A Veterans Oral History
Roland Dille

Heritage Education Commission
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Moorhead, MN

In 2000, Bev Paulson, Heritage Education Commission member, developed a plan to record Veterans' oral histories, starting with WW II Veterans. Bev made a significant personal donation to start our Veterans' oral history project which was supplemented by other concerned individuals, we have recorded 65 oral histories of WWII veterans plus a few Korean War and Vietnam War Veteran. The project is ongoing.

The transcription project began in 2013 and has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota through the Minnesota Historical Society from the Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund.

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Recording Length: Three Sections: 46.11
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Roland Dille Biography

Roland Dille was born in Dassel, MN and was drafted into the Army in 1943. His duties and training included Basic training and anti-tank training during the early years. As he progressed into his military career, some of his other duties and assignments included anti-tank gunner, military police, student at Biarritz Army University, Army of Occupation - Austria and he was in charge of a carpenter shop with 12 German prisoners - 1945-46. Roland served in the Battle of Northern France and received numerous decorations. His final rank was T/5. After his service ended Roland Dille was a teacher and became President at Minnesota State University Moorhead from 1968-1994.

Transcription

LJ: Your name?

RD: My name is Roland Dille.

LJ: And -- Dr. Dille, where were you born?

RD: I was born on a farm about two miles from Dassel, Minnesota, in September of 1924.

LJ: And, just where is Dassel?

RD: Dassel is 50 miles straight west of Minneapolis, 35 miles south of St. Cloud.

LJ: Was it a big town at that time?

RD: Town then of about 680 people.

LJ: Who were your parents and what did they do?

RD: My parents? My father was a farmer and my mother was a housewife, as those things went. He'd been born eight miles south of Dassel and she'd been born nine miles north of Dassel, which meant I grew up with lots of relatives. And my father was very interested in politics of a sort. He was on the town board, school board, county commissioner for eight years, back on the town board. My mother was on the town board. I thought she was the first woman in Minnesota on a town board but she wasn't. We had a neighbor who was. She was appointed when my father got elected county commissioner. She was appointed by the board as a member of the town board. We went to church in town and went to school in town.

LJ: And did you complete high school in Dassel?

RD: I graduated at Dassel High School on -- well it must have been May, May of 1942. I had gone all through school there, starting with a small class in kindergarten. There were 13 of us. Finally graduated with a class of 38 because, of course, in the ninth grade lots of kids come in from country schools.

LJ: Did you go on to college from there?

RD: Yes. Let me go back a bit and point out that -- I started my senior year in September 1941 and it was in December that, that Pearl Harbor came. And we all knew that we were slated but we didn't know when. So we went ahead with our plans. I graduated and my friends and I decided to go to the University of Minnesota, which we did. We started then in September 1942 at the University of Minnesota.

LJ: And -- were you drafted eventually or did you elect …

RD: Yes, they were drafting people from the ages of 19 to, I think, 35 or 36, eventually to the age of 38. No 18-year-olds were drafted. And then at Christmas, when I was a freshman at college, we had to register for the draft if we were 18 and, thereafter, anybody 18 years old would register for the draft. I registered for the draft at Christmas vacation. I went back to the University of Minnesota, and -- I was called up in the first part of May, before the end of the semester but I, I got grades for all my courses and finally, went in, well, on Memorial Day 1942. I went into the Army.

LJ: So you got one year in of college, right, and then went into the Army?

RD: Right.

LJ: Could you have chosen the branch that you served in or were you -- told?

RD: Well, one of my best friends and I went down the same day. He took the Navy and I took the Army.

LJ: Okay. So you did have a say?

RD: Right. By that time, of course, several of my friends had volunteered in various ways. At least three of them had volunteered for the Air Force, that's the way you got sure of getting into the Air Force by volunteering. And my -- one of my two roommates -- got into a Navy program which kept him in college until he got his degree and then he was commissioned after that.

LJ: Where did you go for your military training?

