

Interview with Harold Hammerbeck

April 23, 1990

Central Minnesota Historical Oral History Collection

St. Cloud State University Archives

Interviewed by David Overy

Overy ([00:00:05](#)):

This is an interview with Colonel Harold Hammerbeck. It is April 23rd, 1990, a re-recording of an interview done some time ago. Colonel Hammerbeck, why don't you give me a brief biography of your military career, the positions you held, the responsibilities, and where you were, just an overview?

Hammerbeck ([00:00:42](#)):

Well, I joined the Guard October 4th, 1938, at Camp Ripley at the same time that one of my best friends and our now retired Assistant Adjutant General, Bill Cheeseman, who joined the same night. Peculiarly enough, we joined for the same reason, for the dollar it gave. Two hours of drill, and you got a dollar, and they saved it for three months, and you got all \$12 at once. There was no deductions. And that was our main incentive because money was hard to get in those days.

Hammerbeck ([00:01:21](#)):

But one of the most-- Well, from there on, my first assignment was motorcyclist for a quartermaster truck company, Company D 109th Quartermaster Regiment of the 34th Infantry Division. And after I discovered one thing, is when they asked for volunteers for advanced detail, never do that again, because I spent the first two days scrubbing a mess hall right about where

your school is now. We took down the mess halls and built this-- Where they're building facilities up there from area 11.

Hammerbeck (00:01:55):

Then I was the only one who knew how to ride a motorcycle so they assigned me a brand new Harley Davidson's motorcycle with a side car. That was a year of all the Army maneuvers around Little Falls and Pierz and Buckman. There was, I think, around 40,000 troops around here came, and they maneuvered outside and leased acres from farmers. So I run one of the messengers for the maneuvers. Well, the mobilization came February 10th, 1941, and at the Army out in Camp Ripley, they staged out there and we found out what mobilization meant. It meant you're no longer a civilian. You're a full-time military. We convoyed to, with some old trucks that are 1936 Chevys and Dodges that out here on-- I think it was February 14th, 1941. It was 35 below zero when we left here, and only one truck had a heater in it. And we had four buckle overshoes, and those'll keep your feet warm.

Hammerbeck (00:03:14):

But we stopped at Windom the first night out in the armory there, and then the church people down there gave us [inaudible 00:03:21]. It was a long trek to Louisiana. When we got there, half of them are sick from change of climate and too much cold. I ended up in the hospital down too, and that's when I found out what there is about the Southerners think of the Yankees. The nurse in our ward says, "I was 30 years old before I found out that Damn Yankee was two words." And that was our introduction. It was Camp Claiborne, Louisiana.

Hammerbeck (00:03:50):

And they filled in a swamp, not completely, but called it a camp, with tents and a muddy soil that you could stand in mud and have dust blowing in your face. I'd never seen a worse piece of land

[inaudible 00:04:06] in my life, but we managed to survive. We had gas heaters. There was one thing that they had down in Louisiana. There was lots of natural gas, so they had gas heaters in each tent, so we could keep warm. But miserably cold, and then it'd get unbearably hot.

Hammerbeck (00:04:25):

We went through the Louisiana maneuvers with the 82nd Airborne, and I forget what other outfits, the 43rd division from Florida also maneuvered up. And that's when we first heard about Patton. I don't know if you ever remember the yoohoo incident in which Patton was driving along. A GI was working on a telephone line and he yoohooed to Patton, and he wanted to court martial for insubordination. That is published around quite a few places. Patton didn't get a very good sendoff on that.

Hammerbeck (00:04:59):

But anyway we suffered through Louisiana maneuvers, and we're just kind of licking our wounds from that. And December 7th came along, and Sunday afternoon, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, we had received orders to go deploy and protect all the bridges and ports in the South. The same day that war was declared, we were on the road to Pensacola and New Orleans, and we had guards on all the bridges because that was felt that there was an extreme possibility of [inaudible 00:05:36] activities. The reaction was instant.

Hammerbeck (00:05:41):

We packed up everything. We loaded up New Year's Eve. We loaded trains and headed for Fort Dix, New Jersey. We arrived there January 4th after a long train ride. We called that the Chattanooga Choo Choo because that was a popular song at the time. We stayed there 10 days, I think, and we stayed in tents. And each night, a tent or two would be burned down. They were heated with Sibley stoves. The Sibley stove looks like an inverted funnel with a stove pipe on

top, and it sits on a bed of concrete in the middle of the tent, and you stoke it up with coal and lift the whole stove in order to get draft. And it's just, like I said, an inverted funnel.

Hammerbeck (00:06:37):

And Northern boys, being good wood stoves operators, they get a little more than smoke coming out the chimney. There'd be sparks, and then it'd set fire to the tent. So every night there's somebody had a tent going. So instead of taking the tent down, they'd put the fire out, and then you put another tent on top so you'd get kind of an insulation out of it anyway.

Hammerbeck (00:06:55):

Well, I think it was January 12th that we loaded out of there. In the middle of the night, we set on a train to port of embarkation. We heard those words PEO. I didn't know if they meant. But we found out that you go into on a wharf, and you get into the side of a ship, and you don't know where you are. You carry your A bag on your back, and your B bag is being kicked along by somebody that has no regard for your personal belongings.

Hammerbeck (00:07:27):

And we loaded in the [inaudible 00:07:29], an old banana ship of World War I. Took us 12 days across the stormy Atlantic to get to Ireland. My first assignment after I got there was as motor sergeant. Incidentally, while we were in Fort Dix, I was asked to prepare a list of materials we'd need to operate for six months by their truck company of 50 trucks. I said, "Where are we going to go? Into temperate or tropical climate?" "Well, we don't know. Just give me a list of what you want for six months."

Hammerbeck (00:08:05):

I think I discussed what they ended up-- Some of the units that did that says, "Give me 10 of everything, 10 frames, 10 steering wheels, 10 tires, 10 spark plugs." So they had a warehouse in Londonderry that's full of 10 of everything. And you can imagine the stupidity of that.

Hammerbeck (00:08:22):

Well anyway, I stayed with the Quartermaster Truck Company until the African campaign. We arrived in Africa around Christmas. I don't remember the exact date. It was a heck of a big convoy going down through the-- The reason we finally found out where we were going-- Nobody told us. We didn't know if we were going to cross the English Channel or go to Murmansk or where. But it was cold and miserable when we loaded out of Liverpool, England, and we landed in Oran, North Africa. There was a--

Overy (00:08:58):

Let me stop just a moment and make sure I'm getting this.

Overy (00:09:00):

What about your National Guard training here in the States? What was that like?

Hammerbeck (00:09:05):

Well it was at individual and small unit level, and at Camp Ripley during drills, we had a lot of range practice with our primary weapons. I was assigned a BAR, and most of us had 03 rifles. There was a few Thompson submachine guns. We also fired the 30-caliber water cooled machine gun.

Hammerbeck (00:09:33):

We did that, and then we did a lot of blackout practice, truck driving practice in blackout, getting used to how cat eyes work and getting used to learning how to stay on the road by feel other than

by see, because you don't-- In total blackout, all you can do is follow the leader and go by the cat eyes. You get too close, you can two sets, and if you're far enough out, you just barely see them.

Hammerbeck ([00:10:03](#)):

Other than that, we did a lot of classroom work. We had a lot of training on our mission, which was mostly trucking, but we also had some infantry tactics. We had to learn the use of the bayonet and personal combat and so forth. We covered everything the infantry manual had.

Hammerbeck ([00:10:27](#)):

We had one heck of a lot of close order drill. We did do one thing well. We learned the infantry drill very well, including some of the-- We had a good rifle performance teams [inaudible 00:10:44]. That was about the extent of it up here at Ripley. Other than the maneuver, which was a company and battalion and the division size. I think there were three divisions involved there. Of course, they was short divisions because at that time nothing was filled out for their--

Overy ([00:11:01](#)):

You mean down at Claiborne?

Hammerbeck ([00:11:02](#)):

No here in-

Overy ([00:11:04](#)):

Oh, here?

Hammerbeck ([00:11:04](#)):

In Claiborne, I think all we did was goof up. We did not have anything in modern equipment. We didn't even-- We had our old trucks. We didn't have up-to-date equipment. Didn't have an anti-tank gun. We had very little artillery. Had the old Schneider howitzers and some 75s and a few 105s. What we did in Louisiana, and they called it exactly that, it was a lot of maneuvering.

And for anti-aircraft guns, we used brooms. Just point a broom at the sky when planes made their so-called scraping attacks. We had to blue and the red armies and so forth. And it seemed like most of the time we were lost.

Hammerbeck ([00:11:52](#)):

One of the things you learned early in that type of training is that hurry and wait. You'd have a assignment to pick some troops up at a given time. We were usually operating the [inaudible 00:12:03] at the end of the [inaudible 00:12:04]. And so we're always waiting. And nobody'd ever got the word where we're going to go, what we're going to do.

Hammerbeck ([00:12:13](#)):

From there on, we discovered one thing about the Army. They seldom do get the word out down to the individual or squad level. I think we're pretty lucky if we got it up to the platoon level. I guess the company commander might have known, but he didn't get the word out. That type of training, it wasn't very inspiring, especially the lack of adequate equipment, modern equipment. We didn't get-- I could say that was active duty training. That wasn't National Guard training. I think your question referred to National Guard involvement. I think we did more in the National Guard up here than we did in active duty Army.

Hammerbeck ([00:13:01](#)):

We did process and train an awful lot of draftees. We got the first of the draftees. After we were got ourselves trained, then we received-- I think we had in the neighborhood of 12,000 draftees we got to fill out our division of 18,000.

Overy ([00:13:20](#)):

That was down South?

Hammerbeck (00:13:21):

Yeah, in Louisiana. I know we got people from-- Well, most of the people we got, fortunately were from Michigan and Wisconsin and the Northern states, although we did get a few rebels in there from the South of the Mason Dixon line, but not many. They sent those to the Northern units. But we filled out, and we got our final company size training in North Ireland. We completed in North Africa, and we should have known more about, but we did do awful lot of conditioning, 20-mile forest hikes and five-mile running hikes. And we did a lot of Ranger training around North Ireland and in Scotland. And that's all troops. This wasn't just combat troops.

Overy (00:14:17):

So you went from the United States to Ireland then, shortly after the first of the year, 1942?

Hammerbeck (00:14:23):

We were the first ship over there. I was on the first ship. Eighth person [inaudible 00:14:29] what they call the AEF, the American Expeditionary Force and the Belfast. In fact, I got the front page of paper that I and Bill Cheeseman and some of my friends from Brainerd coming off the gang plank. We were getting this [inaudible 00:14:47] girls.

Overy (00:14:50):

What were they? NAAFI?

Hammerbeck (00:14:52):

They're north-- Oh I can't remember. What they are was a auxiliary these NAAFI auxiliary unit that provided, oh, administrative service for the Irish and English troops. There's so many acronyms that they have. The Air Force had their equipment WAVES, and the English had the women that attend to anti-aircraft guns. The NAAFI helped in the housekeeping type of

activities. One thing about it, and they all had the same type of uniform. Was rather uncomplimentary English type of wool. They all looked overstuffed. They were not nattily fitted.

Overy ([00:15:51](#)):

What did you do in Ireland? What was your specific--

Hammerbeck ([00:15:55](#)):

I was still a motor sergeant.

Overy ([00:15:56](#)):

Motor sergeant.

Hammerbeck ([00:15:58](#)):

We had quite a bit of new trucks. By then, we were beginning to get the 6x6, the GMC 6x6s.

And we still had the old 03 rifles. We didn't get the Garands or the M1s until just before we left Ireland. We did quite a bit of maneuvering in North Ireland. All around the North Ireland, from Enniskillen up to Londonderry and Belfast and Antrim and [inaudible 00:16:31]. All the little villages had Yanks in them all over the place.

Hammerbeck ([00:16:38](#)):

And we did some countryside maneuvering. That's when we found out those hedges could wreck a truck. Those hedges that are 300 or 400 years old had stumps in them about four or five inches thick. And on those winding roads, going down the left-hand side, the Yanks didn't have a lot of practice in that. One of the wildest things I ever seen was the first time they started teaching us how to drive on the left-hand side. The British taught us how to drive their lorry, their trucks, and it's like trying to write with your left hand. You're shifting the left and steering with the right. Everything is lopsided. You have to undo an awful lot. And then after we learned how to get used to the left-hand side, then we go to Africa on the right hand side of here.

Hammerbeck ([00:17:28](#)):

So at least we learned how to survive for 11 months in Ireland and Scotland and England because we moved to England and to the town of Prescot right out of Liverpool, and staged for going on the ship there. It was quite a convoy coming down through the British Isle. There was kind of a colorful business. By then, we felt pretty well trained.

Hammerbeck ([00:17:53](#)):

One of the things we were always conscious of was air raids. We had to have our-- The other thing was the potential for gas attacks. We had gas spots painted on our hoods of the trucks that would change color in case there was a gas attack, chlorine or mustard. And that is our gas indicator. And of course, we had to have the star or the circle on it to show we were Americans, at least if, in case we had air superiority. We wished we didn't have them in North Africa.

Everybody covered them up because they had air superiority.

Hammerbeck ([00:18:33](#)):

But they were good vehicles. And our troops were fairly well trained, but they didn't have much unit size exercise because it wasn't that type of terrain. But they sure got a lot of it when we got to Africa because there was a baptism of fire there.

Overy ([00:18:50](#)):

Do you think the training in Ireland did anything much to prepare you for what was going to happen in North Africa?

Hammerbeck ([00:18:57](#)):

Oh yeah. We learned the technique of survival under difficult conditions. But primarily, we learned that Yank ingenuity will find a way to do it when all else fails. And we did, by the use of this ingenuity, survive in North Africa where conditions were, at very best, bad. The biggest

thing we encountered there was lack of good air cover, air defense. We had an awful lot of trucks shot up.

Overy ([00:19:37](#)):

In North Africa?

Hammerbeck ([00:19:38](#)):

Yeah. One of our biggest problems, we always had to operate at night because if we went out in the daytime, Germans were around everywhere. And they had the air to themselves. Once in a while, we'd get a couple of our planes or a British Spitfire come through, but there were awful few and far between. And almost every plane we seen, we treated it like an enemy until we found out it was. But one of the things-- I want to say when we come moved from Iran to Tunis, we went through the Atlas Mountains, and the first-- We parked overnight. We parked at night. I mean bivouacked at night and put out our camouflage. The next morning, they're covered with three inches of snow. And this is our introduction to Tunis. We thought Africa was hot. This kind of surprised us. We also didn't realize we were in the Atlas Mountains where the cork forests are.

Hammerbeck ([00:20:40](#)):

But that was our introduction into Tunis. We come in by Maktar, which is the principal city inland from Bizerte. Then we went down through the Wadi country desert into the desert through plains of [inaudible 00:20:59]. That's where we had our first encounter with the Germans. That's when Rommel and his well-seasoned Afrika Korps being chased by Montgomery with his equally well-seasoned desert rats made a pass right through us. Cut off whole regiment of our troops, which they captured and managed to get across the Mediterranean to the prison camps.

Overy ([00:21:22](#)):

You're talking about Kasserine?

Hammerbeck (00:21:24):

Yeah, Battle of Kasserine. We were cut off in the same area but they didn't know we were there-- Our whole unit, complete with the division, supply dump and ammo dump. A lot of people from the Little Falls were there. And we were told that we couldn't go back because Germans were on both sides of us. So we spent the next day learning how to fire bazookas. First time we'd ever seen them. In fact, the first time we seen 50-caliber machine guns for anti-aircraft use was the day before that. So all of a sudden we get to start getting armed up for armor and aircraft after the battle is practically over. But we did learn how to point and fire the .236. That's the smaller bazooka that first came out.

Hammerbeck (00:22:16):

We didn't have anything bigger than a 37-millimeter anti-tank, and we had darn few of those, and they were absolutely worthless against a Tiger tank. Unless you happen to be able to cut a track or get a lucky hit on a roadwheel, you might as well use a pea shooter on it. But we did have a few halftracks with 75-millimeter howitzers. Anymore, you can't use a howitzer on armor. You can just make an awful racket in there if you get a [inaudible 00:22:43] round on it.

Hammerbeck (00:22:45):

But we were totally mystified by why he didn't come through our direction. But the whole French Foreign Legion, General Lauzun and his whole works come through our pass at Hagen, and we had to help them all through there. And his staffers mined the pass, so we had to get out of there. And he's going to blow up the pass. And I says, "We got all our troops to get out of there yet too." And it was a horrible night, but we finally got out of there, and just in the nick of time, and some of [inaudible 00:23:19] rear guard come up. They discovered they were there, and we had to burn up the dump and then flee with what we had left.

Overy ([00:23:31](#)):

Let me take you back then to-- You landed-- You were on the initial landing wave?

Hammerbeck ([00:23:36](#)):

No, we were in the secondary wave.

Overy ([00:23:37](#)):

The second wave. And this, you landed at Oran?

