

JOHN ARMSTRONG

This is a portion of the oral history of Northwest Missouri of the 1940's program. The Nodaway Historical Society is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities Counsel and with support of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Today is February 4, 2009 and this interview is being conducted at TJ's Café in King City, Missouri in Gentry County. The interviewer is Joni Amthor and assisting is Margaret Kelly and we are interviewing John Armstrong. He was born on October 22, 1918, he lived during the 1940's and served in World War II in the Army and he was a Staff Sergeant. John, can you tell us a little bit about your background first, talk about where you were born, when, what was your parent's occupation?

John: Well my introduction to King City and to this part of Missouri was in about '73 because our daughter married a local guy and she was our youngest and graduated at Maryville and so actually the rehearsal dinner was held in this very room, haven't been here since, that had to be '74 but my background is I was born in Philadelphia and my father was a eastern sales supervisor for Schaeffer Pen when Schaeffer Pen was a brand new firm so his office was in Philadelphia and New York but we lived in the Philadelphia area and also in Montreal, Canada for awhile but he died quite young and I was not quite 8 at the time so the normal thing to do of course was to go back to your parents home which in my case was in South Bend, Indiana, so essentially I grew up in Indiana and graduated from DePauw University, a major in history and married a girl from the campus from Louisville, Kentucky and so that's been our life and we had 4 children and the oldest died quite young but the others are all alive, David, Tom and Nancy and that brings you up to date that covers a lot of territory.

Joni: Was there anyone else in your family that went to war in World War II?

John: Oh yes. Of course my generation virtually every male was in the service because of the draft system where you either volunteered or were drafted so I had 3 or 4 cousins and of course a good many of my contemporaries so it was a far bigger involvement of course than we've had since.

Joni: Can you tell us about the propaganda that you might have heard before the war about Europe or China, what was the United States saying?

John: Before the war?

Joni: Before we entered the war.

John: Well there was, there of course there was some objection, the administration had always promised us that they wouldn't, we wouldn't be involved and then FDR's close relationship to Churchill and it became evident that it was important for us to get involved and so we pulled together real fast – this was in '41.

Joni: Do you remember what you were doing Pearl Harbor was bombed?

John: Yeah, I was in a – on the 7th of December in 1941, I was attending a Boy Scout training course in the Episcopal Church in Excelsior Springs and driving home why I put the radio on and

this was Liberty at the time and we were not subjected to a lot of propaganda, believe me, once it became apparent that Hitler was going to overrun Europe and destroy the existing countries there why it didn't take long to rally the cause here. Everybody went to work – to England – the women went to work in factories and the men took off and the few who remained behind were either involved in agriculture to the point that they shouldn't be missed but other than that everybody went.

Joni: Now did you enlist or did you – were you drafted?

John: Oh I was drafted I mean you just wait your turn you see the term draft gave people the impression that you were running away and they had to go get you but that wasn't true at all I mean that everybody knew they were going but certainly if it was a matter saying going now or going 6 months from now why you took 6 months.

Joni: How were you and what year did you go?

John: Well I would have been 24.

Joni: So what year was that?

John: '43 and we'd had a - we were married and we had one child and of course that was really no factor because the draft ignored the fact that you had responsibilities at home. So it's a – and you just made the adjustment, in our case why my wife and baby moved in with her parents which was the usual thing because it was hard to maintain the home – the stipend for a soldier was \$30 or \$31 a month and that really didn't cover much.

Joni: So if they moved into her parents house, what happened to your house, did you still

John: It was rented, yeah, didn't have any sense or I'd have bought it because it's still there and weathered there beautifully through the years, right across the street from the college in Liberty but a – oh that was a – that adjustment was easy.

Joni: Do you remember anything about your basis training camp, where you were stationed

John: Yeah I was – had the good fortune after being inducted at Leavenworth why they – I wound up at Fort Knox, Kentucky which was right outside of Louisville and that's where my wife was so I had a break there and could get away on a weekend why I was – of course it was certainly less painful but that didn't last too long and as I recall I was hopeful that I would get some assignment that would keep me there at Fort Knox but it didn't work that way they were shipping you out pretty fast so I was in Europe within just a matter of a few months.

Joni: Did you get any specialized training?

John: Well, not really, no I can't say that anything was specialized.

Joni: What was your actual job?

John: Well my actual job and I kind of worked into this – I wrote citations, there were a number of awards coming along and all of them required a citation, why as a history major why I of

course did a little more than my share of education at that time so I walked into that and wrote citations under fire because as the outfit advanced why of course the circumstances for sending out and doing anything literally was not so good.