RD: I had in -- April, or something like that, taken a test that anyone could take. If you got a certain level of -- a certain grade, you would be eligible to go to a program, in either the Navy or the Army, depending on what you were in, called the Army Specialized Training Program. So I assumed that was where I would be going eventually. So after we left Fort Snelling on the 13th of June 1942, we went down to Fort Riley, Kansas, where we had our basic training. Thirteen weeks, it went a little longer than that -- and everybody in that battalion, which was part of the cavalry -- although we didn't have any horses or anything -- we were just taking our training under cavalry officers who were "_____+" they were very beautiful people with their shiny boots and their, their -- Army, or their horse-riding trousers, and very tough. We had a good basic training. Then some of the people who had thought they were going on to college were not allowed to because the first day in the Army we took what's called the -- well it's called the Army IQ test. And if you didn't do very well in that then you really couldn't go on to college, so I lost some of my friends there, but. We went then to the University of Nebraska, getting there in the middle of September 1943.

LJ: Any special memories of the -- the military training?

RD: Well, yes. I have a lot of memories. It was interesting. Of course everybody in the battalion, -- that's what they called it -- in the cavalry, I don't remember; but everybody in our troop, so I knew well -- 200 and some, had been in college or was going to go on to college. They were from all over and it was a pretty exciting thing to meet so many people because in the '30s we didn't travel very much. We didn't have the money and it wasn't something you did, so getting to know a great number of people in a lot of places was kind of important to me. I went to see a baseball game. The Army -- the Fort Riley team played a game. I went to see it. And one of the fielders was a fellow named Pete Reiser, who had been one of my heroes. He was one of the leaders for the Brooklyn Dodgers who won the pennant two years earlier. One day walking down the street from a movie, we noticed that there was a boxing match going on. There were a lot of very small people in Fort Riley because they were Hispanic, from Texas they knew about horses and they also, I suppose, were aiming to use them in some less than exciting effort -- cleaning barns and so on. That's the way the Army was. There was also a lot of, of what we then called Negro troops. We were walking by this -- vacant area -- I noticed there was fight going on so I stopped and watched it. It was a couple of very lightweight boxers, featherweights probably. But the exciting thing about it was the referee was Joe Lewis, who was stationed at Fort Riley and later on that summer we had a party, a beer bust they called it. I was from Dassel and didn't drink but I'd gone to a movie, which we hadn't done in Dassel either. And I came over afterwards and there was a civilian there. He was talking baseball so we all talked baseball. I was never a

baseball player. I was a basketball player but not baseball, which was something I always wanted to be. So I did what many people did, I became kind of a scholar of the game, in a way. I knew everybody's batting average and all sorts of things, read a lot of books about baseball. So, I'm sure that, as I think back, I had a lot to say. I probably even told the guy some things I thought he ought to know. But then he walked away and I said, "Who is that?" "Well, that's Ty Cobb," who at that time may have been, we thought perhaps the greatest ball player that ever lived. I hope I didn't tell him how to slide into third. It was said that he left scars on 2,000 third basemen over time. Those are the things I remember and I remember some really great people that I got to know -- and then we all went off to, to Nebraska.

LJ: And, how long were you in Nebraska?

RD: Well, I took the -- I was put into the second class because I'd already had a lot of college courses. But a lot of people had had, but I had freshman English and I hadn't had much math. Finished the first term, first quarter at Christmastime, then started the second one and early in January they announced the program was going to fold. It was quite clear to the Army, though not to us, that we were going to win the war and we were going to win it fairly soon. Who would have thought that? Anyway, they were to close it down. They said, "The war would be over with before you graduate. We need to have somebody to invade Europe."

LJ: How could they determine it was going to be such a fast war?

