

Transcription: Gerald Counts

Today's date is Thursday, October 8th, 2009. My name is James Crabtree, and I'll be interviewing Mr. Gerald Counts. This interview is taking place by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Counts is at his home in Runaway Bay, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board, Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. Usually the first question we always start off with is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and what your life was like before you went in the military.

Gerald Counts: Well, I grew up during the Depression, but we done pretty good.

Were you born in Texas?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, I was born in Wise County, Bridgeport, in the upper end of what's now Lake Bridgeport, and we moved to Perry and that's where I went to high school and graduated from high school in Perry.

Did you live on a farm?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, I lived on a farm.

Now you were in high school when the war started, is that right?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, I graduated in '42.

Do you remember hearing about Pearl Harbor being bombed?

Gerald Counts: Oh yeah, we didn't have a radio I don't think, but I found out about it some way or another.

What were your thoughts when you heard that? Did you think you think you'd be going to the war yourself?

Gerald Counts: Well, I probably didn't at that time.

So the bombing took place, you learned about it at some point. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Gerald Counts: I had one sister and brother, a lot younger than me, both of them younger than me.

The war started, you graduated in the spring of 1942 from high school. When did you come about joining the Army? Were you drafted?

Gerald Counts: Yes. I was drafted. I was out almost a year before I got drafted, and I was drafted in Jack County, Jacksborough.

Did you have any idea that you were about to get the draft notice?

Gerald Counts: Oh yeah, I knew then, everybody was having to go, you know. I knew my time would come.

So tell us about what that was like the day that you – had you ever been away from home at that point?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, after I got out of high school I went up to Amarillo and worked a while. They were building an ordinance plant up there and I worked up there until I got drafted.

So you got drafted. Where did they send you to?

Gerald Counts: First went to Camp Walters in Mineral Wells, right close to home. That was an induction center then.

Tell us a little bit about what that was like.

Gerald Counts: Well, it was different than anything I'd – I remember the first morning they called us out, that first sergeant run out and hollered sick, lame, dumb and crazy fall out. A bunch of them pulled up to the front, you know. I remember one guy always had heart trouble. He said die and prove it, said a few dirty words. I thought oh boy, I ain't never seen nothin' like this.

How long were you there for basic training?

Gerald Counts: Well, I didn't take my basic training there. It was a basic training camp, but they sent me to Camp Roberts, California. I was there in Camp Walters about two weeks I guess, as far as getting starter shots and give us uniforms and all that. Then they put us on a train and sent us to Camp Roberts, close to Paso Robles, California. Basic training in heavy weapons, you know, water cooled machine gun and A-1 mortar and all that stuff at Camp Roberts.

Tell us a little bit sir about what the other men in your basic training platoon were like. Where they were from...

Gerald Counts: Well, there was a few from Texas, but most of 'em was Yankees. I know I had my best friend named Cooper. He used to aggravate them Yankees carrying on. They called him hillbilly and all that. But he was pretty tough, basic was. It wasn't nothin' like parachute school.

So you went through basic training. How long were you in basic training?

Gerald Counts: It seemed like it was 17 weeks.

That's a pretty good length of time.

Gerald Counts: Well it might not have been, might've been 13. I don't know.

But after you got through with that, did you know, when did you know that you were going to be going to parachute school?

Gerald Counts: Well the last day we was there, we had several of the guys from jump school come there and trying to get volunteers to go to parachute school. It was all volunteer. Got to me and Cooper, and this ol' buddy of mine, it paid us \$50 a month if you went to jumpin'. That doubled our salary, so we thought, back then \$50 was a lot of money, and so we decided to go to jump school.

Where did you report to jump school?

Gerald Counts: At Fort Benning in Georgia.

So you went all the way from California back to Georgia.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, put us on the train. It took about six days to get there.

Tell us about jump school because I've always heard -

Gerald Counts: Well, jump school, it was only four weeks long, but it was a tough four weeks. You done lots of running, calisthenics all the time, and you ran everywhere you went. Stood at attention in parade dress is the only way you stood. First week was just all calisthenics and practice jumping out of mock-ups and such as that. I don't remember, second week was the same thing I guess. And the third week, we jumped out of a 35-foot tower and you'd fall down halfway and then ride a cable down to the sawdust pit. We started learning to pack parachutes there. We packed our own chutes there in jump school, and then on the third week we had them 250-foot towers. They'd pull you up and it bumped, you would float down, you know. But all the time if you wasn't riding in one of them towers or something, you were usually doing some kind of calisthenics. They didn't let you stay still. Done push-ups for punishment. They'd tell you, say drop down and give me 25. You'd get done and they'd say did you cheat? You'd say no. They'd say give me 25 more for lying. If you said you'd cheated, you'd get 25 for cheating, so you ended up doing 50. It didn't make no difference.

A very physically demanding place. Did you have any fear of heights?

