

WILLIAM SHACKLEFORD

Bohlken: This is a portion of the *Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri in the 1940s* program. The Nodaway County Historical Society is sponsoring the program in partnership with the Missouri Committee of the Humanities Council, and with support of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Today is the fourth of November, and that this interview is being conducted at the Nodaway County Historical Society Museum located in Maryville, Missouri. The interviewer is Bob Bohlken, and assisted by Margaret Kelley. The interviewee is William Shackelford, who was born on April 11, 1918. He lived during the 1940s and in this interview is his story of the life during that period of time, including World War II and in the Army National Guard with the highest rank achieved is Staff Sergeant.

Bohlken: Okay, William, - William, I should call you. Where were and when were you born?

Shackelford: I was born April 11, 1918, a mile south of Burlington Junction, Missouri.

Bohlken: And your parents were farmers?

Shackelford: Yes.

Bohlken: Okay. And did you have any brothers or sister?

Shackelford: No, I'm an only child.

Bohlken: Okay. Tell us about your life in the 1940s prior to the World War, and before that, you went to school where?

Shackelford: Yes, I went to the old one room country school, and the first school I went to was the Star School and the second school I went to was Pleasant Valley.

Bohlken: Okay.

Shackelford: And I went to the Burlington Junction High School.

Bohlken: Did you have any family members – did your father serve in World War I?

Shackelford: I can't recall any relatives, no.

Bohlken: What did you – what do you remember – what did you know about the war in Europe at that time?

Shackelford: You mean during World War I?

Bohlken: No, in 1940.

Shackleford: Well, I could see that it was – you know, it was going to be a big war the way it was carrying on, and like I told you I joined the Missouri National Guard in 1936 and my first summer at camp was at Fort Riley, Kansas, in 1937, and then in 1938 the summer camp was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and then in 1939 it was Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and then in 1940 it was Fort Ripley, Minnesota, and then on November 25, 1940, our outfit was mobilized for a year of special training and we were sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

Bohlken: Okay, and that led to your

Shackleford: And at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and so when our year was supposed to be up in November, see, but they were slow about process us, and then Pearl Harbor broke December 7, while we were still in, and that automatically froze us for the duration of the war.

Bohlken: Okay. Now, you knew about the war in Europe and most of this information prior to 1940 and in 1940 came by how? How did you get that information?

Shackleford: Well, the newspaper, and the movie's news reel.

Bohlken: And that also covered some aspects of the war in China?

Shackleford: Yeah, it showed the Japanese abusing the Chinese people.

Bohlken: The image that was created by the news reels – was it really bad as in regard to the Japanese and the Germans?

Shackleford: That's something a person couldn't prove, but I assumed it was just like it was.

Bohlken: Alright. So at that time, you were in the service, but how did you, or where were you when you learned about Pearl Harbor?

Shackleford: I was at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, sitting on my bunk writing a letter home and I had my little old radio on, and it came over the radio that Pearl Harbor had been attacked.

Bohlken: Was there any immediate response on your outfit's . . .?

Shackleford: Well, [Laugh] we all knew we were automatically froze for the duration, so I mean, we settled back just to see what was going to happen.

Bohlken: With your basic training as a guardsman, what was it – do you remember anything particularly about it?

Shackleford: Oh, we had the standard basic training when we joined and that's all I can say. It was just standard.

Bohlken: Was it – did you do infantry and gun weaponry?

Shackleford: We were an artillery regiment and we had 45 caliber pistols that we target practiced with, and then the firing batteries had little 75 millimeter towed artillery pieces.

Bohlken: Okay, were there any difficulties with the food? How would you classify the food that you had?

Shackleford: Well, in my estimation, of course I was a farm boy and I reckon I appreciated food more than anybody else, but my estimation was food was most of the time alright.

Bohlken: Okay. From a farm boy, that's saying quite a bit, isn't it?

Shackleford: [Laugh]

Bohlken: When you were in the service; when you were sent into combat, what were the missions or the battles that you partook in?

