

Interview with Walter Vicinelly
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Masontown, PA
Interviewer: James Zanella
Transcriber: Fran Margiotti

[Begin Tape 1, Side 1]

WV: My date of birth is January fifth, 1925. I'm seventy-nine years old.

JZ: Tell me about your father. You say he's from Tuscany, how did he come here?

WV: My dad came here from a little town in Italy, which is in the Tuscan area called Castelnuovo, provincia di Pisa. He was fourteen years old and had an uncle that was a shoemaker that lived in a small town of Royal, which is about ten miles from here. He went to work in the coal mines in Royal. It was my dad's uncle that made a decision, Belvo Vicinelly, he made a decision to move to Masontown and put a shoemaker shop in Masontown. My dad had a job in the coal mine and he didn't come to Masontown until he could a job here in this area, in Masontown. So he went to board with another family that came from the same town my dad came from by the name of Gino Prosante? He stayed with them until one of his friends got him a job in the little town of Leckrone which is about a mile from here. When he came over to Masontown, he was renting one room that he stayed in. My mother is from around Milan in the town of Bellagio. She came here, she had a sister in Masontown, and she came to Masontown to stay with her sister. It ended up in 1920 that my dad and mother got married. They were renting a house here Masontown and then they built a house one street from where I'm living now. My dad worked in the coal mine fifty-two years. He had a coal mine during the Depression, a small coal mine. He had a friend that was a farmer that had some coal on there, so my dad would mine the coal there and would have to pay royalty on the coal to the farm that owned it. During the Depression he would sell coal to the stores in Masontown. He never got paid, it was barter. If he gave a little coal to a furniture store, we would get furniture. If it

was a dry-good store we would get over-hauls or plum juices and same with the grocery stores. We would get groceries. That's what he did all through the depression, we never had any money but we never did without anything. Anybody that he gave coal too, whatever they had, we had. Then in the 1930s the coal mines started picking up so he went to work for H.G.Frick, which eventually became U.S. Steel. He worked in the coal mines for over fifty years, fifty-two if I remember correctly. He retired at sixty-five, he came here when he was fourteen years old and never went back to Italy and then after he retired he went for three months. In fact, he made two trips to Italy. He made the one for three months and then a couple years later he went again. He passed away in 1972. And my mom passed away in 1982.

JZ: Do you know what year he came over exactly?

WV: No, I have it over there. I would have to dig it out. It was way before World War I. The reason he gave when he came to America there was nothing in Italy, no work. I think that time is when the Fascists were coming in to Italy.

JZ: Was there a lot of Tuscans here?

WV: Yeah. Well, let say this to you, the number of trips I made to Italy I got acquainted with the people, a lot of people in the small town my dad came from. Well one day I got a call from a gentleman from Italy if I could come up with names of people that came from Castelnuovo to Masontown. I said, well yeah I could write it down. I could go down every street and name them. In the 1920s, they had a Tuscan association or club in Leckrone and one of the guys was the secretary and treasurer, have me the book with the names in it. We put a list together, the ones that were members and the ones that could. There were 110 people that came from Castelnuovo to Masontown. Now they didn't all stay here, they came here because during the Depression the coal mines were bad. They would work two or three days a week and then they would shut down so a lot of

people left and went into the cities. They were here for a period until they learned enough how to get around and speak English.

JZ: Tell me about your childhood, did you go to school, did you help your dad out?

WV: Yeah, well I was raised here in this bottom as I call it. There was nothing but coal mines here and coal companies. I went to, a block away from where I lived to a one roomed school that we went to. There was a pot-bellied stove in there that used to heat the building up and outside toilets. I went there from first grade to eighth grade then I went to Germantown High School. I graduated from high school in May and I got drafted in the army in August. Back before the war, every coal mine had a baseball team. So every night there was a baseball game someplace in the area.

JZ: So how many coal mines were there in the whole town?

WV: I would have to say a lot, every hill had a coal mine in it. There was Vesper Mine, Leckrone Mine, Grays Landing Mine, the whole town every few miles there was a coal mine. I went to work in the coal mines when I was fourteen. My dad had this little mine so I would go in with him. And at that time, we had what we called a Carbide light. It would give you light in the mine when you were working and the hat was a canvas hat with a beak on it and you would hang the light on it. When I would come home after school or days off from school I would go work with him in the coal mine.

JZ: How big was the coal mine he had?

WV: It was his coal mine, it wasn't that large compared to the larger mines. It probably went in about five or six hundred feet. The entries on them were ten feet wide. He had two coal mines. One was what we called the Pittsburgh Steam Coal which was nine feet high. He also had a coal mine which we called the Sewickley

Steam which was five feet high. You would just role the tunnels in, just role the coal you went in, you're cross tunnels, until you mine it out until he would find another block. That's when he went to Sewickley. First he was in Pittsburgh.

JZ: Tell me about some of the Italian traditions you grew up with in your family, with food and holidays.

