

Michael O'Brien Oral History

World War II in Carver County Oral History Project

November 17, 1999

Interviewer: Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson

Interview with Michael O'Brien

Interviewed by Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson

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Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson SHW
Michael O'Brien MO

SHW: This is the World War II Era in Carver County Oral History Project. It is November 17, 1999. I am the interviewer. My name is Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson. Today we are going to be interviewing Mike O'Brien. If you could say your full name and spell it, we will get started.

MO: Mike O'Brien.

SHW: When and where were you born is the first question.

MO: I was born on April 8, 1925, in Sibley County.

SHW: Where in Sibley County?

MO: Right adjacent to Carver County, southwest of Carver County.

SHW: Did you grow up there?

MO: Yes, I grew up in Arlington, Minnesota.

SHW: Were your parents farmers, or did they do something else?

MO: My father hauled livestock to South St. Paul.

SHW: That must have been interesting.

MO: It was at that time, yes.

SHW: Did you help him with the job when you were a kid?

MO: The last few years when I was in high school I did help.

SHW: What year did you graduate from high school?

MO: 1943.

SHW: During the late 1930s and early 1940s before American got into the war, were you aware of what was going on? You must have been pretty young, actually.

MO: Well, I wasn't that young. I was like fourteen or fifteen years old. We always delivered papers, so we had a lot of papers around the house. There were three Minneapolis papers. Brothers or sisters delivered each one of them, so we got a free paper. That was one of the benefits. So we were aware of what was going on pretty well.

SHW: Did you think America was going to get involved?

MO: It seemed that way, yes. It seemed that way at that time. My mother had four brothers in the First World War, so we always made kind of a connection there. She knew what it was like. One of her brothers was only seventeen when he went into the service.

SHW: Oh, my goodness. On December 7, 1941, what were you doing, the Pearl Harbor Day?

MO: My brother and I were home listening to a pro football game when they interrupted the game and announced about Pearl Harbor. I knew a little bit about that because one of my classmates who was a year older than I was had gone into the navy in 1940, and had been at Pearl Harbor. He wasn't that day, but he had been there before that. I had written him occasionally, so I knew a little bit about Pearl Harbor.

SHW: What did you think when you heard the news? Do you remember?

MO: I can't remember exactly what my thoughts were. I think we wondered how it was going to affect us.

SHW: Because you were both young enough to . . .

MO: I guess I was seventeen at the time.

SHW: How old was your brother?

MO: Sixteen.

SHW: Did you know anybody who immediately joined up?

MO: There were a lot of people already in the service at that time because the draft had been going on for I think two years. So I knew a lot of people who were in the service. A lot of them joined up within days of that. Our class, we were seventeen.

SHW: You would have had to lie to get in.

MO: Yes. When I graduated from high school, I graduated on Friday, June 4, and I believe I went into the service on Monday. So did everybody else in my class.

SHW: Did you enlist?

MO: No, we were drafted. I had just been a day short of two months past eighteen. We left right after school was out.

SHW: Can we backtrack for a second to what it was like during that first year of war to be a senior in high school. Did your school do a war bond drive?

MO: Oh, yes, they did. They had war stamps. You could buy stamps. I think they were twenty-five cents. You had booklets that you kept. One of the big things that happened to us, they had gas rationing. I played football and basketball in high school. Anyhow, we had great difficulty getting gas to go to neighboring towns to play. People would donate their stamps, and I think if you had a "C" stamp you only got five gallons a week. So it wouldn't take you very far. We went in cars to ball games. That's how we got our transportation there. It was difficult to get enough gas to transport whatever we had for numbers, I forget.

SHW: Did you get involved in any of the scrap metal drives or the newspaper drives?

MO: Yes, we had all of that.

SHW: Were those a big deal?

MO: Oh, yes they were. They'd make a big thing of it. I remember they had a scrap metal drive up at our high school, and they had pots and pans and everything. People cleaned out their garages and cabinets and whatnot. They got rid of a lot. They made a big contribution, from what I understand.

SHW: What was the rationing like? Did that affect you much?

MO: Yes, it did. I was a seventeen-year-old boy and hungry most of the time. It did affect me, and I think it affected everybody. A lot of things like sugar was in short supply. Meat was in short supply. You had to have stamps to buy certain types of meat and certain cuts of meat. I think probably in a rural area like that you're probably not as affected as what you would be in an urban setting.