RD: Well, you remember the war started in 1941. By May of 1942, we had essentially destroyed the Japanese fleet. It was going to take a long time but nothing was going to stop us. In -- and in January of '41 -- I mean, sorry, June of '41, before Pearl Harbor, the Germans had invaded Russia. And about the time of Pearl Harbor, they had come against Moscow and hadn't made it. And it was quite clear that Russia would eventually triumph and England had held out all by itself for so long that we were encouraged to be, to be their partners. So -- we had -- through a great miracle of the war, which obviously, we converted to -- wartime industry. We were turning out airplanes, tanks, everything we needed. So, we were told that was it. But if you were going to be a, a doctor or a dentist or an interpreter, you could stay in -- and it so happened, I had an acceptance at dental school, largely because my sister-in-law was a secretary of the dean of dental school at the University of Minnesota. I had good grades as a freshman, so -- if I completed the required courses, I would be accepted into dental school. So I walked around that night, pocket for a week, and then finally, finally threw it away. And decided I got to choose between being a dentist and invading Europe, I guess I'm for Europe. I wish I could pass it off as a matter of courage or what not. It was just a feeling that that was our war and I wanted to be in it. I didn't want to be a dentist anyway. It had been a really very interesting six months because we were all allowed in on the basis of the test scores, which didn't necessarily say that we'd make great engineers, so there were quite a few fellows who were no more engineering material than I was. And in my own particular platoon -- that's not what they called it -- but 25 people, there were seven of us who were very much interested in literature. And they convinced me one ought to give one's life to literature. Be a poet if you can. Be

novelist if you can't be a poet. If you can't be either of them, be a scholar and a teacher. So out of those seven, four became doctors.

LJ: That's terrific.

RD: And one who died about three years ago became probably the most distinguished student of constitutional history in the United States. He was Regents Professor of the University of Minnesota. And the other one, besides me -- died in the war. And then there was me, and I went into English.

LJ: Terrific. So where did you go after your -- your schooling in Nebraska?

RD: We were shipped down as were, see there were a lot, a lot of these programs and from a lot of places, we were shipped down to Camp Robinson in Arkansas, just outside of Little Rock. We arrived, got off the train. It was raining -- and the sergeant who had us lined up there standing for two hours was saying, "We'll teach you college boys what it's like to be in the Army." And then we went into our various companies. I joined the, I'd found that I was a member of the 66th Black Panther Division. And it was a rather unusual thing because that division had begun in June the previous year. They had gone through basic training, gone through maneuvers, and then bam, the invasion was coming up. They took every private out of the division and sent them overseas, leaving the officers and the noncommissioned officers there. And we came in. Well, they were awfully close friends to the ones who had left and there was an initial some dislike for us, especially since none of them had ever gone to college and all of us had gone to a couple of years of college. But we soon found out that that didn't make any difference. And, they tried to work us too hard but they didn't realize we had physical training under some real experts at the University of Nebraska every day for six months and we were in pretty good shape. But the wetness and the terrible heat in our cabin because of one fellow living there and he insisted on keeping the heat way up, sent me to the hospital. And they took a blood test and lost it, and took another one and lost it. I said, "I got mononucleosis," which I'd had the previous year. They said, "No that's not it." Well, then the division got orders to move out and my captain came to see me -- and he said, "We can leave you or we can take you along if you want to leave the hospital early." I said, "I want to go along." They redid the blood test but it hadn't come back yet but they let me out. And they were making me a, I didn't have to go to work for a while, what was then called Camp Rucker, Alabama; now it is Fort Rucker and the center of all the helicopter Army services. It was just kind of, another Army camp.

LJ: And, how long were you in Alabama?

RD: Let's see we got there -- after about a month in Arkansas, we got there then sometime in April and we were there long enough then to get our furloughs. We all had furloughs pretty much at the same time, the first couple of weeks of July; came back and then, everybody who hadn't got a furlough, got a furlough, even if you were going to be coming or not. We knew then, of course, we were slated to go overseas. But we didn't immediately leave Camp Rucker until about the 1st of November. Now, if you think back on the war, we had invaded -- I'm sorry -- yes, D-day had been in the June of '44, this was now November of '44. In November we