WV: In 1922 there was a strike here in the coal mine of what they call Leckrone. There were people were going around asking if there was a fellow that spoke American that could speak Italian and he would speak to the Italian and he would talk to the Italians. And there were Slovaks and Polish and different nationalities that would have a representative that would approach people to sign the union card. They were trying to organize the union. The ones that signed the union card, no one was suppose to be aware of it but word got out. Anyone that lived in the company house, if you worked in the coal mine you could rent a company house, anyone that lived in that house loan alone signed that union contract. The company police moved all their stuff out on the road. So right down here, the house in down in town, was called Tent City. People were living in tents.

JZ: So people were kicked out because they joined the union?

WV: Yeah because you signed a union card so things were pretty rough, nobody was working and at that time they didn't have unemployment. Then later on in years they did have a relief station up here. My dad did always have a garden and could always sell a little coal, even though he went to work to a coal company on the weekends he would load a truck of coal and give it too the grocery stores so we always had groceries. Just to show you how it was, the grade school I went had a bugle group. The bugle cost two dollars and fifty cents. Everyone in the area that bought a bugle paid twenty-five cents a month to pay for it and some of them had to struggle to make the payments.

JZ: Did you speak Italian with your parents?

WV: Oh yeah, in fact when I went to school in first grade, I came back home and said I was in the wrong place because I could only speak Italian. Most my parents spoke to me was in Italian. When we were at home, we would always have to speak Italian even after growing up, got married. Still my parents would speak to me in Italian.

JZ: How did everyone get along in Masontown, you had Polish, Italians and Slovaks? Did everybody get along?

WV: There was a little bit of a problem when they organized the union because they used to have picket lines and would holler at people in the house to come out, the coal miners. During that time there was a little bit of a problem. There was what we called scabs, sometimes go to work and see a picket line and would get into trouble when they would do that. But there were no problems. Maybe an individual got into a fight with somebody. In fact my neighbor, where I was raised down here was Serbian. Hell, if someone was sick they were over the house to help you. If they made a Serbian dish they would bring it over to you, or if they killed a hog they would bring stuff over to you. There were no problems other than during the strike.

JZ: What would your family do, would your mother cook? Could you go over some of the dishes real quick?

WV: Everything from ravioli, pasta e fagioli, sopressata, sausage, all the Italian dishes. Biscotti she made. Pizza, but we didn't call it pizza, like fried bread. My dad would always have a big garden and my mom would can all her stuff. She made tomato paste, canned tomatoes. Everything, enough for her to can a thousand jars. We had chickens, he dealt with a coal deal, would give a guy some load of coal and would give him half of a pig or a pig depending on the size of it.

JZ: You were born in 1925 so by the time the war broke out you were not eighteen yet, right?

WV: No, the war broke out in 1941. I remember that date. I was with a friend of mine that was a little bit older than me and he was driving on a nice warm Sunday when the announcement came over the radio. I said I'm a sophomore in high school, by the time I got out of high school the war will be over.

JZ: Did you know about Mussolini?

WV: Yeah, my dad was totally against Mussolini. In fact in Uniontown in a place that call Shadygrove, every year they would have an Italian picnic. All the Italians would go, and I remember one time we went there, there was a hell of an argument over that there were some people supporting Mussolini. And the Tuscans were against him and they got in a hell of an argument, and some got into a fight over it. After that my mother would not go to another Italian picnic at Shadygrove. There were some people wearing black shirts and these Tuscans started hollering at them and calling them names.

JZ: Were these the Italian from a different region?

WV: Yeah the biggest part of them was from southern Italy. Sicily, Calabria, places like that. There was a hell of an argument. Then we started having our own picnics here in Masontown, at those picnics it was an Italian picnic. It was never a problem. It was a big affair in Masontown.

JZ: Now where was Shadygrove again?

WV: Shadygrove was on the hill side of Uniontown. We used to go on the street car that went through here. They used to have on Sunday, a dollar pass, the whole

family could ride that street car all day for a dollar. My mom used to make, we had those big baskets at that time, she would fry the chicken, spaghetti, and everything we had to eat in there. We would get on the street car and head out to Shadygrove.

JZ: When the war started in 1941 you thought, “oh the war will be over.” As time went on when you were still in high school how did you feel, what was going on here in Masontown through the war?

WV: When the war first broke out I was in high school, I was playing football. The coach was a guy by the name of Tube Rossi and he was the air raid warden for this bottom here, they called this Sandy Bottom. So he went to all the young guys and made them junior air raid wardens. We had an arm band on, a tin hat, and remember there were no lights in here, the only lights we got was from the coal companies. They had drills, we would be uptown and a fire whistle would blow, a certain signal and you would know it was an air raid. We would come down and I would have to patrol the street below, Cedar Avenue. You had to check every house to make sure no lights were on. In Masontown, there used to be a bank building but it burned down now, but on top of it was a little building that they built and it was a look out, people used to man that. They would have a bucket of sand up there and fire extinguishers and it was manned twenty-four hours a day, a scheduled setup and people used to be up there with binoculars. Then the bridge you crossed over the Monongahela River, they even had soldiers guard that bridge when the war first broke out.