SHW: Probably not because at least there are people around you with everything available if you've got the stamps.

MO: Right.

SHW: Did any of your classmates get married right before they shipped out, if everyone was graduating?

MO: None were married. I think there were eight boys in my class who were old enough to go in the service, and they all went the same day I did. But none of them were married.

SHW: None of that last-minute marriage thing?

MO: No, none of that. We were too young.

SHW: I know in Carver County there were not a lot of mixed feelings, but some of the people who were German—and so many of the people in the county are German and had been here forever basically—had some mixed feelings about it because some of them still had family in Germany. Did you sense any of that?

MO: I really didn't. I know some people up until the time the war started were wavering a little bit as far as their allegiance went, but I think once the war broke out, I didn't hear any more of that.

SHW: It was probably more tough in World War I.

MO: Could have been, when they renamed New Germany something else—Motortown or something like that.

SHW: Unbelievable. You went right into basic training right after graduation?

MO: Yes, I did. They shipped us down to what was in North Camp Hood, Texas, supposedly the biggest army base in the United States. It supposedly had like a quarter million soldiers down there. They were in the process of building it, however, and you could see every day they'd build a row of barracks. We were on the edge of the camp when we got there. Every day there would be another street or row of barracks. By the time we left there you could not see the far end. There was no drinking water other than out of lister bags, these bags what they call the company cow. They are a canvas bag that they would hang from a tripod, and the water out of there was terrible. We only had one set of uniforms, so you had to wash your fatigues at night and hope that they'd dry by morning.

SHW: Was basic training a shock to you? Was it a big change? Were the people a big change?

MO: No, they weren't. Most of the people there were about my age. I guess it was about what I had expected. It was real difficult. The one thing that shocked me more than anything else, I was in the infantry, in which the primary weapon is the rifle. Our whole platoon—thirty-six of us—only had eight rifles to train with. Not only that, they were World War I British Enfields. I'd say we were down there seven or eight weeks before everybody got a rifle. They, too, were these World War I British Enfields.

SHW: Was this the spring of '42?

MO: The spring of '43, spring and summer.

SHW: That's pretty far in.

MO: Yes, it was. I felt maybe we weren't ready for war.

SHW: When you can't give your people guns, that's scary. What else was surprising or different about army life?

MO: Well, everybody of course complained about the food. Most of us gained about twenty to thirty pounds during the first few months. For one thing, we had just turned eighteen and were at that stage where no matter what we were doing, we probably would have put on weight. But the food, I guess, must have been adequate—wasn't real tasty, but adequate.

SHW: If you ate enough to gain twenty-five pounds, it can't have been too terrible, but probably not like Mom's.

MO: Right.

SHW: How long was basic training?

MO: We were there for about five months. As I said, the camp wasn't set up. First, they had us in one area of the camp. Then they moved us to another area. North Camp Hood was primarily a tank destroyer camp. We were in one of those training groups for a few weeks. Then finally they got us in an infantry training battalion. Then we started our basic [training] from there. Basic was supposed to be thirteen weeks, but ours was extended quite a bit beyond that.

SHW: Did you have any idea where you were going once basic training ended? Did they give you any hint?

MO: None whatever. They sent us to a college for about two months. The name was John Tarleton State. It was, and still is, at Stephenville, Texas. It's a branch of Texas A&M. Supposedly—well, we had taken some test—you could get an engineering degree in two years under this program. It wasn't for me because you're in with people who had graduated from college and had degrees in Chemistry or whatever. I think we took eight subjects a day there. I failed three of them—Chemistry, Calculus, and Physics. I didn't have a good background in that. So then I was sent down to Camp Swift, Texas, and there I was in an army engineer battalion, the 260th.

SHW: What did you do in the battalion? What were your duties?

