Jesse Crews oral history interview

Corporal, United States Army
World War II – European Theater

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Extent: 1:09:06; transcript (21 pages)

Abstract: Jesse Crews discusses his basic training in infantry at Fort Lee and airborne training at Fort Benning. Crews talks about the difficulties of maintaining ideal unit cohesion in infantry services, which occasionally delayed officer schooling and unit deployment. He describes his journey to England aboard the *Louis Pasteur*, particularly rough sea voyages and frequent food shortages. Crews tracks his movements through Belgium and Germany. He talks abut hearing the news of the German advance in December 1944 during the Battle of the Bulge and setting up defensive positions. Crews reflects on the reality of combat on the Belgium and shares memories of inadequate clothing, wounded soldiers, marching behind tanks in the snow, and causalities during the Batte of the Bulge.

Transcript Notes:

Transcriber:	Cinebar Productions
Abstract by:	Aaron Rodriguez, VWM Volunteer

Interview Transcript:

Interviewer: Okay, first thing we'll have you do is spell your name.

Crews: Spell it? First name is...

Interviewer: Let's do last name..

Crews: Last name first. All right. It's Crews, C-R-E-W-S, Jessie, J-E-S-S-I-E, Albert, A-L-B-E-R-T.

Interviewer: Okay, now we'll do branch of service, rank, serial number.

Crews: I was in the Army in the infantry with the 86th Infantry Division to start out with and later went to the airborne school and became a paratrooper and fought with the 82nd Airborne Division.

Interviewer: Rank.

Crews: Rank. I was, I was a corporal all my life. My serial number is 33525174.

Interviewer: Okay. Let's start right at the beginning. When you joined up, tell me when you joined up, why you joined up, why the Army, what your parents said, what was going on, sort of that whole picture?

Crews: Well, I was like many other, other young youngsters coming along in the day. I'd finished high school in June of '42, and I was drafted in February of '43. And I was called into service and came to Richmond for my physical and swearing in on the 9th of February 1943. And I reported for action... reported for duty at Fort Lee on February the 14th, 1943.

Interviewer: What was the training like? Do you remember your first drill instructors and all that?

Crews: Yes, I remember that quite well. He was a PFC, and he was a most powerful man I ever met in the military. He really gave us a hard time, because we hardly knew which foot to step off with. But we had a little bit of drilling at Fort Lee before we shipped out to Texas, to the 86th Infantry Division. This division was just being activated at the time and we were all new. The camp had not been completed, and we had a lot of details to do and to work on, and along with a full-scale training program.

Interviewer: And what was the training like?

Crews: It was pretty rough going but being young and eager to do what you needed to do, you got involved with all the things that were going on and made the best of it. I had a platoon leader who was a kind of a father figure for us, because he was an old man. He was 28 years old. He had been offered a job as a company commander and he refused to take it. Said he wanted to stay, stay with the troop closer to the troops. And he gave us a lot of good advice. He said, "You should spend this time learning everything that you possibly can about being a good soldier, knowing your equipment, and knowing what to do with it." And I put a lot of effort in trying to do that.

Interviewer: Anything funny happen in training?

Crews: Well, maybe not too many things funny, a lot of unusual things. I think we had one draftee who came in with us, and I believe he was from New England states, maybe New York, but he could not conform to his, to military very well. He, he would never fall out for, for reveille or any of the meetings. He didn't do anything. Just stood and looked out of the window. And he never changed his clothes. He never took a bath. And he just stood by the window and looked out. And so, we had been there a few days, and the, they came around with a partial pay so everybody would have a little money for the necessities of life. And he wouldn't go to get any money. And so, the company commander sent a sergeant down, with a bayonet fixed, to bring him up to the orderly room. And they brought him up there and he wouldn't salute to company commander. He wouldn't do anything. It just stood there. And the, so, first sergeant weighed 138 pounds and about five feet six inches tall, hauled off and hit him right in the mouth and

the nose. And the blood started flowing, and he took off and headed to the chaplain's office. And we never saw him again. But our training was was, was very good. We went, we went through all, all of the, all the basics and then went into weapons and on into some advanced training and then on into maneuvers.

