

Transcription: Melvin Adams

Today is Thursday, March 5th, 2009, and my name is James Crabtree. I am interviewing Mr. Melvin Adams. We are doing this interview in person at the Courtney Texas Veterans Home in Temple, Texas, and this interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, I just want to thank you for taking the time to sit and talk with me today so we can record a little bit of your story.

Melvin Adams: I don't like to talk about it, all this, but I will try to help you if I can.

I appreciate that. I guess the thing we always start off with when we interview veterans for this program is just we ask them to tell us a little bit about their life before they went in the military, where they are from or maybe a little bit about your family or where you went to school or any of that sort of thing.

Melvin Adams: Well, I was born in Houston and my mom and dad separated and moved up to Hillsboro, Texas.

I know where that is. Did you go to high school in Hillsboro?

Melvin Adams: No, I went to school but I didn't go to high school. I went to grade school.

What was Hillsboro like when you were living there?

Melvin Adams: Well, it wasn't too much. There wasn't no money, there was no money nowhere, anybody got no money.

Did you live on a farm?

Melvin Adams: Yeah, my grandfather lived on a farm and that's where we stayed because my grandmother died and then my mother took care of her daddy.

Do you remember where you were or how old you were when you heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed?

Melvin Adams: I was Hillsboro when they bombed Pearl Harbor, and then in December they got me.

Do you remember how you learned about it? Did you hear it on the radio or did somebody tell you?

Melvin Adams: I don't remember just exactly but it had to have been the radio.

And you said after that it wasn't long before you were drafted or you signed up?

Melvin Adams: Yeah, I signed up and they called me. I was 20 years old.

20 years old, yes sir. And where did they send you off to boot camp?

Melvin Adams: I went to Georgia and then I went to California. Then I went to Virginia, West Virginia, and I went to Pennsylvania. Oh man, I don't know.

So they sent you all over.

Melvin Adams: Massachusetts and then they shipped me overseas.

When you went to boot camp, did you know anybody from your town? Did any of your friends go with you or were you just completely on your own?

Melvin Adams: Well, I didn't know 'em but there was two or three men from that same town, but I didn't know 'em before.

When you got to boot camp, when was it that you found out that you were going to be in the infantry? Did that come along later on?

Melvin Adams: No, whenever we was sent to Georgia, we was in the Coast Guard, but we was in the Coast Guard for I don't know, maybe three months, and they changed us. They changed the guns and everything and gave us machine guns, and we went through that, and when we went overseas we wasn't involved with 'em, we was attached to the 29th Infantry.

So after you finished your last bit of training in Virginia, and that's when they sent you to Europe.

Melvin Adams: Yeah.

Did you go to England first, or Ireland?

Melvin Adams: Well our last training when we was in Massachusetts, that's where we was shootin' flags overseas behind the airplane.

Oh yeah, the big banners, yeah. So for target practice you were shooting those.

Melvin Adams: And that's when they sent us overseas.

When you went into the service, did you have any brothers or sisters back home?

Melvin Adams: I had two sisters back home. They was younger than me.

Did they write to you or did you write to your family?

Melvin Adams: Oh yeah, all the time I was gone. I didn't have time to write a lot of the time.

I know you said there are certain things, I don't want to ask you anything that's uncomfortable, but maybe tell us a little bit about what your unit was like, the group of men that you served with in Europe.

Melvin Adams: Had a good unit, that was a good unit, that's right.

Tell us a little bit about the men or your officers.

Melvin Adams: They were all good, every one of them, yeah. They was all older than us, so they had been in the service a long time.

What was the morale like of the troops that you served with?

Melvin Adams: Well, it was the best you could do, but you couldn't do much. I guess it depended a whole lot on the person as the way he thinks. I don't know, I can't really answer that question.

How long were you in Europe for?

Melvin Adams: I went over and it was about 19 months.

19 months in theater. And did you go to France first? Go through France?

Melvin Adams: We hit, had made the invasion of France, and we just kept moving. We were moving and went on to Paris and I don't know. We went into France on June the 6th, 1944. That was that invasion.

How did the average French person treat you? I've read a lot of those stories.

Melvin Adams: They were the best we could. Well, it's kind of hard to explain, but most of the people, the commanders and whatever, they didn't even come around. They just come around and tell you what to do and then gone. You just followed what to do. I can't hardly explain it. You had to be your own boss, really.

Did you feel a sense of gratification that you were helping to liberate France from the Nazis?

Melvin Adams: When we got to Paris, we could not hardly get down the streets. There were so many damn people. They just wouldn't give us the room. They was shaking hands, kissing everybody, doing everything they could, they were so proud of us. I don't know how to explain it. They was really, really tickled to death that we was there and the Germans was gone.

