in the pharmacy. I was helping with medication for mailing. We had these big mailers, and I got to where I couldn't tear the strip off the seal. I even tried to pull them off with pliers sometimes. So I finally gave it up, and I said I'm gonna have to quit until my hand gets okay.

DM:

This is carpel tunnel? Is it?

ER:

Yeah it started out, did surgery for carpel tunnel and that was—fifth of April, was a year ago and never did get better. And like I said this thing here—

DM:

It's got a brace on it.

ER:

With my hand wrapped, and I can't raise my hand up like that. I try it and my fingers try to work but the rest of them don't.

DM:

When did you start feeling some discomfort in all of this? Was it during you career as a watch repairman, did you ever have any?

ER:

No.

DM:

All after retirement?

ER:

Yeah.

DM:

Well that's good. I'm sorry you have it now, but I'm glad you didn't have it then.

ER:

I'd have been in trouble.

DM:

Now what about your feet? Have you had any trouble over all these years since 1944?

ER:

Oh yeah. That's my big trouble now. I can't hardly walk around. They're purple right now, bloodshot look like. They're swollen, always swollen.

DM:

Have they always done that? Let's say in 1955 or '65 were you having trouble with your feet?

ER:

Not that much.

DM:

Not really? Just recently?

ER:

It's a—what do they call it. When they first diagnosed me with diabetes it was caused from nerve damage from my frozen feet.

DM:

You're still feeling the effects of the Ardennes.

ER:

Oh yeah, very much so. That's the reason I fell out in the backyard yesterday. I fell down on my shoulder. I couldn't get up. I had my cellphone in my pocket. I called her and she came out there and finally helped me to get up on my knees and I crawled over to that banister that goes up to my shop. And with her help and me hanging on to that thing I finally got on to my feet. The least little old stumble and down I go. This scar right here where I fell, twelve staples there, and eleven there.

DM:

All because of those feet. All because of that cold winter and being out there in it. Never could you have imagined I guess when you were that young guy in the Ardennes Forest that you'd be having trouble in 2013 over what you suffered through then.

ER:

One of the things that the doctor told me the other day—I saw my primary doctor at the clinic, Dr. Strange, and we was talking about my medication and stuff and he said, "Well there's no cure for it. All we can do is try to make you as comfortable as possible."

DM:

For your feet? It's kinda exactly what they did during the war still—put you in bed and gave you some pain medication.

ER:

I take two or three pills before breakfast and ten with breakfast.

DM:

And that's for your feet mostly?

ER:

Yep, different things. Several pain pills for my feet, and blood sugar.

DM:

Right. When a cold front comes through, when the weather really turns cold, does it bother your feet? Do you know when a front's coming?

ER:

No I don't. I don't pay attention to that.

DM:

How about heat or cold on your feet. Does that affect it—heat or cold sources?

ER:

Well not so much because they hurt all the time.

DM:

All the time so you can't distinguish.

ER:

Can hardly tell.

DM:

What do you wear on them? Do you wear socks and some kind of soft shoe?

ER:

No. Like a soft shoe like that?

DM:

Yeah, kinda like a tennis shoe.

ER:

Yeah they feel like house shoes, but they're better than anything I can get on.

DM:

Do you have times when your feet swell more than others?

ER:

Yeah I guess I do. I got some pretty good shoes that I can't wear. I can't get them on they're so tight. I need to let the air out of my feet. (laughs) Neuropathy was what I was trying to think of.

DM:

Oh yes. Well this is what I wanted to cover today. Is there anything you would like to add?

ER:

No, I don't believe so.

DM:

Okay I might have some questions pop up, and Sue, if you don't mind I'd like to come back and interview you also. And same thing, if we're talking and you have some questions or something

to interject that would just be wonderful. If you can stand to see my face again I'd love to come back and talk to you some more but I'll go ahead and shut this off for today.

Interview ends.



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