invaded the Philippine Islands. That looks like things were drawing to a close. But of course, we still had Okinawa and Iwo Jima [?] ahead of us. I remember when we got word we were going overseas, some of us went down to a movie; it was a Sunday afternoon. And a friend of mine said, "Gee, are they going to send us over there to fight those grown men?" We thought of ourselves as pretty young. We found out that Germans were younger. So -- we left Camp Rucker. Now I'd been in the same platoon since March and we were getting to be awfully close friends. Went to New York and were there for -- oh, about 10 days. We got into New York City three times and saw three plays. A really great all-black play called -- oh it had Hilda Simms in it and -- Canada Lee. -- Well anyway, kind of second-rate romantic comedy.

LJ: Was that your first time?

RD: Yeah.

LJ: To New York City?

RD: My first time in New York, my first time to see a …

LJ: Oh.

RD: I had seen a couple of plays at the University of Minnesota and high school plays. So we went to what I suspected to be a third-rate musical called "Mexican Hayride."

LJ: Where did you stay those 10 days in New York before you were . . .

RD: Well, we were about 50 miles up the, up the Hudson, Camp Shanks. I think it was Camp Shanks. Anyway, we could get a pass any day to go into New York in the evening.

LJ: Um hum.

RD: So we were there then in Times Square on election night 1944, when Roosevelt defeated Dewey and got a third term. And it was getting crowded. We went to a movie and saw "To Have and Have Not" with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. I can still quote passages from that movie. It has really stuck. We came out and it was after midnight and Roosevelt had won pretty easily. And Times Square wasn't as rambunctious as we thought it was going to be. Two days later we, we -- left. It was then, of course, sometime after the first of November we left -- Alabama. I suppose the election was something like the seventh. And we were around a few days longer, because we were on the ocean during, on -- Thanksgiving.

LJ: What was the ship like that you were on going overseas?

RD: It was very small, very small in the North Atlantic in the early winter, late fall, a pretty stormy place and I came down with seasickness very quickly. Most of us did. I picked up my Thanksgiving dinner and went out to where we stood and ate; took one look and got out of there. The -- well it was interesting, anyway. You know I had never seen the ocean before.

LJ: Sure. How long were you on the sea?

RD: I think it was 10 days.

LJ: 10 days.

RD: And we were in a convoy, quite a few ships and there were destroyers -- out there to keep the submarines away from us. And so, we landed then in late November in Plymouth, England. Which was a pretty exciting thing for me, as English literature was one of my interests even then; and to suddenly see a foreign country is something one cannot really describe when thinking about. It was a unique experience. Got on a train and took us to a small town. A truck picked us up and they took us to a little town called Beaminster. Our company took over various houses, housing there. We stayed a couple of months. It was -- that was interesting, too, to get to go to England. I had read, the last book I read before I went into the Army in freshman English was *The Return of the Native* by Thomas Hardy. I knew we were in Hardy country. One day I was on a detachment to go and pick up ammunition at Dorchester, which was where Hardy had lived, and bring it back and I was pretty excited about that. The town called Beaminster turns up in a couple of, of books from Hardy, couple of novels as "Emminster." So we learned about pubs and we learned about land girls and we learned about all sorts of things. We went to a card party in the city of Hull (sp?) about three miles away. Two young women, one was pushing a baby carriage, had come by and invited us to come up there, so we walked up to this little cabin. And that was the first time I had heard about a very well-kept secret; that is, the German B-2 bombs that were bombing London. No, there was no news about that. They didn't want to let the Germans know how successful they were. It was really pretty horrible. There were after all 93,000 British civilians killed during the war. So I got a pass to London. I came down on Christmas morning.

LJ: That must have been exciting.

RD: Yeah. They said, "You can't go. We're going to go to France instead."

LJ: Oh?