Joni: So where did you have you're a – where did you serve?

John: Our outfit was sent to England and we were in a holding pattern in England before the invasion, this was prior to the invasion and so once the – you gave up your happy home in England quickly after the invasion. I wasn't in the first group I was in I think later on that week – every day they had a new batch of ships came over from England but it was at the invasion and you just moved into France which was being torn down actually the Germans would bomb out these various cities and we just moved from one beat up old town to another and they claimed that our outfit, the 25th Cavalry, traveled more land miles than any other outfit in the Army and we were the 25th Cavalry but there was no horses, mechanized cavalry and it was in a position to move pretty fast – we had gone through France pretty well and our outfit wound up in the southeastern corner of France at a town and we were being treated beautifully and having Christmas with the family and it was going to be very nice, this was in December of '43 and – but that is when the Germans had broken through at Bastogne so we quickly moved from this comfortable location up to Bastogne to move into the battle there and it was a miserable winter and no housing at all and we just find ourselves as warm a place in the snow as you could and then of course eventually we managed to get the Germans out of Bastogne but this was the turning point of the war and our outfit was given a; because they had been so involved was given a rest situation in what they called rest and rehab or something in Luxembourg so we lived in a – actually in was in the gardeners house it was a big complex of buildings on the grounds of the Shell Petroleum guy for Luxembourg and he was a Nazi so they just took over his house and so I had 30 days in Luxembourg which was delightful, made friends there and still have some friends there after all these years. But there again it came to an end because the Germans had regrouped and so we were put back on the road and kept going until we crossed the Rhine and went over into what was then Czechoslovakia which is now Slovak Republic and that's where I was when the war ended. So it all went pretty fast really but even though there were lots of dangers involved why you still have some very good memories there.

Joni: Is there any one special mission that stands out more than the rest of them?

John: No, not really I think probably the Bastogne experience was the most memorable and it was not comfortable at all and really quite dangerous but you really didn't paint any pictures of heartfelt patriotism for what you were doing you just did it because it was the company thing to do and while we were fairly well advised that the Nazi's took over Europe that it would be certainly a blow to – in the meantime the Russians were a factor because they were fighting the Germans on the Eastern front and lost many more men than we did and as a matter of fact they were in this town in Czechoslovakia where we wound up and it was right at the end of the war and the local people there, the natives didn't make any distinction really I mean they were two different armies moving into their town. The difference was in the language they were speaking so we got acquainted with Russian soldier right at the grass roots, lots of celebration because the war was over and everybody thought they were going home right away well of course it didn't go right away because there was lots of occupation and lots of work to be done.

Joni: Did you ever learn to speak any of the languages that you were

John: Well I had taken German in college so I knew enough German to get along and that of course was the only language that would have been equally helpful would have been French but I find myself as an interpreter so to speak for officers in our group only because I did know a little German. I didn't make any great claim to fame on it because I'm sure it was certainly rudimentary in translation.

Joni: Did you receive any medals or commendations for

John: Well I got a Bronze Star and which was not unusual to get the – I was a Staff Sergeant and they a – the officers who were in charge of course they could very well dole out these awards, you know, the Bronze Star or whatever but I was fortunate and had no – well I had been exposed to a lot of danger I was not wounded and came back in good shape which is the matter of waiting until you know.

Joni: How did you handle seeing all that destruction and casualties?

John: Well that's very – it's very pathetic but on the other hand you just – you just say this is one of the penalties for the war and when you – since – not at the time but since I saw many pictures of destruction in England, in London, not in any countryside but in London itself and in the major cities and there it was just assumed that the Germans to the extent of their capabilities were going to tear England apart and on the other hand a big contrast why they took over France by tearing down a lot of these smaller cities on their route across the country but Paris itself was fairly well preserved and of course it was largely because the French sold out to the Nazis. In other words they had a deal where they set up their own government in Vichy and that gave them some protection so Paris was not destroyed like London was. I've been back to Paris a number of times and they have great appreciation for our coming over to you know stop things.

Joni: Did you form any friendships and camaraderie with a lot

John: Well yes but most of them have of course have gone away; I did keep in close touch with people in Luxembourg because we stayed there for a month in a fairly private comfortable situation but after all people get older and once you lost track of them at Christmas time why that's it.

Joni: How about communication, did you write home quite often?