And then, we were, started out, I think, to be a rush program to get us ready to go to the Pacific. But I think the whole picture changed, and we became a training outfit then. And I moved on up to from a rifleman to a scout to an assistant squad leader and later a squad leader in, in the training program. And after we had completed that basic advanced training and maneuvers, the outfit was broken up. Most of them were sent out for replacements, because they were having a pretty tough time in Italy at that time. So, they were sent out for replacements, and we got in a whole bunch of new recruits. And I volunteered to go on this, but they didn't take me. They kept me there as a squad leader in training. And I learned more and more. It was a good process, but I felt a little guilty about some of the young people going off to, to get into combat, and I could still be there working with training. But I learned all of my infantry weapons, learned how to disassemble them, clean them, put them back together. I instructed in, in tactics and, and weapons and, and actually, in our maneuvers, it was as much like combat as it could possibly be without firing live ammunition. Our bullets were all blanks. So, but we had had referees and umpires and all who watched all the things that were going on.

And they, they would come along and say, “Well, you're shot, you're wounded, or you're dead, you're out. You can't participate anymore.” But we learned a lot by infiltrating our lines. We had the reds and the blues, so we'd patrol and infiltrate the lines of our enemy and do a lot of good training there, A real live like type of training.

Interviewer: How long did you do that?

Crews: I went through basic advanced maneuvers three times. And after, on the third go round, I decided it was time for me to move on. It looks like, it looked like we were not going anywhere. So, I thought, it's time for me to move out and let somebody else do that. And I'd get on in with, with the war effort. So, we had a

recruiting team came up from Fort Benning, Georgia. And so, I, I went up to, to interview, for an interview, and to watch their demonstrations and whatnot. And I was taken in by that. And I decided I'd go ahead, and I signed up and joined, joined them and, and went on to Fort Benning, Georgia. Then my company commander told me that he hated to see me go, and he didn't think I should go. He said, I've been to Fort Benning. I know what those people do. He said, “You should stay here.” He said, “I'll look out for you and take care of you.”

But as a squad leader, I got a, I got dismissed a couple of times. One was, we were out on a field project, and we had to, had to, had... were called up at about 3:00 in the morning, 3:30. I guess it was about 3:30, they said, “We're moving out in 20 minutes. We want everybody out.” So, I ran around to all my squad, got them all on their feet, I thought. And when we got back, we fell out to leave, I went down the ranks and I counted all the men in the ranks. And I had... it was so dark I couldn't see their faces or tell who was who, so just counted them. And when I reported them all present, I got to thinking about that. We marched on for a good while until it got daylight, and I stopped and let them all walk by. And I found out I had one missing. So, the company commander was very upset about that. I went up and reported it to the platoon sergeant, and then he said, “Let's go up and see the company commander.” And he, oh, he was real huffed up, act, put on a good act anyway. And he made platoon sergeant, and I walk right beside him for the rest of the way in. We went on for a pretty good ways. And then, we got the Jeep, when we got to got to our campsite, and we went back to pick up this guy. And he was still sleeping in the woods where we left him. So, the company commander said, “You're no longer, you're no longer a squad leader. You take your place in the ranks.” So, I, I went on back as a rifleman. Next week he came home and put me back in the squad leader, though.

And one other occasion, I, we were on a, on a maneuver area and we were, came into a campsite… had finished the program that we were on. And so, we got in and the company commander said, “We're going to have an inspection in ten minutes. We'll have a rifle inspection.” So, everybody got busy cleaning up and whatnot. And we had one rifle cleaning kit in the whole squad for 12 men. So, I let everybody use it first and by the time we got around, to me it was they were falling out. So, I went ahead and when the company commander came around to

to inspect me, my weapon, he said, “Did you clean this rifle?” I said, “No, sir.” He said, “Why didn't you?” I said, “We only had one rifle cleaning kit and I let all the men use it first. And when it got around to me, we were falling out. So, I didn't get around to it.” So, right on the spot, he said, “You're, you're relieved as a squad leader.” So, it wasn't but a few days until I was put back in.

But from the maneuver area in Louisiana, we went through maneuvers in western Texas, and twice in Louisiana, where we went through all kinds of experiences there. We went through water up to our neck, at times, in swamps, and, and was ice and snow and cold and all kinds of weather to put up with. Was there one Christmas and got bogged down for about three or four days. They couldn't get any chow, chow trucks in, so we didn't get anything to eat for about three days except what we could scrounge. So, maybe if we had a few crackers in a pack or something, you know. But they were, some of the experiences that we had, we had. I know one night, we were had camped up for the night, and we tried to find a little higher ground and, and we got all, got about six of us together, and put all the blankets together to try to keep warm. And during the night the water got up, came in. And when we woke up, we were sleeping in, in a puddle of water. So, and it was cold and freezing. And it was pretty difficult situation to get through with all that. But all of these things was part of the training, I guess.

Interviewer: Now, what did you do after the training?