Hammerbeck ([00:23:39](#)):

Oran. We landed and bivouacked at Land Mountain, north of Oran. And it rained to beat hell the first night we were in there. Washed us all down the hill.

Overy ([00:23:51](#)):

Did you have any idea before you got on the ships where you were going

Hammerbeck ([00:23:55](#)):

No.

Overy ([00:23:55](#)):

--from Ireland?

Hammerbeck ([00:23:56](#)):

Not the faintest notion. When we got down-- Oh, the second or third day out, they issued us French-- What'd they call the little books? They always give you a book of where you're going that tells you how to speak the language-- Interpret--

Overy ([00:24:16](#)):

I know. I can't think of it either.

Hammerbeck (00:24:18):

Anyway. So it'd give us an idea, well, we're going to France. Well, this is a far cry. We hadn't even heard about our first troops having hit Africa because we're out in the ocean. They don't give you any news. So when we went through the Straits of Gibraltar, we certainly weren't going through France because there was the Prudential rock sitting out there and you can't miss that.

Overy (00:24:40):

Well, had you thought you might be invading Northern Europe? Was that a possibility in your mind?

Hammerbeck (00:24:44):

Yeah, that's what we thought.

Overy (00:24:45):

Oh that's what you thought?

Hammerbeck (00:24:46):

Yeah, we thought we were going to go in Portugal or southern France. But then, when they started getting news that they allowed to come through that our first troops had hit Iran and Algiers, then we knew that we were the second wave. We were on the Empress of Australia. It was a British ship. Their degree of sanitation was far from ours. But we swore they had a scoop on the front that picked up dead fish because how could they get fish that tasted that bad? No, I'm not kidding at all. The potatoes were black. Their kitchens couldn't stand inspection, absolutely. By American standards, they were absolutely terrible.

Hammerbeck (00:25:36):

That's our first encounter with what we thought was a bad deal with British food because when we get into Tunis, and we were sent down in the interior of-- Away from the coast, we had

troops helping unload the ships, and the British took our rations, which what they call a B rations, which are semi-perishable, and they're good rations, and they'd give us what they call their compo rations, which are all canned hardtack.

Hammerbeck ([00:26:06](#)):

And I think I-- Well, I guess I told you about these crackers that you couldn't-- They'd burn in a blue flame, and you couldn't soak them to get soft. We tried boiling them on a canteen cup with a blow torch, and they're still hard. And we finally found a meat grinder with a nutcracker attached, and we'd ground up and made pancake flour. And then we used toothpaste because the only place to get soda-- Was quite a bit of salt in it, but soda and salt and made pancakes. And boy, they were good because we'd been living on that oxtail soup and mutton. Sticking to the roof of your mouth.

Overy ([00:26:44](#)):

Well you must have been swearing at the English. Yeah?

Hammerbeck ([00:26:46](#)):

Oh God. We were furious because just a few miles north of us, they were eating our rations. There was no reason that we could see, other than the fact that their ration was more of a combat ration. Well, who needs to be told they're guarding our warehouses full of flour and our condiments up there and give us their rations. They were eating our rations. I still couldn't see the reason for that.

Hammerbeck ([00:27:13](#)):

I know I my company commander, Bob Mogoine, who took my pickup, my maintenance pickup, and he drove up about, oh, 100 miles up towards the coast to come to a ration dump. And we talked our way into 50 pounds of flour so we could bake some rolls and biscuits. Well, we did

get some baking powder, too. But that was all the summer that we were there it was like that, until after the campaign. [inaudible 00:27:44]--

Overy ([00:27:45](#)):

And when you landed it at Oran, you stayed then there for a while?

Hammerbeck ([00:27:49](#)):

Oh, just for a couple days. We stayed there long enough to get our trucks unloaded and get our training for combat down to the-- We issued-- Well, we did get the ammunition in North Ireland, and then-- Yeah, we started getting the 50 caliber machine guns in Oran, but nothing to put them on. You've got to have a mount. You can't-- When you're driving a truck. So they come out with what they call a cab mount and a kit that you could cut a hole in top of the truck and put this ring on, on top.

Hammerbeck ([00:28:28](#)):

And then we had quite a bit of more aircraft identification school because they didn't want us firing at our own plane in case we should see one of them. If I sound cynical about our air cover, it's because we didn't have it. And we didn't. We had some pretty good dog plate, and we got credit for knocking down a couple Spitfires and firing into the dog plate, as in Tunis.

Overy ([00:28:55](#)):

So you were fairly stationary then for a while? You were--

Hammerbeck ([00:28:59](#)):

No, we moved a thousand miles then up into Tunis from Iran after we'd staged-- We staged at an Arab city. I can't remember the name of it. It was where we got our first introduction into Arab life. There was a sports stadium there. We stayed in that for two or three days until we got everything assembled for convoying. And we convoyed right up the coast, right into the line as it

was. British had the north sector, and we had the central sector. And the 34th Division was given the center of it with nothing to-- What can you-- You can't link up because we were spread about 500 miles with three divisions, and you can't do that.

Hammerbeck (00:29:51):

A lot of times, when we were looking for repair parts for our trucks, we'd go on the road, and we'd take the spark plugs out of burned-out trucks. We found out there was quite a few spark plugs out of German trucks would fit too. There was quite a bit of German stuff along the sides, too, but there was an awful lot burned up American trucks. And incidentally there's quite a few planes laying around. We'd get the plastic out of the windshield of those and make rings and watches. We had maybe really [inaudible 00:30:21].

Overy (00:30:22):

Was the action-- Were you pretty close to the actual combat that was going on? Was it going all around?

Hammerbeck (00:30:31):

We were right in it. Let me put it this way. Support troops are supposed to be delivering the goods to the combat troops. And half the time we didn't know where they were, and half the time we were too far ahead. A lot of times, we'd come back and we'd see our guns pointing at us because it was such a wandering desert. It was full of wadis, or dry ditches, and heck a lot of mine fields. We lost a lot of trucks in mines. We'd lose a front corner and we'd wait until we got another one with a different front corner and put a whole new axle in there. But then if you hit a stacked tower, you could lose the whole truck.

Hammerbeck (00:31:16):

My encounter was to fire a lot, the machine gun fire, at planes that kept scraping us. And they would scrape us, it seemed like endlessly. We got so many trucks with holes in them and some odd things happened. We found out the only way that you can plug up a hole in a gas tank is with GI soap. It makes the best plug. When the gas is running out, you can take a bar of GI soap and plug up the hole. We had one truck in that was-- He had had a [inaudible 00:31:53] round bomb. He was bombed, and the round when off and back, and a fragment from the bomb--

Overy (00:32:02):

Shrapnel.

Hammerbeck (00:32:02):

Shrapnel went through the cab right beside him, through the dash, and into his air cleaner and spun up into solid ball, all the copper wool that was in the air cleaner. Made one solid ball out of it. That's when it comes to rest. And because of amount of fragmentation, we'd lost so many tires. We couldn't get enough tire patches. We didn't have tire patching for about two months, and we had to use a blow torch to vulcanize rubber onto rubber to patch up tires, which wasn't too successful, but it was the best we could do. Well, when supplies would come in, and there was repair parts, there was so not enough of them. Never enough. We couldn't build up any stock.

Overy (00:32:54):

So you were a pretty fluid situation all the time.

Hammerbeck (00:32:56):

Very fluid. It was my recollection at that time-

Hammerbeck (00:33:02):

My recollection at that time, was that we were often wondering which direction the enemy was, they were behind us or in front of us. Because there was such big gaps in the line. It was not a fixed battle situation. There was no zone of no man's land at all, because we didn't have any fortifications. The only foxholes were in-- You'll always dig a foxhole when you stop, for protection from bombing and strafing. But otherwise, there was no fortifications as such. But there was a heck of a lot of foxholes.

Overy (00:33:45):

What was life in the desert like when you were-- You were moving pretty rapidly, weren't you?

Hammerbeck (00:33:48):

Oh yeah. Well, once we got into [inaudible 00:33:53] then we made night moves just because you had to keep dispersed. We had to have a minimum disbursement of a hundred yards, so we'd present a very poor target. So when you parked a truck, you'd take a long ways to the kitchen, usually about a quarter and a half mile, and that led to the mess truck. And there was not a big event getting there because it wasn't really attractive food. One of the things that-- You're bitching about food, of course, [inaudible 00:34:36] the army. If there's nothing else to bitch about, you bitch about the food. We had a good bitch but we survived it.

Overy (00:34:41):

You're still on English rations always?

Hammerbeck (00:34:43):

Yeah. The next worst enemy was Pat. First of all, I don't think he could do much about the fact we were wearing whole uniforms and the temperature was 118 degrees and it was dreadfully dry. And we were taking Adermin every day because of the malaria situation. I managed to get away

[inaudible 00:35:13] with malaria, despite it. But everybody looked yellow. Their eyeballs were yellow, their skin was yellow from Adermin.

Hammerbeck (00:35:20):

And we were usually rationed water, one canteen cup a day.

Overy (00:35:24):

One canteen cup a day?

Hammerbeck (00:35:25):

Yeah. And then bit by bit, as the engineers got up water points-- Water is so darn far apart there. They take water out of a ditch or out of a camel hole or an oasis someplace and send in an engineer tank and treat it. By the time they get it treated enough to be safe to drink, it's treated as sewage. You boiled the hell out of it, after you got it. But it was so full of chlorine, it was hardly palatable. But it was just enough, if you were real conservative about it, you could get a coffee out of it, a couple drinks and enough to brush your teeth with.

Hammerbeck (00:36:07):

But baths were practically unknown there for a hell of a long-- There wasn't even a shower point set up. We never did see a shower point the whole summer of '43 that we were in Africa. Then finally, after the battle was over and the Germans had given up, then we were moved up to the Plains of Mature again, near Lake Bissouri. Then we really went hog wild with showers and we got pressed uniforms, cotton uniforms finally. But I wanted to tell you, it was about then I got my battlefield commission, just before we moved back to the states, before going to Italy. The caption issued an order for all second lieutenants to tour the rest areas or any place they could, and fine GIAs for not saluting them. \$10, an arbitrary fine of 10 and you had to collect it. And if

you didn't, you had to pay it yourself. That's what he did to suck an attendance price out of the battlefield commission.

Hammerbeck ([00:37:11](#)):

I absolutely despised that type of an attitude. Didn't cut any mustard with any of us in the first place, because he never had won any battles for us. But we wondered where he was until finally, the battle was practically over with. And he'd come in there with his entourage of publicists that would give him all kinds of publicity.

Overy ([00:37:37](#)):

What was a typical kind of day like for you personally, as you were in North Africa the first several months? As you were going toward-

Hammerbeck ([00:37:46](#)):

We did a lot of exploring, when we were not repairing trucks and digging better foxholes. We'd take the maintenance pickup, and we'd look at the battlefield wreckage. And we'd pull some of it in and fix it up. Once in a while, we'd find a motorcycle. I found a heck of a nice-- A brand new motorcycle, with a side car. It had reverse gear and it was a sidecar wheel drive and reverse, it was a BMW motorcycle. You know where it was built for? For Russia. It had handlebar heaters, two tubes coming up in the cylinder heads. But anyway--

Overy ([00:38:29](#)):

It's like woolen uniforms in Africa.

Hammerbeck ([00:38:30](#)):

That's exactly right. I imagine the Germans had a few words to say about that. But there was one [inaudible 00:38:41] site the Germans had been blown out of, by some of the airstrikes, when we finally got the air part. And there was quite a bit of strange equipment. I was naturally curious

and I'd pick up equipment. You'd always have to watch out for booby trapping and just check it out for that. And I got the nicest engine and we got a propeller off from a-- I forget what kind of a plane it was. It was a good size propeller. We made a frame, we made a great big stand, started it up. We had a nice wind and we could put a sheet in front of it or a mattress cover and keep it wet, and we had air conditioning. That fast evaporation would just make you shiver, it got so cold.

Hammerbeck ([00:39:27](#)):

And other than that, we had outpost to watch for two things, Germans and Arabs. The Arabs are selling information to both sides and they had issued an order to get all the Arabs out. And if they wouldn't move and you see Arabs any place, shoot them. But try not to hit them. So there were guys that would sit up on top of these little rolling hills there and they'd target shoot them. But it didn't take the Arabs long to figure out that they were not welcome there. And well, it was terribly tiresome, that heat. We all had the trots from the flies. There was flies on everything, these big black flies. By then, we got orange marmalade. And by then, we were getting bakery bread. This is after the campaign was over. And I always remember these flies just loved that orange marmalade. And so did the bees that was around there. So you'd pick up a piece of bread with orange marmalade and you'd blow like heck to get all the flies off before it'd get to your mouth. And they'd hang on. I'll tell you, you've never seen such tenacious flies in your life. But everybody got the trots from that. Dysentery was-- All the army had diarrhea.

Overy ([00:40:48](#)):

And this was after the campaign was essentially over?

Hammerbeck ([00:40:51](#)):

Yeah. One of the greatest sites I've ever seen was, the after core giving up. I mean, they convoyed up to us, with a band in the first truck and all their desert tan troops and all the trucks behind, playing Lilly Marley and singing. And it kind of tears your heart out to see warriors of that type, that have distinguished themselves in some pretty long battles. They've been fighting for four years, darn it. Yeah. They had been in Montgomery.

Hammerbeck ([00:41:33](#)):

We had a lot of respect for these-- They were well seasoned troops. The British, the Tawnys, were something else again. They were tough and they were the rottenest mouthed people I've ever talked to in my life. They all sounded like they came from-- What was that place near London?

Overy ([00:41:51](#)):

Lime house?

Hammerbeck ([00:41:59](#)):

There's a name for that type of Tawny. But they'd lived out in the desert so long that they didn't know how to talk decent language anymore. It was all motherfucker and that type of stuff. But it would take a long time before they'd become human again. Well, after you live like this for a while, you don't have to be nice to anybody.

Overy ([00:42:19](#)):

Did you feel that that experience in North Africa was very dehumanizing for you?

Hammerbeck ([00:42:22](#)):

Very. I really do. Like I said, did a lot of exploring. In the Mature area, where the old Roman viaduct-- And digging a foxhole, I found quite a few old Roman coins. I still got some of them

here that were committed before the time of Christ. And I made a cigarette box out of German 88-millimeter artillery, casing, brass casing. And mine had all these coins. I cut out holes so I could see both sides, open it up and see both sides. Somebody stole it when I got into Italy. But anyway, one of the things, we did a lot of tinkering, crafts work to pass the time. Then tried to keep cool.

Hammerbeck (00:43:18):

There's something terribly tiresome and frustrating about it. There's nothing so frustrating as lack of action. And there would be days without action and then there'd be so much action, you couldn't sleep for days. And then there'd be days without action. And most of the time, you're trying to figure out how to make do with what you've got. When we finally got the-- After the campaign-- Well, I was going to tell you about that motorcycle. I had that for quite a while and then finally, my commander says, "You've got to turn that in to--" We had a couple German tanks and a couple halftracks, great big three quarter tracks of time overs for their 88 monitor. We got those running pretty good but they wouldn't let us keep them.

Hammerbeck (00:44:10):

But we kept the motorcycle until my commander said we had to turn it in. So anyway, a mechanic drove it to Tunis, to the Kasbah, and we traded it for five gallons of wine. He caught a truck back to [inaudible 00:44:24] area. And we learned all about the Kasbah in Tunis. It's kind of a wild place. But while we were on the way up to Tunis, along the beach, we took the beach road from Mature and [inaudible 00:44:40].

Hammerbeck (00:44:40):

And here's great, big German airplanes scattered all up and down the beach. There was at least a dozen of them. And I found out that they were Gotha gliders. There was six French Gnome

engines on each of them. Not on the wing but a Gnome engine is an engine that rotates with a propeller. The engine goes around and the crank shaft stands still. I'd never seen a bigger airplane. Now I've seen the Spruce Goose and they were bigger than that. The cord of the wing was five feet. That means five feet thick at the root of the wing. There were three engines out on this wing and they had laminated mahogany props.

Hammerbeck ([00:45:24](#)):

Looked like big fans. And the landing gear was a whole row of heavy wheels, solid rubber tires, along each side of a square base fuselage, with huge I beams. So they could transport tanks with these planes. What they were, were gliders that had been used to make Creekwood. And they'd put the engines on and they'd put all six engines on and they'd have to tow them to get them off the ground with a load. And they'd fly about 10 feet above the waves to get across the Mediterranean. They'd almost crash land to get in there. Well, the American Air Force caught the last batch of them before they got into the interior airfields and shot them all down. All they could do was make their way into the beach. And that was it.

Hammerbeck ([00:46:11](#)):

That was the most spectacular thing of everything. Other than that, our ammunition dump caught fire up there. And that was the most spectacular blowout.

Overy ([00:46:20](#)):

Where was this?