RD: So we spent Christmas Day then waiting to go. I was on an anti-tank company. We had a 57-mm gun and I was the number-two man. I was the loader. And the corporal, who was the guy named by the sergeant, was off to the side telling us who to shoot at. And -- so we had trucks, which was pretty good; we had our own trucks. So we waited all that day. We were going to have steak for dinner that day, but we weren't going to have dinner so they handed out K-rations and they gave us each a piece of steak which we then cooked over whatever kind of fire we could make in the street. I remember waiting all that day, all that Christmas Day. There was a very pretty, young woman who would stand behind the walled area and look at us all the time. She was young. We all speculated as to why she never came out. That day she came out and came over and kissed each of us and went back. It's a, it's a, kind of a sweet memory.

LJ: Uh huh.

RD: And then, we started out for . . .

LJ: Now, this was in France?

RD: No, this was still in England.

LJ: In England.

RD: And so Christmas Day we started out [____+] to get into our landing craft tanks and we got there and we heard that one of our ships had been sunk on the day before, Christmas Eve – Leopoldville. And we lost 1,800 [800] men from our division, all riflemen. Well we got to, we got to -- most of the night we were on the channel. We got to France, landed at Cherbourg. We were sent out to a little village, not far from there and told to wait. Some little boys were there and I, for the first time in my life, I spoke French using my phrase book. I said, "Asseyez-vous ici. You sit down here." And they sat down, I thought, "Hey, piece of cake." And we gave them candy and things like that. And we waited and we started off the next day and everybody said -- you see, our French was that bad, they said, "Well, we heard we're going to Reims." Well, you must remember that the Battle of the Ardennes Forest was then going on -- what they called the Battle of the Bulge, it was pretty clear to us that we were going into the Battle of the Bulge. Well we didn't go to Reims; we went to Rennes, which was in the middle of Brittany. And so all that day we went through where they stormed Normandy fighting, got into Brittany, came to Rennes. We stayed there for about three days and then we went down to the front. In Brittany there were three towns, Saint-Malo, Lorient and Saint-Nazaire, another town south near Bordeaux, where the Germans had not surrendered. They had -- when our tanks came through, they came through so fast they couldn't take time with all the prisoners. So some of us just went in. We had our division was 15,000 men, less the 800 we lost -- we're detailed to keep the Germans at Lorient and Saint-Nazaire. There were about 90,000 of them. And so that's what we did. We -- they weren't going to come out and we weren't going to go in. But we, we had as partners the Free French Army. So on New Year's Eve we moved down -- to our -- I suppose our battalion headquarters. And that night on guard we could see the light of artillery through our artillery "____+" farmhouse. Well, our platoon took over this town called Lanton (sp?), Lanton(sp?). And my squad was at a farmhouse about a mile out of town and the first squad was in three dugouts about a half a mile up the road. And the third squad was in a schoolhouse in town. And between us and the Germans, there were Free French dug in. And New Year's Eve, that New Year's Day, that first night, I and one of my best friends, my best friend in the squad, Barney Johnson and I, were on guard and we, the artillery came in. We could hear it creeping up on us. One hit right behind the house. These were small weapons. They were German 88. They didn't do a lot of damage but they had to hit something. And I remember Barney and I said, "The next one will come right over that house, right on us." And it did. But it went in the ditch right across the road from where we were. And the shrapnel was all around us and knocked "____" stone off. And I said, "Boy, are we dumb. Why didn't we lie down when we knew it was coming!" We didn't. Meanwhile, they, a whole bunch of shells burst in the dugouts, a half mile up the road. And our telephone connections went out, we thought they were all dead probably. But in the morning here they came carrying their mess kits down the road, because we ate, ate at our house there. The food came out -- we ate twice a day. The food would come out from the headquarters and those would come down and eat with us. And -- we all got a Combat Infantry Badge, which you get for having been under enemy fire, or in contact with the

enemy. Well I didn't, neither did Barney. I had to write a thing for the -- the other -- other squad. I wrote a -- I wrote a satire which got to the captain by mistake. He was not terribly amused but not terribly angry either. I was a little upset that we, you know, I got shrapnel flying around me. They said, "Don't worry, you'll get your chance." We were there three weeks. We were a mile out of town. And every day somebody would go into town and buy steaks and bring them back. There was no way for those steaks to get shipped anyplace, so we weren't supposed to eat food in France, but we could eat those. There was a woman butcher. And we, we went off guard at midnight or one o'clock, whatever, and buy ourselves a steak. It was not bad duty, not bad duty.