Crews: Well, we, when, we finished, each time we'd finished the maneuvers, we kept sending out replacements from the 86th. And that's when I left to go to parachute school at Fort Benning. And I was pretty well hardened and, and physically fit, because we'd been covering like 30 miles a day on, on foot with no problem. So, but in the parachute school, we were put through some pretty rigorous training. We had, first week, we had eight hours of calisthenics and exercise. We'd run for an hour. We'd do various different exercises for, for the whole day. And we were about a half a mile, I guess, from, from the camp, from our quarters. And every morning when we'd go out, everything had to be on the run. We were running all the time. We'd run to the training area, and run back after that, after each series was over. The second week, we got into more advanced stuff, and we got. Jumping from platforms and jumping from towers and various things and learn

how to jump and to land. And then, I had 250-foot towers. And the first thing that happened to us when we was in, entered the school, they took us up to a 250-foot tower with a parachute. Well, this time they had what they called a buddy seat, and this was to prepare us for the towers. I guess it would go up 250ft, and then they'd drop you, and you'd free fall for about 50ft. And then, the, they would start, they had it loaded so it would gradually start slowing you down. You'd come on down as if you were in a parachute, but you would hit the bottom. You'd bounce up right high.

And then, but when we started jumping from the towers, they had the parachutes rigged up on a big ring, and they'd pull us up to 250ft, and it had an arm out and they would then they would release you and you'd come in and do all your parachute landing falls, and all the, all the guiding the chute and all the things that needed to do and, and landing in a parachute. From that, we went on to packing our own chutes and doing all the basic stuff. And, and then, on the fourth week, we did our jumping from the plane. We made five jumps in the school from, from the plane. And that was one of the hardest things I have, ever had to do in my life, I think, to get out of that airplane, because I was the number two man in the stick. And we were flying from Fort Benning Airport over into Alabama where they had farms and all those things around. So, a lot of peanut fields with shocks of peanuts, with sharp stakes sticking up and all those things. And I could look out the back door and see all of that. And so, it wouldn't be too good to get down in that. But they had a drop zone that we jumped in and I was number two in the stick, and looking out of the door, and figuring how in the world will I ever get out of here? So, I, the, the red light came on to get us ready, and we stood up. You stand up and you hook up and you check your equipment, get everything ready to go. And, and I felt like there was no way in the world I could step out of that door. But I looked back and I saw all these people behind me, and they were all about as pale and scared as I was so I decided I got to do it if this is the last day I live. So, we, the green light came on. The jump masters give you a slap on the back of the leg and out you go. So, that that first getting out and stepping out into an empty space is a hard thing to do though. And I don't think I ever saw many people who said they love to do it, but, but a lot of us did. And so, after that, it got better. And I believe on my second or third jump, I was the first man out. And so, it was easy stand in the door. And the green light came on, and I started to take off

and a jump master grabbed me and said, “Not yet. Wait until I give you the signal.” So, then, out I went.

But we had some things that they do. They do everything they could to discourage you and to, to make, condition you, too, I guess. They would go around, while we were on a jump line getting ready to... they had some of the instructors had come around and check, “Hey, your harness is not tight enough, you'll get all kinds of riser burns.” And they pulled up something until we could hardly breathe, tightened us up. And, and we had what we call a sweating line. You'd wait and you'd sweat out the, the, the jump. And then, the old Number 13, C-47, would taxi up, and we'd had to load in on it. So, but it was a great experience, and we mighty proud when it was all over with. And after we made all of our qualifying jumps, we did another jump at night to get in some night jumping. So, that was an experience to get out in the dark, and you could look all around and not see much and wonder where you're going to land and when you would land. And I know on that jump all at once, I felt somebody on top of my chute, which was pretty bad situation. You could cause your chute to collapse maybe, or somebody chute to collapse if you get tangled up. And so, I grabbed my risers, and I slipped away from him right quick to get out of the tangle. So, everything worked out all right.

Interviewer: Now, when did you, when you finally got through training. Where did you all move to next as a group?

Crews: Well, with the parachute?

Interviewer: The paratroopers, where did you all go after training?