Gerald Counts: Oh yeah, it scared the dickens out of me. I guess it did everybody. I'd never been up close to an airplane. Most of us hadn't, you know, never rode in one. I know that first day went out to jump, walked up to that C-47, I thought boy, that's a big old thing. Now you put one on a wing of these big airliners now. In jump school, they'd jump 12 men to a stick, and that's what the plane would hold, 24 men, and then you'd go up on the first stick and jump, then come around the second stick and jump.

So you had never been in an airplane?

Gerald Counts: No, that's the first airplane I'd ever been in.

So the first airplane you'd ever rode in, you also jumped out of?

Gerald Counts: Yeah.

There's not a lot of people that could say that anymore.

Gerald Counts: No, I know, but probably 97 percent of 'em did. As a matter of fact, I went up I guess 11 or 12 times before I ever landed in one.

How did you deal with the fear of heights and the fear of jumping out?

Gerald Counts: Well, doing, jumping out of them mock-ups and things there for three weeks, you know, it just kind of come automatic. You had a certain position you had to jump, you had to throw your right leg out and let that prop blade trips you around, you see. Chutes we jumped was hooked to a cable inside the thing, you see, inside the airplane. And it just all come automatic. I remember when I got out and chute opened, well there ain't nothin' to this. Then I hit the ground pretty hard and I said well, that kind of hurts, you know. I said I won't be scared tomorrow, but I was just as scared on the last jump as I was the first I guess. I'm sure everybody was. They'd make like they wasn't, but you know a man in his right mind don't walk out of an airplane.

When you were in that plane, you mentioned you'd hook a cable up to a static line?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, static line, yeah.

As you jumped out of the plane, it would pull back the cable and pull your chute.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, this static line was stowed across the back of your chute, you know, and it would unwind and in the backpack of the chute was laced on with twine. It'd pull off with that thing and at the very apex, top of the chute, was a hook with four turns of twine, and when you hit the end of it, that twine would break. By that time the chute had pulled all the way out. Jumping like we did, jumping out of a C-47, that prop blast helped to open that chute.

Was there also, I know I've seen this in the old newsreels and movies, did you also have a light system in the plane where there was a red light and a green light would come on when the time would come to jump?

Gerald Counts: Yeah. You had a red light, that was to stand up and hook up. And when the green light come on, that was go. They also had a bell which was emergency.

So you made about a dozen jumps or more there out of planes at Fort Benning?

Gerald Counts: No, only made five there. You had to make qualifying. On Saturday you got your wings and started getting \$50 a month more.

So you got qualified and you finished at Fort Benning. Where did you go to next?

Gerald Counts: Well, they sent me up to Fort Mead, Maryland, for about two or three weeks. I don't know why. We went from there to Camp Shanks in New York, and we left out of Brooklyn Navy Yard there. It was about probably 500 paratroopers, some whole Division I think on that ship I was on. It was an old converted crew ship. The name of it was, I don't know, Santa Maria or something. It was the name of one of Columbus's ships.

OK, yeah, that might have been the Santa Maria. Did you know at that point where you were going to?

Gerald Counts: No, we didn't have no idea where we were going. But we was in a big convoy. We were on that ship four or five days before we left, waiting on that Division to load, us paratroopers. Anyhow, you know they say sea sickness is partly in your mind? Well, there ain't nuthin' to that because about third or fourth week whenever we left, I woke up in the morning about 3 o'clock sick as a dog. So that wasn't in your mind – I woke up sick as old time, boy.

I guess you were relieved to finally get off the ship.

Gerald Counts: Oh yeah. We went to Belfast, Ireland. The ship I was on unloaded there. I told old Cooper, I said I believe it's green and pretty there, I said I think I'm gonna stay here, I don't believe I'll ever go home. I ain't gonna ride one of them boats. But I was ready when the time come.

So when you arrived in Ireland, were you assigned to the 101st?

Gerald Counts: No, it was just a bunch of paratroopers and we stayed in that place called Camp Plandybull. Stayed there about a month. This was in January I guess. And then they carried us on a barge across to Scotland and went on a train and sent us down past Swinden, England. I was in a little town called Ramsbury. When we got down there, they divided us out and sent us to different regiments, you know. That's where me and my old buddy Cooper got split up. He went to 501 and I went to 506. I think there was three or four of us went to 506. We stayed in a stable there outside of Ramsbury.

What was it like being a new guy in that unit?

Gerald Counts: Well, we all got to be pretty good buddies. I know the first day we got there, a sergeant named Joe Reed, he met us and he told us I can whoop any SOB in this company, and if you want to try me, now's the time. But none of us wanted to try. No private is gonna punch a first sergeant, you know.

Sure.

Gerald Counts: But yeah, I stayed with a buddy, and I got pretty friendly with some guys, Mo Morrison, different ones. I was in the 2nd Squad, 2nd Platoon.