That's amazing.

Melvin Adams: It's hard to explain.

I'm sure you've got to feel proud though that you helped in freeing those people.

Melvin Adams: I really didn't feel anything except that they were happy because you had so many things on your mind that somebody's shooting at you, and you got to shoot at them, that you didn't worry about things. It's hard to explain, I tell you.

What were some of the better memories that you'd want to share with us about your time in the service or the time in the Army?

Melvin Adams: Not really, I don't know what to tell you, not much you want to know really. We just went through service, went through training, whatever.

I guess you never really knew what the big picture was in terms of where you were moving to or what was going on.

Melvin Adams: No, we didn't know nothing.

Were you in a platoon?

Melvin Adams: Yeah.

Did you have a sergeant or someone in charge of your squad?

Melvin Adams: We had a first lieutenant. He was over about 40 people.

The platoon commander?

Melvin Adams: No, he wasn't a commander, he was about 40 people had, and then we had a sergeant that had two units, and it was 12 in a unit.

Yeah, like a squad.

Melvin Adams: There was four different squads.

Were you pretty close to the men in your squad and your sergeant?

Melvin Adams: Oh yeah, we was. We were all friends really.

Where were most of the guys from? They were from all over the country?

Melvin Adams: Most of 'em was from the north, up in Pennsylvania and all up in through there.

Was that the first time you'd ever met somebody from that part of the country?

Melvin Adams: That's correct.

What'd they think about you being from Texas?

Melvin Adams: Well they wasn't in Texas, but we didn't even talk about things like that. We didn't ask them, they didn't ask us, we were just friends.

Did you get much mail from home?

Melvin Adams: Oh yeah, I got quite a bit of mail, but I didn't have time to answer a lot of it.

I don't want to ask you any details or anything that's going to make you upset. Do you remember where you were when victory was declared over Germany?

Melvin Adams: We was on the outside of Belgium, Berlin. They stopped us right there. That's where the United States made a mistake. We got up there and we got in the edge of Berlin, they stopped us. We didn't know why. But the Russians were coming this way and they wanted for

us to wait and let Russia get there and take part of that town, so when they got there we moved in, and they get there and half of it, and we got the other half. We could've had a whole a town, but we waited and then bam, they sent us, left to get us ready. We was fixin' to go to Japan, then they dropped that bomb.

Do you remember what the feeling was when you found out that Germany had surrendered? Did your sergeant tell you?

Melvin Adams: Well yeah, it made you happy, but we was fixin' to go to Japan, and that didn't make you happy either.

So you still had that hanging over you, sure. Do you remember where you were when you heard that the atomic bomb had been dropped and then shortly thereafter when the Japanese surrendered?

Melvin Adams: We was in Czechoslovakia. When the war was over in Germany, they moved us over there and got us all together, and that's where we was gettin' ready to go to Japan. Of course we didn't do that.

So at that point then I imagine you had to have felt relieved that Japan had surrendered and now the entire war was over.

Melvin Adams: Well, after that was over, they wasn't, I don't know, a very short time, maybe two months or something like that, a short time, they started separating us. People that had the most credit, the point system, well there was about I don't know, quite a few of us in my unit, and they just separated them to ship us out and shipped us in another unit to go home. So from then until August, we got home. They shipped us right out because we had the ticket.

Do you remember the day you got home what that was like when you finally got back home?

Melvin Adams: Well, not really because you didn't know what to do. You'd been gone and changed, and things wrapped at me a few times because I wasn't talking. Well, I guess they, I don't know.

Were you glad to be home and see your family and friends?

Melvin Adams: Oh yeah, I was happy about that, but you didn't want to talk. You had so many things on your mind, and I don't know, I can't explain it.

Do you feel like the experience that you had in the war changed who you were in terms of your personality and stuff when you got back home?

Melvin Adams: It probably did but I didn't notice it. I'm sure it did. When I got out of the service, when they shipped me back to Houston where I was born.

What did you do after you got out, got back home?

Melvin Adams: I didn't come back home. I went to Houston. My daddy and sisters and brothers was in Houston.

So you got a job and started working?

Melvin Adams: I got back in Houston at 3 o'clock in the morning on a Wednesday I believe it was. I went to see about a job. They hired me and I went to work the following day and worked for 25 years.

Really, who did you work for?

Melvin Adams: Chicago Bridge _____. I worked for 'em 25 years.

And then retired from there.