Shackleford: Well, should I back up here and explain to you – you see we were mobilized or sent to Camp Shanks, New York, to be shipped overseas, and we boarded the USS Henrico, which was an amphibious boat, and they wanted to get that boat over there to have it for D-Day, so they used it for a troop ship, to – to move this part of the 6th Armored Division, and I was – let me back up and tell you that in the fall '42, our outfit – the 6th Armored Division was activated, and our outfit became a part of the 6th Armored Division, and so getting back to this USS Henrico, part of the 6th Armored was boarded on it, and on my way we went to the North Seas and encountered a terrible storm had come up. And not only the soldiers, but only the ship's skipper was sick and the next morning he told us that we were very fortunate, that if the ship had listed ten more degrees, we would have capsized, and so I figured that was one of the first miracles in my war experience that I can related a number of miracles that happened from that on.

Shackleford: I was always happy to look out and see these destroyers – there were usually two or three following us over and never saw an enemy and they would circle our boat, and that gave us a pretty good feeling of safety. We landed at Glasgow, Scotland, and we took a train up to Ramston Heath England, where we were billeted for the time being, now we didn't hit France on D-Day, but when D-Day came, why they gave us word to make preparations that we might get called up any time, and finally we did go to South Hampton, England, and finally about the middle of July we got orders to go to France. The English Channel was awful rough when we went across, and the destroyer had to go slow, and you couldn't see your hand in front of you, it was so dark, but they still put two guards out on the boat, and these two guards laid their bed rolls down next to the cabin, well, then the in the process of getting their transom, their bed rolls went over into the ocean and so soon as we got to France, these two men come around and said, "Sergeant Shackleford, we lost our bed rolls on the way across the Channel." And I said, "Well, my goodness, you're supposed to be ready for combat, and you've lost your beds already. I said, "Well, here," we were issued two blankets. I said, "Here, take one of my blankets, and you two guys will have to sleep together."

Shackleford: Now here's where the second miracle happened. Now about the next day or two I was out close to this old shell-pocked road, and each squad had a one-burner gas stove, and I had talked the kitchen out of a gallon fruit can, and so I heated some water on this one-burner gas stove, and poured the water in my steel helmet and had my mirror hanging up on a tree and I was shaving and here come this semi-trailer down this old shell-pocked road, going [roar, roar, roar sound] you know, and about the time he got even with me, a package on top of that truck rolled off in the grater ditch, and I tried to holler at him but with that truck making so much noise, he never heard me. So I scampered and turned that bundle over, and do you know what I saw? Army blankets. So that was the next miracle, so I dragged that bundle up and put it in an ammunition trailer and I called the two men to come see me; I wanted to see them. So when they came to see me I said, "Boys, I'm sorry, but I want my blanket back."

Shackleford: Well, they looked at me like well, what kind of a guy are you? So I led them over to the ammunition trailer, and threw the curtain back and drug this bundle of blankets out, and "My gosh, where in the world did you come by them?" They were plum dumbfounded, so I replenished their blankets and got my blankets that was one of the first miracles that happened and then when the breakthrough came through at St. Lowe, why our objective was go down the Brittany Peninsula and bottle up Brest. Now I got to back up though and tell you something about General Patton. After we got to England, why see we automatically became a part of Patton's Third Army, so Patton wanted us to pass in review – get a look at us. Well, some of us were National Guard, getting close to middle age and I suppose somebody – a few of them limped when they were passing in review so Patton swaggers over to our commanding General Robert Grow, and they went to West Point together – he said "Bob, I want fighting men, I don't want your candidates for the old folks home." Boy, that made us all madder than hops, so when they got this assignment to go down to the Brittany Peninsula, and bottle up Brest, Patton came over and he said, "Bob, I got to apologize to you, you've got a fighting bunch of S.O.B.'s."

Bohlken: You'll have to clarify. You were with the artillery.

Shackleford: Yes, artillery battalion.

Bohlken: And what were your weapons?

Shackleford: We had self-propelled 105's, mounted on M-7's, and now I'll insert the story about Brest. There's two combats – Combat Command A and Combat Command B. Well, Patton said there's no need for two combats holding Brest, and I don't remember which Combat Command he had found and all that; but intelligence coming out that there were enough soldiers and sailors bottled up in Brest to run out and run over us barehanded. So you know what we did? We used a little psychology – we had these self-propelled M-7, and we run them back and forth and threw them a few rounds and made them think we had a whole Army back there, see? So, we held Brest for a while and then got relieved and fanned on out, and that is where we stacked up these five combat battle stars – our first one was in Normandy, and Northern France, Central Europe, and Rhineland, and Ardennes – we ordered five battle stars.