Were most of the guys from all over the U.S.?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, they just met where they had in my squad there were two Italians from Brooklyn. I remember them, La Fierre and somebody. Old Mo, he was from Virginia. Just from everywhere.

What were you doing while you were in England? Were you doing a lot of training?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, we done training, map reading, taking care of us, chunking us around all the time. We made I guess one or two night jumps there in England. One, they were getting ready for the invasion, you know, and it was a big deal and we made a night jump. And played war, you know.

Did you have much interaction with the British civilians?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, well not a whole lot, but you know, went in them pubs and things. Yeah, the English people was nice to us.

While you were there as well, did you ever experience any of the bombings that the Germans did?

Gerald Counts: No, not at that time they were bombing London a lot, but where we were at they weren't. Of course everything is blacked out there. You know, at night, everything, everybody had blinds on their windows and no lights at all. There was quite a bit of bombing, but none where we were.

How long ultimately did you spend there in England?

Gerald Counts: Well I don't know, like I say, I think we got there some time in January and when we jumped in Normandy it was the 6th of June, or the night of the 5th really when we jumped.

So leading up to Normandy, did you and your fellow soldiers, did you have any idea that something big was coming, something was building up?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, you know, there had been rumors there was going to be an invasion. We knew that because everywhere in England was ammunition and tanks and stuff in every field, you know, stacked up, and people, a lot of soldiers. I guess there was more Americans in England there than there was English people. I don't know. But there was a lot of us. But we knew it was happening and then they carried us to that marsh in there when we got ready to go, and it was fenced off and we couldn't get in there, was there before we found out where we was going and all that, what our mission was.

What was going through your mind during those hours leading up to the invasion? Did you have any particular thoughts?

Gerald Counts: Oh, I don't guess. Everybody was kind of worried about it, scared kind of and all, but we thought we were tough. You know, they tell you how tough you was. Kids will believe it. We were all kids most of us 19, 20 years old, you know, believe anything.

What did your commanders, did you leaders tell you anything, your platoon commander or any of those folks before you got ready to go?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, like I say, we had sand tables set up and they had all these buildings on our drop zone, all that kind of stuff. Our captain, Captain Rodstein, he briefed us on what our mission was, and they had aerial photographs, everything of where we were supposed to drop and all that.

And what was the mission?

Gerald Counts: Well, most of this to disrupt the Germans and we were supposed to clear the route out when they got on Alma Beach, we were supposed to have the roads open you see there for three or four miles, have a little where they could get in real quick.

Have a landing area.

Gerald Counts: Establish the beach head, yeah.

Sure. So during this time when you were in England, did you have any contact back home with your family? Were you able to send them letters and that sort of thing?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, we could send letters, but back then they censored them. You couldn't tell where you were, what the weather was, all you could say you was fine and hoped they was. That was about the extent of it because they censored your mail, and you couldn't tell where you were or nothin', what you was doin'.

So leading up to the invasion, do you remember, did you go to the staging area about a day before?

Gerald Counts: Oh no, we was there about a week, maybe two weeks, but they had a barbed wire fence around and guarded just like a stockade. Nobody could get out or in once we got in there.

So take us through that invasion. Tell us about when you left.

Gerald Counts: OK, we wore a lot of equipment. As a matter of fact, we carried like 150 pounds of equipment. We carried machine gun ammunition, mortar rounds, scattered out with different guys, and I had a rifle and carried three mortar rounds. I had six hand grenades and a whole bunch of M-1 ammunition, 30 caliber, and had three K rations, two or three D bars, and a change of underwear. We wore long handle underwear, and we had OD pants that was impregnated to keep gas off of us, and also a jump suit. We had a different uniform than anybody else in the Army. We thought it was awful fancy anyway, jump suit, and had all that on, and then had all this equipment, and had a bayonet, gas mask.

You were definitely loaded down, weighted down.

Gerald Counts: Oh yeah, as a matter of fact they had to kind of lift us up on the airplane. They figured us 300 pounds a man, most of us weighed around 150 you see.

That's a lot of gear.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, it was more than you needed really. Had entrenching tool, and you just can't imagine what was in there. But anyhow, I was in the 2nd Squad, 2nd Platoon, and they had our stuff laid out down there, and we went down there and put it on, the chute and all that, and they told me I was going to jump with the 1st Squad. Well I raised Cain because it was all my buddy, you know, but I didn't know at the time why it was, but I was told to be platoon runner, and I was jumping with Lieutenant Kennedy, he was the platoon leader. But anyhow, the 2nd Squad got shot down, killed them all, that whole bunch. Lost him on the jump.

You were supposed to have been on that jump?

Gerald Counts: I was supposed to have been on that, yeah.

When did you find out?

Gerald Counts: I found out, went to a reunion here oh, four or five years ago and I met Lieutenant Kennedy, and I was telling him about it, and he said well did you know why? And I said no. He said well, you was platoon runner. I said yeah, and you said you're supposed to jump with me, and I jumped with the 1st Squad. That's when I found out. I just thought some lieutenant or something wanted to jump my place, you know, and be some with one of his buddies or something.