JZ: Now was that power plant up there?

WV: No, nothing was there. That power plant was probably put up about twenty-five years ago.

JZ: When you were young, you were a junior air warden?

WV: Yeah, a junior air warden. Did I tell the story that you weren't allowed to smoke, light up a cigarette, no light at all. After I got into the war, planes would be flying over us. I would think how strict we were and how stupid we were. Down in the service, we would smoke cigarettes, try to hide it a little bit maybe not light it but smoke it. I'm talking about when you're on the front line you wouldn't do at night.

JZ: So were your drafted?

WV: Yes I was drafted when I was eighteen years old.

JZ: When were you drafted, in 1943 right after you got out of high school?

WV: Yeah, 1943. I graduated in May and got drafted in August. When I was in school, you only had a half a day of school because it was too crowded. So if you played football or any other sport, you went in the morning. In the afternoon you were off. Well after football season I went to work in the coal mine. So I was going to school in the morning and working in the coal mine in the afternoon. I did that until June when I started getting the draft notices and getting called for physicals. That's when my dad said, "time to quit, you're needed for the service."

JZ: He never objected. He was fine with you going into the service?

WV: Well, I'm sure he was concerned and wished we didn't have to go because I had a brother that got drafted at the same time. But we had no choice; we got drafted or go to jail. Anyway I'll get into my service. I left here in August. I went to Camp Grant, Illinois which is in Rockford, Illinois. I had my basic training in there. I was in the Medical Corps; I don't know how I got into it.

JZ: They just decided they would put you there?

WV: That's all. I got on the train, and they were loading us onto the train they said we were going to Camp Grant, Illinois, it was Medical Corps. You're eighteen years old. The furthest I had ever been at that time was Pittsburgh to see a bunch of baseball games. Anyway at Camp Grant I had my basic training there and by December I was on my way to England.

JZ: You were still at Camp Grant the whole time?

WV: Yeah basic training was eight weeks. After basic training I came home on a five day furlough. Then I went to Camp Reynolds in Youngstown, and from Camp Reynolds they sent me to Camp Scants in New York, which was the ports location. I got on to the Queen Mary. It took us five days and we landed in Scotland. In Scotland we got on a train went to a place south of London on the coast by the Channel. In England we had training, we go on maneuvers.

JZ: I'm curious to know your medical training here in the States.

WV: Now that I know what medical training is available, there was no training. You learn pressure points, you learn artificial resuscitation, and you learn how to splint a broken leg and arm. The training when you go on maneuvers or bulwark, you drove an ambulance. You would just stand around the ambulance and if anyone got hurt you would take them to the hospital.

JZ: What is bulwark?

WV: Well bulwark means maneuvers but on a smaller scale.

JZ: Is that an acronym?

WV: That's the accurate name of the type of training.

JZ: You know what it stands for?

WV: If they said bulwark, it meant a day or two. When they said maneuvers, maneuvers involved everything, obstacle courses, shooting over your head, crawl on your belly and stuff like that.

JZ: How long was your medical training?

WV: Well the total training was eight weeks. Then when I went to England, I worked two days a week in the emergency room in the hospital or I would ride an ambulance in the community in case someone got hurt. At that time a bomb had taken place up around London, and we were about thirty to forty miles south of that. But the real training I got was in the hospital. Two days a week I would go to the hospital, the other days it would be down training.

JZ: The other training was out in the field you said.

WV: Yeah you would go on marches, five mile marches. Small obstacle courses. We had and stuff like that.

JZ: What kind of equipment did you have with you? Did you have an M1?

WV: No as a medic you were not permitted to carry a gun. At night we had to pull guard duty. Some of us sometime we had to guard a water tank, when you had to guard the water tank they would give you a gun. As a medic, I had very little rifle training.

JZ: Two days a week you would go to the hospital, what would you do there?

WV: Everything. Helping people, they would want you to help. A guy would come in with a broken leg. Hell, I even watched an operation.

JZ: Of course this was American military, it wasn't a civilian hospital?

WV: No, this was a civilian hospital that took soldiers into it.

JZ: What was your unit, were you attached?