John: Well I wouldn't say often, but regularly yeah there was no problem on that, managed to get mail some usually took awhile.

Joni: Did you try to create some codes for your family so they would know where you are?

John: Oh no, no there wasn't any but that was done though.

Joni: How about entertainment did you ever have USO or Red Cross in your

John: Yeah whenever you had that opportunity you took it. As I recall we saw a USO show in England and probably one more in France and I'm even forgetting who was involved at the time but it was important to relieve the routine.

Joni: How about any leisure time what did you do during – between battles?

John: In our case since we moved on as a motorized unit why we were on the go to the point that there really wasn't any leisure time. I recall trying to brew coffee in the backend of a half track and we would move into a French town and it had been occupied by Nazis so if that were the case why we could move into their house and get what we wanted so somebody was assigned to the attic to get the sausage and somebody else assigned to the basement to get the line and that was entertainment but by and large you really didn't give that a lot of thought. You were on the go to the point that you just weren't looking for something else to do.

Joni: What about D-Day, where were you at that point?

John: In Czechoslovakia and word came down that – this was in May of '45 but a – and the Russians were in the same town that we were so they were as excited about D-Day as we were. As I recall they got in their big trucks, they had 6 trucks and picked up all the beautiful girls they could find and all the wine they could get ahold of and routed around town, it was a big celebration, then there was no certainly restriction on us.

Joni: Was there anything during your term in the service that stands out; any memorable moments that have stayed with you that you would like to share with us?

John: Well there were a lot of memorable moments but I – I think that if your outfit was being shelled why this frequently brought on some memorable moments. I recall crawling under a bed or a bed because we were being shelled and that would give you some protection because if the house fell down chances are it fell on the bed and I crawled under the bed and there was another guy had done the same thing from the other side, both of us had on steel helmets and it made for quite a scene. And there were as you got out into the open and the German Luftwaffe was strafing a community why of course you really were at the Lord's mercy I mean it was no way to avoid it and about the only thing you could do is drop into a ditch and be hopeful that if he was strafing it would be at ground level and miss a ditch which in most cases they did and as we had to wait about I expect it was 2 or 3 weeks before there was a troop ship available to take us home after the war was over and of course the war in Japan was still going on in the Pacific so there was some fear that people that remained and in good shape would be transferred to that other theater and you hoped that this wouldn't happen and I think that there are probably _____ because we had two children at the time and had me on a ship a little ahead but in the meantime why your not too far out of Paris waiting for a ship because that's where the troop ships were going was to Cherbourg so we would frequently get a chance to get into the city and it was beginning to get back to normal because it hadn't been torn up.

Joni: How did you feel about the bombing – the atomic bomb – did you agree with Truman that he should have done that?

John: I'm not so sure I agreed with Truman at the time it seems to me there should have been a way to have stopped the war without killing as many innocent people and if you place any value

on human life why the atomic bomb was it's just an invention you want to forget. But on the other hand his justification was probably sincere, it just stopped it but we the average soldier didn't know that much about it in other words we had no - we were told of course about the atomic bomb and how destructive it would be but we learned a lot more about it later and there was no way to express yourself in other words it wouldn't have done any good to have complained.

Joni: Did you ever come across or meet any of the Generals during the war; the main Generals?

John: Did I ever what?

Joni: Did you ever come across or meet any of the main Generals?

John: Oh you don't meet them you kind of think you do like in my case it was Patton but then he became quite visible and certainly the news people made a big deal of it and people at home got far more information than we did but the average enlisted guy in my case as a Staff Sergeant you were in a sense were an assistant to an officer, Captain or Major usually so your relationship would be with that level and you really never moved beyond that in other words if there was a General in command why he was in a Jeep coming down the main street but you didn't know him and nobody gave any great thought to that.

Joni: Who was your direct commander?

John: The direct – the guy that was in charge of our outfit was a guy by the name of Goodhall, he was a Lt. Colonel and so you of course felt that you knew him on the other hand if you saw him it was at a distance there wasn't any relationship at all but within your outfit why you a – and as a Staff Sergeant I worked with a Captain and got to know this Captain pretty well.

Joni: And who was he?

John: How's that?

Joni: Who was your Captain?

John: A guy by the name of Cowall and of course I've lost track of these people a long time ago. In other words he had the job of writing these citations and what he was looking for was somebody who could do that without a great deal of pressure and this was a fairly easy thing for me to do.

Joni: So how many citations do you think you wrote over the year?

John: Oh I have no idea.