LJ: You spoke about staying in this house. Was it an abandoned house?

RD: Yes. Everything was, it hadn't been, they'd moved out. It hadn't been abandoned, really but it was close, the Germans were right over there. And so it was a farmhouse, which meant that there was a big room downstairs with a fireplace and a big table. There was a, a bedroom off to the side where the lieutenant and the company sergeant, the platoon sergeant were, as well as the medic and the jeep driver. Then upstairs we were in what would be a hay mound, because attached to the house then was the barn, and the barn had big doors, we kept our guns in there, our guns and our truck in there. Our gun and our truck -- one 57-mm gun for each, each squad. So we were there for only three weeks and then we were moved to another part of the front to a little town called "___+" which had been totally abandoned, because the Germans were on one side of the canal and we were on the other. And they were hidden in dugouts. And during the day we could go into the town or hang around in that orchard which we had. And in town there were lots of houses to explore. And, there were a million gallons of wine, but nobody ever dared take any. There was big barrels and they were afraid they may be poisoned. And there's nobody there. A week before we had arrived, our cannon company, our artillery had put an observation booth in a spire of the church. And the day it was finished, the church was blown up, by the Germans who had come through carrying, we were told, C mines and then just "____" blown it all to pieces. So, you know, when we realized that, the day we came in all of our places were being fired on and they had gone after that church, they had another one deadlocked. A good spy system. There were a lot of French people collaborating. So we were there for three weeks. We -- we had a dugout and then we had a passageway from the dugout to another small area and that's where we stayed on guard at night to watch and see if anybody was going to come out. There was artillery most nights that came over us and hit, who knows what they were shooting at; apparently they had plenty of shells because they kept shooting. I know, when I talk about the kind of, information the Germans had, back in the old farmhouse some of us had decided we'd go out and practice shooting our guns. We weren't exactly a priority sector. We were issued seven, seven shells per our weapons each week. I carried a pistol -- which is what you did if you loaded, loaded the cannon. And they handed out rifles to everybody but I was someplace else so I carried that pistol, although I wasn't ready to kill anybody. But we decided to go out and shoot it. We'd found a can and put it up against a haystack and shoot. The first thing we know, we were being fired upon by what we thought was the biggest shell that the Germans had. The kind

they used for their, their -- coastal defense. They came, as they always say in books, it sounded like a freight train coming in. It did. And boy, we got back to our place in a hurry. So in the evening then it was, you know there was not any snow there all that winter or, if there it was, it was very little. It went very quickly. We'd stand outside of our dugout before it got dark. We watched the Germans across the canal quite a ways off. We could shoot at them if we wanted to but nobody ever wanted to. It didn't seem to, it seemed too cold-blooded, I mean. We all assumed if we charged anybody we'd shoot like mad or if they charged us, we'd shoot. Except during target practice, when we were being, nobody ever, nobody ever "____+." So after three weeks we went back on reserve.

LJ: So these Germans you were watching, they were just content watching you, too?

RD: Well, I don't think they wanted to draw any fire on themselves; and they couldn't see us as well as we could see them because we were in that orchard. They were a long way off.

LJ: Okay.

RD: While we were out there one day, I got my pass to London, only this time it was to Paris. So I went into Paris for four days along with my platoon commander, Lieutenant Price.

LJ: That must have been exciting.

RD: It was really exciting. I saw everything in Paris one shouldn't see. I took a tour. I saw an Army review. I saw a play put on by the USO. I went to the Folies Bregère -- and you know, Notre Dame and everything -- the Louvre, the -- Napoleon's tomb. I saw it all -- it was a cold, cold desolate winter, of course, and everybody was cold and, of course, back in our dugout it was warm. And we could read at night because, Barney Johnson, my friend who was a genius of sorts, figured out a way to mix kerosene and calvados, which is apple brandy. It made a beautiful light to read by.