WV: I was with the Ninth Infantry Division. Now the Ninth Infantry Division is made up of three regiments, the sixtieth, thirty-ninth, and the fourth-seventh. I was with the forty-seventh regiment. Let me give you some history, Ninth Division made the invasion of North Africa and from there they made the Invasion of Sicily, then they went to England. I was training for the Ninth Division but I was not attached to them yet. I joined on December second, when I landed on Utah Beach for three days I stood on the beach and either worked on wounded guys or carried them on stretchers to the boat or L.C.I. I joined the Ninth Division on D-5 or D-6. They were just getting out and were coming down into the hedge rows. I don't know if you know what hedge rows are but they were hedges that some were eight feet high and too thick to get through. It was probably six, seven feet thick. To get through them we used to carry a block of TNT and put it against it and blow a hole through it. Then later on, they came out with the tanks and put a blade on it like a bulldozer has, and that would open the hole for us so we could go through. Now, any place that there was a hole, the Germans had either a machine gun or anti-tank gun to cover that hole. The hedge rows were tough. If you move up one hedge row, they had that zeroed in, we would take a hell of a beating.

JZ: I've heard of it. So you're talking about big, vast area of hedges.

WV: They were placed together, you couldn't crawl through them. Sometime you would get a axe and try to put a hole in it but the easiest way to do it was to get a block of TNT and out it in there and shot it.

JZ: Tell me about D-Day.

WV: Well they put me on a boat for twenty-four hours. In fact when the planes were going over for the invasion, I was on the ship watching. At that time they had gliders going over. You sat there one day then took us off to sea. From the ship we got onto an L.C.I. which is landing craft for infantry. When we landed, there was an officer there with an arm band. He told us to start working there. Now, let me say this to you. Omaha Beach was the rough beach; Utah was rough but not like that. Utah Beach they went in right away about a half a mile with little problems until then but after that all hell broke loose.

JZ: You say you landed on D-2 on Utah Beach. What were you thinking, how were you feeling at this time?

WV: I was scared. If someone says there were not scared, I remember my first day of combat hearing rifle shots, machine gun shots, you think everybody is shooting at you. Then as you went on, you got the attitude that you learned some with the experience you had, that you could get out of this. I can get out of this; I can do the best I can. There were times later on in the hedge rows that I didn't sleep for three days or in a fox hole until two or three o'clock in the morning and say, "Hell I cant live like this" Hell, I even thought about shooting myself in my hand or the foot but never had the guts. You would be surprised, as a medic I can tell you this, the number of people that shot themselves in there hand or foot just to get out of this.

JZ: You had the band on, and on your helmet too? As a medic you had no gun. So when there was action going on, combat, were always in the rear?

WV: No, you right with the infantry. If there was rifle man going up there and a sniper shot at him, he's wounded, you had to go get him. If that sniper, he could shoot at you. Generally what you did was get the infantry to come with you, they would be shooting at the direction of where that shot came from. There had been times when I picked a guy up and put him on my shoulder and took him out of there when he was bleeding because if I left him there then both of us would have been shot and I dragged him out of there.

JZ: Can you tell me of some instances of how you treated wounded soldiers? Can you give me some stories you remember.

WV: Well, during the time I was on the front line I handled people with any type of wound that there was arms blown off, legs blown off, stomach wounds. In a time and we'll get into later on, there was the town Greenwich, there was a guy with a stomach wound. During that time I had a jeep that you put the two litters on the front end on the hood, and then they had a rack on it that you could put three litters, two across the top and one down here on the opposite of the driver's side. Anyway, this guy got hit with a stomach wound, he was coming out with bomb craters and the holes when the artilleries shells hit and bounce. This guy with the stomach wounds was saying to me, "you're killing me, you're killing me." I'm sure he was in pain and concerned but with a stomach wound the faster you can get them out the better chance for him to survive. I wasn't going fast. I couldn't. Every time we hit a bump he would holler. After the war was over, I went to the division reunion in Philadelphia and this guy came up to me and told me, "I was that guy on that thing hollering. I believe you were trying to do you're best." You know one night I was out on patrol with the infantry and we came back in the morning, like five o'clock before daylight I went to the aid station. The aid station was generally close to the front line, a half a mile. There were times front lines would be on the hill and there's a house or town there and the aid station would be in the house. Anyway, I came in, the captain was there and he was from

Sharpsville. He was a doctor, an Italian surgeon, Captain Lali. I came in and was loading up my two first aid packets. He says to me that he doesn't want me to go down to the line and get some sleep downstairs. I told him I could just sleep in the hole up there. He says, "No get a blanket and sleep because I'm going to need you tonight." It wasn't half hour when they came down to get me. Five more medics were on the jeep going up to the front line, which was a half a mile away and they hit a mine and all five of them were killed. I had a picture of the jeep that is the book. A lot of things took place in the hedge rows.

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

JZ: We were just talking about those five medics that got killed.

WV: On the jeep that hit a mine.

JZ: Now, where was this at, in Scharenberg?

WV: No, this was up further. This was after Belgium.

JZ: Tell me about Saint Lo a little bit again.