Hammerbeck ([00:46:21](#)):

In Tunis. I thought, "Well, all our ammo for Sicily and Italy must have been in that dump", because it burned for two days. It was a horrible big fire. But then when I received my commission, I was put in charge of the collection of all the transport to go back to Anel Trick,

down by Oran. It's a sea coast town. And that was a thousand mile convoy. And we had one heck of a job just keeping everything going but we did get it all down there. And I was assigned to the ordinance by then. And then I was assigned to plan a shipload, a Liberty ship to take the invasion load of equipment, of the 34th division, to Italy.

Hammerbeck (00:47:12):

And we loaded everything on paper. It was a whole-- We were called TQM, Transportation and Quarter Master. And our assignment was to tell exactly where each piece of equipment, what unit it was with, what the [inaudible 00:47:28] of the unit was. And that-- One of the biggest battles, before Cammel gave up, was I think, the town was Karu. And that was towards the sea coast, the coast of Tripoli from Kasserine. And it was a kind of a line of hills and the Germans had gone into a defensive position and they were bombed and artillery [inaudible 00:48:10] So a lot of them where-- Their fortification had left their stuff right there, so we had a chance to look at it. But there was some grizzly sites and there was some interesting sites. One of the most grizzly was, one of their tanks had been hit by a tank round that had set fire. Which if a round gets inside of a tank, it spins around, just the friction, sets fire just entering it.

Hammerbeck (00:48:35):

And the guy was still at the controls. His hands were on the two levers, the steering levers, and his whole upper torso was missing. The fire was so severe, he couldn't get out of the seat. And the top half of him was burned off and the bottom half was completely intact. So that's an unforgettable sight. There was quite a few casualties that hadn't been picked up but they get awful smelly in that kind of weather.

Hammerbeck (00:49:06):

The same as in Italy too. One of the things that happened after a battle, is that it takes a while for graves registration, for people to pick up. We always had one truck designated for picking up corpses and that's the truck you could never get washed enough, because of the smell. One of the peculiarities of the North African campaign is the Arabs had absolutely no consideration for Christians and they fought with knives and they would dig up the Christians and our soldiers to get their shoes and their uniforms and the mattress cover they were buried in. The battlefield graves, they'd rob them.

Hammerbeck (00:49:54):

So the Americans got into the habit of putting a personnel mine on the top of each grave, until the Arabs got discouraged from that practice. Another thing that happened and that happened to quite a few of our guys, when they'd be sleeping in a pup tent at night, they'd wake up in the morning with their ditty bag slashed and all their personal possessions gone from underneath their head. They were such expert thieves, they were some of the best thieves in the world. They could so silently steal from you and you couldn't figure out how they could do it, but they could do it.

Hammerbeck (00:50:32):

And you always had that prospect of that type of thievery. We began to look at Arabs as being a little bit lower than animals because of their attitudes towards us. All the Arabs we saw in the Siroccan desert area or in the Plains of Mature area, were nomadic. And they were traveling tribes. They didn't even have good tents, they were such a poor grade. And I think I told you about the fact that we changed their habits of travel, with the chief at the head of his tribe, and all his wives and kids behind with his goats and sheep and chickens and so forth. And he had them

all-- After he stepped on a few landmines, he'd always ride a little donkey. And he finally decided that the best place for the chief was at the rear end of the whole works because he'd step on a landmine. That changed centuries of tradition.

Hammerbeck ([00:51:39](#)):

There was an awful lot of landmines. And the Germans laid mines, the British, the Americans laid mines. They were all supposed to keep a minefield map and I don't think anybody really paid much attention to that. But the engineers always had good minesweepers. We had minesweepers, we'd use them wherever we'd go because we didn't know where the mines were. You'd get roads through minefields, you soon learn to respect which way the red arrow was pointed, because boy, you could be sure of hitting one if you went out of it. And there's an awful lot of-- You could go there today and there's still thousands of mines, in the plains of Africa.

Overy ([00:52:29](#)):

Describe to me once again, your experiences with the Kasserine battle. What did you see of that?

Hammerbeck ([00:52:36](#)):

Well, the thing we seen most of that, was the size of the tanks at night, moving and you could hear them and you could see the outlines of them, going by our pass at Haget, the Haget Pass, which was a side road to Kasserine. We had troops at Kasserine and the rear detachment was the other side. And we had trucks hauling infantry to try to keep up with the retreat that we were trying to conduct but they were cut off. And so we didn't retreat because going the opposite direction was the best direction to go to save ourselves because the Germans had come right through us. And they went right on down to Kasserine. We were up above them, where they'd come right through our division area and they didn't know we were there. They moved so fast.

Hammerbeck (00:53:37):

Then that's when they had the tiger tanks. And the stories and the feeling we got, we didn't have anything to stop them. It was a total frustration because the-- And the tank people could not do a thing with it. And the artillery renewals we did have, were pitiful because we didn't have much for artillery and there wasn't much stable position. There's not much to fire with. Artillery is much not much good against armor anyway, at the very best.

Hammerbeck (00:54:18):

I guess it's hard to relive the feeling of frustration but not hopelessness. We always felt that something would come out of it. One thing about rural Americans, especially when we're all together from the same hometown, we can sit around at night and talk. And you talk about letters from home and one of the biggest things everybody looked forward to when someone finally did get mail-- And mail would accumulate for a long time, you wouldn't get it for two or three weeks and then you'd get a great big bunch. And we always felt that the cookies from home were always put underneath the tanks on the shipment over cause they were ground to bits by the time you got them, so you ate them with a spoon. But that was the biggest occasion. Mail calls were the greatest.

Hammerbeck (00:55:16):

And other than that, speculation about when we were going to go home. We'd been overseas almost two years by then. After the campaign was over and we had this assembly, incidentally, an interesting spot about Bissouri, Mature is right below the Bay of Bissouri. There's a huge plain where the Romans used to fight there. It's right not too far from-- What is that oldest city in the world? I can't think of it now. Old baths and so forth. But the Americans made a whole invasion fleet in the Bay of Bissouri. There was hundreds of landing craft and troop ships and so

forth, all up and down through the Bay of Bissouri. And they were all fake. The Germans came over and bombed with the fake bombs. It was a total loss of deception. They knew where we were doing it and so they just figuratively laughed at us.

Overy ([00:56:35](#)):

Were there any good times in Africa? Any things that you remember positively? Any funny things or--

Hammerbeck ([00:56:44](#)):

Well, yeah. Haircuts. There was no barbers around so people started cutting their own-- Each guy could cut his buddy's hair. And since there was nobody who could give a hoot to what you look like, they started coming up with the Apaches and lettering system. Every type of a beard was razed and a wide variety of original haircuts. I think we cut some of the first of the beetle haircuts there. But most of the haircuts were short because of sanitation problems.

Overy ([00:57:21](#)):

Sure.

Hammerbeck ([00:57:24](#)):

I think one of the funniest-- I shouldn't say funny but it had a lot of humor. When our guys helped unload the ships in Algiers, they were unloading British ships as well as American ships-- And when the British had a rum ration, and of course, we didn't have any ration, so one of our guys was assigned to help unload the ships. He got a crate, that's a wooden crate filled with sawdust and two 5 liter, what they call British gallons, of rum. And this rum is the most potent stuff on God's green earth. It looks like nitroglycerin I think and acts a lot like it. We didn't know it but they cut that four to one. I mean, when they issued this grog to their troops. We didn't cut it

at all but you couldn't drink it. It was like drinking scalding lye. But anyway, the only thing you could drink it with was with lemon crystals.

Hammerbeck ([00:58:30](#)):

The only thing we had that was taste anywhere near decent, was lemon crystals in that water.

There was never any ice so you'd kind of cut the water with lemon crystals and you'd put this rum in it. And a couple of drinks of that and you've just had the course. Well, we had saved one British jug of this, this great big five quart glass jug, all during the campaign with a promise that when the campaign was over, we were going to spring for the whole works.

Hammerbeck ([00:59:03](#)):

So we had a maintenance shelter up at Canvas and we had a couple low beds, had found some bed springs someplace that we could sleep a little bit off the ground rather than the air mattresses that were on the ground. We opened up that jog and we advertised to the neighborhood that the British rum was available there. And everybody brought their canteen cups and come up there. And this party is-- Have you ever seen the Daisy Fly Killer they used to have? With the little spots of poison and the flies walk up to it and they'd roll over dead when they'd take a lick of it? Well, that's what I'd liken that to because the people would get a couple of drinks and they'd roll over and act like the dead. And if they weren't dead, they wished they were.

Hammerbeck ([00:59:47](#)):

And we were always getting second lieutenants from the states, fresh from the OCS. We had a heck of a nice guy, we called him APO Stewart. He was our kind of post office officer. And he'd come in there and he was just a regular guy. And he had a couple of drinks and he fell-- There was a foxhole around an olive tree, a circular one. And he fell in the foxhole on the way out. And it was a real deep one. It was about four or five feet deep, you could almost stand in it. And he

spent half the night going around this circle, he couldn't figure out how damn long the trench was. He was too drunk to get out of it.

Overy ([01:00:37](#)):

Well, it sounds like all in all, being in North Africa was a pretty miserable experience.

Hammerbeck ([01:00:40](#)):

It was. We felt betrayed, to say the least, because they were calling us green troops and we weren't green troops. We were poorly ironed troops. They said they were unseasoned troops. We were not unseasoned troops but that's the way it came out in the paper.

Overy ([01:01:06](#)):

And so you had deficiencies in your armament and your arms.

Hammerbeck ([01:01:09](#)):

That's exactly right. We just seemed to get the asshole of everything, if you pardon the expression. Because that's exactly how we felt about it. We'd see the British Panther tanks and say, "Why haven't we got tanks like this?" Our best tanks at that time, was the Grant tank and that had no [inaudible 01:01:30]. It didn't have a turret, it had elevation and a 75-millimeter cannon on one side and a 50 caliber cupelo gun. And that was it. They had a 37-millimeter on it that you might as well have left home.

Overy ([01:01:44](#)):

That was that short, stubby barrel?

Hammerbeck ([01:01:45](#)):

Yeah. Right. Then we finally got a few Shermans, a very few of them. They were brand new. We got most of those to go to Italy with. And that was it. We were so short of transport and we were short of arms. The Bazooka, can you imagine coming to us after the battle? After the battle of

Casareen passed, we get the anti-tank weapons. And after we'd been shot up, had the hell shot out of us, we get anti-aircraft guns on. There was no Bullfires. There was no 40 millimeter guns out there at all, anywhere. We didn't have anti-aircraft guns. They didn't think we'd need them. Of course, they needed them in the Pacific where they were getting the hell shot out of them by the Japs. We never saw an Arliken or a Quad 50 or any multiple barreled guns at all, in North Africa.

Overy ([01:02:53](#)):

Did you have any contact with any Germans when you were over there?

Hammerbeck ([01:02:55](#)):

Oh yeah.

Overy ([01:02:55](#)):

Direct contact?

Hammerbeck ([01:02:57](#)):

A lot of them.

Overy ([01:03:00](#)):

What did you think of them?

Hammerbeck ([01:03:02](#)):

In general, I guess I have to say I respected them, those that I had contact with. Except well, when I'd come back from R&R, we'd come back in a hospital prison ship and we had all the officers of the North Africa core on it. And they were allowed all the rules of Geneva, the rules to live by. So they were free on the ship and they'd all stand at attention and, "Heil Hitler", and click their heels, before they sat down to eat. That just irritated the hell out of everybody. The most interesting part of it all was, we got news from home and our letters were not clipped up.

We got newspapers. I've got some German newspapers in my treasury of souvenirs of that time, telling how New York was being bombed. It had pictures of it and there were stories that the Germans that had got out of their battlefield trenches there, telling about how the ships were being sunk and the United States is really catching it.

Hammerbeck ([01:04:16](#)):

And I got kind of a couple German prisoners on the ship going back to-- When we went in to the East River in New York, it was a hospital prison ship, it was a George Washington. And I said, "Let's stand out in front and watch all this damage that's been done to New York", because they had pictures of skyscrapers that had been shelled and bombed by ships and planes.

Hammerbeck ([01:04:39](#)):

And he was absolutely-- Could not understand. He looked like he had really been betrayed. And the whole work stood in utter disbelief that we went down the east river, there was no sign of war there at all. And I guess from an impression standpoint, our biggest impression was getting used to lights at night. We'd been without light for two and a half years by then. Well, it was almost three years because that's [inaudible 01:05:11] coming home from Italy. And to see light, it took a long time to get used to it, walking along the side of the road. Because you always walk where the cars traveled, you didn't walk on the road shoulders. But seeing lights in windows is one of the greatest sites there is.

Overy ([01:05:29](#)):

So this is when you were going to be discharged?

Hammerbeck ([01:05:33](#)):

No. When I came home on rest and recuperation.

Overy ([01:05:36](#)):

Oh, I see.

Hammerbeck ([01:05:37](#)):

I came home in '44 for a month on R&R and it was just like being back in heaven. And then I went back to Italy again. But it was my experienced that 30 days never went that fast in my life.

Overy ([01:05:56](#)):

Well, you must have dreaded going back.

Hammerbeck ([01:05:58](#)):

I did. I had my girlfriend, my wife now, to leave--

Hammerbeck ([01:06:03](#)):

--my girlfriend, my wife now, to leave. I left Christmas Eve, by the way.

Overy ([01:06:05](#)):

To go back to Europe, or to come here?

Hammerbeck ([01:06:09](#)):

From home, to go back to Europe. Interesting, I had, starting from Minneapolis, two lieutenants and a major in this, and myself. We got to be buddies on the way back, just five of us in a group. We got to Camp Patrick Henry out of Hampton Roads, the port of embarkation on the East Coast.

Hammerbeck ([01:06:39](#)):

It turns out the port IAG is an old friend of mine, the guy that runs the port. His name is David Babcock. He's a buck sergeant in the army here in Little Falls in 1938 when he had the 39 maneuvers. His wife was my best friend's sister, so they said, "If you ever come through there, be

sure and look me up." He says, "You come out and you stay at my place. You're not going to stay in the barracks there."

Hammerbeck ([01:07:12](#)):

They sent a car to pick me up, and the camp was froze. The Battle of the Bulge was going on. They didn't know if we're going to go there or back to Italy. Here comes this car. Generals can't get out of there, but here's this first lieutenant getting picked up by a car, a special car with special guards, that get out of the-- I stayed at his house.

Hammerbeck ([01:07:35](#)):

Then he says, "How many buddies have you got?" I said, "I got four buddies and myself. Been together coming back overseas, and we're going back." He said, "I'll get you a ride in New York for New Year's Eve." Sure enough, he sent his car and he took us to all to a big hotel right in downtown New York, and we spent New Year's Eve.

Hammerbeck ([01:07:57](#)):

He says, "Incidentally, you're going to Italy. You're not going to France," because we were held there. We were supposed to go out Christmas Day and ship out, but they're holding us because of the Battle or the Bulge at that time. We might need reinforcements there. He says, "So you don't worry about that." But everything is tight secrecy and sealed up. Nobody could even call out of the damn place. They finally let us call home, and we're going to go back to where we came from. We couldn't even give names, and so forth.

Hammerbeck ([01:08:36](#)):

Incidentally, one of the toughest parts of being a commission to officer at that time, you had to censor mail. That took every evening. Then you had to put up with the shit that-- The guys are trying to get even with the censor. They're mad at everybody, so they--

Overy ([01:08:53](#)):

Had a few choice words for the censor?

Hammerbeck ([01:08:57](#)):

They didn't care who the censor was. They knew it was an officer, and a lot of guys, they had a perpetual hard on for officers. Of course, you could pick up some good tips on lovemaking by mail, too. Some guys got pretty good at that. They were sure far from military secrets.

Overy ([01:09:20](#)):

Did most of the unit come home, or just selected people?

Hammerbeck ([01:09:23](#)):

Piece by piece. Our unit was demobilized overseas. I should say, demobilized.

Overy ([01:09:32](#)):

No, I meant when you came home for R&R.

Hammerbeck ([01:09:35](#)):

No. That was based on a point system, and the fact that you'd performed well in battle. When you get a battlefield commission, they feel that you earn the right for an R&R. It was only about 10% were allowed that. I thought, terribly fortunate in getting it, especially at that time of the war, because we were locked in the Battle of the Apennines about then. They didn't miss me, even though I was declared essential up there.

Overy ([01:10:15](#)):

Did you go through Sicily?

Hammerbeck ([01:10:20](#)):

No, we--

Overy ([01:10:21](#)):

You went from North Africa, then, to Italy?

Hammerbeck ([01:10:23](#)):

Yeah. Right. I was going to say, unloading that ship-- I was due for a-- I knew exactly what was in the cargo. The convoy, they knew exactly where it was in Atlantic. We had everything timed so there'd be no congestion at the docks. We didn't want to get a good target for bombing.

Everything was right down pat.