Joni: More than a hundred?

John: Oh no I doubt if it was a hundred but many of them were pretty much the same in other words you didn't get into personal things when you are writing a citation all you do is give an occasion of the incident and that was it.

Joni: So what was it like when you returned home did you receive a reception from your family and friends?

John: Oh yeah I had no problem whatsoever. My wife was visiting in South Bend with my mother and it was equal-distant from Louisville to Camp Attebury in Indiana where I was discharged. In other words they were nice enough to discharge me close to the family, didn't have to go back to Ft. Leavenworth so my wife drove down to Camp Attebury in Indiana from South Bend and then as luck would have it my brother, six years younger than I had been in the service and was discharged just a couple of weeks afterward so we had a big family doings. I recall going to Chicago to celebrate; South Bend was about 90 miles from Chicago and I was assured of my old job so I had – it wasn't a matter of hitting the streets looking for work which was a big part of it because if a guy came back and he found himself completely lost and didn't have employment why he would have been in trouble.

Joni: Did you join the American Legion or the VFW when you returned?

John: Oh yeah I was fairly active in the VFW in Plattsburg but I moved up here a couple of years ago and they don't have one so I'm tied into the Legion, I was at the Legion last night.

Joni: Are you proud to be a veteran of World War II?

John: Oh sure, sure.

Joni: Were you concerned about the Soviet Union's spread of Communism when you returned?

John: Well I think we were concerned – the spread of Communism is not the essential, it's how belligerent they are going to be in their effort and we've got to – the USA has got to appreciate that there are other great powers and one of them is Russia and even though they gave up Communism here a few years ago that didn't cancel them out, they're an economic powerhouse among other things they got oil, oil that we don't have and China of course has the volume and with their tremendous economy why they're a factor. I don't sense any international problem that can't be solved if we're willing to admit that other countries have a part in it and I think we are going to be doing more of that now this business of just being stubborn to the fact that yes we are number 1 and please get out of our way doesn't work. And actually people in these other countries really live pretty good.

Joni: Could you tell us what you think the differences are between the war today and the war that you fought?

John: Well the difference is definition, definition, we can't define it nobody knows who the enemy is in other words you've got to go back to the Revolutionary War where the Red Coats had a red coat and the other team didn't and that's been pretty much the pattern of warfare; it certainly was true in the Civil War but recently you don't know in other words it's pretty easy to be critical of the moves we've made on an international basis in the last few years but there's not been much right about it. The average soldier today he's got no reason to be mad at anybody in other words the bad guys aren't necessarily on the other side.

Joni: Is there anything else you would like to share with us today?

John: Well I think you have pretty well exhausted my memory.

Joni: We sure appreciate

Margaret: I have a couple of comments or questions. You were 25 when you did go in; were they not interested in taking you until then because of your background and profession and your family life or how come they didn't nab you up sooner and did – because you had the education and the background was that any advantage to you or they didn't care one way or the other or until you got in there.

John: No I wasn't 25 I forgot how old I was.

Margaret: 24 or whatever.

John: Oh whatever it was the early 20's.

Margaret: And you were working and had your history degree and everything before that.

John: Yeah, well there were a lot us who were getting close and we knew that eventually you would probably be in the service but it didn't deter too many people in their plans to get married and have a family and very glad that we didn't but at the time you can just sit back and give up on it and say – you know. But a – I'm sure that I got some preference in terms of moves because I did have a college degree but that's

Margaret: Did that determine where they wanted to place you or not especially?

John: Well.

Margaret: Or did you just seize the opportunity?

John: Yeah that's right, yeah in the case of my writing these citations which really was a break because if I'd strictly been put on the line with a M-1 rifle why God knows – but the – somebody in the personnel office headquarters; this was in Europe they were fussing around with the cards and the people who were there and because I had been a Boy Scout executive this guy was fascinated by that and he knew other Boy Scout executives so that was the connection education wasn't a factor but you had to have an education to get this kind of a job that's all it amounted to and so yeah, you took advantage of whatever breaks there are but I don't ever recall the fact that I was married and had a family I don't think that ever gave me any preference at all because there were a lot of guys in the same situation.

Margaret: It was just the progress of time then.

John: Yeah, yeah.

Margaret: Because they were still taking What was your – did you have a specific area of history that was your specialty.

John: No I didn't have a Hi, I want a ride

Joni: Thank you for coming in.

John: Nice to visit with you, you bet.

Joni: I had a great time.

John: Go ahead and double park, I'm through.