WV: After Scharenberg, then in were the hedge rows, which we ended up going to Saint Lo. Now in Saint Lo on July the twenty-fifth is was they called the Saint Lo breakthrough. That's when Patton made the breakthrough with the tanks. Well on the twenty-fifth our planes were going to come over and bomb the Germans. The first few flights that came over bombed the Germans. The flights after that dropped the bombs on us, the Forty-Seventh Regiment and Thirtieth Battalion. That happened is the morning, the bombing was ten o'clock in the morning and we picked up wounded guys to the next morning at five o'clock. I was never

aware of the number of people that were wounded or killed but from the Discovery Channel on television, the blunders that occurred during the war they mentioned the Forty-Seventh and Thirtieth Battalion, there were 510 wounded and 129 killed. Two days later we got on Patton's tanks and took off across France. Sometime again if we hit a pocket of Germans we would be delayed a day or two at the most and then move on.

JZ: Most of the time did you have your own jeep?

WV: Well that depends, like during the hedge rows the jeep was no good to you. After we got up into the towns where you could use the jeep, in the front lines you walked across or if you had a wounded guy you carried it back to the jeep and took him to the aid station. The aid station had three jeeps with brackets on it that you would be able to put five litters on it.

JZ: And a litter would be?

WV: A stretcher.

JZ: How long were you in the hedge rows? How long were you there for in that area?

WV: I'm trying to figure that out, well that was in July. I'm going to say a couple of months.

JZ: Did you ever work on German soldiers?

WV: Oh yeah there were times when you had a wounded German soldier you would work on. Even civilians. If you got a small town with no doctors and you got a wounded person you would work on them.

JZ: During those times you saw so much, how did you handle it emotionally?

WV: I told you, at first you said no one could live here, you got to get out of it. Then you could see no one could get out of it so you got the attitude you were going to do the best you could. You're going to take chances, don't get me wrong, but when the shells started hitting bodies you were scared. If anyone says that they weren't scared, they're lying. They were scared or they had a mental problem. You just had to live with it.

JZ: Seeing the soldiers wounded and dying?

WV: Well, that was your job and you felt bad but you couldn't get yourself in a position when it bothered you. It did bother you but not that it was going to affect the job you had to do.

JZ: Tell me, what was you're rank?

WV: Staff Sergeant. I was offered a battlefield promotion to second lieutenant and I turned it down. On the front lines if an officer is killed, if it was someone without the ranks they would give you a battle field promotion. I didn't want it.

JZ: How did you make sergeant?

WV: The guy above me was killed or wounded and I was next in line so they promoted me to staff. I went from corporal and the person above me was wounded so they promoted me to staff sergeant.

JZ: What was some of the equipment you had when you were on the field as a medic?

WV: Well you had two packs and it had all the first aid equipment you needed, compresses. Generally in the jeep we carried metal splints if a guy had a broken leg. There were times, depends where you were at, if a guy had a broken leg you

would make a blanket splint. You would roll a blanket up and tie it up tight with both legs together and get him out of there. We carried morphine, blood plasma. In fact we carried blood plasma right on the jeep. That was about it, when we got to the aid station, there wasn't much they could do either other than the first step to control bleeding. If he was in shock, treat him stat and get him an ambulance to get him to a field hospital as fast as you could.

JZ: Yeah I'm curious, when you think of hospital you think of MASH and the Korean War. And of course during World War II they didn't have helicopters so how would you evacuate them by ambulance as fast as you could?

WV: Ambulance. We had two ambulances, put them in the ambulance and they would take them back even in the middle of the night. They had some rough times too because there were no lights and the woods would be dark as hell. Going down the road, if another ambulance was coming back you saw him before you saw him.

JZ: So how far behind the lines would you say the field hospital was?

WV: Probably four, five, depends.

JZ: Tell me about some other stories you can remember.

WV: What I wanted to tell you about Schevenhutte. From Liege, Belgium we went to a little town called Rochon. From Rochon we went through Soignies, now we traveled through Soignies at night and it was nothing but woods and a small road. We traveled all at night, when we were going to bed down when a battalion of Germans come walking through. Some were killed, some were wounded, and some got away. The Colonel said there was no use staying in the woods so we moved out and took the town of Schevenhutte. That night all hell broke loss. They sent a hell of a counterattack against us. There were Germans out the windows.