Hammerbeck ([01:10:48](#)):

Then the convoy got hit by submarines, had knocked them on their alignment in the convoy. They come through the Straits of Gibraltar in the wrong alignment, they come into port in the wrong alignment. I got an entirely different ship with an entirely different general cargo, and so did everybody else. There was about 20 of us that were going to load this whole works up here. Here comes total mayhem at the docks. The wrong ship and the wrong verse, and nobody's going to change it. We just said, "Get the stuff on, get it on there as fast as you can." We got heck of a lot more stuff on than if we loaded on paper, because we just kept on jamming trailers, and trucks, and Jeeps, and stuff in. We even got a trailer bath unit for our-- It was sitting in the dock, and--

Overy ([01:11:41](#)):

This was where?

Hammerbeck ([01:11:44](#)):

In Oran. I just told the stevedore, I said, "That's part of our load," and we put it on. We had that the rest of the-- With us in Italy. Real nice bath. You stick a hose in a ditch and you can do showers for a dozen people.

Hammerbeck (01:11:59):

Then we stopped at Malta on the way up. The first time the Merchant Marine crew ever released a barrage balloon was, we approached Italy. They knew that we had to have the balloons up. They just give the order for it. The barrage balloon, it's a steel wire with this big, puffy balloon. We always said that if they cut the wires on those balloons, Ireland would've sunk, because they had them all over there, over the port.

Hammerbeck (01:12:30):

The Merchant Marine, they were down to the bottom of the barrel. They never did have too much in the barrel in the first place, when you come to knowhow. They got this balloon laid out on top of the-- We had a lot of tanks on the deck and quite a few trucks, along with our full load in the hold. They had to lay the balloon out on top of everything.

Hammerbeck (01:12:55):

They get their gas out and start blowing it up, and there's strings come down. You start holding it as soon as it starts waving around the mast and get it above the mast. Then they get this steel wire, it's got a great big reel, up by the forward mast by the second hold. They hook that onto the balloon, then it's, "Okay." Let go of the holding cords, and up the balloon goes. They got it full by then. Up it goes, and up it goes, and up it goes. This wheel's going around to be-- Hell, it took all the wire off, and it went to-- The wire wasn't fast enough to reel it, so we didn't have a balloon. Nobody thought to check the wire in the first place.

Overy (01:13:40):

What did you do in Italy? I see here you land at Salerno. Where were you in Italy?

Hammerbeck (01:13:48):

With the 34th Division. Our division was one of the initial troops at Salerno, and 151st Field Artillery fired right down the tubes at the Germans on the main road coming out at Salerno. That is one of the most beautiful artillery performances that's ever been recorded.

Overy (01:14:13):

You shot down the board? Direct fire?

Hammerbeck (01:14:15):

Right down-- Direct fire. Opened the breach, and sight. That's the--

Overy (01:14:17):

Yeah. Okay.

Hammerbeck (01:14:18):

Tubes, and the board sighting on the-- They fought off a hell of a counterattack there.

Hammerbeck (01:14:26):

Then we finally started moving up towards Naples, and they bypassed Naples because you can't-- Street fighting isn't a good way of defending, nor is it a good way of-- You'll knock down a lot of homes. One thing about the Germans, they'd knock every bridge down, but they wouldn't go into a city and-- Just defend it house to house until they got up to Cassino.

Hammerbeck (01:14:56):

I finally got my ship unloaded 17 days after I had got it taken off from the dock, because our stevedores went on strike. The Merchant Marine head was getting \$500 apiece bonus for going in the Mediterranean when they went through the Straits of Gibraltar. Then they changed that to \$50 when they had to weigh anchor, for each Merchant Marine every time they weighed anchor for enemy air action. They weighed anchor every time that there was a siren going off

anywheres. The purser was writing down long lists of \$50 bonuses, and this pissed everybody off, our gun crew, the Navy gun crew, and the few army that was on board. There was only about a dozen of us army people on board, because we had all equipment. But then they went on strike, and so we called for stevedores from the shore, army stevedores.

Hammerbeck ([01:16:00](#)):

They come out and unloaded the ships, and the captain, he was an old Swede, and he put the whole works in irons, and he fined them all \$500. He kept them in irons until the ship was unloaded. I always felt justice was great.

Overy ([01:16:17](#)):

For once, justice was served?

Hammerbeck ([01:16:19](#)):

He had the biggest, fattest brig you ever saw. Never been used.

Overy ([01:16:24](#)):

What were your duties once--

Hammerbeck ([01:16:27](#)):

I was evacuation recovery officer for the division. Had this fleet of wreckers that I'd pick up battlefield casualties and bring them back.

Overy ([01:16:36](#)):

Tanks, and half-tracks, and things?

Hammerbeck ([01:16:38](#)):

Yeah. Armored cars and trucks. It was an interesting experience, because they want stuff evacuated under fire to get it out there before it's fired on more. I know, at Cassino, we usually had to evacuate at night because you make too good a target. The artillery got a lot of counter-

battery fire up at Cassino. They had lost almost a whole battery, but they had an ammunition truck up there they wanted out, and that was disabled by the counter-battery fire.

Hammerbeck ([01:17:15](#)):

We went up to get it. They must have had sound detection equipment, the Germans at Cassino, because every time we'd come around the curve of the mountain we'd get fired on. We'd go into death land to get out of it. That meant that, after we finally got the ammo truck picked up, we found it in the dark, and the guide was almost hysterical because the Nebelwerfer had been firing over there. That's such a demoralizing thing.

Overy ([01:17:48](#)):

That Screaming Mimi?

Hammerbeck ([01:17:50](#)):

Screaming Mimi. That is a horrible-sounding thing. It's got more of a psychological effect than the damage.

Hammerbeck ([01:17:58](#)):

Coming back, this mountain road around, had lots of holes in it where artillery rounds had hit when they were trying to hit us on the way up. Then they followed us all the way back. We had to walk along the road, walk around these craters, to get that wrecker and the truck around them. Finally got it back. It turns out this load of ammo is all HE, high explosive. If they'd ever hit that they'd have got a prize, because it is the whole battalion's load.

Overy ([01:18:30](#)):

What were conditions like in Italy when you were there, just the day-by-day kinds of conditions?

What was it like?

Hammerbeck (01:18:37):

I think mud, mules, and mountains tells it best. It seemed like there was an awful lot of mud. The wintertime was-- Spent most of the time waiting for a new drive during the winter. Then in the summer we'd make a quick drive from Anzio. We got stopped there. We tried to bypass Cassino, and we spent four or five months up there being shelled, all of us, with a-- Then we go to beat hell up to Leghorn and set up a line in the Apennines, and sweat that out until '45. Most of the time we always felt that we're not getting the stuff we needed. We had a 24-plane air cover, which was good.

Overy (01:19:32):

You had a 24 what?

Hammerbeck (01:19:34):

A 24-plane of air covered which kept us pretty well protected. But we did have one hell of a big dogfight before they had settled-- The German decided that our air cover was better than theirs, because they were going to try to break our air cover. We seen the biggest dogfight, a 48-plane dog fight, one day. Could send six of our guys to the hospital, just on stuff falling out of the sky.

Overy (01:20:00):

I don't understand this 24-plane air cover you're talking about.

Hammerbeck (01:20:03):

They kept 24 planes in the air over our division front all the time. They had enough planes, so they'd have sorties in the air to protect us from the German air--

Overy (01:20:18):

Strafing and bombing?

Hammerbeck (01:20:19):

Yeah.

Overy (01:20:20):

What kinds of planes did you have?

Hammerbeck (01:20:21):

Mostly Mustangs. Beautiful plane, just one of the-- After the-- What was that one before the Mustang?

Overy (01:20:30):

P-47?

Hammerbeck (01:20:31):

Yeah. That was a--

Overy (01:20:32):

Thunderbolt?

Hammerbeck (01:20:33):

Thunderbolt. Our pilots were good. We had an all-black squadron of fighters there. They had checkered tails, orange and black tails on them. They were black fighters. They also had the first all-black division come into the line near Leghorn in the Apennines. They had a terrible time. They finally had to replace some of their officers. They had to put quite a few white officers, because, I hate to be quoted on it, they didn't believe in their own officers. That's what they found out, and that they tried it out. I think it was the 92nd Division.

Hammerbeck (01:21:29):

Then we always had the mishmash of Fifth Army troops. We always had South Africans, Australians, Canadians, Indian troops. The Indian troops were interesting. The grooms, and the

Sikhs, and the Gurkhas, they were the fearless fighters. They were with us in Africa. The Germans feared them more than anything else, because they were knife fighters. They were attached to the French and to the English, and they didn't want-- They'd get a nice French carbine, and they didn't want it. They'd sling it, and they'd just fight with their knives. They'd fight at night. I would hate to have them against me. They're the kind of-- But they're horrible drivers, and I was always picking up their trucks. They'd roll them over, and they'd drive so damn fast. Then they'd turn on their headlights, and this didn't go well. They finally had to unplug their headlights so they couldn't get them on.

Hammerbeck ([01:22:28](#)):

We had the British-- There was always a kind of a hard feeling between the British and Americans. There was never good rapport with it. They would blame us because the front was moving. They had the right flank in Italy on the other side of the Tyrrhenian Sea, was it? I think.

Overy ([01:23:00](#)):

West.

Hammerbeck ([01:23:00](#)):

We had the Mediterranean side, the west side. That's where the main supplier route. That's where all the Germans were. How the hell can you go if you got Germans in front of-- British didn't have any problem. There was no MSR on the other side. We always had that problem going on.

Hammerbeck ([01:23:18](#)):

The press releases were always much better released by the British, because they had a lot of photographers going. All the combat film you see, not all, but most of it, is British. We didn't fare well on that one.

Hammerbeck (01:23:36):

I see there's some releases and there's some accounts being written now that are giving a fair shake to the battle plans that were put forward, some of the battle plans. I think Mark Clark was probably the worst field commander we could've had, and particularly at Cassino. His conduct at the Rapido River crossing-- I got the full congressional investigation of Mark Clark. I got the copy of it here. Because it was so bad that he should have been court martialed, but by politics he was not. Just, it was that type of a situation. The 36th Division Association of Texas went out on a limb to try to get him--

Hammerbeck (01:24:26):

The reason I know so much about it, because my wife's husband was killed in that battle. He was a fresh infantry second lieutenant. He was one of those who had said it is a suicide to try that Rapido River crossing, with the crossfire and the setup that was there. The intelligence report showed that it was suicide. Mark Clark ordered it anyway, and it was a-- It's the first time the Germans called the battlefield truce so we could pick up the mortalities in that. It was a terrible thing to have happen.

Hammerbeck (01:25:05):

You have enough accidental bombings in artilleries. You bomb your own unit, or shell your own unit, and so forth. But when you have a deliberate act like that, then someone should pay for it. Because that was a deliberate miscalculation, and he had full knowledge of all the intelligence reports on the type of trap that there was there. It should have been unforgivable, but it wasn't.

Overy (01:25:33):

He also decided to take Rome instead of trying to cut off the retreating German army.

Hammerbeck (01:25:37):

Yeah, that's right. He had the best troops. We had the Jap 100th Battalion, which was a wonderful ones of fighters. They were out to vindicate all our--

Overy (01:25:50):

You mean the 442nd Regimental Combat Team?

Hammerbeck (01:25:52):

Yeah. We had the 100th Battalion before the 442nd got there, and they were there with our 133rd Infantry. They did a beautiful job. When the 442nd come up, they were on the coattails of the theme that this 100th Battalion [inaudible 01:26:11]. So when they started the battle up past Rome, they cut them off at Civitavecchia and they captured the Schutzstaffel division. This has got to be the prize of all prizes, to get the SS troops. They took hardly any prisoners.

Hammerbeck (01:26:29):

I'll never ask a question, but we sure got some nice equipment on that, because I got a four-wheel-drive, amphibious Volkswagen, and we got hundreds of cars and beautiful fighting equipment. They had some awful nice scout cars and armored cars, and a wide variety of experimental stuff.

Hammerbeck (01:26:52):

I got to tell you about the experimental stuff. They tried everything in Anzio, including Anzio Annie up there. But they had a track bomb, 500-kilogram bomb. They put a set of tracks on it, and electric motor with a set of batteries on it. They crawled across the no man's land over to our trenches and exploded. It never got there because the Americans zero in on it with 50 calibers, and they detonated before it got away from their trenches.

Hammerbeck (01:27:23):

Then they had rockets they fired right out of the crate. They had a body-- It must have been about 150-millimeter rockets it used. Had legs that tilt right out of the crate, and you'd tip it up. The crate was only about six feet long. That was an HE too, and they were terribly inaccurate. They used a tailfin assembly, somewhat like an aerial bomb, and they couldn't stabilize it. There was no spin stabilization, so the trajectory was awfully unpredictable. The thing could, in effect, go up and make a circle and come back down again. You've seen the failures on launchings of rockets where you don't know where you're going, you get some of it yourself. That didn't work.

Hammerbeck (01:28:17):

Then they had a scout car that-- I drove that one. That had a driver at each end and go equally fast either way, and it had a 37-millimeter turret in the middle, and the full set of gears and all-four-wheel drive. We're just beginning to see this in the highways now, but all four wheels turn. When you're going that way, your direction, the guy at back, he just trailed. You didn't have to turn around in order to go the other direction. I said there was plus that it was made by Italians. I figured that it was very appropriate for them because they had a hell of a job going forwards. They were retreating most of the time.

Hammerbeck (01:28:59):

I got some pictures of the last time the Blackshirts-- They stuck with the Germans, and the Germans, they despised them. They were not good fighters. They were better politicians. I got quite a few pictures of them, when they gave up, up in the Po Valley, coming out of their tanks. Each tank has got a woman in it. Big tank crew, and they got their pleasure palaces. Blackshirt division.

Overy ([01:29:38](#)):

Were your experiences before the capture of Rome essentially different from afterwards?

Hammerbeck ([01:29:49](#)):

Impressions. Anzio was another very frustrating experience. You knew that it should have worked. If we could have cut the Germans' MSR, they'd have had to withdraw from Cassino. That's what we were attempting to do, is-- We didn't quite make it. The town of Cisterna and Vietri, which is right below Rome, we wanted to take those as a first objective of the beachhead. The Germans had got wind of what is happening, so they completely stopped us. They had excellent armor there, and they had tanks built into farmhouses in the Cisterna area. This is that rich farmland that Mussolini became so famous for recovering the marshes.

Hammerbeck ([01:30:40](#)):

You couldn't believe the number of our tanks are knocked out by one Tiger tank sitting in a farmhouse or in a barn, raking a whole field. They were deadly accurate with that 88-millimeter, the tank gun. They just stopped us cold until we had enough power going north of Rome that they had to withdraw. They couldn't get their supplies in. When they had time to bring in two big railroad gardens from Germany, this Anzio Annies, and bring those down there, you can be sure that they knew this is a siege then. It is nice to be the target in a siege.

Overy ([01:31:19](#)):

Did you go ashore in the first couple days at Anzio?

Hammerbeck ([01:31:21](#)):

Yeah. In fact, I took two landing craft ships up there, loaded them out of Pionieri, which is north of the Bay of Naples, and brought them in. By then our whole division was up there, so I went

back and got another load of our division stuff and brought that in. Then we marked time until the smoke screen-- You'd get random artillery all the time.

Hammerbeck ([01:31:51](#)):

There was the last time the Germans made a concentrated effort to use aircraft on us, and that's the first time that we used radar on them. It completely shot-- A 36-plane foray, and only about a dozen got out of it. Just deadly accurate. Then they come up with chaff. The next time they come through there, they completely disoriented our guns, which, by then, they didn't have any planes left either. But the last big night raid they had up there was a doozy. It just happened to coincide with-- We got five brand new Jeeps to come up, replace some wrecked ones. They're all sitting where the guys had left and are going to eat. One HE lit right in the middle and completely wrecked the whole works. Five Jeeps at one. This is unthinkable. You never should park vehicles that close together in the first place, but to have an accidental hit like this--

Hammerbeck ([01:32:51](#)):

Coincidental of this was the fact that they'd used chaff, and there was a 90-millimeter battery sitting right in our midst. Their guns are pointing every which way. There is guns pointing that way, that way, every way but the-- They were completely out of orientation. They could not find their target because the air was full of targets.

Hammerbeck ([01:33:12](#)):

That's when they had the magnetron tube that cut the wavelengths. It took about an hour to replace it. Once you started ranging with a radar, and the Germans are resonated on, and they find the frequency, then they'd cut chaff and they'd make-- It was worthless. Then we had to change our magnetron. They had us start doing that regularly to outwit them.

Hammerbeck (01:33:41):

By then the Battle of Anzio was over, and the 90 millimeters were not really that necessary anymore because the Germans had run out of aircraft, and were just few and far between. They'd potshot a photo of Freddy, and he'd-- Then, of course, they'd fly about 20,000, 25,000 feet high, and the maximum range of our 90s was 18,000 feet. You could see the contrail on the sky, and then, pop, pop, pop.