LJ: Um. Wouldn't that draw attention to you guys?

RD: Not in the dugout.

LJ: Okay. How deep was the dugout?

RD: Well, it was deep enough so …

LJ: Oh, okay.

RD: We had, there were logs around and they were all covered with dirt and nobody could see anything from there.

LJ: That's good.

RD: On the way back from Paris, the captain would say, "Boy that Rue," the lieutenant said, "that 'Rue Pig Alley' is really something." That's the Rue Pigalle, which is where all the bars and the prostitutes were and I said, "Pig Alley?" "You mean you didn't go to 'Pigalle,' 'Pig Alley'?" "No I didn't go." "What the hell did you do?" I told him. I thought he was disappointed in me "____+" What I had done was

bought a bunch of books including a novel by Henry Miller who could not be published in the United States. One of my, one of my friends in our poetry club back in the University of Nebraska had said, "If you get to France, make sure you buy Henry Miller's books." So, now I'd never seen anything like that. I remember lying in our bunk, which we had dug out in the walls of the dugout one night and I said, "Listen to this." And I read a passage to them, incredibly obscene and I remember a fellow said, "That ain't in no book, you just made that up." I said, "Have you ever heard me swear?" Which I didn't do; I was quite good about swearing. So we went back to a town called "____", which was a town we went to once a week to get a shower, in an Army shower unit. And we stayed in a big country house, near a bunch of old castles, and found abandoned, I think. And we played a lot of touch football and our platoon commander, our platoon sergeant broke his leg playing football, so our sergeant, squad sergeant was moved up to take his place. And while we were there we got our first passes to go into Nantes, a city of about a million people on the seacoast. And -- Oh man, just think, we're going to be going to the USO and the Red Cross club. Well there wasn't any USO; there wasn't any Red Cross club. We were at the front, of course. Now, back in England, shortly before Christmas, we read in the Army newspaper that the big hit, number one on the Hit Parade was "Don't Fence Me In." "Don't Fence Me In." What in the world kind of song is that? We had lived, as my generation did, with the Hit Parade. We had defined ourselves, our romance and everything through the songs on the Hit Parade for all those years before. And here was a song on the Hit Parade that we had never heard; we were wild to find out what it was all about. But we didn't know, we couldn't find out. So we went into, we listened to the radio in England, but we never heard it. When we got our first pass to Nantes, we went down to, into town. There was no Red Cross club. We went to bars. There was no music. De Gaulle said no music. "_____+" free til evenings. And nobody played "Don't Fence Me In" to us. Went to the opera one night. It was a Tuesday night, and I remember we couldn't stay until the end of it. Rigoletto, we had to leave early because the road we went on back to where we were stationed was bombarded about midnight every Tuesday night. So we went back. I remember we, how in the world did Rigolleto end, how does it end? And somebody said, "Well, I got another question. How did it begin? We couldn't figure out any of it." It was a glorious experience, anyway, for a bunch of privates in the Army. And, we found one place where they would serve us food. We weren't supposed to do that but they gave us fried eggs and fried -- potatoes. So there was plenty of that around. And they couldn't ship it to Paris, that's the way people were. And then we wasted our time in the brothels on the waterfront which, let me tell you, we were a very moral group. Nobody ever went upstairs with a girl but we had no other place to go. They put up with it pretty well. We left huge tips and we play. We didn't drink much either; we were rather an "___" group. Oh what a bunch of, well, we were 1930s born, was what we were. And I remember playing -- where you put all your chairs around and pull one away …

LJ: Oh sure.