MO: Oh, boy. You've got a lot to do there. Primarily engineers work with demolitions, mines and booby traps and bridges. Plus, you get all the infantry training. I was in the 260th for about four months. We were alerted to go overseas. We were out on bivouac at one time, camped out for close to eleven weeks. We came in and I had a telegram from home that came just that day. My father was gravely ill, so I went home, which was quite an adventure at the time. I was pretty green, and traveling wasn't easy. Anyhow, we took a train. There was no way you'd have any other type of transportation. When I got home my father had passed away. I asked for an extension on my furlough because I think I only had six days. They gave me the extension, but my unit had been alerted to go overseas again, and I was transferred to another group, the 1284th Engineers. That's where I spent most of my time in the service was with the 1284th. The 1284th

was a little different type unit. They were made up of people who had been in the service. They had been in, say, the Balloon Barrage or the antiaircraft, or a lot of them out of the air corps. So they had had basic training of some kind, but they hadn't had any engineer basic. So we trained down in Texas most of that summer until mid-summer. Then we went overseas. We went to Camp Chanks, New York. From there we went down to New York City and got on a World War I British ship, the *Esperance Bay*. I think, if I remember correctly, we were on board that about two weeks and landed at Avonmouth, England, near Bristol. Then we went to Gloucester.

SHW: Was there much fear of sub attack at that point?

MO: Oh, yes. The subs were still sinking a lot of ships. We were in a convoy. It was huge. We only got up on deck once a day. We'd get up there for exercise; walk around was all we could do. The first morning when we got out there, we were four stories down in the front of this ship, and the conditions were not ideal. Anyway, we got up on the deck, and you could see, we probably were in a convoy of a hundred ships. We were right pretty much in the center. With any other troop ships, they put the ships that don't hold a lot of men on the outside whether they are, I suppose, a little more susceptible to attack than what we were on the inside. Conditions were not ideal at all. The British have a little different way of running their ships than the American navy. We were in a room probably not much bigger than this room, probably 20x20, something like that, and there were thirty-six of us in there. We ate in there and slept in there—everything. They had straw ticks on the floor; one group would sleep on the floor. Then they had straw ticks on the tables where we ate; one group would sleep there. The rest would sleep in hammocks.

SHW: Oh, my gosh!

MO: That's right. That's what I thought.

SHW: Did you get seasick in the crossing?

MO: No, I didn't, but a lot of them did.

SHW: That must have made the crossing real pleasant in a 20x20 room.

MO: And it was long before they had any restrictions on smoking, and of course, you couldn't smoke up on deck. Just about everybody smoked. So those rooms got a little stuffy. They could not show any lights at all at night. I was glad when it was over. I think it took us two weeks.

SHW: Unbelievable.

MO: It was.

SHW: Were people pretty scared? Everybody must have been about an eighteen-year-old kid fresh out of high school.

MO: I think everybody was a little bit frightened.

SHW: Did any of you talk about it?

MO: No. Just looking at that cold water, no, because I think everybody at that age you expect to survive. You don't expect to have anything happen to you.

SHW: You're immortal when you're eighteen.

MO: Yes, at least.

SHW: When you got to England, what happened? What did you do?

MO: We trained a lot. We took some infantry training under British commandos. We took bailey bridge training under British engineers. I went to a mine and booby trap school down in Salisbury, England. We trained hard all the time, and it was miserable.

SHW: Did they ever let you go on leave?

MO: We'd get there once in a while. I did go down to London with a friend. We were down there I think five days, which wasn't real intelligent on our part because they were sending these V-2s over at the time. We'd had been better off up at Gloucester where we belonged. One of the interesting things they did, we had worked a lot on bailey bridges—they're these erector-set bridges. We thought we knew a lot about it. Then we trained under these British engineers, and where we would use our full company building a bridge, they explained to us that we were going to build a bridge every day. Everything about it had to be correct, the approaches and everything. It had to pass their inspection. Then you had to take it down and you were off for the day. The first day we started early in the morning, we expected the whole company. There was just a platoon there. We got to build this bridge; we worked at it all day; we worked at it all night; we finished about 5 o'clock the next morning. Then at six o'clock we started on the next day's project. I think they were trying to impress us with a little bit about how efficient the British were compared to us.

SHW: How fast did you end of getting those things up?

MO: We were there a full month. About the third week we were finishing about two o'clock in the afternoon. One o'clock I think was the best we did.

SHW: So half of the time.

MO: Yes. We caught on to what they wanted, I think that was it mostly. We already knew how to do the work.

SHW: What was the structure of the Army Corps of Engineers? Were there people who were engineers as officers, and then the enlisted men . . .

MO: Well, they'd have some people who were engineers. Mostly we carried the idiot sticks. We carried the bridge sections or the panels—a bailey bridge panel weighs I think 635 pounds.