Crews: Well, starting out with my early training with the 86th Infantry Division, we trained in Texas for the first series of training. And on the second go around, we were in Louisiana. Then, at Camp, we were at Camp Howze, Texas, but in Louisiana it was Camp Livingston. And from there I went to Fort Benning. And from, after I finished jump school, we had some advanced training and demolition work and a lot of things that we might need in combat. And then, we left Fort, Fort Benning and shipped into Fort Meade, Maryland. We were in Fort Meade for a short while, and then we went on to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. From there, we

went on to, to the ship in New York to head overseas. So, it was in late November of 1944 when I shipped out to go to Europe. We left New York, probably, shortly after Thanksgiving, but we were, went on the *Louis Pasteur,* was a French ship that was scuttled in the early days of World War Two, and they'd pulled it up and refurbished it and made a transport out of it. And we were a lone ship because it said the ship had enough speed. We didn't have to worry about German U-boats or attacks and whatnot. So, it was French ship with a British crew, and main food was goat stew on most of the trip, and tea.

We were on, there for seven days. The first day or two out, it was pretty good, pretty good ride. But after that we started hitting the North Atlantic, and that was about the roughest water anybody could ever imagine. We had to get everybody inside. They closed all the main deck. Water, waves were breaking over the bow of the ship and washing everything down. So, it was quite a, quite an experience to go to go through all that. And but we had some consolation, I guess, from old British soldier sailor on there. He said, “Oh, laddie,” he said, “don't, don't worry about it.” He said, “Everything will be all right.” He said, “I've had three ships shot out from under me.” So, but there was a lot of seasickness on board, too. Everybody got sick. It was terrible. But finally, we got on out of there and we went on in. We landed in Liverpool, I guess, it was early December. I think I had my 21st birthday in there somewhere on December the 4th. And we got off in Liverpool, and it was so good to get on, put your feet on the solid pavement. I could still feel that ship rocking. And so, from there we caught a train. It was a, had a little coal fired engine on it, and it was a kind of a, “I think I can” type train. Every time we'd go up an incline, you could hear that engine straining, and we'd slow down to about ten miles an hour. But we'd always figured, well, he'll make it. But we went on that train from Liverpool to Southampton.

And from Southampton we loaded on a ship, *Leopold* (sp?) was a transport carrying troops from. from England to France. And we made it across the channel pretty well. And that was, we got over was coming in to Le Havre, France, and we got into the. Harbor there. But we couldn't land. We had to go in on land and barges, because there was so much wreckage and all around the docks. So, we had to land on landing craft. So that brought up about four landing crafts beside the ship and tied them up and put the ladders down for to start unloading. And the

water was so rough all at once. They got about eight men on one of the landing craft and the thing broke loose and floated off. And so, we, we couldn't unload them. So, we pulled up anchor and went out a little further into deeper water and maybe where the water might be a little calmer, but we had to stay out there for about four days, and we had rations for one day. So, it made it pretty tough getting through on that. We, we had German submarines out there chasing around. They were dropping depth charges, and we had destroyers out there supporting and all, you know. But it was quite a hairy experience out there for four days with no food and all of that going on, too.

But then we finally got unloaded and went into Le Havre, and they had some kind of a camp up on top of a hill there. And we went up. and it was like a stadium, had concrete walls around it and concrete floors and things like that and a courtyard in the middle. So, we got in there and we didn't have too much sleeping arrangements. We didn't have enough of blankets and covers and all to keep warm, because sleeping on that concrete was pretty rough. But the biggest thing was we got in there pretty hungry, and they got a kitchen set up and started feeding the troops and had a line all the way around the, I guess, it must have been about 2,500 or so of us in there. And they had to get, get everybody fed. And so, we had to wait in line. And when I got back to the chow line, about ten people in front of me, and they ran out of food, and it took another three hours to get some more food on the line. So, but eventually, we got everything going. And, and we stayed in there two or three days until we got a train that took us on up to someplace in Belgium, I guess, from there, or in France or Belgium, pretty close to line.

So, we loaded on the 40 and eights and took off. And the American soldiers always had a way of working things out to make things more comfortable. We stopped at a railroad station. Some of the troops got off and they went into station, and they knocked a stovepipe out and got a board and put it under the stove and had a little coke in the stove. They brought the stove and put it in their car to keep them warm. And when we got down to the next station, the police was waiting, French police was waiting for them. So, they, they took the stove off and had to take it back. So, one of the things along the way... then, we went from there on to a replacement center. And when we got there. We had just been there maybe

about a day or two, and then we found that the Germans had broke through and won the Battle of the Bulge. And we, we had to get up early in the morning and get out and set up defensive positions around the place and roadblocks and whatnot. And we had a lot of refugees pouring back through the lines, and a lot of wounded soldiers had gotten out and was coming back through and all of that. And so, we had about a couple of days there, where we had to set up and keep a roadblock there and check all the people coming in.