Melvin Adams: Well, I quit. Well, I wasn't old enough to retire. I had time in but I didn't have the age. And then they started swapping managers and I couldn't get along with them damn young people. I told them the hell with you and I got out. Well, they had all different ideas and they had not had that experience of, they were new people that come into there, and I talked to the manager about it. We were kind of friends and he said well, we got to go along with it because they got to learn. Well I understood that, but I don't know. It's a situation. Well just like you, you're sitting right there, and you don't know what I'm talking about. Well, this was work. They didn't know what I was doing, what I was supposed to do or anything, because I was working with about 55 men, and they wanted to do this and do that, and hell, you can't do that because that's going to cost us money we're gonna lose. And I talked to the general manager. He was over the five states we were, and he said well, I understand what you're talking about but we got to go along with it. Of course they've got to learn. I think if you're going to learn something, you better tell 'em the truth.

Yeah sure. During that time when you got back home, did you ever join American Legion or VFW?

Melvin Adams: I belong to the VFW and American Legion both. Well I didn't belong to American Legion for quite a few years, but I was a member of VFW for 56 years.

Did you ever keep in touch with any of the men that you served with in the Army?

Melvin Adams: Yeah, there was one man in Pennsylvania, he kept writing letters back and forth, for a little while.

And did you ever go to any type of reunions, did your unit ever have any reunions?

Melvin Adams: No. I just forgot about it. It's not hard to say you want to forget something. I don't know.

And I've interviewed a lot of vets and I'm a vet myself, and I know that there are some folks that like to talk about it and you can't stop them from talking.

Melvin Adams: Well they're the ones that didn't do anything.

Well sometimes, but then there's some that have, so it just seems like there's different personality types.

Melvin Adams: Let's keep it right here. It talks about things and different things, and I know they're lyin' because they never was in the war so they don't know.

I think that's true. There are some folks that inflate stuff or make stuff up.

Melvin Adams: They just like to talk and make sure people understand, well if you didn't know, you'd believe 'em.

That's right. No, I've seen that with the average civilian will not understand certain things.

Melvin Adams: Well I'm not askin' you, all different people. How many medals did they have? Oh, well we didn't get no medal. I got six.

Yeah, for a veteran it doesn't take long to usually figure out the people that are making stuff up.

Melvin Adams: I don't know, I just listen. I know they're lyin'.

Now before we started the recorder, you told me a little bit about what you thought about General Patton. Do you want to share that?

Melvin Adams: People hated that man because he was pushin' the people and getting 'em killed. That's the problem right there.

And that's kind of how all the men in your unit felt as well?

Melvin Adams: Anybody would've killed him if they got sense.

What did they think of some of the other commanders?

Melvin Adams: Oh yeah, they got along with them people. He was the only one. Even the commanders right under him didn't like it either, but they couldn't do nothing about it.

What did the men think of General Eisenhower?

Melvin Adams: They thought a lot of him. I met him.

Share with us a little bit about the time you met General Eisenhower.

Melvin Adams: Well, we was in England getting ready to go overseas on that invasion, and he come around and shook hands with all of us. He didn't tell us exactly what we was gonna do. But then a couple of days later they loaded us up.

What did he say to you guys?

Melvin Adams: He just said that you're a nice bunch of people, you know, just general comments. He didn't say too much.

Do you think he was trying to motivate you guys?

Melvin Adams: No, he was just talkin' and being honest about things. He knew we was in trouble, and he knew we was goin', but we didn't. Afterwards he come around and shook hands with all of us. He was a nice guy. And that's the reason they got rid of Patton.

Were there any other famous folks that you came across during your time in the service, any other generals, or celebrities? Did you ever have any USO tours come towards the end?

Melvin Adams: No, I met a lot of people but I don't know. We wasn't interested in that.

I've got a whole series of different questions here, but they're usually for folks that want to talk more. We got questions about different types of living conditions or clothing and equipment or types of meals you had.

Melvin Adams: No, that doesn't matter. Hell, we was in the war. We didn't have no meals. We'd get a little box of stuff about last a half a day or all day. We were scattered out. There was no place to cook. Of course we had a little stove, kerosene stove, but we couldn't do much because we didn't have nothing. We just had the canned stuff, drop it and go back.

You mentioned earlier before we started the interview that you were a machine gunner on a half track. Could you maybe explain for folks listening that aren't familiar with that what exactly a half track is?

Melvin Adams: A half track just had, it was built by Whites, and it had four machine guns on it, on a turret, turned around and round, and it could fire 3,000 rounds a minute.

Wow, that's a lot of fire power. And you were one of the machine gunners on that.

Melvin Adams: Yeah. Well, I had a machine gunner but we had to take turn about, it wouldn't

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Did you feel like the half track held up pretty well?

Melvin Adams: It did, yeah. We didn't have a bit of trouble with it.

That's great. Well, I can't really think of a whole lot of questions to ask you because I really don't want to ask you anything that makes you upset or uncomfortable.