So all these years you didn't know.

Gerald Counts: No, I didn't know until reunion.

Wow. So what time of day was it that you guys got onto that plane?

Gerald Counts: I'd say it was getting close to probably 6 o'clock, but it wasn't near dark.

6 o'clock in the evening?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, and we circled for I don't know how long. When we got on, they gave us an anti-motion sickness pill, and it made me drowsy. I think I went to sleep because we circled for, well we didn't jump until about 12:00, 12:30, you know, that night, for D-Day on the 6th. I guess we jumped on the 5th really.

Definitely in the middle of the night.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, yeah. When they got over France, they took a door off the back and had us stand up and hook up, get ready, and that's when I first kind of come to, and I guess that pill, I don't know what it was, said anti-motion sickness.

So they took the door off the back, so you jumped out the back of the plane?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, the side, the left side on most C-47. It's EC-3 civilian, you know, but kind of left side, yeah.

So I guess the planes, were they taking a lot of ground fire at that time?

Gerald Counts: Oh yeah, I remember seeing tracers and stuff. Like I said, I was kind of groggy. Anyhow, when we got time to jump, well he didn't slow – when you jumped out they were supposed to cut that left-hand engine down a little because you're jumping right out in that prop draft, you know, and they're supposed to slow down. But there with them pilots was all scared, they was young just like us, you know, and anyhow he was going way too fast and I don't think we was over 400-500 foot because the chute just opened and I oscillated about once and I hit the ground awful quick.

So what was your thought as you jumped out of that plane? Were you thinking anything at that point? Did you realize how historic that mission was?

Gerald Counts: I don't know other than I was scared. I don't know what I was thinking. But we carried a little trinket, little old clicking thing, and when you jumped out and got on the ground and you heard something, you were supposed to click at them to see if it was one of your buddies, and he'd click back. See the parachute's out here when you jump out, you assembled to

the way you were going, you see, go backwards even. You need to get a bunch of men together quick. But they scattered us everywhere in Normandy, just flying too fast. They told us when you get out to look for an orange flyer and try to assemble on that. That was what they was gonna shoot up, and said if you don't see that, said don't hear the bugle says watch where them airplanes are flying, and go the way they are coming from, you see. Them airplanes they were going every which way, you know, it was a mess. They was scared to death. They really messed us up and scattered us all over. As a matter of fact, we was mixed up with 82nd Airborne and all the regiments, at least four or five days getting their companies back together what was left of us.

When you hit the ground, you had 150 pounds of extra gear, did you hit the ground harder than you'd ever hit it before?

Gerald Counts: Yes, hit real hard and that's where I left a lot of that stuff. I also had a demolition kit on my leg, TNT in little half pound blocks, TNT and primer, cord, and fuses, all that. I left that right where I got out of that chute, and I heard somebody and I'd click my clicker and this guy jumps right before me, and got with him, and then we met up with two more, a major and a lieutenant. They weren't even out of my company. We stayed with that lieutenant all that night just about.

You said it took you about four days to get reunited?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, get our companies back where it was a unit again.

Wow. What about contact with the German enemy soldiers once you had landed? Did you see much of them?

Gerald Counts: Oh yeah, well when I first got on the ground, lieutenant coming with a machine gun, German machine gun shooting. But we couldn't see, it was dark, and we hit a creek-like thing, and this major told me and this guy slipped around there and pulled a hand grenade on 'em, and we did, went around there and I threw one, he threw one, one of us hit, three and don't know where it's goin'. But anyhow that lieutenant come and told us come on with me, so we left. That one guy he had a grenade, he done pulled the pin but he done threwed the pin down of course, and he was holdin' the handle down, that lieutenant, he said I've got a grenade here with the handle pulled, let me have it. Switched around changing that grenade. The lieutenant carried it. He had more sense enough I guess, thought he did. Anyhow got oh, maybe 15, 20 minutes, he jumped back and hollered grenade. He dropped it. We was in water about knee deep. It didn't hurt none of us.

Wow. So during that time, when was it you realized, I guess maybe when you took off, did you realize that this was like THE big invasion, the D-Day invasion?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, yeah, we knew what it was when we went and got to that Morrison area, we knew what was going on.

It just is such a historic day, I think everyone who's ever read anything about American history or American military history understands and appreciates what an amazing day that was, and that you were right in the middle of that. In the fog of battle I know you're thinking about just one minute to the next, but did it ever hit you at some point what a historic day that was, and the part that you played?

Gerald Counts: No, no, I'm just an old country boy. I didn't know, no it didn't.

So it took about you said four or five days for your company to be reassembled. What was going on during those four or five days?