Hammerbeck (01:34:10):

One day when we were having chow, there was a 90-millimeter battery that was taking target practice on them, and they finally hit him. Here comes this plane storming down out of the sky. Everybody for miles around had the big roar across the whole division front.

Overy (01:34:29):

What did you do north of Rome?

Hammerbeck (01:34:38):

Leghorn was a turning point. That's where the euphoria set in that this thing is going to be over. The Germans are retreating. But they set up a big line in the Apennines. We went up to Florence, in the center of the Apennines, and set up a winter line in what they call the Rainy River Valley. Maybe part of the tape is salvageable.

Overy (01:35:05):

Yeah, I hope so.

Overy (01:35:05):

You were talking about the difficult conditions with the mines. This was pretty much continuous after you got out of Salerno and up in the Naples area. What?

Hammerbeck ([01:35:24](#)):

Yeah. It was almost such a predictable and common thing, that we begin-- When we pick up mine vehicles, once in a while you get one that hits a stacked tower mine, when you've got two or three tower mines, and it just totally demolishes. But we'd keep a front end of a vehicle if it backed over one, until we've got one that had run over the back end. We'd have two halves, would make a whole.

Hammerbeck ([01:35:56](#)):

The six by six is worth a heck of a lot. Most of them the front wheel hit the mine first, because they're driving forwards. Invariably, is alongside of a road someplace where they had the mines swept, and they had a box mine or a plastic mine. The six by sixes made good trailers, you just cut the cab off and then pull out the whole front end is blown off, pull the frame together, and put a pintle on, and you had a whole two-and-a-half-ton cargo trailer.

Hammerbeck ([01:36:27](#)):

Then one of the things-- Everybody wanted to have a Jeep, if they could get a spare one or illegal one. But you could always build Jeeps by just saving pieces.

Overy ([01:36:39](#)):

You must have had some great mechanics in that.

Hammerbeck ([01:36:42](#)):

Yeah.

Overy ([01:36:44](#)):

In the outfit.

Hammerbeck (01:36:44):

We had, like I said, Yankee ingenuity. In Africa, they had such rotten wine, this big old red-- The French had wine. There was always a lot of wine. In fact, the French soldiers used to say, "It's not safe to drink the water, but that's what wine is for. You can wash in the water." Because their canteens are always full of wine, too. You never saw a French soldier drink anything but wine, because that's a staple good. It takes the place of milk.

Hammerbeck (01:37:14):

But the guys couldn't stand that, just the plain wine, because, boy, you'd get-- Drank too much, they'd get such horrible hangovers from that green red wine, so they fixed up a still. The airlines, out of a German three-quarter tractors that were movers for their 88s, had a lot of copper tubing. You'd strip all the copper tubing out and make a still. Use an Arab stove for the fire, and you'd have a copper kettle. Everybody seemed to find a copper kettle someplace, even if they use an old wash boiler. Put a cap on it, put this line up, and then let the air cool the-- So it'd drip down into a canteen cup.

Hammerbeck (01:38:05):

Everybody had a still, and every outfit had a still. They'd call it P-38 juice when it come through the first run. It was probably about 140 or 50 proof, but it was horribly strong. It was not refined. It had to have a second run, but nobody would wait for the second run. The only way you could drink that stuff was with lemon crystals. All the lemon crystals you got was the only drink you could get that was tolerable, because the water tasted so bad, so you'd mix lemon crystals. You'd drink it with lemon crystal.

Hammerbeck (01:38:45):

We were sitting next to a British port during the summer waiting for the invasion of Sicily and Italy next to a British Spitfire group, the bomber group that was bombing Pantelleria at that time. Their pilots used to wander across the desert over to our place, and--

Hammerbeck (01:39:03):

And their pilots used to wander across the desert over our place and shoot the breeze. They swore that stuff would fire a bloody spitfire, the way they flew it. It was powerful. But there was always somebody that had this-- Well, there wasn't much of it. It'd take about a day to make a cup-full of-- You'd buy [inaudible 01:39:27] a whole five gallon can of wine and you'd get about a cup of alcohol out of it. In Africa, we'd run onto a German motorcycle, the BMW motorcycle, with a powered sidecar wheel drive with reverse in it. Can you imagine a motorcycle reverse?

Overy (01:39:48):

No, I can't.

Hammerbeck (01:39:50):

And a sidecar wheel drive, and it was a shaft drive motorcycle. Well, a BMW is a beautiful machine, but it was made for the Russian campaign. It had hand warmers on it and they shipped it down to Africa because Ramel needed it more. Well, we got a hold of that where they had abandoned it in the battle ground [inaudible 01:40:12], on the route up from Libya, and hung onto it. We knew we were going to have to turn it in eventually, but we hung onto anything we'd get ahold of as long as we could, and we finally [inaudible 01:40:30] turning it in. My mechanic drove it up to Tunis and went through the Kasbah. We traded it for a bottle of good booze, caught a truck back. But that's where we'd seen one of the most incredulous sites I've ever seen, in terms of German equipment, they had the Gotha Gliders up there on the shores going up near

Carthage, just on the shores of Tunis. What they are is a six-engined glider, huge. The Gotha Glider is the biggest plane ever built in the world.

Hammerbeck ([01:41:05](#)):

I forget the dimensions of it, but when you look up, the cockpit is up about 20 feet. The whole sides were square, just like it's built with a tinker toy box, and there's three engines on each wing. The cord of the wing is about four feet thick, tremendous monoplane, and it had French Gnome engines on them. Now, this is that five-cylinder rotary engine with mahogany-laminated propellers, great big fans up there. Now, this is where the whole engine rotates on a crank shaft and these great big fans, when they loaded this thing, it would carry a load almost as much as the Spruce Goose and [inaudible 01:41:55] was supposed to carry. They had two or three tanks inside of it and they'd fly these things across the Mediterranean, but they had to tow them with six engines, they had to tow them to get them off the ground.

Hammerbeck ([01:42:08](#)):

They'd fly about eight, 10 feet above the waves, and the Americans found out that they were coming off of Crete, and they had brought these gliders into Crete when they invaded there, when the British would get chased out. So, they had waited for them until they got near the shores of North Africa and they fired it all. But those that didn't land on the ocean, were up at the beach, and not one of them got to their destination. They never got to the airfield. I have never seen such a tremendous plane. They're so crudely built, and obviously built out of pieces they could find, like these engines, they're World War I engines.

Overy ([01:42:58](#)):

Tell me what Italy was like when you were there. You were talking about the weather and the terrain.

Hammerbeck (01:43:06):

Well, it seemed like it was mostly-- We were assigned the mountains stretch because anybody could run up the coast. Our division, 34th Division was assigned a sector right in the backbone because it was light infantry division, and when the winter came and the heavy rains came, all the-- Italy's soil is mostly volcanic. It turned to a very abrasive mud, a real slippery, abrasive mud. You were up to hubs in mud and the roads are not surfaced for it. The MSR, Highway 6, going up the center of Italy had become a quagmire of mud, and all secondary roads were about the same. So, our trucks are always grinding in all-wheel drive to get through it and constantly driving in mud, and that tore out all the brake bands and the brake shoes. It just wore them out, because there was no way that this abrasion could get out of the there.

Hammerbeck (01:44:15):

So, we ended up having to build brake drum lathes out of old Oerlikon lathes that we got out of bombed-out factories down by Naples. And then we found some carbide-tipped tools out of the factory and we made up brake drum lathes, kept them going day and night to turn the brake drums. Then we ran out of brake lining. We finally got to send a special plane from United States to bring brake lining because we had to have the [inaudible 01:44:48] pulled out of the line until we get our brakes fixed. But I've never seen such miserable fighting conditions because of the constant battle against the mountains. It was a case of one hill to the next, all the way through. And not just that, but the need for tremendous amount of bombardment to loosen up the stronghold that the Germans had on the hilltops.

Hammerbeck (01:45:17):

The Battle of Cassino was three divisions across: there was the 45th Division from Oklahoma, the 36th from Texas in the center, the 34th in the North with the-- By then, we had got the 100th

Jap Battalion, Nisei Battalion, and we sat in that valley, we had augmented with Long Tom rifles and eight inch guns. There was 750 pieces of artillery in that valley and we could not get moved up through the Peto River [inaudible 01:45:54] and past Mount Coley, was a small mountain right in the valley, it was a volcanic mountain and that is the only prominence. And otherwise, we set up on a terrace where we could see the whole thing. And when the [inaudible 01:46:08] were for the German rocket guns that opened up, they call them-- Well, Germany was never [inaudible 01:46:16]--

Overy ([01:46:15](#)):

Screaming Mimis?

Hammerbeck ([01:46:17](#)):

The Screaming Mimis. And they had, I think there was 12 rounds, there was two rows of four, or something like that. And I watched a battle one afternoon, you're going to hear out of the-- There was constant smoke screen on everything, there was hanging over to everything so they couldn't see anything. And the Screaming Mimi let go up from the base of Cassino Hill. So all the guns you see in the valley, the camouflage nets started to go up, and the card games are put away, everybody sits around does something, waiting for emission. And you see all these barrels coming up all through the valley. Everywhere, you can see these camouflage nets rising and they just beller there for about 10, 15 minutes. They tuned in on the spot where the Screaming Mimi was and they all wore their barrels and everything calmed down about half an hour later. Pretty slim. Here comes-- They just pulled into a cave and ducked for the fire.

Hammerbeck ([01:47:23](#)):

And what it seems so in Congress, is that there is no way you can do battle that way, it's frustrating for everybody that does it. Well then, we had some many smart stuff that they would

sit there and peck at us, and they'd peck until they finally hit an ammo dump or a fuel dump, and they'd get a good fire going and they knew they had something, so they just keep on mixing it so they finally get counter battery fired. But that always break up our card games because you'd have to go out and count, because we were getting their stuff as intended for the stuff back of us, we were too far forwards. We were up for the medium artillery. So had everybody had a darn good hole and you'd get in your hole until the counter battery fire was over, and get back at the card game that you had.

Overy ([01:48:12](#)):

You really weren't moving very much at all. You were pretty much in place, weren't you?

Hammerbeck ([01:48:15](#)):

Absolutely, just tied up all the time. The only time that we really had enjoyable moving, we broke out of Anzio on the beach had broke out, and we could shoot up past Rome and just free sailing up almost to Leghorn. Well, up to the Apennines actually. And that was about a hundred mile stretch of pure joy. That was the summertime when the weather was a good, too, we broke out in the spring and it was just fantastic, the feeling of exhilaration. But the Germans were on the run until they hit the next mountain range and that is another whole winter fighting up in Apennines.

Overy ([01:48:58](#)):

So you went from the Naples area then to Anzio?

Hammerbeck ([01:49:02](#)):

Yeah, well, a part of our division stayed at Cassino, then we staged at Pianura, right on the Bay of Naples, and set up a beachhead in Anzio. So there was half of our unit up there and there and half of it down south. And the beach had broke open and we linked up again.

Overy ([01:49:24](#)):

Were you actually there when these divisions tried to get up to Monte Cassino? Were you right in that area there?

Hammerbeck ([01:49:35](#)):

I had was right-- I watched the bomb bays open on the fortresses. Right above my head I could see the bombs coming out to bomb Cassino, I had a perfect view.

Overy ([01:49:46](#)):

How did you feel about that, at the time? Did you believe that the Germans were actually in that?

Hammerbeck ([01:49:52](#)):

Oh yeah, we were absolutely convinced that the Germans were using that as an observation post, which they were, they didn't fortify it. They were using as an observation post because it was the perfect spot, you could not knock them out. And when the decision was finally made to do it, we really felt bad about it. But when they did it, and when they started to plaster it, "Well at least we're going to get out here, at least we're going to break this stalemate that we hit," and when they got through with dive bombing, and waves, and waves of liberators that came over and dropped 500-pound demolition bombs.

Hammerbeck ([01:50:38](#)):

And in between, they had the Mustangs coming in with 250 pounders and just laced that place. When the smoke cleared, it was still standing and they were still fighting after they had plastered, absolutely plastered it. The Germans came out from underneath and fought off one of the most beautiful fighting infantry, fighting units I've ever seen; The Jap 100th Battalion. By then our 168th infantry had fought door to door, street to street, in Cassino until Cassino no longer was a town, it was a pile of rubble.

Hammerbeck (01:51:19):

But Monte Cassino Abbey seemed to be the hub of the whole thing. And of course, it's all restored now, completely, totally restored. But it just was hard to see it being demolished. But when they did demolish it, they didn't demolish it, all they do was turned the outside into rubble because the walls were seven feet thick at the base.

Overy (01:51:49):

Created a better place for the Germans to fight from.

Hammerbeck (01:51:51):

It was absolutely-- Exactly right.

Overy (01:51:57):

Did you have much contact with the battalion civilians when you were there?

Hammerbeck (01:52:05):

Oh yeah. When I say quite a bit, we had partisans with us quite frequently, and the partisans are informers and they give us information, the Germans and keep us aware what is going on, because they could sneak back and forth on both sides of the line. But where they really showed up was the Po Valley after we broke out of the Apennines. I got an interesting story about them. They showed up more and more as we got towards the end of the war, they become more frequent. I got pictures of bandoliers and grenades they carry, they become more brave as the war was finishing out. And I had partisan for guides, I had to pick up a bunch of German prisoners in the middle of the night up in the Po Valley in a little town right on the Po River. And I had a heck of job locating it, but I had a partisan guide and so he knew how to get in through the back roads and we finally got there, and there's about 400 Germans that had been surrounded

and agreed to surrender, but they were still had their arms, so we had to disarm them first and send their guns away and then load them up.

Hammerbeck (01:53:27):

But in this farmhouse, where I was meeting their [inaudible 01:53:34] organizer, he was SS, he was with the Specialist Services group, was an American officer. And he'd been working with the partisans, and living with the partisans, working. He was the one that had called for this help to pick up the prisoners. And about 20 years later, got the Pine age in here in Little Falls, sitting and talking with a guy down there and we were chit-chatting about the war and I says, "I've been in Italy," he says, "Well, I was in Italy, I was with Special Services there." I [inaudible 01:54:09] in there, his name was Lindquist. And I says, "Did you call for a pickup of prisoners about 3:00 in the morning in Po River? He says, "Yeah." I says, "I come up there to pick him up," I said, "This is about the smallest world you get." He's next door, he lives right next door, my folks are [inaudible 01:54:31]. He was an engineer for the boat works up here.

Hammerbeck (01:54:40):

The peculiar thing about the end of the war was the hardest thing to believe, it's like a big, long dream. You develop a kind of feeling about, "When will this ever be over? This is three and a half years living in the field." And when it starts to happen, you can't believe it. It's so difficult to comprehend because you're always dealing with unseen enemy, except prisoners. And here all of a sudden, we're called up below the Swiss Alps up in the Lake Como, the most beautiful part of Italy, to disarm the whole German 14th core. This is a neighborhood of 200,000 troops, and here we're just a division. Well we've disarmed the German 34th division first. But I was called on with records to take their artillery away and load up their antitank gun, and so forth. And when we drove up into that area, all the Germans are bivouacked just like we've been, along the road

and they got a guard in the road, he's got his rifle and all his ammunition, and I was an officer, we were out in the Jeep and they salute me. I can't [inaudible 01:55:59].

Hammerbeck (01:55:59):

So we stopped at an Italian place to ask directions, one of these outside cafes and here's Germans sitting around here drinking Italian wine. And we sitting up the next table, we're all armed and they're all armed. This is what's unreal. You cannot believe it. And as this type of dream-like quality of living progresses, such things as German soldiers hitchhiking trying to catch a ride along the roads, the thing is hard to believe.

Hammerbeck (01:56:34):

When we passed several outfits of Germans bivouacked and finally got up to the meeting place where the truce had been declared, by then I was ready to question my own sanity. And we slept in a big, old barracks of some sort, up near the trees of Switzerland. The middle of the night, I hear stomping of boots, the unmistakable stomping of German boots in the hallway, "Where is the American Command?" And this German colonel wants to surrender his battalion and he's madder than heck because there's nobody there to greet him. And he cusses me out in no unmistakable language. I was the first officer he could find. I said, "I don't have an outfit, I'm a evacuation recovery unit here picking up weapons." And he insisted that I accompany him to find an American officer to surrender to, and he was really storming man. Because this is according to the way the rules of Geneva Warfare is supposed to be.

Overy (01:57:40):

Boy, that's quite a contrast between the way it was and the way it said that it was.

Hammerbeck (01:57:46):

You find it, when you look back in your record, you picked up about all you can pick up, just to ride along and drop them off at the nearest POW collection point. And nobody's equipped to receive this type of-- What you do when all of a sudden they don't want to fight anymore?

Overy (01:58:10):

What was your impression of it?