Bohlken: Did you have a lot of casualties during this time?

Shackleford: I think we had a lot of people home praying for us; we had very few casualties, and I'll sight you one casualty that we had – one day we were in convoy and we was coming from the west to the east and the sun was going down in the west, and here came a German plane, and I said to the driver of the ammunition truck, "That guy's coming around and give us a strafing." And so who ever was in charge of the convoy, halted the convoy. Well, my driver and I jumped out and ran for a hay stack and we swear to this day we could see tracers going through us, and I guess they were missing us. But anyway, we only had one casualty out of that thing; one guy got up to man a fifty-caliber machine gun and this plane shot a 20 caliber shell and it hit the ring mount, and took his little finger off and that was the only casualty we had out of that. That German pilot he rose up and went on east, and about the time he did that, why over here was an anti-aircraft battery camouflaged they cut loose and blasted him out of the sky. So his victory was short lived. Oh, I could sight you several instances

Bohlken: How about the other battle stars? Did you have casualties there?

Shackleford: I will tell you about the 6th Armored Division, we had three infantry battalions, and when the war was over, there was a 300 percent turnover, so our infantry – see, the infantry is always the one that catches the brunt.

Bohlken: Yes. Okay. Now when you were in combat, how did you keep in contact with the folks back home?

Shackleford: They had a special kind of a letter that we wrote and the commanding officers and his lieutenants read our letters before they were mailed. We'd write them and leave them unsealed, and of course if we said something in there that we weren't supposed to they took it out.

Bohlken: And did you get mail?

Shackleford: Oh, yes, now I'll sight you another about mail. We were billeted at Pearl, Belgium, and one morning, the first sergeant called us out on the line, he said I want two volunteers: I want a jeep driver and a non-com to go to Arlon, Belgium and pick up some mail. And the sun was going down that evening by the time we got back, and I'll sight that we were in an open jeep with a windshield down, and snow on the ground and I don't know how cold it was, but we were young and full of vinegar and we didn't get too cold. But the very next morning the called us out again, and said we want a jeep driver and a non-com to take the mail up to Bastogne and I of course volunteered again, and so we went up there and took the mail around to the foreign batteries and pretty soon it was getting pretty late in the evening and I said to Kurtch, "I think we ought to get out of here before dark; I said we'll be able to dodge those shell holes on" – see, we just had cat eyes on our vehicles, and he thought it was a pretty good idea, so we just no more got out of there and got over the hill, and the Germans laid in the awfulest barrage that anybody ever heard. We missed that and I always did say my guardian angel was always nudging me about things.

Bohlken: Okay. When you weren't in combat, did you have any type of recreation or time off?

Shackleford: Oh, we'd go back to the communication zone and relax and get fresh clothes, and take showers and whatever, and then we can go back into combat.

Bohlken: Did you listen to the radio?

Shackleford: Ah – well, [Laugh] we had a radio that was in the Captain's weapons carrier, and a little radio operator would monkey with it – he's get in some entertainment on it for us.

Bohlken: But there wasn't anything else like movies . . .?

Shackleford: Oh, yes. The Special Forces would bring up the projector and a certain kind of movie and we'd have an outdoor movie; the screen would be set up outdoor. Yes.

Bohlken: Did you know anything about Axis Sally?

Shackleford: We heard about her, but we never had any experience with her.

Bohlken: Never heard her. When the news – when you were in combat there, did you get news about the rest of the war?

Shackleford: We had a paper that was called *The Stars and Stripes* and I might insert this – I've got a copy of *The Stars and Stripes* and it shows C-47s dropping parachutes on Bastogne, and the parachutes colored. For example, a red one was ammunition, and a yellow one was explosive, and so on, and I've got that, and I've also got pieces of two of the parachutes – I've got a red one and a yellow one and I also got on the internet and got a full explanation of what each color designated and what was attached to it. I feel like that's sure a good piece of history.

Bohlken: Now how did you find out about the dropping of the atomic bomb?

Shackleford: Oh, we were – the war was over with Germany, and we were at Weimar, Germany and I forget – anyway, the Captain called us out and told us about that Truman had okayed the dropping of the atom bomb on Japan, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and of course –

Bohlken: Did you approve of that?