They were fought off and that took place for close to a month and we were cut off at one time. I was at headquarters where the Colonel was at when the Germans came along the road and he was calling on the radio for help from the First Division. He said I don't know how long were going to be able to hold out. They held out, they fought them off. That took place every night. There was one night, about six o'clock at night, when a woman comes walking down the road through the lines. An infantry guy stopped her and took her back to headquarters and started questioning her and she said the Germans were going to attack at three o'clock in the morning. And the Colonel had a fifty caliber machine gun set up outside of the hill. And sure enough they came through and that night again all hell broke loose and very few of them got through. The ones that got through were killed later on. Any movement at all, there was a two story house with an attic window. We would have a guy up there, an observer. Evidently the Germans spotted him or saw movement up there they pulled their tank up and shot up in the window and blew him right away. In the same town of Schevenhutte in the end food was getting scarce for the civilians and things let up a little bit. From where we had aid station, across the road and down the field a little bit there was a grandfather, father and a five year old daughter in the building. The grandfather and the father were butchering a goat to eat and the German's threw a mortar shell in there, killed the father and the grandfather and blew both the five year old girl's legs off. We couldn't get out with her, we kept her in the aid station and gave her blood plasma and took care of her. She was in pretty good shape as far as shock or anything like that goes. Three days later they were able to get out and take her to the field hospital. I always wondered what happened to her, if she made it. Well about five, ten years ago I was working for a German company, the owner of the company and the engineer came here. After we were done with our business, I said, I hate like hell to bring this up, and I told them about this little girl. The guy says to me, could you give me any names or anything. All I knew was the mayor's name. The engineer says he went to school in Altin, and Schevenhutte was a resource town. He told me he was going to go up there and see if I can find out something and he did, he located her. She has two kids and

she is married and lives in the next town over. I had to go to Germany and this engineer says that when I come over he'll take me over to meet her. Well, when I went to Germany he was in Africa and was suppose to fly back home but the airline was on strike and couldn't get out of Africa so I didn't get to go up.

JZ: She survived the war.

WV: And had two children. But I always wondered about her, did she make it. And she made it. Anyway, that's the town that Lou was a machine gunner and was at an outpost and got shot in both legs. And Lou [LaCivita] and I were good friends. When he got hit, he was able to get on the phone and says to tell Doc, tell Doc that Poncho got hurt. They used to call me Doc. Well I got word and I was down the line a little bit that there was a wounded guy up there. This was two or three o'clock early morning. I had to alert people that I was coming because if not they'll shoot you. Well, it took a little time because I called the one guy in the hole to pass to the next time that I was coming up. They were good at that; they would say, "Hey Doc's coming up watch out for him." Anyway I got up to Poncho, worked on him and patched him up and put two blanket splints on him and brought him down were the jeep could get him. I remember him complaining that he got hit and had two broken legs. I said, "Poncho, don't complain. It's bad you're hit, don't get me wrong you're alive. You're going back to the States. You're going to be alright. He kept saying, yeah but with two broken legs." I say it's the best thing that happened to him. The next town is a town when you read about the Silver Star. It's where all those guys were wounded. Now, would he have made it? Machine Gunners are out there shooting. Once they pick up the direction where you're at they throw mortar shells in there and artillery shells. Machine gunners got to keep moving. He fires a lot here and change positions if not they'll get him right away.

JZ: Tell me about the next town because that was even worse.

WV: Gressenich was the next town, probably about four miles from Schevenhutte. The infantry was moving into Gressenich and there was a wooded area before you got into town. The Germans let us get into the woods and they threw a hell of a mortar and artillery shells. When you're in a wooded area where there's trees and stuff, even if you dig a fox hole you're not protected because when that mortar hits the tree the burst comes down the hole. If you're out in the field and hits the ground it's not going down so you're safe in the hole. We had a large number of wounded people there. We were putting five people on the jeep. The colonel came to me and says that we need to get these wounded guys out of here, what the hell is it going to take? I told him, all we had is a jeep. Get me a half track. He says you'll have it there in ten minutes. Sure enough in ten minutes they brought a half track down there. Then we started loading them up and putting them in the half track. Even guys that should have been on stretchers we didn't put on stretchers to make room to take more people out. As we left this wooded area come down, there was an open road for about a quarter to a half of mile. When we started down across that road that's when they opened up on us. They could see you and with artillery and mortar shells they hammered the hell out of the road. We got them to the aid station and went back to get the rest of them.

JZ: When was this?

WV: Last part of September or first part of October probably of 1944.

JZ: Afterwards you continued on?

WV: Yeah, you kept moving up and after that was the Battle of the Bulge. We were north of the Bulge and that was during the winter with snow. We were out in the fields. The aid station had a tent up. We stayed there until that was over. I think at the Battle of the Bugle we were close to the town of Cologne, we had taken Cologne. Then we moved on and we were in Bonn, Germany when we got word of the Remagen Bridge across the Reine. They moved us down there and I would

say we were the probably with the first hundred men across the Remagen because we had an aid station right in that tunnel. There was a railroad tunnel there. The first day we had the aid station there, and then there was too much commotion with people coming across the bridge and everything else, the shooting and artillery shells coming in. So we moved up the road further and there was a house up there. So we put the aid station in the house. On top of the hill was the autobahn, big highway. From there we went to Camp Dachau, there were the political prisoners, the Jews. It's when they have the crematories. We went through Camp Dachau but never stopped. We went to take the next town, Musberg. There was another infantry outfit. I think it was Forth Infantry that was at Camp Dachau for a day then the special forces came up to take care of the people of Camp Dachau.

JZ: So you didn't stop at Camp Dachau?