And then we moved from there. We went on to Suippes. And Camp Suippes in France was just a ways out of Reims. And we stayed there for, for a while. And somehow, I got assigned in charge of the stockade. We had about 47, as well as I can remember, of our 505 members there in the stockade who had, left behind when it when the division moved up into the Battle of the Bulge. So, I got assigned to the stockade, and it was, had to post the guards and keep security and all of that. And so, that went on for a while. And, and then, things got going pretty rough up, up in Belgium where they were fighting and they lost and lost, had a lot of casualties. And they needed everybody they could get up there. And so, we got a call to if all of the prisoners would go back and join the company, that charges would be dropped against them. I never did get to know any of them very well or know what they charges were or anything, but we rounded them all up and took them back and dropped them out, too. So, they all went back to the company and got into the into the war, into the fight. So, I stayed with the headquarters for the first, my first days in in in the Battle of the Bulge.

I learned real fast what it was like to be in combat, because when you see all a lot of dead bodies all over the place, arms and legs sticking out of a snow, cows turned upside down with their feet sticking in the air, all swelled up, and horses that dead and buildings burning and all those things. You see the, you see the real combat when you get involved with that. But I didn't get into much shooting or anything. I was mostly in guard duty there until about 9th of January, I think, we got relieved, and went back to back in Belgium, to a little town called Theux, T-H-E-U-X, Theux, Belgium. And we stayed there until about the., I think, what maybe the 17th of, of January. And this was a real treat to be there, because those people really did bend over to help us. They took us in in their homes, and they didn't have much to eat. But we'd go through the chow line and get all the food we

could get and bring it back to the house and share it with some and get coffee and things like that, which they didn't have. And they really, really created a great friendship there. And those people, when we left... we left in the middle of the night, because they was afraid the people would be up so upset with about us going back in, you know.

But about the 17th of January, we went back and started. That's when the big driver started to push the Germans back. And we got involved in the fighting from there on up to the Siegfried Line. While we were in Theux, though, we didn't have much leisure time. We got out and trained. You never stopped training in the Army, you know. You always can learn a little bit more. We were trained, to, with the tanks, and to follow up on the tanks and whatnot. We knew, we knew we were going to be pushing forward, and we'd have some tanks along with us for support, maybe. So, we did all kinds of training with that. We trained using the German weapons that we might be able to pick up along the way and help us and whatnot. So, but at Theux, Belgium is when I joined the C Company, 505. And when I entered the company, they, they said, “Does anybody in this group...” we had two or three other replacements who joined C company along with me, said, “Anybody else, anybody in this group know anything about a BAR? And I said, “Yeah, I know something about a BAR,” because I had, when I finished my first round of training, I qualified as an expert infantryman. So, I had experience with all the weapons, and I instructed with the weapons and whatnot. I knew the BAR quite well and it was, in my judgment, was the best weapon we had in a rifle company.

So, they said, “Well, go down and get that BAR, and get it cleaned up and get it ready to go.” So, I did, and I carried the BAR for the rest of the way through the war. And I wouldn't have had it any other way, I don't think, because it was a good weapon, and I had qualified as an expert with the BAR. I could, I could pick off a target, a bull's eye at 500 yards, nine out of ten times. So, I felt, felt quite comfortable with it. There's one thing about all the training that I went through, I think, we had an opportunity to train in all the positions, so that we'd be qualified to pick up any, any position, any job that needed to be done. And I think, I was used that way quite a bit in the, in the company, because I did scouting and patrolling, and they always hollered for the BAR man up front. And, and the two

people they said was most vulnerable in a rifle company was a platoon leader, lieutenant and the BAR man. So, it was a weapon that I appreciated and enjoyed, and I could, I knew what to do with it. And so, when we went back on the line in January, I had my BAR there, ready to help them. When we, we had, we had a lot of marching to do to get up or walking to do to get up to the to the battle area, because the roads was pretty mountainous and there's pretty rough terrain.

Snow was deep and we had a column of tanks going right along with us, and we were walking on through there. And the troops kind of learned that if you get in the tracks of the tank, the tank, you could walk a whole lot better. So, I was following along behind the tank, and I stumbled and fell. And another one was coming up right behind me. So, I had to do some fast crawling to get back on my feet and get going, because they were in the dark and they couldn't see what was going on either. So, we had to try to keep on our feet and keep going. But when we started off on our first attack, after we got up there, we kicked off about daylight, started going up through the woods. And it was, it's pretty cold, lot of snow and a lot of stuff to plow through. And one of the things that we were faced with, as well as the enemy was, inadequate clothing. We we had a rough time. We had to fight to keep from freezing all the time. And so, but when we got up into the main attack, we started.