Shackleford: Well, here's the way to look at that. If we hadn't attacked Japan, we'd have lost – oh, you couldn't probably have counted up the lives we'd have lost. But when they dropped that atom bomb, that stopped that, see. I suppose Truman got criticized, but I myself think he did a wise thing.

Bohlken: Okay. How did you get back to the states and win after the war?

Shackleford: I say, I want to insert something; you were asking about hearing about the atom bomb? We were stationed at Weimar, Germany, and a short distance from that was Buchenwald Concentration Camp, and our division liberated Buchenwald in April of 1945, which is before the war was over May 8. I have photos of that – of Buchenwald, and there was a classic deal

about Buchenwald – one photo says “They went in this gate” and then it shows an incinerator – “and they went out that chimney.” And I have photos of that and so well, anyway, we were stationed at Weimar, Germany, and then when time to first go home, why we were transported by truck to well, there’s a camp – different camps were named after cigarettes and my camp was Camp Phillip Morris and there we were processed to go over to Leharve, France, to get on a boat to come back to the states.

Shackleford: We got on the *Kingston Victory*, and as we came into the Boston Harbor, Les Brown and His Band of Renown came out with a welcome boat, and I’ll never forget the song they were playing: “I’m going to take a Sentimental Journey,” and so we pulled into Boston and went out to – oh, I can’t think of the camp – let’s see, Camp Miles Standish, I believe, anyway, they did a little processing, and scattered us out, and I got sent to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, where I was discharged from the Jefferson Barracks, and I phoned my wife - she stayed with her parents in Rock Port, and I made plans with her to meet me at the bus depot in Kansas City, and then I went and got on a train that went to Kansas City, and I got to the bus depot ahead of her, so was right there to receive her, and then we went and got a room at the Pickwick Motel, and the next morning we boarded a train to go to Rock Port, Missouri, where her folks lived, and we stayed with her folks for a while, and Burlington Junction was my home town.

Shackleford: We went over there one day, and Bill Miller, the manager of the Junction Mercantile approached me and he said, “What are you going to do? Are you going to run your folks’ farm?” And I said, “No, it’s just an eighty, it’s not enough for both of us.” And so he said “what are you going to do?” Well, I’m going to find me a job. He says, “How’d you like to go to work for the grocery store?” I said I’d think that over, and George Bennett, which was a real estate man, says we’ll find you a place to live; and he came up with a little four room house and only wanted a thousand dollars for it. So finally I and my wife got our heads together and decided that I would go to work at the grocery store and buy this little house.

Shackleford: Believe it or not, I went to work for seventy-five dollars a month and I was there for a while and Forrest White the guy that ran the local theatre come to our house one evening and he says “How would you like to come to work for me?” I said, “Well, shucks, I don’t know anything about running a theatre.” He says, “Well, I’ll teach you. We’ll have your wife sell the tickets and you both do the janitor work and you both change the hand bills and so I give the Junction Grocery a thirty day notice and went to work for him and he says, “I’ll teach you how to run the projectors in two nights” and so he was with me two nights. Well, the third night it was a long film “For Whom the Bells Tolls,” an eight reeler, and so I and my wife went down and here comes the time to start the show, and no Forrest. He wasn’t nowhere around. Well, so I thought “well, shoot, I’ll just “– I had machines loaded – I’ll just take off, he’ll probably come pretty soon.

Shackleford: About the middle of the show he stuck his head in the projection door – “you son-of-a-gun, you were suppose to be here to help me.” He said, “I knew you could run it.” So from then on we ran the theatre until the TV got popular and he had to cut it down to three nights a week, and well, you couldn’t make a living that way, so I decided I was a farm boy anyway, so I went to the farm and the summer – well, the fall of ’52 I plowed up the bottom ground to put in

corn. Well, the summer of '53 it rained and I never got a plow blade in there at that bottom ground. I told the wife if we have a sell this fall we'll get out of here with the shirt on our backs.

Bohlken: Okay, you were married before you went into the service?

Shackleford: No, that's something I left out – the post commander at Camp Cook, California; see, when the 6th Armored was activated at Camp Chaffee, AK in the fall of '42, we were sent to the California desert to be trained for desert warfare and then in the spring of '43, we were sent to Camp Cook, California and Post Commander sent word down that you might as well send home for your wives or sweethearts, the Armored war is all over and they won't need armored for a while. Well, he was wrong – so I wrote home and told my sweetheart that I might as well take a furlough in June and come home, we'd get married, and I'd bring her back out there. So that's what I did, but New Year's Day, I had her on a train taking her home; we got our orders to go overseas, so in February we shipped overseas.