You'd get six guys with these sticks about this long, one on each side of it, and carried it. Slave labor, more or less.

SHW: Are these bridges strong enough for tanks to go across?

MO: Oh, yes. They can hold a 50- or 60-ton tank. You always had to run a vehicle over it when you finished the bridge. That was part of it. They'll hold them without any trouble.

SHW: Were you one of the youngest guys in this?

MO: I was the youngest in our company.

SHW: Was that at all strange?

MO: Well, you take a lot of needling, that's about it.

SHW: The other training you did was booby traps?

MO: Yes.

SHW: What was that like?

MO: The British have a little different outlook on that, too. It's the old UXB theory, the Unexploited Bomb Theory. They like to disarm them, where Americans, I like to say, are a little smarter than that. They set them off or do something to get rid of this booby trap or mine, whatever it was. But the British would use live booby traps, but they just used a blasting cap, which will take your finger or your eyes if you set it off. I got through that all right. When we got to Germany we set everything off rather than . . . We'd use these grappling hooks, and if there were trip wires or anything there from a booby trap would set it off.

SHW: That makes more sense.

MO: Yes, I thought so.

SHW: Better to keep your eyes and your fingers.

MO: Right.

SHW: Actually, if you set it off when you were too close and it's a real bomb, you'd probably lose everything.

MO: Yes, you would.

SHW: Did you do a third type of training when you were in England?

MO: Infantry training, yes. We took that, too.

SHW: And that was pretty much what you did back in the states?

MO: It was, only they used all live ammunition there. We didn't too often in the states. They used live ammunition, and you were graded by these British commandos in our training. It was interesting; it was good. Kind of uncomfortable.

SHW: I would say, having people shoot at you. What happened next? Where did you go after England?

MO: We went down to Weymouth, England, and they put us on an LST, and we went to France. We went up the Seine River for I don't know how many miles—not very far. Then they took us off there and put us in trucks, and we got up to Belgium and Holland. Later we got into Germany. We built a floating bailey bridge across the Rhine River in Germany, and we took one down. Later, we built a timber trestle bridge, which is quite a project. It has timbers, as you might suspect. It's a permanent type structure. I think I have some pictures of that in this book. It was a two-way bridge, that is, you could have traffic on both ways. It would hold seventy tons.

SHW: Oh, boy. How close to the front are you when you are doing all this?

MO: Well, I really don't know. We were in what was called the Ruhr pocket. We were on Essen, Dusseldorf, and whatnot, and they had some German soldiers surrounded there. They had like half a million of them that were surrounded in that area. So there you're right at the front. But the real front was fifty or seventy-five miles from where we were there.

SHW: So no one was shooting at you while you were trying to put these things up, or was there still danger?

MO: There was some artillery fire, but there were no riflemen around there.

SHW: After you built the timber bridge, what happened?

MO: About a week later, the war ended. One of the things about being in the Engineers, these bridges take a lot of maintenance, so you always have a small crew at each bridge. Sometimes these floating bailey bridges are built in thirty-foot sections with three what the engineers called "puns," but everybody else called pontoons. They are thirty feet long. Once in a while they might have take one of those out and float another one in there. They use big drift pins about four or five inches across to put them together.

SHW: With the end of the war in Europe, you did some bridge maintenance, and then?

MO: It didn't take very long for it to happen. I think we were at Mülheim-Oberhausen at the time the war ended. I think maybe one or two days later, they got us all together and they put us on trucks, and we had about a 700-mile trip down to Marseilles in southern France. We were going to the Pacific. We had only been in Europe I think about ten months, so we were kind of the greenhorns. So we were there for I guess maybe six weeks. During that time I was one of two

guys from our battalion that got to go to the French Riviera. I went to Nice, a great place. I suppose this was probably late in May or early in June. The weather was perfect down there. But then we up in the hills outside Marseilles. It was hot and kind of miserable there, but we were getting ready to go to the Pacific. One of the big projects did not concern most of us, but it concerned the truck drivers, the Jeep drivers and whatnot because they had to get their vehicles ready. The vehicles left before we did. I can't remember what the date was when we left for the Pacific, but we were on a ship, the *General S. D. Sturgis*.

SHW: Did they tell you where you were going?

MO: No.

SHW: You didn't know you were going to be on a ship for like a month?