I was headed to a crossroad ahead, and I think it was our B Company on our right. And they had they had gotten a little bit ahead and they were making a flanking attack across in front of us somewhat. And then, we had some support from an anti-tank gun someplace, because this was a pretty well fortified place by the Germans. So, we had German tanks in there. And, and they were they called for the BAR man up front. I went up and the lieutenant and I took, took the lead and went ahead. But most of the fire was bullets was flying all over the place, but the flanking company was taking care of enemy pretty well. So, as we went up, I saw it was a young German lieutenant. He was probably my age, I guess, and he had built him a little hut out of the branches of the trees, the evergreen trees. And it was an and he had walked out of the door of that little hut he had, and he had a bullet right straight through his head. And he was lying cold in the ice and snow. And I looked down at that guy and I said, “Well, you know, that could be, that could be me.” But and, I said, “And here he is. He's got a mother. He's got a

father, he's got brothers. He's got somebody that cares about him. And why should we be into something like this?" You know, it makes you question those things. but of course, you know, we had a job to do and we had to do it.

But we went ahead a little bit further, and there were two German tanks that were knocked out, and they had tried to keep going and, and keep shooting, I guess. And then, they tried to get out of the tanks, and they must have gotten a direct hit right on them as they were coming out of the tanks, because there was something like three bodies scattered around over the place. It was just blood and guts, a foot here and a head there and the arm. It was a bloodiest scene that I've ever experienced. And it was about three of those Germans. One was hanging over the turret with his with his insides all streaming down the side and blood. But they had finished the course, and after things kind of got a little bit quiet, all of the Germans had packed up and got out of there pretty fast that hadn't been wounded or killed. And then, we went on down, continued on down one of these roads in attack. And I, we, we got down our ways, and then we stopped and was looking for our, I believe it was, A Company. It was supposed to come up on our left. And they, we didn't have any, any word from them. We didn't know where they were. So, we stopped to see if they could catch up or find out something about it.

So, they asked me to take patrol. And one other guy, we called Old Slim, and I went on a patrol down to try to contact them. And on the way, we ran into a lot of booby traps and wires and all kinds of stuff that was set, and they were above the snow. We could pick them up and we made it all right. So, we went and looked all over the place, and we couldn't, couldn't find them. And so, we came back, and I reported in, "We couldn't find anybody coming up on our left." So, they said, "That's all right. We found out they're coming up behind us." So, so we kind of got together there a little bit and we was trying to get organized again. And I think the Germans had a pretty good observation point somewhere they could see us, I'm sure, and they started shelling us. And the first shell came in, landed about 30 yards from where I was. I was sitting right under a tree. And everybody made a dive for that hole, and they were piled in there three deep. So then, you know, you never get two shells that hit in exactly the same place. So, pretty soon the second round came in away from that, and that hole filled up pretty rapid. And another round came in and it cut the top of the tree that I was on and that treetop came

down and jammed in the snow right beside me. And that was a close call. And I looked around and wondered, how in the world did that happen, that I'd be able to get out of it. But things quietened down after the shell for a while.

But I tell you, you learn the smell of a battlefield. You feel the hardships of all of it. You know that it's not a good place to be, but it's, it's kind of unbelievable what you have to do sometimes. As we moved up from there, I think, we, we went in on into the woods and spent the night. It was a pretty good day for one. And then, later, we got ready to kick off again. They called on me to take the lead, and I had to go out in front, had another scout come along behind me about 100 yards, and we were winding through the forest, a little trail. And the snow was deep, was above my knees, and we just plowed through it. And we went on for a ways. And as we came around a little bend in the forest, I looked down and here I'm staring right into the muzzle of a Tiger Royal tank. I'd never seen one before, and that, that would put the fear in you, if there's any fear to, to come there. And I froze in my tracks. I just couldn't move anything. I just stopped right there. I had my old BAR slung so I could fire from the hip if I needed to. I looked around. I didn't see anybody at all. So, nice clean tank, too. And so, I didn't see anything. And so, we figured that the Germans had, they had run out of gas, they'd left a tank, and they had gone. So, I went back and reported back what you know, what, what's happening out there. So, we kind of changed our direction a little bit, and I think got together and moved on into the woods a little bit more. And finally, another night came on, and we settled down in the woods for the night.