Gerald Counts: Well, we were fighting the whole time. We had to go, we were trying to take Karringtan, it was a rail center or something. Anyhow, we did finish it, take two of us about four or five days, but when we went in there, we got most of C Company back together. Of course there was guys from all three regiments with us, and guys Navy 2nd and everything else. Like I say, the Air Force just scattered us everywhere. It was a mess.

When you got the unit back together, what was your mission at that point?

Gerald Counts: Well that's when we was taking Karringtan and I don't remember. We was in Normandy about 45 days I think. I don't remember all the – there was a time I could remember it, but I can't because I'm an old doggie.

What about the French civilians, did you see them much?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, had a little contact there at last you'd see 'em. The last week we went up, they sent us up to Cherbourg, and that's where we got the first bath we'd had. It wasn't really a bath, just a barrel up on some posts, you know, and we stood under it and got wet and took a bath. But that was about, I don't know, in July sometime. But we got up there and there wasn't nothing going on. That's the first time we got to sleep. I think we had some hot meals there. I think they had cooks there or something. I don't remember.

I imagine the French people you ran into were probably pretty appreciative.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, pretty good. They were pretty good. I know some of them there that they collaborated with the Germans, I mean women, you know, they shaved their heads. I remember seeing some of them.

Wow, that's probably a pretty good warning sign to everyone. Would the Germans themselves, the German soldiers, did your unit capture many of them?

Gerald Counts: Oh yeah, we captured quite a few.

What were they like when they were captured?

Gerald Counts: Well, most of 'em was pretty defiant, you know, for a while, them older, but longer when we was in Holland and we got them young kids and stuff, they wasn't near like them old M troops we was fighting there in Normandy. A lot of them come out of that Africa and Italy, you know, been a-fightin'.

Pretty battle hard.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, they was pretty tough.

Once you were able to secure Normandy and push on through, did you and your men start to get the feeling that the war was going well, that the Germans were being pushed back?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, we thought it was at that time. We didn't stay there but like I say about the middle of July and we went back to England and got replacements. I think it was 53 or something left in my company. Of course a lot of them just hurt. They wasn't all killed. But I think it was 53 out of 150 come back to England.

Not very many.

Gerald Counts: It wasn't very many, and we got replacements. We stayed there in England until oh, September 17th, and never seen any combat. The trainers, they would use replacements. And the 17th, we went to Holland and made that jump there, Market Garden they called it I think.

And what was that jump like?

Gerald Counts: It was a good jump. It was a day jump, and we jumped right at noon, and they kept us, they didn't scatter us, it was good. The Air Force done real well. The plane I was in as a matter of fact, the right hand engine was on fire and we were down there and the red light was on waiting for the green light, and that bell went off. Well we got out of there pretty quick. But anyhow it went down. I didn't see it but more guys told about it, but that guy held us there until we got out, you know, Air Force guy. Found out later he was a colonel. We was in the plane, one of them had a radar, you know, we had pathfinders went 15 or 20 minutes ahead of us and they would set up a radar thing to hone in on, you know.

I didn't realize that.

Gerald Counts: Yeah.

So what was Holland like?

Gerald Counts: Well, it was tough. We were supposed to have slid a road. 101st jumped from Eindhoven to close to Nijmegen, and 82nd was from Nijmegen they had to take a big bridge there across the wall ___ and the British 1st Division was up north of there, and they all, anyhow it all filled up. This was a thing a gentleman gunnery planned. The idea was to go up this highway and that the British was gonna come up in tanks, you see, we were gonna clear this highway out and they were gonna come up in tanks and get around behind the wall at the Rhine River, you see. At that time, the Americans were trying to get across the Rhine and he was gonna, you know, the general was gonna pull this off, but anyhow a day or two of getting dust and they lost that whole British Division up there. Simey didn't get up there in time. We had our part done, that's Navy 2nd.

How long did you spend in Holland?

Gerald Counts: Three months about. We jumped the 17th of September and we left about the last day of November.

OK, so you were there when it started to get into the cold –

Gerald Counts: Yeah, after about three weeks, we had all that road and all that cleared, so maybe in three or four weeks, that's Navy 2nd did. From then on, we just held the line. Germans on one side and us on the other. There wasn't much going on there, just patrols and little shell fire and such as that. It wasn't no real hard fighting. Of course we lost a few men along. As a matter of fact, we lost as many men in Holland as we did in Normandy, because we done pretty fierce fighting up that road clearing it out.

How did you deal with that, losing your buddies and others? Just for the listeners who have not been in a combat zone, how do you keep focus and keep going when you've lost people in your unit?

Gerald Counts: Well, you don't think much about it. You try not to. Things that you don't never get out of your mind, but we didn't, I don't know. You tried not to get too close to people. You knew 'em and all that, but you didn't get to be too big of buddies.

When you were in Holland and even before that when you'd been in Normandy, I guess your parents obviously had no idea that you were there.

Gerald Counts: No, but my mama, when they had the invasion of Normandy, they figured out where I was.