RD: What's that called? Oh well …

LJ: I know what you mean, I just can't …

RD: Anyway, they turned on the phonograph and there we were. There was a dwarf who worked there standing on the table, just [clap, clap, clap] he'd clap, you know, and we'd all run for the chairs. Well I never told my mother about that. It didn't seem to be the sort of thing she would be interested in. But she wouldn't have, she would have thought it was amazing. Nobody ever went upstairs with a woman there. But it's part of our experience. Then we moved to another place and still on reserve. And some of us were sent out to guard the general's house and, what do you know, there was a USO show, show in the next town. So we divided ourselves very carefully to those who could sing and those who couldn't. And those of us who could sing went to the afternoon thing, to have them sing "Don't Fence Me In," but it had been cancelled. So that evening the ones who couldn't sing went over and they all came back and said we heard "Don't Fence Me In." Sing it; sing it again, Sam. And they couldn't, they couldn't sing it. So we didn't know. Well, then one day, one day it came out in the Army hit "____". So it's still my favorite pop song of all time. It took so long to hear.

LJ: "Don't Fence Me In."

RD: Give me land, lots of land . . .

LJ: Yeah.

RD: You know, it's a really great song. I said, of course it was written by Cole Porter, of all people. It was part of a movie called "Hollywood Canteen." Well, then we went on reserve in another place, Ploërmel, which is interesting, the last, big nightly, not really a pageant, battle between knights. It was, of course, a show being held at Ploërmel. And that's where we were when we heard that Roosevelt had died. We didn't do anything but sat around our tents. We had a big tent then, officers cried. And during the day we came down into town and the Frenchmen kept telling us how sorry they were. And then it was decided that we should send somebody down to guard some prisoners. So 10 of us went down. My friends and I went down, to -- what they called a "___" no that wouldn't be it; that was a German town not far away where there is some 100 German prisoners who were kept in the stockade. And they were the rail-head for our quartermaster company. So they would work and we would guard them. We had our tent right outside. And that was interesting, very interesting. We were right on the big canal and I would walk along the canal. I remember I was reading -- oh what's happened to my mind? -- an English novel; an English writer Carlyle, I guess, on power and what not. And I thought, "How interesting to be guarding these Germans." Well we went back. Barney Johnson hadn't come with us. Barney, you see, was known as "Sad Sack" because Sad Sack was a cartoon character who looked just like Barney. He never shaved very closely, he couldn't. He had an acne face. He was thin. He was hunched over. His clothes looked like he had got them at the Salvation Army, but he was maybe the best soldier I ever saw.

LJ: Um, hum.

RD: And he could do anything. He played the harmonica. And we'd been close together, you know, for a year. On the way back, the driver said, "Hey, Sad Sack got transferred out." And -- he thought that was funny because if you didn't know Sad Sack, you'd kind of make him a joke. And the guy looked back and we were all crying, you know. He was our friend.

LJ: Break up the group.

RD: Yeah.

LJ: Yeah. Where did he end up going?

RD: He was, because he was as good as he was, he was taken into a tank company to repair tanks. They needed somebody and you know without a computer, he could still spot it. Now, see I told you that one of the friends in our poetry organization called the -- Ezra Pound/E. E. Cummings Poetry Club, we even had a thing that we all signed. Paul Murphy, in constitutional law, he didn't go overseas. And when I met him on the university campus, I said, "Whatever happened to you, Paul?" He said, "Well, they wanted somebody to play the piano and type. I got transferred out and sent to an officers' club someplace where I -- where I typed all day and played the piano in the officers' club at night."

LJ: Really?

RD: He really felt he had been cheated. A lot of his friends went down on that ship including -- I said one of our people got killed in Hawaii, but he went down on that ship. And a few years ago, walking in the cemetery above Omaha Beach there were these -- all these people who were buried there with their names. And then along the wall, there was a plaque of people missing in action and on this plaque was . . . Well -- we -- we then -- something terrible happened to me --

LJ: What was that?

RD: I had to go back and guard more prisoners. And this time they started out by going through some sort of a roster, so my friends and I, this time they started at the top of the roster, started at the bottom of the roster, I don't know how people were assigned. Then they went to the top, I was the man on top, so I was there with 12 guys I didn't much care for. They were okay but they weren't my friend . . .