And then, following that, we went on to, follow through on another night program. We went wandering around and we got in behind the German lines, and I didn't think we'd ever get out of there. Finally, we wound around and found an opening, so we just set up for the night there. It was about midnight, at least, later. So, posted the guards and security around, and, and then we had another patrol to go on to go on a security patrol, see if there was any troops right close to us. So, there was a Sergeant Hines and I went on that. We didn't get back until about... we didn't find any Germans anywhere. So, we came on back. It was about 2:00. So, they said, “Well, you fellows try to get a little sleep and we'll, we'll keep the guard going and you won't have to pull on the guard tonight.” So, when I woke up the next morning, I found... I just, I just threw my old sleeping bag right on top of

snow. Slept right there. When I woke up the next morning, there were, like, five dead Germans out in front of us. They had, through the night, they had come up with a patrol in there. And we had a machine gunner on guard and he had halted them, and they didn't stop. They just kept coming. So, he halted them again, and they kept coming. So, he just opened up with his machine gun, blasted them out. It was about eight of them in the patrol, I think he said. But he wasn't 50ft from where I was sleeping, and I never did hear anything. But we got up and got out of there the next day, and then moved on to another position.

And we found a, a... finally, set up at the edge of the forest. And they told everybody to dig in and get ready for maybe a counterattack or something. So, we all started digging their holes and a fox, a slit trenches, to dig in. And before we got through digging in, they said, "Hey, we're leaving, we're moving." So, off we go. And food was pretty hard to come by there, too. And I had some, I had taken off my overcoat and it took the D-rations out of my pockets and whatnot so I could dig a little better. So, we, when we left, I grabbed everything, put it together as quickly as I could, and I left my left my D-rations on the bank where I was digging. And we got up and was ready to move on out. And I said, "Oh, my goodness, I can't go without my food." So, I turned around and went back and while I was gone, they kind of missed me in the platoon. And when I got back to the platoon leader went, "Where in the world have you been?" I said, "I went back to get my rations." He said, "Don't you know you could have been killed or captured or something going back there?" I said, "Well, I took my chances. I knew I had to have something to eat, too."

So, we got out of there, and we went on back and set up a defensive position in the woods. And we dug in and we were pretty, pretty well scattered out, though it was getting pretty close to the Siegfried Line up in that area, and we were scattered right far apart. We had, we had set up in two-man teams, and we're about 100 yards apart across the front, which was pretty thin for a main line of resistance. So, we dug in, dug a slit, slit trench. And my partner and I, we got there and we was going to fix up good, comfortable place. And we got all these branches from the trees, and all put them in the bottom, made a cushion there and we got things fixed. So, one of us had to stay awake all the time. So, we had to take turns on being on guard. But I don't think either one of us slept any, because

we were both on guard all night. And that was one of the things that would go a long time, night and day would be moving, and it wasn't much to eat, and it wasn't much sleep and a lot of cold. And so, we dug this slit trench, and we got down in it and we were going to sit there quietly and listen good. And after a while we put my hand down. I felt the water coming up and that place was filling, that slit trench was filling up with water. So, we had to get out of there and sit on top again. But when you look out there, you could imagine all kinds of things. You know, you could see the trees moving around and what have you. But it was a very uncomfortable feeling.

Interviewer: How long was this before the end? I mean, how, how close were you getting?

Crews: Well, this was still in January, I think in early February, we got out of the Ardennes and or and had it got up in the Argonne Forest. We got relieved there and went up towards through Schmidt, Germany and onto the Roer River. And we set up on the Roer River and we were, we're supposed to cross the river, but we never did get around to it because the floodgates had been opened. The river was flooding, and it was, some of the patrols tried to make a crossing on the river just to see how it would work. And I believe General Gavin was even involved in it. And they, they said, "Well, the water was too swift to get out in it with the boats." And so, we waited for a while, but while we were waiting, we were still getting shells from the Germans, but we were sending right, many of them back. But on the way up, we rode, rode on the truck some. And then, we had a lot of walking to do after we got off of there and we went up through what we named, and other people had named it ahead of us. Maybe it was Death Valley. It was a Kall Valley up in northern Germany, not, not too far from, from Schmidt, Germany.

And 28th Division had attacked through there earlier in the winter or early, late fall, early winter. And they had lost about… they and their support units and all had lost about 8,000 troops being killed in there. And when we went, we went through this Kall Valley on the way up there, dead bodies were everywhere. They had never picked the bodies up. And they, the engineers, went through, cleared a path and put ribbons down both sides of the path. And they instructed us to be very careful not to get beyond any of those ribbons. That place was heavily mined. And so, we set out in a single file to go through the through the Kall

Valley. And when we did, was going on through and we could... it was pitch black, dark. But you learn to see in the dark when you're in it so long, I think. We could see the man in front of us, but we just followed the man walking in front of us and stayed in the path. But we had gone down in the bottom, and was heading up the next hill and I stumbled over a body and fell, and my knee went in the stomach and I felt some gurgling. And it was a, it was a terrible feeling. My hand smashed right in his face when, when I threw my hand out to catch. And that was something that really made me feel sick. I couldn't, I couldn't eat very well for the next day or two. It was terrible experience.