They knew what unit you were in, right?

Gerald Counts: No, they didn't know what unit. No, you couldn't tell what unit you were in.

They didn't even know you were in the 101st.

Gerald Counts: No. I don't know why, but that was the way it was.

I guess she was following pretty closely the news and heard obviously about the invasion.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, they figured it out, yeah.

So tell us, sir, what happened after Holland. Where did you go to next?

Gerald Counts: Well, we come back to Rheems, France, and they took upper Wolfen. Like I say, the same amount come back from Holland plus Normandy 50 something, and was supposed to get replacements there and we was out in a little town outside of Rheems, France, but close there. So we wasn't there but oh, two or three days when they paid us three months' pay. See, we hadn't been paid, and give us 24 hours to Paris, you know, to come back. So we went to Paris and stayed that 24 hours and got back, and the night we got back, they issued us our old weapons back and told us that they had a big breakthrough and we were going, didn't know where, but we was gonna leave out in trucks. So we left out the next morning and put us back in trucks. We got a few replacements or we wouldn't know where a cold school shrink and haul us up to Bastone in Belgium, and of course we didn't know where we were or nothin'. But just seen a sign that said Bastone. And they took us and we headed out to a little county called Poem. It was hot and heavy, boy, they was all kind of stuff going on. That was the first day a shell hit and kind of hit me, but the cobblestone or something cut my face all up. Anyhow, I went down to the aid station, hit me in the head. They told me, sent me back to the evacuation hospital. The 101st had an evacuation hospital, kind of like that MASH think on television, and I went back

there and they cleaned me up and gave me some sulfur powder on it and all that, told me they were going to send me back to General Hospital. So I laid down, they had me on a cot and there about 30 minutes, and heard them tiger tanks coming up the road. By that time I'd learn the sound of tiger tanks. I could distinguish between them and our tanks, you know. I could tell the German machine guns and all that. Anyhow, I heard them tiger tanks coming and I got out and got in a hole out there with a medic. He had some holes dug. And I left my weapon. I had a _____ sub machine gun. I left it down at the aid station, and with a buddy. I told him I'd be back in a little bit and get it. Of course I never did go back. Anyhow, them tiger tanks started shooting in them pens and directly at the colonel or whoever it was, a doctor come on the PA system and said the ones that was able held load the ones that wasn't on the trucks. The Germans are gonna give us 30 minutes to get out of there. Well, I knew that wasn't right. But anyhow, I got out and helped load. They loaded us all in back of trucks and of course German guards got up in there with us and shook us down and had us back up a line and the tiger tanks coming with POWs. I'd always figured on getting killed or hurt, but I never had figured on getting captured, but that happened.

So that was part of the Battle of the Bulge.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, that's what it was. That's right at the start of it. The 101st stayed on there in Bastone. They held it. They surrounded it for a whole bunch of days there.

So you were at the field hospital when it was overrun by the Germans and were taken prisoner. What did you think when you realized you were a POW? What was the first thought in your mind?

Gerald Counts: Well at first thought well, they'll probably shoot me, but they didn't.

Had the Malmedy massacre already occurred before that? Are you familiar with that? Where the Germans shot and killed a bunch of U.S. soldiers that had surrendered? That might have come later in the war.

Gerald Counts: I don't know, I don't remember.

That was a pretty famous war crime where the Germans cut down a whole bunch of American soldiers that had surrendered in the snow. But anyway, that was in your mind that you thought they might execute you.

Gerald Counts: I figured they might, yeah.

So what happens next?

Gerald Counts: Well they hauled us in this truck, we got to the first stalag, what they called prison camps, Stalag 12A in Lindberg, Germany, and got in there and it was full of people, the 106th Division. It was a Division made up just to rag-tag people, you know, guys out of the Air Force and everything, and a lot of 'em, it wasn't very good. Anyhow the whole Division about give up there. They sent 'em up there in that Battle of the Bulge, you know. They generally were all in that prison camp when I got there. It was full of people.

Then they just threw you I guess into buildings where you had bunks to sleep in?

Gerald Counts: Oh no, Lord no, they never had bunks. They didn't know about that. They had hay on the straw. It was a big old building. Somebody said there was 1,200 people in there. I don't know. It was covered with straw. No restroom. They just had buckets out in the vestibule where you went in. They had kind of like garbage cans you could use for bathroom. Everybody had dysentery. They fed you we called it grass soup. I don't know what it was, some kind of, can full of that every day.

Geez. And how long did you end up spending in that place?

Gerald Counts: Oh, about two weeks and then they put me in a boxcar and put 50 men to a car and we rode I think 8 days. Gave us a loaf of bread when we got in there and that was it. And of course that old rye bread. And we were in there, the same way you use the bathroom there, the doors kind of push out if you had to use the bathroom. Got the snow and had little old enrollments in each corner kind of where you could reach up and get snow and stuff. We got for water and stuff. But we were in there for 8 days and they took us to I think it's Stalag 2D at Steffeen, that's on the Baltic Sea. I think it might have been in Poland. It's on the Polish border anyway.