Melvin Adams: That's all right, go ahead and ask.

While you were there in Europe and obviously you saw a lot of action, what was your opinion of the German soldiers?

Melvin Adams: Well, you really didn't think about it because the German people was really, really nice to us because they hated the commanders. They was nice to us because they knew we was going to be better to them later on. I can't explain it all, but they hated their commander. When we took over, they knew we'd be good to 'em, and we was. So that's what they understood, and they treated us nice.

That's good. Did you have many German troops surrender to you or your unit?

Melvin Adams: I killed two, and I had one surrender. It was about 1 o'clock at night he surrendered.

But you didn't have any large scale units surrender to your unit.

Melvin Adams: No, whenever the war gets a little bit on the line, they never think about giving up. We'd drive down the road to the next front and I don't know how many people, soldiers was walkin' down the road passing us, getting out of the war. There was a lot of 'em, because we didn't even stop and talk to 'em or nothing. We just let 'em go.

Kept going, yeah.

Melvin Adams: A lot of people cannot understand that, but them German people soldiers, now the SS troopers, they were son of a bitches, we had to kill 'em, but the other ones, they didn't want the war.

They were probably conscripts.

Melvin Adams: And they were just as nice to us as they could be, and also the people. But the SS soldiers, you had to kill them.

When you got closer to Berlin, did you feel like the intensity of their defenses picked up, I mean when you started backing them into Berlin, did it get worse for you guys or better?

Melvin Adams: Well, the war had gotten less and less and less, we pushed and pushed and pushed, a lot of miles that we didn't do it. We just had to stay in one, two or three places and maybe two weeks before we could move. We were shootin', whatever.

Did you and your unit actually go into the City of Berlin or just up to it?

Melvin Adams: No, went up to the edge of Berlin and that's when they pulled us back.

Held you back, yeah.

Melvin Adams: We waited until Russia got there. When Russia got there, then they pulled all of us back but just a few because they wanted Russia to take half of Berlin and we took the other half. But the Germans had already give up, they were gone.

Yeah. Did you guys have a chaplain?

Melvin Adams: Oh yeah, when we was in camp, yeah, but no.

Not in combat? I've read sometimes like I knew where we were, we always had a chaplain with us and sometimes that helps guys. Did you see that much in your unit, guys becoming more religious?

Melvin Adams: No, there was different, all kinds of religious. I don't know whether they took time. Different churches. You could listen to any one of 'em you wanted to or whatever.

I guess my question was did you feel like the guys that you were serving with, do you think that became more religious or more spiritual being confronted with the circumstances they were in, than they might have otherwise been?

Melvin Adams: They did in order to get out of the war.

More praying because of what they were in, yeah.

Melvin Adams: What they was in, they didn't go to the front lines. You didn't ever see 'em no more when you was in the war. Well, that's pretty smart. They got out of it.

Oh, so they got out of going by, OK. I guess what I mean was were more of 'em just because they felt like they were facing a tough situation that they would pray more or become more introspective.

Melvin Adams: There were so many crooked people that you don't know what they're thinkin'. I can't explain.

Well, I appreciate you talking to us though because your story is one of thousands that helps us better understand what it was like in the war and it also allows us to have this as a history that we can save this and generations from now people who have never even heard of World War II can listen to these –

Melvin Adams: Well they don't even talk about it, don't even think about World War II today. They have no idea what it was all about.

That's right. That's why we're trying to save some of these. I guess if there was, years from now or even 100 years from now if somebody was listening to this interview, what would you want them to know about your service in the military or the troops that you served with?

Melvin Adams: Not really anything. I don't talk about it. I'm talking to you because I know you want to do something or write something so other people can understand, but I don't talk about it.

In your case, that's the best way to have handled it, right, is just to, yeah.

Melvin Adams: Well, I don't know. I can't explain it.

Well, that's understandable. Some things can't be put into words.

Melvin Adams: You can't put your feelings in words, I don't care who that is. They can think they can, but they can't.

Well I can definitely understand. Well I really appreciate, sir, you taking the time to talk with me today and everybody at the Land Office appreciates your service and sacrifice. Commissioner Patterson is a veteran and I'm a veteran, a lot of folks I work with are veterans, but even people at the Land Office that aren't veterans appreciate your service and your sacrifice.

Melvin Adams: Now if Patton had lived that long, somebody got a chance at him because he got lots and lots of people killed.

Well, we'll have that in the interview as well, but thank you for your time sir. I really appreciate it.

Melvin Adams: Well, when we made that invasion in France, there was 1,200 dead ones on the beach.

Well thanks for coming in, sir.

[End of recording]