Hammerbeck (01:58:24):

Generally, we had a high regard for the shoot staffer, the SS troops, because they're the backbone of the fighting corner. But we had no time whatsoever for their sensitivity. They had absolutely no personal feelings, they're fighting machines, they come out in their black uniforms and [foreign language 01:58:53], they wouldn't wear a helmet, they were too tough for that. When they would show up, they showed up bravely and they put black bone into the land wars at the peasantry. But the conscripts, who were real nice people, I always felt they were some of the finest people I've ever met. I was assigned a prisoner of war company right after the surrender and I got to know quite a few of the old timers, it was like talking to your dad, this is really what it's like. I just felt sorry for them, because they didn't want any more of it than we wanted.

Overy (01:59:30):

Did you speak German?

Hammerbeck (01:59:31):

No-- Talk become a very common thing to be able to say what you want to without saying much of anything. Just a few-- The Germans learned a little Italian, and I learned a little Italian, so we could use Italian as a common language and they could get along pretty good other than that. But they were artists, mechanics, craftsmen. I'd never seen a group like that.

Hammerbeck ([02:00:04](#)):

The few months that I had that unit they had their POWs, they attached to our maintenance company and we give them work to do to overhaul our trucks and that we had a German bus company and we took care of those. They built a model ship, a beautiful model ship sailing vessel in their quarters, [inaudible 02:00:29], a complete bowling alley out of the crates of engine crates, they put on the [inaudible 02:00:36] the whole thing. They made their bowling balls, their bowling pins. I thought we had unique ingenuity, but they surpassed us in that. I got to know an old carpenter there and he's like, "Can I fix up my jeep?" And he upholstered it in beautiful brown leather, the whole Jeep, back in and padded it. I'd never seen such craftsmanship.

Overy ([02:01:08](#)):

How do you think that the war affected you as a person?

Hammerbeck ([02:01:17](#)):

Appreciation. I think that if I could say one single thing, it's the appreciation of what I got out of it. Let me get tell you just what I mean by appreciation; I come home in R&R in 1944 for 30 days and I never believed that light in windows could look so good, because we hadn't seen light in windows for two and a half years. You can't imagine how good it sees to go down the street and the windows are all open or lit up. There's lights on the outside. Blackout has a-- you get used to it, but it's a depressing effect you can't see in it. That's the biggest thing. The next thing is the feeling of have you accomplished what you set out to do when you didn't really feel it was worthwhile in the first place? I had, when we were down in Claiborne, Louisiana, I was an isolationist to begin with and I still am somewhat of an isolationist, although I changed my perspective on the world in general.

Hammerbeck ([02:02:22](#)):

I think we're a community of people not separated. But when England was getting in trouble and they were asking us for Lend-Lease help, I didn't agree. I wrote a letter to the paper to that effect, that we're being sucked into another war. Which I've often regretted because I had some-- I had to eat my words a couple times when this letter was-- When I was being cleared for top secret. And I had a radio, I'd made up a case for when we were down in Louisiana that on the outside I pinned what I had seen as one of those sages say that are heard of, "Did you ever stop to think what a world we could make if we put into peace endeavors, the energy, self-sacrifice, and cooperation to put into the wastefulness of war?" And I often thought that if we could, this is idealistically speaking, but did you ever stop to think if we put that much energy in cooperation, could we really come up with a peaceful system rather than a warring system? And I guess I'd have to be respectfully philosophical and say, "No, we can't."

Overy ([02:03:44](#)):

Did the war have any adverse effects on you?

Hammerbeck ([02:03:46](#)):

No.

Overy ([02:03:46](#)):

That you-- Okay. Nightmares?

Hammerbeck ([02:03:51](#)):

Oh, I get lots of nightmares. You can't-- Bound to have-- I say lots of, "No, not terribly a lot," but there are a lot of frightening, and fearful, and terrifying situations. Artillery barrages, bombings, strafings, all have a rather profound effect, even though you kind of toss them off and say, "No," it does. Particularly the [inaudible 02:04:25] crosses, I hated the idea of being in the middle of

the ocean without any protection and the closest land is a mile down, common statement. But also, I could not stand the act of-- I'm trying to, I can't think of the word-- When you see death everywhere, I was a grave registration officer, so I had to take my colonel in the [inaudible 02:04:55] from a minefield in Anzio into a grave registration place in Anzio. And there's thousands of rotting bodies laying out in the sun, that's cover the flies. And you take one of your best friends into there to deposit his remains and to be taken care of. You've had it about up to here with gore, you can't take much anymore, but you just go back and say, "That's war." You start getting a little crusty, but you don't ever lose the compassion to feel for these poor guys that are accumulating. After battles, there's always somebody laying around someplace that hasn't got picked up yet. And I didn't know whether they're Germans or Italian.

Hammerbeck (02:05:42):

Civilians always made me feel bad, the worst casualties of the war, as far as I'm concerned, was those kids that come and eat out of our garbage cans. I really felt sick about that and that that was a very common thing for them to have a little bucket. And when we're through eating, we dump our stuff in the garbage can, crust of bread and so forth, and they're in there dipping it out, and they don't eat it there, they take it home to eat. That's, to me, is the worst casualties of war there is. I think out of that, I gain a great deal of respect for people who are sufferers, who not the combatants, but the noncombatants, they're the ones that suffer most. When you see--

Hammerbeck (02:06:36):

One of the things, you asked about the personal feelings of people. The resentment over not having enough airpower to protect us was what bothered more than anything else. And when finally we did get enough airpower, then we also got some antiaircraft, the 50 caliber ring mounts and bumper mounts, so we could at least fight back. And we caught all kinds of hell one

day for firing into a dog fight. We were given credit for getting a couple spit fires, which didn't crash, but they said they had 50 caliber bullets in it. And that didn't go well with anybody. But we had had just about all we could stand, this unprotected business, where we had no umbrella.

Hammerbeck ([02:07:33](#)):

And the other thing was a lack of adequate supplies. And I say adequate, you ran out of everything. And one of the things we ran out of was spark plugs, of all things. So I and a couple mechanics would drive along these roads where all these wreck trucks were, and we'd take spark plugs out of the burned out trucks because spark plugs were still good, and that's the only way to get spark plugs. And of course, we salvage the heck of a lot of stuff from the bombed out and the stray trucks. And that's when we found out that some of the German spark bugs were 14 millimeter and fit ours, so we at least got some theirs, too.

Hammerbeck ([02:08:16](#)):

But one of the things that you see that is Yankee ingenuity, and I give this, the credit, to the fact that rural farm boys, rural people, are more ingenious than any number of city bred people. I think that the big city people are city wise, but to be really downright ingenious, you have to come from a farm, someplace. And that's where the half the battle is won, is doing with what you've got. And I've always adopted a philosophy and we did at that time, "You have to do with what you got. You can't bitch about what you don't have. Make do with what you got." That's one of the big things that we realized right away, this is not going to get any better.

Overy ([02:09:08](#)):

Were you really angry at the high command for-- Sounded like you felt like you were kind of abandoned.

Hammerbeck ([02:09:15](#)):

You know who we're most angry at, was Patton. He'd come up, well, this is later on in Africa. After the campaign was over, he come out with all the rules. He hadn't even been there, he come in and took over, took command after Bradley left, and he and Eisenhower took off for England to get ready for the invasion. He come up with the neck ties and woolen shirts, we had woolen uniform. We didn't have summer uniform, but you had to wear a black necktie with your shirt sleeves rolled down. That was called discipline, it was supposed to make you a better soldier. And that was a big resent over that. And then he started a campaign for discipline and military conduct. Well, right after the African campaign I received my battlefield commissioner was, up until then, a sergeant and four of us received battlefield commissions after the campaign. And one of my first duties was to go into the city and find soldiers that didn't salute me, and fine them and collect \$10 on the spot for each time that I found a soldier that wouldn't salute me.

Hammerbeck ([02:10:32](#)):

Well, the last thing in our world I wanted out of this army was somebody to salute me, because I didn't think much of saluting to begin with. I thought that military ceremony and discipline had it's place, but not in the battlefield. I never felt that the battlefield was any place, especially in the field, for that type of nonsense. Well, Patton he would just come into his notoriety, his introduction was to be a horse's ass and he was real good at that. I spent one day and I said, "I'll resign my commissioner before I'll do that again." I didn't collect any fines and I was reprimanded for that. I thought it was one of the worst things I ever heard happen.

Overy ([02:11:18](#)):

Did you have any, thinking back, you think that there was any justification for Patton to think that you were, and US troops were undisciplined?

Hammerbeck (02:11:27):

Oh, yeah.

Overy (02:11:28):

Did you resent that very--

Hammerbeck (02:11:29):

His feeling was that we were National Guard troops. Even though we were augmented with almost 18,000 draftees, that National Guard troops couldn't be good because we weren't regular army. And we're still referred to, even after a hell of baptism of fire, we're still referred to as Boy Scout troops. And this was the biggest resentment we had.

Overy (02:11:56):

Did you feel they were good soldiers?

Hammerbeck (02:11:57):

We certainly did. We felt that we were doing a hell of a lot with very little.

Hammerbeck (02:12:03):

We were doing a hell of a lot with a lot with very little, and we were doing a lot with a little. We were having to do, because of poor planning, but we always felt whoever planned to war in the first place? I'll give you an example of incredible things. When we were in Fort Dix, cold winter, my commander come in and says, you've got to make up a list of all the stuff you need to run our trucks for six months. And I said, well what do you mean? What kind of climate are we going to be in? We don't know. So, I said it makes a difference in what grade of oil and greases and whether we need antifreeze or not. He says, well you better get something for everything, including repair parts. And I said, well that's almost an impossibility. We'd load up with way too much and we never could get that much anyway. There's always shortage of that.

Hammerbeck (02:13:03):

Well, I did make up a list of points and motors and spark plugs and the normal repair parts of carburetors and generators and so forth and what I felt would take to run the trucks average of a thousand miles a month during that period for six months. And I just took a shot in the dark that we could-- There was no such thing as motor grade oils at that time. So, you either had 10 weight or 30 weights. So I went for a 20 weight where it could last either way and that was it.

Hammerbeck (02:13:40):

When we got to Ireland and into London area and they were setting up a depot up there and somebody had been asked that same question about what would it take to run the division for six months. And they had 10 steering wheels, 10 spark plugs, 10 frames, 10 tires. Can you imagine a warehouse with 10 truck frames, random truck frames? Who needs a truck frame? It wasn't based on mortality of parts, it was based on taking the parts book and giving me 10 of everything. That's how damn dumb some of the stuff was at that time. That's why we learned to rely on ourselves. You learn the military way, then you throw it away and use common sense.

Hammerbeck (02:14:33):

And all the way through the campaign, all the way through the whole war, we kept finding out that common sense always prevailed and we got in more trouble relying on the military system of planning because the planning never survived because of a breakdown in the supply pattern. And the breakdown was always inappropriate, and it had such disastrous effects because when you've got 48 trucks to support a battalion of infantry, you better have 48 trucks out there. You can't run on 40 trucks if you're going to make, give them a move from one point A to point B during a nighttime move.

Hammerbeck (02:15:17):

So you're trying to keep at least 50% of your trucks ready to go at all times while you're working on the rest of them. But we were always learning how to steal, beg, borrow, and steal wherever you get repair plants. And that is my view of the battle and my mechanics and my drivers was that we always felt that something had failed at the planning end. The logistics end. We didn't know the term logistics at that time, I've learned it since, but somebody was sitting with their finger in their butt when we were supposed to be using common sense, they were using a book.

Hammerbeck (02:15:59):

But if there was any resentment, that was the most common one. And I can't really say that food was ever a gripe until we got those British rations. We learned to live with them. And I guess the biggest problem other than that Patton discipline and the current lack of, the mail came in batches. Everybody was affected by the lack of mail. If all the mail was on a ship that got sunk, you didn't get mail for a whole division. So they started learning to split up the mail and they'd never fly it over until they come out with D-mail later on in Italy. And that was kind of an inadequate thing. And the other resentment that showed up, I'd feel it as much as anybody, was the censoring of mail. And that started in Africa. I hated to have my mail censored and I hated even more to have to censor mail when I became an officer because--

Hammerbeck (02:17:11):

Funny thing, there's a lot of guys that hate the army and I don't think anybody really loves it. You have to have a hole in your head to like it. But they'd have to take their resentments out on some and they usually take it out in the censor. You can really cuss out the officers. There's always a break between their officers and enlisted men, even in an outfit like ours in which everybody grew up and the went to school together, nobody really paid much attention to who had what on.

There was a few, we got sent what they call 90-day wonders in, but we soon converted them. The white people would come from OCS graduates. We got some real good ones, but we got a couple of horses' asses and it took a while to transform them. We either got rid of them or got white people again.

Overy ([02:18:09](#)):

You were really one of the few units that knew each other before you actually got into--

Hammerbeck ([02:18:17](#)):

That was our biggest factor of morale. We could always sit and talk about old times. We talk about time record school and back in Little Falls and so forth. And that attracted draftees who came from the area, that the here was a game from Minnesota, let's go up and visit them, because if they were draftee from Iowa he'd look for anybody from Iowa or anybody from Minnesota. And once in a while we'd catch somebody going through the replacement system that was a friend of ours. We got to steer him off and get him in our outfit. The Vice President of the First National Bank came through as a replacement and we nailed him just by name alone. I mean he is now the Vice President but he was a country bumpkin at that time.

Overy ([02:19:06](#)):

Tell me about your getting a battlefield commission. How did that come about?

Hammerbeck ([02:19:13](#)):

Well it started back in England. On the day before Christmas what was now our retired assistant adjutant general and I were, his name is Bill Cheeseman. I don't know if you knew him or not, or heard of him, but he was the assistant adjutant general for Minnesota here for many years. He and I were on leave in Manchester. I hate to make a long story of it but I've got get the details of

it. We got our first pass and we went down to Manchester to visit his old aunt, and then we were going to make the bar scene after we'd done our duty, our social duties.

Hammerbeck ([02:19:58](#)):

I remember back in season report back to Liverpool, we were due to go back to OCS in the States. So, through rain and cold and misery, we got taxis and so forth. Got back to, I think it was about a hundred miles, back to Liverpool, back to our unit. The orders were canceled. We thought we were going to be home by Christmas. We're going to load up instead, on a ship. Well then we were identified as officer material by selection and by appointment and whatever method of reporting that we were officer material. So, after the Tunisian campaign was over, there was four of us that were appointed as eligible for battlefield commissions and discharging commissions in the field. And it's the first time I ever heard of a battlefield commission. We supposedly had done extraordinarily good leadership duties and so forth during the campaign. So they felt they wouldn't set us back to the States. They would just give us gold bars out there.

Overy ([02:21:18](#)):

Had you led troops in battle or had you--

Hammerbeck ([02:21:20](#)):

No, not in-- We were in involved in, oh this, I was talking about getting the cranks out of this mudhole. That is a night that saved quite a few our troops from being trapped because we kept that road open by touring them through. That and keeping our trucks going, keeping ourselves mobile by whatever methods we could do. You couldn't do it alone. But you had to devise means and that was the reason that I was assigned it. Friend of mine was Ed Keefer, he was with the ordinance unit. He had kept the ammunition going. Cheeseman was with the supply unit and he had kept what supplies there was going. What you're doing is doing your job right.

Hammerbeck (02:22:21):

And we were supposed to learn by home study the duties of a commissioned officer. My first duty was to report back to RAM and learn how to load a ship for the invasion of Italy, which I did. We each were given a ship, we were called TQM, Transportation Quarter Master. And we loaded a ship in miniature on paper and we were assigned a ship that was in the convoy coming across the Atlantic and they were supposed to be coming in exact order into the boating facilities at both Algiers and Iran. And so we practiced loading everything, trailers, and trucks, and tanks, and so forth. My ship was, and each ship had a specific cargo in the hold when it came in. So we had between decks and top deck to load our vehicles. Well, the convoy had been attacked, several ships were lost, and it came in the wrong order. So, I got a different ship, a different captain and different cargo.

Hammerbeck (02:23:34):

And then to screw it all up, the order of march to get this infantry equipment on the ships was completely reversed and it had become a whole big mess. So, it ended up with loading the ships as fast as we could, getting them out of the harbor so we don't present too big a target, scattering them in the Mediterranean and wait for the convoy to move. But then the air cover had given us enough protection so the air raids were down and so we didn't lose much to air raids. But then one of our ships coming out of Algiers were torpedoed, we got a torpedo right in the engine room and all our shop vans, by then the maintenance vans were on it. But the ship didn't sink right away. So, they towed into dock and chained up to dock and transferred all the trucks onto a different ship, a landing craft, LCT.

Hammerbeck (02:24:37):

And then they let us have all the stuff that was on the ship. Coffee, Natchez coffee in two pound cans, fresh steaks, frozen turkey, I mean frozen steaks, frozen turkey. We loaded up two tons of coffee in our trucks. We drank fresh coffee. Everybody else was drinking this ersatz coffee all through Italy. We had trading stock. But anyway, when we finally got, well, we stopped at Malta. Because of the lack of a staging area, and then started heading for Italy, we knew where we were going. We were supposed to invade Italy and they even gave us the place, it would be in Salerno. And we had to go single file through the streets of Macina, between Sicily, and that's when I seen the big whirlpool. Have you ever heard of that? The tremendous whirlpool.