So they sent you pretty far.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, a long way and we wasn't there but about two or three weeks and we could hear that artillery fire, them Russians was getting close, you see. So they marched us out of there and then we walked from about the middle of January to the 15th of March, we walked from Steffeen to Camp 10C down between Brenham and Hamburg, Germany. That's where I spent the majority of my time there. Of course the majority of the time I walked and we'd stay in barns at night.

What were the German prison guards like? Were they pretty brutal?

Gerald Counts: No, they was mean. Like I say, we all had dysentery and you'd walk and marching along, of course we just wasn't going fast, if you had to use the bathroom, what you'd do, you'd run up to the front of the line and get your britches down, and then you tried to get up before the guards come to pack because they would start hitting on you, kicking you or whatever. It was pretty miserable.

When did your family learn that you had been captured?

Gerald Counts: Well, they first got a message I was missing in action not long after December 19th when I got captured and it wasn't long after that they got a thing I was missing in action.

So they got a telegram?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, and then I don't know, a month or two later they got confirmation that I was a prisoner of war.

So they got the notice then that you'd been missing in action pretty close to Christmas.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, yeah.

And at that point, was your younger brother in the service yet?

Gerald Counts: Oh no, he was 10 years younger than me. He was just a little old kid.

Did you ever talk to your parents about what that was like the day they got that telegram?

Gerald Counts: No, no I never -

I've got to imagine that was probably one of the worst days of their life.

Gerald Counts: I guess.

So you were a POW then from basically December of '44 until when were you finally freed?

Gerald Counts: About May the 3rd of '45. I know the war was over in Europe I think about May the 8th or something. The British liberated us there. It was in the British sector.

Do you remember that day pretty well, the day they got you out?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, they did, they just come in and changed the guard on the camp and brought us some canned stuff in there to eat, you know, and we stayed there three or four days and they come in there. We had lice. We all had lice on us, you know, body lice? And they come in there and put some powder, pulled our shirt open and spilled powder up and down our clothes and up our sleeves and down our britches and in our hair and everywhere. Most of us hadn't had a haircut and pretty wooly lookin'. Pretty dirty. We had on the same clothes we had on when we was captured, you see. We stunk.

How did you keep up and around? How did you keep up the sense that you were going to finally get out of there one day?

Gerald Counts: Oh, we done all sorts of things. It would take a long time to tell this, but really when we got to that last prison camp, they had Red Cross parcels, and there was a 10-lb. parcel and it had cigarettes and C-rations and spam and all kinds of stuff in it, a can of peanut butter and jam, and we got so we'd get one for every two men, and this camp, everything was, the price of cigarettes, if you wanted to buy a can of C-rations like 30 cigarettes. And if you wanted to trade a can of jam for a can of C-ration, well the jam was 20, and you'd get 10 cigarettes change, you see. And the guys would make cakes out of stuff and raffle 'em off. We done all kind of stuff like that. We didn't have any playing cards or nothing like that, but we occupied our time pretty good. After it got warm along in April, we'd stay out in the warm part when the sun was shining, and pick lice off our clothes and one another and stuff like that.

Did you always feel at some point you would be rescued?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, you'd see them bombers and they were bombing, the Americans bombed every day and the British bombed every night, and you knew it couldn't last long, and as long as you'd hear them sounds, you would see stuff tore up.

When you were in prison, did you have a chain of command? Was there a senior officer kind of in charge? Or was it just kind of every prisoner for themselves?

Gerald Counts: Well no, usually the last camp I was in, yeah, there would be usually there, the Germans didn't keep the officers with men. They was strict about that. There wasn't no officers in this camp. But there would usually be a first sergeant or something like that that would be over the camp. But this last camp I was in, no, it was a bunch of British guys in there that got captured at Dunkirk. They'd been in prison since when, '41? A long time. Some of them hadn't been home in 15 years. They had been in India before they put 'em up there and they got captured at Dunkirk. They was a kind of funny bunch of guys. They had learned how to handle all that prison stuff, experience.

So you were finally liberated and you said in May of '45, so then the war ended shortly after that. How long was it before you finally got to go home?

Gerald Counts: Well, they put us on an airplane and flew us to Brussels, France. We got off the airplane and that was the first airplane I landed in there in Brussels. I got off it and they had us strip off buck naked and they threw all of our clothes and they had a big fire going, threw our clothes, all our shoes and all. Put us in there and we shaved and bathed and got haircuts and all that stuff, and gave us British uniforms, they were British outfits, you know. Then I stayed there two or three days and I think we went on a train down to Le Havre, France, and that's where I got back into an American place called Camp Lucky Strike. There they had big cans of, called it eggnog, but it didn't have no alcohol in it, but it was real good. So we was all pretty poor, you know, as a matter of fact I weighed 110 pounds the first time I weighed and I had gained a little before then.

