

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
www.heritageed.com
Moorhead, MN

Emery Roy
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

ER: My name is Emery Roy. I am a retired Presbyterian clergyman. I was born and raised in North Dakota in the little town of St. John, up on the Canadian border, about three miles from Canada and went to school there, graduated from high school and spent some time there after graduation doing some odd jobs. I didn't go to college right away because that was still at the end of the depression years in the '30s.

I graduated in 1938; and went in the service in 1943. I was sent to the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks to radio school and learned Morse code, and then, was in basic training in California. And following basic training I went overseas to Europe, landing in England first, and spending the time there from February until the landing on the beach of Normandy. And about 30 days after the Normandy landing, the unit that I was with went on the mainland of Europe.

I was in a combat engineer battalion, attached to Third Army Headquarters, General Patton's Army and served my year-and-a-half in Europe with the Third Army with this combat battalion. The battalion itself was trained to build bridges. That was our chief responsibility. I did not have an opportunity to make use of my Morse code training because where we were and such, we were not actually in combat, so there was no need for that type of communication. So I did some other things. I was a jeep driver for a while and had some kind of general duties like that.

Then at the end of the war, I had an interesting experience. I was sent for about three months to Norway with a contingent of Allied troops to send back the German soldiers that were in Norway when the war ended. And to destroy their military equipment that they had there and then help Norway kind of get ready for living without being occupied by the Germans. Then I returned to the United States and was discharged from the Army after two-and-half years in the service.

My memories of the war were that I'm glad I had the experience. I feel that it helped me in a lot of ways to be more mature and having grown up in a small

community, never having had a chance to do any traveling and any chance to see some of the world and meet other people. And my memories have to do, I guess, mostly with not only the American troops that I got acquainted with; I was in a unit primarily made up of men from the New York City area. So they were Easterners and that was a new part of the country really, for me, as far as knowing any people.

But one of my experiences that I've often thought about was especially in the closing days of the World War in Germany where I was – there wasn't really a front line. There was kind of – everything was moving very fast and we didn't have camps so we operated from – we just kind of almost operated on the run, because the Third Army especially was advancing so rapidly that it was just mostly on the move. And one of the things that we did when we went into a town in the evening to stop for the night, we were allowed to ask a family to move out of their home so we could occupy it for the night. And one particular night we did this. It was a family – I think it was a three-generation family. And there were some smaller children and grandparents and there was a mother but the father I think was in the service, was in the German army. We were not supposed to visit with them, not supposed to fraternize with the German people – that was against military regulations. However, in the evening after we had eaten and they had finished their evening meal, they were in a little house at the back of the main house where we stayed. We invited them to come in and visit and the grandfather could speak good English.

We could not speak German but he spoke English and we had a nice visit. And he shared with us some of what it meant to grow up under the Hitler regime. He gave us some insights into what it was like. He said, for example, that it was not people of his generation that were the supporters of Hitler but Hitler was able to capture the mind of the young people. That's where he got his main support. And we felt that he was not just saying that trying to make himself look good, you know, but that he really felt that. And that was good for us to understand a little bit of what was going on in the minds of the German people at that time.

But the interesting thing was that, in that little while, it was such a kind of a friendship established between us. In that hour or so we visited, when it came time for them to go out to their house in the back and for us to go to bed for the night, he came to one of us and he said, "If you would like, one of us will stay up tonight and guard in case any German troops would come by and we warn you so that you can take proper protection to protect yourself." And again, it just felt as though a kind of miracle of people who were supposed to be enemies becoming friends and caring about one another, and it's something I've always remembered.

And I think it was in a home in France when we were doing the same things. Well I'm not sure now what country, but I don't think it was Germany. It's possible it was. My memory gets a little uncertain here. But one night, when we were staying in a home, well the war was drawing toward a close and the American troops were

looking for souvenirs to take home – looking especially for cameras, so we'd always look through every house. And it was said that when the American soldiers went home after World War II, there wasn't a camera left in Germany. They just cleaned out the cameras.

Well, anyway, as we were in this house and that night, we were looking around to see what we might find; we went down in a cellar and there was a room there and, well, it was a vegetable cellar and fruit cellar. And there was some cupboards in there and went in there and looked and here were jars of canned fruit and canned vegetables. And I remember one of the men said, "Look at this. This is just like what we do at home. They are just like we are. My mother puts up vegetables. They do the same thing." He said, "Why are we fighting these people. Why are we so alienated from them when we have so much in common?" you know. Well, a simple little illustration.

And I've always remembered that it shows that, you know, you get to scratch the surface and get down underneath and we have a lot of the same needs and hopes and problems as anybody else, even though we're separated by language and culture and geography, yet we're still all just human beings and so those are things that stayed with me through the years and I've often thought about and felt that it was good for me to have had that experience.

Then I returned after my period in the service was over, to go to college and prepare for the ministry. I had a technical rating being not a line officer. I had nothing to do with commanding of troops but mine was a technical, as a radio job. And so, I had a rating equal to – the same as a corporal, but it was called a T5. And I went in the service voluntarily although I knew that my draft number was coming up soon and so I decided to volunteer rather than to wait for that. So that was how I got into the service was by volunteering. So I guess that's kind of my story.