MO: No, and we were on longer than that. They didn't tell us where we were going. We went through the Straits of Gibraltar. We went down to the Panama Canal. We went through the Panama Canal, and when we left there, then I remember they said the next port of call is Hollandia, New Guinea. I don't know exactly how long we were on the ship. I've heard reports of from fifty-eight days down to forty-five, but it was a long time. Conditions were a little better than what they were on the British ship. Food was a lot better. Fortunately, our company, somebody volunteered, which is a no-no in service, but volunteered for us to take guard duty of some kind. It wasn't anything difficult. It got us to be on the upper deck, so we didn't have to stay down below. That made it go a lot faster.

SHW: The only time it's good to volunteer.

MO: Yes. It turned out that way for us. Anyhow, I think there was about a three-week stretch that there didn't seem to be a ripple on the water or anything. The only thing that broke the monotony was that we cross the Equator, and the navy has a big ceremony with that. Of course, you become a shellback once you've crossed it. You go through all the initiations that they have. If you were a minor character in the cast, you didn't have much to do for initiation, but if you happened to be a high-ranking officer, they had some of them in hula skirts, they had one guy—I think he was our colonel—measuring the length of the ship with a six-inch ruler on his hands and knees, and all the rest of that. A lot of foolishness, but good times. Anyway, we got down to New Guinea. I got to go ashore there just to load some things. I volunteered because I thought, I'm here, I might as well see what it's like. It was miserable. We loaded this ship with some supplies. We got back on our ship and took off for . . . I don't think they told us where we were going, but we suspect it was Manila, and it was. About a day out of Hollandia, the first atomic bomb was dropped. Then there were a lot of rumors that we were coming back to the United States, but none of them were true. Both bombs had been dropped by the time we got to Manila. They put us on a train, a different type train than you would see around here. It was similar to these cars that they use to haul beets, only they had GI's in there. We went up to probably sixty or seventy miles from Manila up to Cabanatuan to a place I think it was called Angeles or something like that. Then they dispersed us to different places. My platoon was sent to a place called Balini Pass, which was up in the mountains. We really did not have much to do, but it took the army six months to find that out.

SHW: So you just sat there for six months?

MO: Well, we had a choice. We were supposedly there on road maintenance, which would be a big job during the rainy season, but the rainy season had ended. So we played softball during the day. We had the opportunity to go to Baguio, the summer capitol of the Philippines. It's up in the mountains, and if you played golf or . . . well, it was nice up there, nice and cool. You could go there for a week. Then you were supposed to come back to Balini Pass for a week. Then you could go to San Fernando, which is up on Lingaven Gulf. There it was real nice. You're on the ocean. There had been a hospital there at one time, an army hospital, and they had cleared out, so they used it for recreation.

SHW: At least you got to have some fun while the army forgot about you.

MO: Sure. We did.

SHW: When did you get back stateside?

MO: That spring, I had quite a few points. I forget what I had for a number, but there were a lot of people who had been in service for five years and I was still under three years. So those guys of course went back first. I can't remember just when we got back there. I was in the 29th repple-depple in a replacement depot in Manila. From there I got on board a ship, the *Marine Swallow* was the name of it, and I don't think the *Marine Swallow's* crew was too well indoctrinated on how to run a ship, or certainly not on how to run a lifeboat drill because they couldn't put it over. Anyhow, on the way home I came down with malaria. I was miserable for the whole trip home. I can't remember much about it at all. I could not carry my duffel bag off the ship, I was that weak when we got to San Francisco. I don't remember much about the train trip. We went to Camp McCoy from . . . I remember we stopped at Salt Lake City, and that's about the only thing I can remember. I looked out and thought, Boy, that's a big mountain over there. It was Mt. Olympus. My sister lives out there. I've been out there fifty times since then, but at the time I thought, I'm never coming back here. But I've been out there a lot. When we got to Camp McCoy, I was discharged about a week later.

SHW: So they never put you in the hospital with malaria?

MO: Yes, I was in the navy hospital. It was a little scary because the first night I was in there, a kid in the bunk below me died from malaria. That affected me for the next four or five years. I probably had twenty-four or twenty-five attacks of malaria.

SHW: That's bad.

MO: Yes, it is.

SHW: I knew some people who caught it, but when they use modern medicine they don't have as much trouble with it.