So you'd lost about 40 pounds.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, I lost 40 pounds, I was just skin and bones. All of us were. Anyhow, we got feed good there and we were there about two or three weeks and then got on a ship. I was glad to get on it even. I couldn't remember getting sick going over. Went on that ship and went back to New York.

When was it that you were finally able to get back home to see your family again?

Gerald Counts: I guess it was probably about April when I got back home. I went from Camp Shanks, New York, that's where I left from. Then they sent us on a train there at Fort Sam Houston, and there I got a 90-day furlough. They called it convalescent furlough and I come home.

Tell us a little bit about what that was like after all you'd been through.

Gerald Counts: Well I was glad to get home. Said I never would get hungry no more, and I gained a lot of weight.

I guess did everyone in your town and all your neighbors and people in your town, did they know that you'd been a POW?

Gerald Counts: Oh I guess, there were several boys, it was a little old town, but there was a bunch of them that had been POW in Japan and got captured in a place called Java. I don't know what that is now, but it's in the 36th Division, it's an outfit over there called Lost Battalion, and there was a whole bunch of them from right around where I was. Being prisoner wasn't nothing.

As a matter of fact, most of the people had gone into the services, you know, it was in that age, and a few draft dodgers we called 'em, thought pretty low of 'em at that time.

Oh I'm sure.

Gerald Counts: You kind of get over that.

I mean after all you'd been through and to see somebody that didn't even serve.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, didn't go, didn't much like it.

But I'm sure everybody in your town had to have been appreciative of your service.

Gerald Counts: Well I guess, but like I say, it was just so many boys and a little old town in Louisiana, there was probably, there was 300 population, there was probably 7 or 8 out of that bunch that got killed, and pretty high percentage.

And what was the name of that town?

Gerald Counts: Perring.

Perring? And so after the war ends and you told me earlier you got discharged in October of '45, then at that point you got out and went back home?

Gerald Counts: Yeah. I first went to Amarillo and went to work, worked there a while. Then re-enlisted in the Army after about three months and stayed another year up in 82nd.

And during that entire time you were in the Army, you didn't have a wife?

Gerald Counts: Yeah, I had a wife.

Oh, so you were married.

Gerald Counts: Yeah, I was married and had a daughter.

Oh, for some reason I thought you just had your folks. So you were married and had a daughter when you went over. So I guess your wife then got a telegram –

Gerald Counts: Yeah, she's the one, yeah.

I imagine that had to have been horrible for her.

Gerald Counts: Yeah it was.

But the day that you got home, how old was your daughter when you got back home?

Gerald Counts: I don't know. She was born, I guess she was about 2, 3.

Did you take a train back home to your town?

Gerald Counts: Well, you have to have a train to Fort Worth. Wasn't no way, I had got an aunt lived in Fort Worth and carried me home.

I've got to think that had to have been probably one of the best days of your life.

Gerald Counts: Yeah it was.

The day you got to see your wife and your daughter and your family. And your daughter is the one I believe contacted us about interviewing you, is that right?

Gerald Counts: Well that was my other daughter. I got two daughters and it was my younger daughter that contacted you.

I know they've got to be proud of you. Well sir, I tell you, this is an honor for me to be able to interview you like this and to record some of your memories, and I don't know if you know this or not, but Commissioner Patterson at the Land Office is a veteran and I'm a vet, and a lot of people that work here at the Land Office are veterans, but even those that aren't are very appreciative of the service and sacrifice that you've made for our country.

Gerald Counts: What about them rest homes that ya'll got them things? What does that cost to stay in them?

It costs roughly about half of what it would cost in a civilian or normal home, and we have one in Amarillo.

Gerald Counts: The one in Bonham would be the closest to me.

Yes sir, yeah, there's one in Bonham. It's a home, they're all pretty nice. Yeah, if you are interested in them, feel free to swing by and check them out.

Gerald Counts: I was kind of thinking I might. Some day I'm gonna have to do something, you know.

I've not been to the one in Bonham, but I've been to the ones in Amarillo and El Paso and Temple and other parts of Texas, and they really are nice homes and they are all for veterans and the veterans' spouse if their spouse needs care as well. It's usually just a great group of guys there and the thing I've been impressed by is the homes are really well run. I mean the staff is good, food's good. You go into some of these homes and they're just not that great. These vet homes are nice and we are very proud of them and that's something –

Gerald Counts: They're all so far from where I live, but Bonham I guess is the closest. I may look into that one of these days.

Or just give them a call and they can schedule a tour for you sometime if you are interested or you can always call me and I can put you in touch with the folks that run those homes.

Gerald Counts: Well I'll tell you what, I've got to go -

Well again, I really appreciate you letting us interview you and we'll be sending you these CD's soon.

Gerald Counts: OK, thank you.

[End of recording]