WV: No, but let me say this, we took prisoners. We took the guards and whatever we could get there, but we moved on to the next town which was Musberg. It was Musberg that was a prisoner-of-war camp, that's where the American soldiers were. We stayed in Musberg for about a week.

JZ: So you were at Dachau, tell me about what you saw.

WV: Well I saw the crematories where they had the ovens and where they burned them. They had a stretcher that was made out of metal and they would put a body in it and push them in and close the door. They also had the rooms of showers where they put gas in. They had dogs, we shot the dogs. Then there were trenches where they kept Jews that were dead and even some that were alive.

JZ: Were there still other prisoners that were alive too?

WV: Oh yeah there were prisoners, skinny as hell, nothing but bones.

JZ: Did you treat any of them?

WV: We didn't. Our goal was to get to Musberg because there was a prisoners-of-war camp there with American there. We had orders to move on. There was an outfit that came up behind us, I think the Fourth Infantry, and they're the ones that took care of the rest of the prisoners there. Special Forces came in to take care of the people that were in the prison camps.

JZ: So these were Special Forces, special soldiers.

WV: They were medics. They used to buy the soldiers.

JZ: What was your reaction when you saw the camp?

WV: It was awful, we couldn't believe it. I heard two years back someone on television said that the Holocaust never took place. Well I said how stupid can the guy be. I saw it, and I know it took place. It was pitiful what they did to those poor people, they should all be shot. Sometimes we would take a town and the Germans would have someone hanging from a post or tree.

JZ: Tell me about when you got to Musberg, the American POW camp. Tell me about that.

WV: Well we took the town of Musberg. Some of the people I talked to, I was trying to find out if anyone was from Pennsylvania. Hell, they were happy as hell. They put some people from one of the companies to guard them, and a kitchen crew to feed them. They were there too long; I'm going to say three days at most then they would move the prisoners out of there.

JZ: How many American POWs were there?

WV: Oh, I don't know, quite a bit.

JZ: In general, what was the condition like?

WV: Fairly good. Much better than the Jews. The Jews were totally abused. They weren't treated well and that's the biggest thing. A lot of the Germans were trying to take off when we got there.

JZ: Oh, the guards?

WV: Yeah the guards. In fact after I ended up in Elbe River waiting for the Russians, I went back to that camp. That camp, they ended up putting the German soldiers there.

JZ: What did they do, just put them in a camp?

WV: Yeah, the ones that they had information they would put in special camps.

JZ: You said you got to the Elbe River?

WV: We got to the Elbe River and waited for the Russians and waited for the Russians there. Now I never saw the Russians because we were there for awhile then they moved the battalion down to Linz, Austria because there was suppose to be S.S. in the mountain but there wasn't. A couple days after the war ended I was on my way home. I got onto the train. I don't know how many days it took us because every time another train was coming they would put us aside. We ended up in a camp in France. I spent a week in France then got on the ship and came home. When I was on the ship coming home is when they announced the war ended in Japan. We were scheduled to come home for thirty days, then retraining, then Japan.

JZ: Oh wow. So you said you didn't have a rifle. Did you have to fire, use a gun occasionally?

WV: At night I carried a pistol. During the day they didn't want us to show guns with the arm band on.

JZ: Why was that because of the Red Cross?

WV: Number one, the Red Cross and, number two, because if you're going to have a rifle you're going to start shooting and not paying attention to the wounded guy.

JZ: They wanted all your attention on the wounded guy.

WV: Right, on the wounded guy. During the Battle of the Bulge at night we all laid with guns.

JZ: The worse time when you probably had the most casualties would be during the Bulge, would that be correct?

WV: No, I would say the worst casualties were when we were at Saint Lo. And those hedge rows, those guys would come in at ten o'clock morning and by one o'clock someone was dead or wounded. They would try to take care of everyone that came in. The bad thing was the mortar and artillery shells.

JZ: I don't know if you would like to talk about your service and how you were recommended for the Silver Star.

WV: No, I don't.

JZ: You don't want to speak about that?

WV: No, I don't think too much about it.

JZ: Is there a reason why?

WV: Well I got out of the service and this thing was at home, my dad had it with a letter telling me to send it to the Veteran's Administration for review and approval. I said, I have been in the service and this is sent here. Why didn't they do it? What took place was my captain at that time, and he was a medical doctor, at battalion surgery. He got promoted to regimental surgeon. One day he was coming up in a jeep to bring us supplies and see if we needed anything. One of our planes shot and killed him. I got the call to go up there, that a jeep was turned over and on fire. I went up there and with these bars that they had with the stretchers, I put a rope on it and pulled it up and he was under. He was shot through the back. I guess when they went through his personal stuff they found this was and sent it to my home address. They didn't know where I was at. All they had to do was call regiment at and ask where I was but instead they sent it home. I said, what the hell good is it? Nothing.

JZ: When you came home, how did you adapt to civilian life?