Bohlken: So now when you came back home, the way you talked, you were treated like gentlemen.

Shackleford: Oh, yes!

Bohlken: Now did you have the ruptured duck that showed that you were discharged? Did they know that you were?

Shackleford: Oh, yeah, and I'll tell you what, I guess I was a funny guy – I didn't wear that uniform only about one day after I got home, and I got civilian clothes.

Bohlken: But they all knew you.

Shackleford: Oh, they knew I'd been through the war, yeah.

Bohlken: And they were very kind to you?

Shackleford: Oh, yes, I was received very well.

Bohlken: Did you keep in contact with any of your buddies?

Shackleford: Oh, every Christmas that was a tradition; we'd exchange Christmas cards.

Bohlken: Did you ever meet them again?

Shackleford: Oh very few got to come by.

Bohlken: What occupations did you experience after the war?

Shackleford: Let's see, one I might insert all the different trades – see I had this ailment and went back to town and run the theatre three nights a week, and the Burlington Junction Post is where I learned the printing trade, so I hired out as a printer's devil, and I naturally learned the

whole thing and I got brave and went to work for the Maryville Daily Forum and I worked there for seven years and then the ink and lead were getting to me where I couldn't hardly eat, and I got outside and did carpentry work, and in the spring of '65 Jim Holt called me and wanted to know if I'd come to work for him at his hardware and I said "Oh, gosh, I don't know anything about electric appliances and whatever," and he said, "Well, you can learn." So I hired out to him and they burned out in January or February of '71 or '72. Well, in the meantime this little property of we had in Burlington; you see we came back to it from the farm. Well, in the meantime they bought this property across from us; and the wife was running back and forth to Rock Port to take her folks to the doctor, and we decided to move them into this house so they would be more handy, and they lived there until they passed on and the house sat idle, and then when the Holt burned out, why I went out and gathered up some old printing press and some type and the local shoe cobbler called me from Burlington, and he was getting so he couldn't see and I bought his shoe repair machinery and moved it all into this house and I started up as a self employed printer and shoe cobbler and that's where I retired from.

Bohlken: Okay. Now, when you got out of the service, did you use the home loan benefits?

Shackleford: No.

Bohlken: Did you use any of the benefits?

Shackleford: While I was on the farm I took the GI bill of rights. I went to – every Saturday I went to school at Rock Port.

Bohlken: Then did you get an education or degree?

Shackleford: No, it was just training in farming, and the instructor call us and check what we were doing on the farm and if he thought we weren't doing it a certain way, he'd tell us well, do it that a way or whatever.

Bohlken: Did you join the American Legion?

Shackleford: I immediately joined the VFW and the American Legion.

Bohlken: And have you been a member since?

Shackleford: Yes!

Bohlken: Good! Good job!

Shackleford: When I moved to Maryville I transferred from the Burlington Jct. Legion to the Maryville Legion and I already belonged to the Maryville VFW.

Bohlken: Okay, we're about to finish here. If you were to summarize, what's the difference between the wars going on now, and World War II?

Shackleford: Well, I tell you, World War II we were attacked, and we had a reason to fight, and this war here, why the terrorists attacked us and we had to do something about it. So I just, I guess I'm not wise enough to tell you what we ought to do. It seems like we've been over there for quite a while; it looks like we ought to bring it to a close pretty soon.

Bohlken: Okay. The attitude seems to be different, for example, in Vietnam when those boys came back they were not greatly received.

Shackleford: Yeah, I know, they weren't accepted as heroes, but see, World War II, we were attacked, and we had to defend ourselves, and then we had a war on two fronts fighting the Japs and the Germans and I don't know how we ever did it.

Bohlken: Okay, is there anything else that you would like to add to this that you can remember about your military career or service?

Shackleford: Well, I always had a lot of faith in my Lord, and I talked to him every day, and I told him I won't take a life unless I have to, and praise the Lord, I actually never took a life; I might have indirectly, being in an artillery outfit, I never personally took a life, and I was thankful for that.

Bohlken: Okay, William, thank you very much. We appreciate it.

What? Well, I hope I gave you all the information you wanted.

Bohlken: I think so.