MO: We were taking Atabrin all the time. These Atabrin pills turned you yellow, about as yellow as you can get. We decided we weren't going back home like that, so we quit taking them. I think everybody that was up at Balini Pass I've heard or heard about, just about all of them since, I think everybody had it.

SHW: Why don't we talk a little about your parents and what they knew about what you were doing, and writing home and the censorship. How did that work?

MO: My mother is a very good writer, and she wrote all the time. I wrote and told them what I could tell them about what we were doing. I couldn't tell them where we were once we were overseas. I remember when I thought we were going overseas, I figured it would be to Europe, and I had written to my mother and asked her to send me some heavy wool socks. She got some heavy wool sock, and my mother would always send one of my favorites—date bars—and then she'd pack all of this in popcorn. I did get the heavy wool socks and the date bars, but I didn't get them until the following September when I was over in the Philippines and really didn't have much need for heavy socks.

SHW: It took a year for them to get them to you?

MO: Yes, almost. I suppose she sent those probably around October or November.

SHW: The stuff must have been green by then.

MO: Well, yes, it was. We did not eat the date bars.

SHW: Were you writing to any girls back home?

MO: Several classmates.

SHW: But no one serious?

MO: No, nothing serious like that.

SHW: Was mail a big deal?

MO: Oh, yes. Getting mail was a big deal. Sending it not quite as big, but getting mail was.

SHW: Did your brother end up getting drafted, or was he too young?

MO: No, he enlisted in the marines, and they took him before he graduated. He was just seventeen when he went in, and he was at Iwo Jima first, and then Okinawa.

SHW: Oh, my gosh. Did he survive the war?

MO: Yes, he did. He lives up in Arlington yet. I see him every once in a while. I'm going to see him tomorrow.

SHW: What was the toughest part of being in the service?

MO: I kind of enjoyed most of it. I liked the service.

SHW: What was the biggest plus?

MO: You got to meet a lot of people, and you got to travel a lot. My mother's family had been big on traveling; they traveled all over the world. I guess there was some of that . . . I enjoyed the travel part of it. Fortunately, we got to go to a lot of places.

SHW: When you came back, what did you do when you got out, besides go to the hospital for a while?

MO: I worked for the city of Arlington for a while. Then that fall I went to college.

SHW: Did you use the GI Bill?

MO: Yes, I did. I had a disability because of the malaria, so I think what I was paid a month was about double what you would normally get. So I went to St. John's up at Collegeville. I was there until 1950. I graduated in 1950 and could not find a teaching job. That's what I wanted to do. So I went to work for a company down in Rochester. I worked there for four and a half years. In the meantime I was married and had the first two of our children. Then I came to Watertown in 1955 and I taught there for thirty-nine years—forty-four if you count the subbing I did.

SHW: I suppose you had to wait until the baby boom actually caught up with your teaching degree?

MO: Right, that was about it.

SHW: The first year of the baby boom was 1945.

MO: Yes.

SHW: They were just in kindergarten. My mom actually was a '45 baby boomer.

MO: Is that right?

SHW: Yes. Although my grandparents were immigrants, so it wasn't quite the same. Do you think you were treated fairly when you came back? I know Vietnam vets have a lot of complaints.

MO: Yes, I know they do, and that's sad. We got fine treatment when we came back.

SHW: Was there any hard adjustment?

MO: I didn't think there was any problem adjusting.

SHW: Besides getting rid of the malaria.

MO: Yes. And that lasted about four years. Adjusting—no, I couldn't see where there was any problem.

SHW: Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about? Would you like to show me the book you brought?

MO: Oh, yes, I'll show you this book. It verifies all that I told you, so you wouldn't think I was fabricating all this.

SHW: I believe you. Is this your company book?

MO: Yes. I should have mentioned, we have had reunions.

SHW: You have?

MO: Oh, yes. I think they started in about 1983 or 1984, and I think I got to the first reunion in 1991. I've gone every year since. We have them in Bordentown, New Jersey. This year was the last one because there were only three of us there. I think the first one I went to there were about thirty. We were expecting about ten this year, but advancing age caught up with quite a few of them.

SHW: Well, you were one of the youngest guys, you said, so that would make sense, I guess.

MO: I was.

SHW: Was that the symbol?

MO: Yes, that was our company logo. It's a big-ass bird is what it is.