Overy (02:25:36):

Scylla and Charybdis, Greek mythology.

Hammerbeck (02:25:39):

Yeah, we had the sirens on the rocks and this is quite a whirlpool, the depth of the center of the whirlpool we were out far enough towards the center of the states in Macina, but you could see it and it looked to be about 50 feet deep. And what causes that is the tides of the Mediterranean coming in and back, in and out cause a whirlpool situation because there's such a great surge of water trying to get through the narrow straits.

Hammerbeck (02:26:07):

Well then, so the ships had to go single file, they went back into three columns, and it felt kind of secure. My ship was the center tail ship, the center column. We always called that coffin corner was the two outside corners, especially the one towards the ocean because that's the place where submarines would attack most often. Well, we were kind of bitching because when they lined up

again we were on the outside corner and the ship that was behind us took our place in the center column.

Hammerbeck ([02:26:42](#)):

That isn't fair and we're standing watching and all of a sudden you see the plates buckle on the ship. And the sound takes a while to carry. And steam flew off and the life rafts flew off, it hit a mine and the ship sank in eight minutes. It was a liberty ship. But you could see the guys scrambling off the ship, it was loaded most of its cargo instead of troops. So that is the incident in which I felt was pretty good, but the crew in our ship got all excited and a destroyer come racing around the rear corner and it rolled up a great big wave. The destroyer cuts deep in the water and rolls a big, great big wave. They fired at that wave because there was a submarine surfacing with the deck guns. God, I thought, that has got to be the dumbest thing I've ever seen.

Hammerbeck ([02:27:36](#)):

Well then they were supposed to put up, this is the merchant marine crew and then they have a naval gun crew for the five inch gun on the rear deck. And they're supposed to put barrage balloons because we're nearing the landing area. Well they got the barrage balloon out, the great big rubberized canvas is what it is. And they got the hydrogen, not hydrogen, but they had helium at that time, and they got this thick heavy steel wire. It's about oh three sixteenths of an inch thick, in a great big reel up at the forward mast.

Hammerbeck ([02:28:14](#)):

And they get the balloon laid out and they start filling it up on the top of the deck on top of the tanks and trucks and so forth. And they get it going up and they finally got it up enough so they have to get a bunch of guys to get ahold of the cords that are hanging down from it and then attach the wire to the sling underneath it. Remember that's supposed to be keeping from strafing

our ship. Well they let it up and it went up and it went up and nobody paid any attention. The fact that nobody was on the windlass there, and this was spinning like a fishing reel casting out and nobody could stop but it. Blew it on right up, pulled all the wire off, and there it went sailing through the sky. Well they allowed as how they had never done that before and they made a mistake.

Hammerbeck ([02:29:08](#)):

Oh then we got up to Salerno and they hadn't cleared, the beachhead wasn't established yet so we couldn't unload. And they had, for the Merchant Marine they had a flat rate of \$500 a piece for going through the Straits of Gibraltar, as combat pay. Just back through the Straits. Well some of these, I call them four F'ers that were crewing on these ships. They'd go across the ocean twice and they'd buy a house in those days, because they'd get such a high rate of pay. Even the cabin steward that served the captain and the ship's officers was in the bucks. But then they changed that law so they'd get \$50 every time they had to weigh anchor because of enemy action. Well they weighed anchor 50 times off Salerno and about half of it was so they could collect their bonus. And the ship's bursar, every time everyone would get 50 bucks except the soldiers, they don't get anything.

Hammerbeck ([02:30:15](#)):

Then they had eight hour days and they were going to go on a strike because they wanted to get double time because they're in the combat zone. They wanted to get double time for serving in the combat zone after getting the bonus for being there.

Overy ([02:30:28](#)):

These are merchant mariners?

Hammerbeck (02:30:30):

Yeah. So, we went into the shore to get some stevedores out and load ship the because the captain put them all in irons, put them into the brig, put them in handcuffs and put them in the brig and sent for some stevedores from the shore. And they sent a group out there to man the winches. Well then we had a hell of a big storm and it blew all the ships all around. We damn near collided with a shipload of aviation gas in the middle of the night because it was dragging its anchor and I don't think it was five feet from us before the ship, they got the thing under control, because most of the ships were sitting dead on the anchor, they didn't even have their engines warm.

Hammerbeck (02:31:13):

Well, next day the most embarrassing thing that can happen to the British had happened. They had one of their merchant ships up on the shore it was sitting up on the beach and there it sat into the dismay of every, the British were participating in that thing, not as near the numbers of Americans, but enough so that they could show that there were superior merchant people. But they're up there with bulldozers cutting a trench trying to get their ship off the sand.

Hammerbeck (02:31:46):

Well, it ruined a lot of our landing craft. So, we ended up unloading the ship in ducks. That's a two and a half ton load, and if they got much of a load on they capsize right now, they just spin upside down. And we lost so doggone many ducks. So we had a hell of a job. We finally got some LCMs and there some other, we did unload a lot of the cargo with ducks, but we couldn't unload vehicles with ducks, of course, we had to have landing ship tanks or things like marine equipment.

Overy ([02:32:27](#)):

When you were in Salerno were the Germans still strafing and bombing the harbor?

Hammerbeck ([02:32:30](#)):

Oh yeah, regularly. But there was more alerts than there was actual attacks. They'd come in and they make a nuisance attack and everybody would shoot over an area, never hit anything. But they never made any concentrated raids. They made a couple pretty good concentrated raids when we were in Naples, but nothing that slowed down the war effort. We had quite a battle at Salerno. The Germans made a good counter attack and our 151st field artillery, I don't know if you ever heard of this, they were a multi outfit, they boresighted on the Germans on the road right down the tubes. They didn't have to, direct fire.

Overy ([02:33:28](#)):

155s or 105s?

Hammerbeck ([02:33:29](#)):

105s. 155 is a little bit too big for that. They did a real incredible job starting and stopping a tank attack and counterattack. But the Germans didn't have, there's not enough roads on that part of Italy. So, the main road, if you secured it, that'd become your MSR, if you could keep it secured and keep it moving. Well, the Germans were sitting on it and we had to get them off and so we had to land up above Salerno and start, I mean above Naples and start cutting them off. So, they had to pull back before they got trapped.

Overy ([02:34:12](#)):

So, you went from Salerno then to Naples?

Hammerbeck ([02:34:15](#)):

Yeah, once we unloaded then I was back in my outfit again. My outfit had gone ahead.

Overy ([02:34:23](#)):

I see.

Hammerbeck ([02:34:23](#)):

While I was unloading.

Overy ([02:34:25](#)):

So, they went through the Sicily thing while you were back in training?

Hammerbeck ([02:34:28](#)):

Yeah. And like I said, the torturous route through Italy was, that is the start of true frustration because, there again, we were not getting the type of equipment we needed. We didn't have enough armor. Of course, the reason we didn't have much armor is because armor can't do much in mountains.

Overy ([02:34:56](#)):

And your outfit was, you were back with the--

Hammerbeck ([02:35:01](#)):

Purely infantry.

Overy ([02:35:01](#)):

The truck. You were back to the support group.

Hammerbeck ([02:35:02](#)):

Yeah, maintenance. I was with the 734th maintenance company by then, which is a direct support company for the infantry division. I was in charge of, my first assignment was in charge of evacuation recovery at a group of wreckers, our main purpose to go to pick up battle casualties and--

Overy ([02:35:27](#)):

Vehicles that were--

Hammerbeck ([02:35:28](#)):

Vehicles and guns and so forth, cars, anything that had to have battlefield recovery. And one of the worst I'd ever seen was, we had the old Snyder 155s until we got the new M1s. But old Snyders were so worn out from firing there hardly any rifling left in them. The M1s are a beautiful weapon by any selection. But forced found out what they call a high order burst, is when the HE goes off in the breach, at the same time the repellent charge goes off. That is the most devastating thing I've ever seen. Everything was gone from the top of the Howitzer. The top of the tires, the whole breach, now the breach on this is five inches thick around the chamber and everything was gone. The whole, it just like it evaporated, killed seven of the crew. It was the most disastrous explosion I've ever seen. Unbelievable.

Hammerbeck ([02:36:46](#)):

One of the big problems, again, was mines. The Germans both blew up the bridges and sowed mines everywhere. Any possible place it could go. So, one of the jobs we had when you go to a different bivouac area, the wrecker was heavy enough so you could run over a teller and all you do is blow your wheels off. But you'd have a couple foot imprints in the floorboards when you did it.

Hammerbeck ([02:37:12](#)):

So, the Italians had come up with box mines, which are a wooden mine that mine sweeper wouldn't pick up. They didn't have a lot of them and they were pretty easy to probe for, but they were always a possibility. So we'd run the wreckers back, the bivouac area back and forth to see if there's any box mines before we move in to bivouac.

Overy ([02:37:34](#)):

And the vehicle was heavy enough that it really didn't, wouldn't hurt it that much.

Hammerbeck ([02:37:36](#)):

Yeah, we'd blow a wheel off once in a while. All you'd do is put a new axle and the wheel off.

Overy ([02:37:56](#)):

I guess I was asking you about your reaction to and relationship with civilians when you were, you talked about the Arabs. What about the Italians?

Hammerbeck ([02:38:04](#)):

Well, there's two distinct types of Italians. The Neapolitans and the ones north. I forget what they used to call them, but the Po Valley was more of a mixture. The white Italians. Neapolitans were the original pirate type. In my book they're all merchants and they had merchants' attitudes and they were had merchants' smarts, and they sold everything under the sun. My impression's that area is keep clapping your hands and try to steer clear of them, because they were out, they were very good wheelers and dealers. But there was an awful lot of real likable Italians from north, Rome on north. One of the fun things about, I shouldn't say fun things about, interesting things about the Neapolitans were they liked to party.

Hammerbeck ([02:39:21](#)):

Go on dog. You don't have to be a watch dog now.

Hammerbeck ([02:39:29](#)):

But they liked to get a bunch of Americans together and have a party or a dance. So they could play their concertinas and they could sing. I've never seen, well, I went to an Italian opera at the famous Italian opera house in Naples, the Neapolitan Opera House. And that's where I found out that they are artists and singers along with being merchants.

Hammerbeck ([02:39:55](#)):

Of course, I went to the Isle of Capris and Sorrento while we were down there and enjoyed that. But we worked, had a deal with them because we tried to get native stuff to redo our brakes, we looked for brake lining down in the factories of Naples and we looked, in fact we got some rigs out of a bombed-out factory to rebuild brake drums.

Hammerbeck ([02:40:23](#)):

And then we had tried to buy iron from them to make stretcher carriers for Jeeps in the mountains. Whenever you're dealing with them, they're always, you've got to do a lot of dickering just like you do in New York or anyplace else. You learn to sheeny a lot. I did, we had a rebuild support unit in Florence, Italy, in which we had quite a few Italian employees and they were, if you showed them how to do something, do it well, but they were not terribly industrious. Were not very dependable. But they could pack wheel bearings, they could replace engines if you showed them how, and they could watch, of course fix tires and so forth.

Overy ([02:41:23](#)):

You made a comment at the beginning of the interview about American ingenuity, which I've heard was really distinctive of American soldiers. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Hammerbeck ([02:41:39](#)):

Yeah, it's hard to define except to say that it's very distinctive of country boys. Guys brought up on a farm have learned how to do with what they've got and you develop an attitude that is still with me, you have to go with what you got. And I keep telling my son the same thing in our garden now. You're not going to get all new equipment when you go to the POE, you're going to get what you got and you're going to learn to live with it. And that's the way that Americans were

in battle. They always figured out how to do something when it's almost impossible to do it. If there's a need arises that is an urgent need, they'd figure out how to do it.

Hammerbeck ([02:42:29](#)):

The best way I can see is when we were fighting the mountains, there was no way of evacuating casualties from mountains. Well, we had some mules, which isn't too good to get put a casualty on. So, we had to use our Jeeps. We didn't have the gamma goats or any of those fancy machines you got now. So, we had to use a jeep for it. We had to put stretcher carriers onto Jeeps because the ambulances could not negotiate the mountains. So, we had equipped a lot of Jeeps with stretcher carriers and there was no stretch of things as a stretcher carrier, even in army inventory. So we come up with a design for it. The stretcher would go right up over the laid down windshield and you could put a casualty right on a stretcher and clamping down so he wouldn't fall off because some of these mountain roads are really rough.

Hammerbeck ([02:43:16](#)):

When you see a jeep scratching, you understand what mobility means, but they'd scratch themselves into some awfully bad locations but they get in and out of them. But it took Americans to figure out how to make the Jeep do it. And well, I guess I'll give you a good example. We hadn't seen, I guess I've told you we'd never seen ice anywhere. There's nothing like a cold drink. We got so used to warm drinks that we finally, in the middle of the Italian campaign, they issued us beer.

Hammerbeck ([02:43:50](#)):

Everybody got I think two cans of beer for a week. And here it is warm beer in the middle of the summer. So what do our guys do? They get an old compressor from a half track, an air compressor from a half track and they used fly bomb, they've got freon propellant, the insect

bombs. They were pretty heavy at that time. And they made a back better and with a compressor and they rigged this up with the coils of an old washing machine and put antifreeze in the washing machine and the coil and the antifreeze, cranked this thing up with a gasoline engine with a belt on the compressor and froze the beer.

Hammerbeck ([02:44:37](#)):

Everybody brought the thing of the prestone was getting cold. We said, Everybody bring your beer. So they filled this washing machine, a great big tub, a commercial washer and they cracked quite a few cans of beer. But this was fly bombs for freon.

Overy ([02:44:55](#)):

Made themselves a refrigerator.

Hammerbeck ([02:44:57](#)):

Huh?

Overy ([02:44:57](#)):

Made themselves a refrigerator.

Hammerbeck ([02:45:01](#)):

Yeah. Right.

Overy ([02:45:01](#)):

Incredible.

Hammerbeck ([02:45:01](#)):

Yeah. Another thing, living in the mountains--

Hammerbeck ([02:45:03](#)):

Yeah. Another thing, living in the mountains is terribly cold in the wintertime. It snows. It gets cold like it does in Minnesota. And we come up with a stove design made out of a shell casing,

and it turns out that American 105 artillery shell has got a big enough base, so you can put a Ventura ring in it, and then use a 47-millimeter cell for a burner. You drill a bunch of holes in it, and then put a top on it, little four-inch stove pipe, I mean, twin stove pipe, and run gasoline in this thing.

Hammerbeck ([02:45:39](#)):

And what happens is the gasoline hits this hot shell case-- It takes a while to generate, and it becomes a self-generating blow torch in there. Excuse me. And the air going up keeps from flashing back. So, it burns gasoline, and it completely burns it. There's not a wisp of smoke. You can make this shell casing red hot with it. And all you had to do is just drip the gasoline into it. That become as known as the-- We called that the Arab stove. And we made a hell of a lot of them, for tent heaters. And they worked really good.

Hammerbeck ([02:46:22](#)):

One guy was more ingenious than the rest. He put a spark plug, just so he wouldn't have to get out of his spartan sack at night to-- He'd reach over and press the button to ignite. He'd just start the flow, turn on the gas, and he wouldn't even have to get out to put a match in it. He'd put a spark on it and start it up. Push button start for a stove. And mine was made out of an 88-millimeter shell case. I think I got an 88. Want another Pepsi?

Overy ([02:47:02](#)):

Oh, no, thank you. What kinds of things in your World War II experience proved to be the most frustrating to you?

Hammerbeck ([02:47:15](#)):

Waiting.

Overy ([02:47:16](#)):

Waiting?

Hammerbeck ([02:47:17](#)):

Yeah. The hardest thing there is to do is sit around and wait and do nothing. It's a problem that everybody has to deal with, but you spend so much time waiting for something to happen. And the other part is not knowing what is happening is one.

Hammerbeck ([02:47:42](#)):

We finally organized by the time we got to Italy, where we had a good flow of news. And the stars and stripes did a good job. So, Ernie Powell was with us, and he did a good job, and so did-
- What's his name, the cartoonist?

Overy ([02:48:01](#)):

Bill Mauldin.

Hammerbeck ([02:48:01](#)):

Bill Mauldin, he did a beautiful job of portraying things as they were in reality. It was not cynical, but it bordered on being cynical. Because how else can you put it, when you're frustrated by the terrain, and by the inability to do what you're set out to do? There is no way that you can feel good about yourself, if you're not doing what you're capable of doing, and you're frustrated by not having solutions.

Hammerbeck ([02:48:36](#)):

No matter what level you're sitting on, whether you're at the general staff level, or at the lowest rank, you want to see something happen, so you can get this thing over and go home. I think we spent an awful lot of time talking about why can't we get this over, so we can go home?