WV: When I first came home to be honest with you, I was drinking a little bit. I think everybody that came home, every time a new guy came home that you went to school with or were friends with you went to the bar and had a few drinks. I was home a month and I told my dad I wanted to go to work. So he got me a job in the coal mine. The way we were drinking, all the GIs that came home at that time were drinking pretty heavy, so I went to work in the mine. I had to be up five o'clock in the morning so I couldn't be out drinking too damn much. It's the best thing that happened.

JZ: Did you every face any discrimination because you were Italian?

WV: No. First of all I wouldn't take it and no I never had a problem. Let me say this to you, back in the olden days, I'm going back to the thirties, guy would call me a dago. I would call him a Pollock or something. Even the blacks, there was never a problem. In this town we didn't have a lot of blacks but the blacks we had were never a problem. I didn't know what they were going through but in the thirties they had a hell of a life in Masontown. Now me not going through that, I didn't face that. Now in this town, there used to be Ku Klux, but they never bothered us.

JZ: Did the war change your life? Did it make you grow up more? Did it give you a new perspective on life?

WV: No, the only thing with the training I had and after I came back and worked in the coal mine. When I first came home I was loading coal by hand. You got paid for the coal you put in the wagon. Then that mine closed and I went to work for U.S.Steel. Being a medic and the training I had, the chief safety director asked if I would get on the rescue team. I didn't even know what rescue team was, but I said yes. That was the best move I made because that's where I learned everything about the coal mines. Every time there were classes or new equipment coming in they would send me to it and that's where I got my education about coal mining.

JZ: Would you say some of your medical training and the army helped out?

WV: Yeah because they knew I was medic in the army they wanted me with the rescue team. Even later on I would, I used to train fire companies with their different equipment. In fact I just resigned two weeks ago, for twenty-five years I was on the board of directors for the EMT. I was also on the board at Pittsburgh at the EMSI which is made up of fourteen counties. Emergency Medical Service Incorporated. I told you I am seventy-nine years old and I had to travel to Pittsburgh once a month, its time to quit. Being a member of the board in Fayette County, I went out and raised enough money to buy sixty defibrillators to give to

the policeman and fireman around here. I was shooting for a hundred, but I got sixty. I still was involved with EMTs and fire companies.

JZ: Still serving your country.

WV: Well, I serve it, it's what I like to do and be involved with. As a member of the US Steel rescue team and also the captain I was always called when there was something to replace. Then when I went with the state as Commissioner of Safety I would be called all over the place. I did recovery work, some of it was as captain of the rescue team. Other was I directed the recovery work.

JZ: Anything else you would like to say?

WV: No, not that I can think of. Unless there is something you would like to ask me, feel free to do it. I hope I gave you enough good information.

JZ: Oh absolutely, a lot of interesting stories. Thank you for inviting me into your house. Thank you for your service.

WV: We had an explosion in the coal mine in Homer City up in Indiana. At the mine there were doctors and EMTs. We had a guy that had a whiff of carbon monoxide and the doctor was alright. The doctor and this EMT wanted to go underground and I wouldn't let them because they had never been underground. You never know how people were going to act when they go underground for the first time. After we got done with the recovery work at the mine, I got a call from Doctor Kunckle asking if I would train him. I started training these two ambulance groups. One was from Perry and the other was from Indiana. In case something came up and had to go into the coal mine. After a few trainings they come to me with a plan.

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

JZ: You were saying about Homer City?

WV: Well anyway, Doctor Kunckle came to me and wanted to put a team together called Special Medical Response Team made up of doctors, paramedics and EMTs so that anytime there was emergency in the coal mine that they would be available. I said sure lets put it together. I went to the federal government in Washington, DC and got them a quarter of a million dollars. They bought a truck, equipment that was needed and put a team together. Anytime there was a disaster in the coal mine I would bring the team there. Let me tell you, it's a good feeling to know when you're underground there is a paramedic here and a doctor over there in case something goes wrong. There was a mine fire in Utah. Twenty-eight people were trapped and all of them died. I got a called to go out and help them and I brought the Special Medical Response Team. They went to an earthquake in Mexico. In Ohio there was kid that fell down a hole. And after that I don't know how many phone calls we get about people going into caves and getting lost and having to go look for them.

JZ: Is this the same team that rescued the Quecreek miners?

WV: No, they were up there. The first guy, if it was someone that was sick, the first guy that would be dropped down there was one of the Special Medical Response Team guys. It's a good group, they still meet and I still go to the meetings.

JZ: You're the guy that helped get it started.

WV: I put the team together. At that time when I was working with the state I had the connections if we had to go somewhere I could call and get a plane and go. During the time I was working, anytime there was an emergency a single engine

plane or helicopter was available to me. In fact a couple months back I went to a dinner for twenty-five years that the Special Medical team was organized.

JZ: This is when you were in charge of safety for the state of Pennsylvania.

WV: Yeah.

JZ: Great story.

[End Tape 2, Side A]

[End of Interview]