SHW: Are there any pictures of you in this?

MO: I'm pictured with the squad. I was in the second platoon, and I'll be right here. [shows picture]

SHW: Well, it's pretty small, but you look really young in that picture.

MO: I've put on a few wrinkles since then.

SHW: Do you have any particular friends that you made?

MO: Oh, yes. I have a friend from Philadelphia that I talk to about once a month, and a real good friend from San Jose, California. He passed away, and two of my daughters and I went out

and saw his widow and their family last spring out in San Jose. His three sons are exactly the way I remember the father, only they are a little bit older than he was because I think he was nineteen or twenty, and I suppose they are forty now. A lot of good friends that you keep for a long time. The fellow that organized our reunion is Puerto Rican. He came to this country when he was seventeen, was in the army for twenty years, retired from the army and then went to work for Civil Service for another twenty years. In going about the country he contacted a lot of us. So he started the reunion. You'd think he'd just immigrated to this country last week because it sounds like he's still in Puerto Rico. Good guy, good friend.

SHW: Was that when you were in Europe?

MO: Germany. I think this is Don Campswift. I was a company guide on carrier, so I'm in there someplace. I carried the company flag.

SHW: So you were one of the front four.

MO: I guess I am there—unrecognizable.

SHW: Everyone looks the same, I think, in a uniform, pretty much.

MO: Yes, that's about it.

SHW: Do you have any funny stories you'd like to tell about what happened? Anything amusing happen?

MO: A lot of amusing things happen to you. I picked up the name Reveille. There's a good reason for it. We were down in Texas someplace. We were just bushed after a day. I went to bed, got in my bunk. They used to turn the lights off like nine o'clock. Everybody was ready for it. Anyhow, I heard this Charge of Quarters coming through, whistling and turning on the lights. That was the signal it was time to get up. I got up and I'm sorting through my laundry, and I said to this bunkmate, I said, "Gun, these nights are getting shorter all the time. I don't think I'm going to make it much longer." Then I heard this loud roar. They woke me up about fifteen minutes after I went to sleep. Here, I thought it was the next morning.

SHW: That's the problem with being the youngest.

MO: Yes, that's right. They pull a lot of that stuff on you. Another time, a good friend of mine, Charlie Gross from Michigan, was Charge of Quarters this night, and Charlie overslept. We were down in Texas, we had reveille . . . the four companies and our battalion would all meet in the middle of this place. It was still dark, very dark. I could hear all these other GI's rattling around, and I could hear their rifles and all the rest of them. You could hear them carry the rifles out. Anyhow, the call came for the battalion roll call. Somebody said, "Headquarters Company, all present and accounted for," and he'd be the Charge of Quarters in that group. Then it was our turn, and I heard this booming voice come from outside someplace, "A Company, all present and accounted for," then they went to B Company, then C Company. But everybody from A Company was still in bed, still slumbering.

SHW: He didn't get in trouble for that?

MO: No, he didn't. I don't know how he escaped, because usually something like that will do you in. One other funny incident happened, though I didn't think it was real funny at the time. Another fellow and I went to Manila. We were down there for four or five days. While we were in service we were never given anything alcoholic at all, but somebody somehow or other got a ration of beer for everybody. It was a case of beer. So when I came back, I said to my assistant squad leader, "Ed, where's my beer?" He said, "I was afraid somebody would steal it, so we drank it."

SHW: You weren't of age yet then, were you?

MO: No, but that didn't mean anything. There wasn't that much opportunity to do any drinking, I didn't think, other than in Europe there was plenty of opportunity, but . . .

SHW: You were busy trying to put up bridges.

MO: Yes. One other thing we did in Europe—Engineer Reconnaissance is a big thing. It's pretty good duty. My writing, as you can tell from the questions, is not good, so I'd be one of the observers. You'd have a driver, two observers, and a recorder. You'd record anything that would be of use to engineers, like maybe a stack of telephone poles you could use for piling for bridges, or gravel or sand or whatever. Also, they looked for the distilleries and breweries and wineries and whatnot, and recorded that on another sheet. I don't know what else I can tell you about . . .

SHW: I think you told me a lot of useful stuff.

MO: I hope so.

SHW: Definitely a good interview. Thank you so much for doing it.

MO: I enjoyed it.

[end of interview]