Hammerbeck (02:48:56):

Incidentally, speaking of going home, we talked about going home after the African campaign. Jeez, they might have been sent fresh troops. They got lots of them. And Eisenhower showed up. He only had two stars at that time. And he's just even rank with the Lone Ranger down there. And he talked the biggest mass of troops they ever put together, in the Plains at [inaudible 02:49:24]. And sounded it like it was-- We were not going home till this is over. And that's right from his mouth.

Hammerbeck (02:49:33):

And we had speakers, so we wouldn't miss his words. And he didn't say it cynically or hard nosed. He just said it factually. We have got a job to do. And we're going to get it over. Then we can go home. And, to put it simply, that kind of summed it up. It wasn't like the Korean conflict. And if you could last six months, you're going to come back, or the Korean thing, which is a year. When you get the job done, then you're going to go home. And that made a difference in how it was done.

Overy (02:50:06):

What are the worst memories you have of World War II, if you have a worst memory?

Hammerbeck (02:50:17):

That's pretty tough. I guess the worst feeling I ever had was picking up my commander in a battlefield in Anzio. He and our armament officer stepped on a landmine, and they were horribly mangled. But it was a booby-trapped tar mine. And our shop officer, he died recently here, from Clarissa, had to have an arm and a leg put together with steel plates because he was-- There was three of them.

Hammerbeck (02:50:57):

The hardest part was delivering him to the graves collection point in Anzio, in which there's thousands of bodies laid out in the sun. And it stinks to high heaven. There's clouds of flies around. And all I've got is the highest regard for these graves people. Graves registration people are the unsung heroes, who are out there identifying these bodies, and trying to collect personal belongings and so forth, so they can get these few pitiful things back to survivors. That to me was one of the most-- I can't say it's horrifying, but it's upsetting experience. And you take a guy who's a Lieutenant Colonel at 23 years of age-- The young commissions were all over the place. There was a lot of people were field grade up in the early twenties. But suddenly this lively guy is gone. We eat together every day. This type of loss is hard to describe, but it doesn't make you fear so much as gag. That's about, I guess, I'd say the most disgusting thing.

Overy (02:52:18):

What about funny things? What kinds of things tended to make you laugh? Or did you have anything happen that made you laugh?

Hammerbeck (02:52:24):

I had a lot of things. Right off the bat, I can't think of-- Well, in fact, I got a picture of my buddy Ed Keefer. This is up after the battle, and we went past Roman [inaudible 02:52:43] by Leghorn, and we had a summer staging area there. Real nice park, run by agency. And we had just got the first division issue of Italian gin and vodka. Not vodka, but-- What is that? It's definitely not of grapes. [inaudible 02:53:08].

Overy (02:53:08):

Oh, cognac?

Hammerbeck (02:53:09):

Well, I was assigned, amongst other things, graves registration, real estate, and officer, and so forth. I was assigned as liquor officers, to break down these rations. They got them in water cans, GI cans, like regular GI five-gallon cans.

Hammerbeck (02:53:32):

So, I have people bringing their canteen cups, and their canteens and bottles, and whatever they could find around there, and pour their ration out of those. Break down the ration for the company. Head of a company was about 120 people. So, I had these cans of booze sitting beside my tent. We had a nine-by-nine officers' tent.

Hammerbeck (02:53:52):

And Ed Keefer got up in the morning to wash. And he poured himself a helmet full of water, presumably, and give himself a damn good washing with gin. By the time he discovered it was gin, it was too late. He had it in his eyes and his hair.

Hammerbeck (02:54:10):

That and the fact that another buddy of mine used to be camp commander, his name is Bob Molbrang. But whenever your old buddies going to see each other, whether in the carmat zone or in the rear area, you always break out the Coleman stove and put a number eight can tin can on it, and brew up a pot of coffee. Boil the water and pour the coffee in.

Hammerbeck (02:54:43):

Well, Bob Molbrang did that. And we couldn't figure out why, when he put the can [inaudible 02:54:51], it curdled. And we thought that the condensed milk was sour. Until he sipped on it, and that was a case of having made it out of vodka. Made the coffee out of it, holy mackerel, did

that have a fragrance to it. There was a lot of humorous situations. I guess I'm having a job recollecting it. I'm running out of the recollections.

Overy ([02:55:27](#)):

Do you have any regrets about your years in service in World War II?

Hammerbeck ([02:55:36](#)):

No. I feel privileged to have served. Well, I have a patriotic heart. I hope you don't think I got the project patriotism, but I do believe in it. I'm a great one to support whoever's in charge, and believe in it.

Hammerbeck ([02:55:55](#)):

And, as a consequence, I feel privileged to have served. It's an experience I wouldn't sell for a million, but I wouldn't pay a nickel for another. All the way through, in general, I feel I experienced enough, seen enough, and that I could live a lifetime on the memories.

Hammerbeck ([02:56:19](#)):

There's not many people can add that wealth of experience that I have experienced, and didn't cost me anything. And I can draw on it many times. The biggest thing I can draw on for is appreciation. You can't appreciate anything until you do without it. And I can't say enough for the fact that it's hard to realize, the simple things are the things you miss the most when you have to do without, and real simple things.

Hammerbeck ([02:56:54](#)):

I'm not talking about TVs and VCRs and all the modern gadgetry. The simple thing is a light in a window. Remember, before, I talked about light in a window. That to me was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. To come home, I hadn't been home for three and a half years and sit in a bus window and see that sign that says Little Falls. That was a tearjerker.

Hammerbeck (02:57:19):

But all the way through here, coming on the train from New York, into the Cities, catching a bus there, and coming up to Little Falls, I couldn't get used to lights. I could hardly find my way because the lights were so bright. But lights and windows have always been the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Because lights and windows is homey. It's welcoming.

Hammerbeck (02:57:48):

But the garishness of street lights, you can't-- A long time, I had a job finding the traffic lights. I had a hard job driving a car, because I'd been driving for three and a half years in the dark. It's hard to drive with lights. But the appreciation of light is the greatest appreciation I got out of the whole thing.

Hammerbeck (02:58:06):

But, let me tell you, that there's an awful lot of little things that people don't realize to be grateful for. The privilege of being home, and a free speech society, is hard to realize until you've been denied that for a long time. That doesn't mean you can't talk and say what you want to but do what you want to. When you're structured and regimented for that long, it's not as though you were being harassed, but it's a lifestyle that's not natural.

Hammerbeck (02:58:45):

A bunch of guys living together, that's not natural. You learn to live together, but it is not a natural life. It's nice to have women around. They're good. They're part of our lives. They're important. Family is an awful important thing. And when I'd see intact families in Italy, I used to envy them. Here's a couple with a family, but more tragic than that is a family that's lost their home and all their possessions. But at least they're together there.

Hammerbeck ([02:59:18](#)):

So I guess the wealth that I got out of this whole thing is the many experiences of little things, of important things. A good home cooked meal, one down in Italy. So, they'd make a pasta meal for us if we bring the flowers, now they made the most-- I never tasted a better meal there. And they made the ravioli and the whole works. And I always remember the salad. They got a great big wooden salad bowl, and they get spoons to mix the olive oil and the wine sauce, the vinegar. And they didn't really get all the sand out of it. So, you had a kind of a crunchy salad. If you had a gizzard, it'd be good for your gizzard. But that's an experience in eating.

Hammerbeck ([03:00:12](#)):

It's funny how creature comforts, no matter how small they are, you don't realize how good they are. A good bed to sleep in, a clean bed, a place where you can wash your hands without using a helmet or something to wash them. Good soap. GI soap is not bad. But geez, it's not very fragrant. It's pretty strong. Can you imagine what it feels like to sit on a toilet stool, after you've been sitting over a trench for three, four years.

Hammerbeck ([03:00:47](#)):

I thought it was great in Tunis, when they had the public toilets there. They're all squat take. They've got a cast of two footprints right into the cornerstone, and you sit down, and there's barriers. This is right on the street, because they didn't use stools at that time there. They still have a few toilets like that in Italy.

Overy ([03:01:05](#)):

Is that right?

Hammerbeck ([03:01:09](#)):

And men and women both use them. I mean, you get to sit down, and if you can speak a little Italian, you'd have a good conversation right across the partition.

Overy ([03:01:20](#)):

Well, I think if that were the case, I think I'd get a locked bowel after a while. I think-

Hammerbeck ([03:01:23](#)):

There's a very good reason for those toilets. They don't spread disease. See, one thing about it, the VD rate in Italy is the highest in the world. That's one of the things I was in Italy, I was a VD officer. So, I had to handle all the investigative cases. And we had a hell of a lot of them, where people are infected and had to be able to identify the carrier, and get them out the area, and warn everybody else and so forth. That's kind of a cruddy part of the war.

Hammerbeck ([03:02:07](#)):

But you know that during center of the war in Italy, we had people to division out of the land at one time, with VD. Can you imagine 15,000 to 20,000 troops infected with everything from syphilis to gonorrhea? They had some stuff around Naples that-- Seaports have a way of collecting stuff from all over the world. So particularly firearms, whether have a chance to get something that was a party to everything.

Hammerbeck ([03:02:43](#)):

Incidentally speaking, discoveries that came out the war, when we could get such a thing as penicillin, my God, what a godsend. Because we thought sulfur was a miracle drug, but you never even hear of sulfur being used anymore. But we all had something packed with the sulfur on our [inaudible 03:03:05] belts, in case of a grievous wound.

Overy ([03:03:10](#)):

How do you think the war affected you, being in the service and the war? You think it had an effect, positive or negative on you?

Hammerbeck ([03:03:17](#)):

I feel that it had a very positive effect. I never felt anything but that. I feel somewhat sage about that, and philosophical, because it has given me a much healthier appreciation of the qualities of life, the true qualities. My values are pretty simple. They're not complicated by anything but the simple things.

Hammerbeck ([03:03:56](#)):

I think I really treasured the experiences that the military life has given me. But wars have a way of bringing the best out, and peace time has a way of bringing the worst out. I liked my tour of duty as a camp engineer during peace time. And I lived in fear of my tour of duty during the Vietnam. Or during the Korean War, I had giant size ulcers, wondering when I would be called to that, because I had family by then.

Hammerbeck ([03:04:34](#)):

And the only reason I didn't go was because I had enough dependents, but I was due to go from [inaudible 03:04:42] Alabama, over down in Camp [inaudible 03:04:47]. And I even got with a giant size batch of officers out of that one, because I didn't want to go there.

Hammerbeck ([03:04:58](#)):

The Korean War, from beginning to end, is a little bit like the Vietnam war. It left me cold, because it is too much restraint put on people who are able to do the job that have done with. I've never believed in police action, being a part of the statesmanship that would run a military conflict. I have a strong feeling that we either go to war, or we should stay out of conflicts. Our police actions, we don't do well. We got our faces and nose rubbed in it in both Korea and

Vietnam. We know it. And the reason for it is because we could not bring our full ability to bear. And that's our worst frustration there is.

Hammerbeck ([03:05:55](#)):

I had one son that spent two tours in Vietnam. After, he did a six months tour, and he went home and married his sweetheart. And then he's called up again because he's a specialist in strike bombing electronics. But he holds the same feeling as I do. He doesn't feel any bitterness about it, even though he was betrayed by a second tour. He goes out and counts his lucky numbers, and says, "It's a good experience. I don't make any amends about it. I don't blame anybody for it. I believe that an awful lot of mistakes made, but I'm not going to hassle them. They can't be done over."

Overy ([03:06:46](#)):

What did you think about the general competence of your superior officers? Did you feel they're pretty generally a pretty competent group of officers?

Hammerbeck ([03:06:59](#)):

Most of them. I had a great deal of respect for a lot of key people there. I always felt that we were extremely lucky to have such good generals. General Hendricksen and General Ryder are two of them that I name right off the bat, who were excellent really, just outstanding. They were not only leaders in military, but in the civilian field, or adjunct general, which is a political type of job. But there was an awful lot of deadwood in the staff areas. As I got [inaudible 03:07:50]--

Overy ([03:07:47](#)):

With rangers, and colonels, and things of this kind?

Hammerbeck (03:07:50):

You're darn right. I abhor politics in the military. And I've seen an awful lot of it. Our system of evaluating officers stinks, but it's the best thing we got. To give the right efficiency reports, some people you seldom see is not a good way to do it.

Hammerbeck (03:08:19):

When I was a retired commander, they had about 48 officers. I can't evaluate them if I don't work with frequently, and yet I'm the evaluator. I can have his ass for dinner, or I can give him more than he deserves. I don't think that's right. I think it should be a commission that would look over a person's performance. The final say might be an impression more than a fact.

Hammerbeck (03:08:50):

I've seen an awful lot of good officers go down the shoot, because they didn't keep on the good side of the old man. I don't like that at all. Unfortunately, I've seen an awful lot of poor officers kept on, because they were on the good side of the army.

Hammerbeck (03:09:06):

I had the misfortune of trying to get rid of a deadwood officer once. And I was soundly trounced by my superior, not having rehabilitated him. I hadn't done what I should in counseling him, so he'd be a better officer. I got more of a tongue lashing than I ever got in my life for not having rehabilitated this officer that I knew was deadwood, and he'd proven himself to be deadwood.

Hammerbeck (03:09:44):

So that part of the system still sticks in my craw, that somebody come to say, "He's your fault." I didn't make them better. I did all I could to make him work and perform. But when I have done all I can do, then it's time for me to get rid of him. Then when you get it back in your face, you didn't do all you're supposed to do, until I find out later this is guy's best friend, now that's--

Overy ([03:10:15](#)):

Politics.

Hammerbeck ([03:10:17](#)):

Well, it is.

Overy ([03:10:17](#)):

Sure. Sure.

Hammerbeck ([03:10:19](#)):

But, fortunately, that's not very often. But to be honest about it, you learn a lot from writing the superlatives that it takes to get a good efficiency report. And you also realize that if you don't rate them, if you don't give a guy superior, then he's rated low by just being excellent. Now that's not a good way to do it. But you run out of superlatives. And it's not right.

Hammerbeck ([03:10:52](#)):

The system has tried hard to correct that problem and has done somewhat well by having a rater and an endorser and so forth, and using a system that prevents too much loading up, by using a number system which is scale of 10 or scale of five. You put him in where he sits, in respect to his peers. That's a fairly good system. I think you've seen the type of charts. I don't know a good answer, except to say that you should have the right to disqualify yourself, when you're not in a position to make a good evaluation.

Overy ([03:11:40](#)):

Let me ask you this, earlier in the interview you said, and I quote, "You have to have a hole in the head to like the army."

Hammerbeck ([03:11:51](#)):

Yep. To like it. Yeah.

Overy ([03:11:55](#)):

Yeah. But didn't you stay in quite a long time after?

Hammerbeck ([03:11:59](#)):

No, I stayed in because that's my job. It was a living.

Overy ([03:12:04](#)):

Oh, I see. I didn't know that.

Hammerbeck ([03:12:06](#)):

Yeah. Well, I was a civil service technician.

Overy ([03:12:14](#)):

I see.

Hammerbeck ([03:12:14](#)):

So, I had two jobs, one on the military side, and another was a civilian side. So, I had to be in it.

Overy ([03:12:23](#)):

I see.

Hammerbeck ([03:12:25](#)):

You might as well make the most of it when you have to.

Overy ([03:12:27](#)):

Sure. Sure.

Hammerbeck ([03:12:30](#)):

No, but you're right. What's good about a system like that? Army is a professional business is killing, isn't it?

Overy ([03:12:47](#)):

Or getting ready to kill.

Hammerbeck (03:12:48):

Yeah. Actually, the mission is to destroy the ability of the enemy to kill, not to be-- But it's a term that it doesn't use the term kill, so much as his will to fight. You want to stop his will to fight, which means you don't really have to kill him to do that. You just got to make him so uncomfortable that he wants to quit fighting.

Hammerbeck (03:13:17):

And that's a fact. You don't get anybody to give up by killing them, because then got to-- It's a body. To be alive and surrender, you got to have lost your will or ability to fail. So there's a big difference.

Overy (03:13:35):

One last question. What was your reaction in the 1960s and early '70s during Vietnam, when a lot of young men who were refusing to go into the armed forces, going to Canada, hiding, burning their draft cards? But what did you think about that?

Hammerbeck (03:13:53):

Not very much. I said before I have a patriot at heart. And I believe in the leadership. Right or wrong, somebody's got to take the blame for leadership. I don't have to agree. And I don't agree with how it's conducted, but I do know one thing. If you start allowing the right to choose which is a good war and which is a bad war, we don't have much of a country left.

Hammerbeck (03:14:23):

My personal feeling is, right or wrong, you have a duty to your country. I think those who fled, deep inside of them, were honest about their intentions. I'd prefer to think that they were not cowards. I'd prefer to think they believed in what they're doing. And I think that belief is I really think they were right in this belief. If they went so far as to leave their home and go to Sweden or

Canada or wherever they went, I think they paid dearly for that belief. But there was an awful lot of them that didn't earn it.

Hammerbeck ([03:15:13](#)):

President Carter's welcoming them back didn't sit well with me. That's the only time I ever wrote to a president. And I have a copy of the letter.