And there were about, the 28th Division. I had been called into attack up this valley. And there was one sergeant in that outfit, I think, told his company commander and said, “I'm not going.” And he said, “This is a suicide mission and I'm not going.” And the company commander told him said, “Yes, sergeant, you're going, because you know the penalty of disobeying an order in combat.” So I guess he went. But it's very doubtful that he ever got out of there. But there was one other report that I read about it, about this company commander. And he came back to report on this after this, during this attack or maybe after he came back and reported to his colonel and he said, “I'm the only man left in the company.” And they said he had one eyeball hanging down his cheek and he was just mud and blood all over. And when the colonel saw him, he fainted. And this was one of the tragedies of World War Two, I think. When you think of 8,000 people being killed and in a something that could have been avoided. And when General Gavin went up to, to make a reconnaissance of this area, he went by the corps headquarters and he talked with the people there, thought he'd go in to find out, to get a feeling of what we had ahead of us.

And then, he questioned them about this. He had been, General Gavin had gone ahead of us and gone through this place. He knew what it looked like. And he asked him, “Why did they attack up that valley?” He said, “You had a wide-open spaces all the way around it.” And he said, “Why didn't you go around it and hit them from the back instead of trying to go through that valley,” because the Germans were sitting right on top and all they had to do was just drop the shells on them and it was bloody murder. So, when he questioned them about that, they told him, they said, “General, you better tend to your own business and go on

your way." And never, it was never a whole lot written or said about this, I don't think. But he did go on his way. But I'll tell you one thing about General Gavin, though. He, he was the youngest general in the United States Army and he probably was one of the best. He was concerned about every man. And he would go to the front. When we got up on the Roer River, he came up to our company, walked through the company, he talked to the soldiers. And but it was all in a, in a real fast move. But he, he could really move around, and he took off out in front of us. He was going to see what was out there. He had his rifle slung over his shoulder and his had a captain following him and they took off to go out in front to scout out what was out there, because he wanted to know what was going on. And I think, you can say in the Battle of the Bulge, he was in charge of the 18th Airborne Corps, because General Matthew Ridgway was back in England. So, when the orders came through, he had to take over for the airborne troops, and he was running the Corps. He was running his division, and he was out there with every regiment, too, to see what was going on. So, he was a man that was really moving around and, and looking out for people. And he had a lot to do with what the success of that whole business.

Interviewer: Now, where were you when you heard about the end of the war?

Crews: On the Elbe River.

(Begin Part 2)

Interviewer: Tell me about, tell me about VE-day.

Crews: Well, we were called, General Eisenhower decided that something had to be done on the Elbe River. And he had to get troops in there to cross the river and cut the Russians off from taking over Denmark and a lot of the Scandinavian countries. So, he called on the 18th Airborne Corps to to come in and support the British in that. And that's when we came under General Montgomery, on this operation. But we moved from across the Rhine up to the Elbe, and we landed there in the morning, and was told that we would cross the river that night. And we didn't know much about the situation of what was going on, other than the fact that the British had had problems getting across the river. And probably so, the Germans

were very well fortified. They had all the equipment and everything there they needed to blow us up. And so, we landed there on that day. And some of the things that were frustrating, I think, was that, well, when we got there, well, I happened to be on a truck that was had the convoy mechanic on it. And one of the trucks broke down during the night and we had to stop and a mechanic got out and worked on the trucks, got them going.

And then, we were the lone truck. After the truck got going, he took off. And while the mechanic was getting all of his tools together and getting things back on the truck that we were on, we had lost contact with them. And we got lost and couldn't find a way in at night. So, we found a barn and we slept in a barn that night. And then the next morning we got up and we got into the close to the Elbe, in the little town that we were going to kick off from, about 9:00 that morning. They had the breakfast lunch set up in the main street and everybody was going to eat, and we all got our muskets and went over to eat. And about ten, we started through the line, the Germans started shelling us. They were dropping right in and everybody dived for cover everywhere they could find it. Most of them headed into the homes. And, and, you know, they started roaming around after I got in the houses and they went in, found a lot of wine cellars with a lot of good booze in it. And they proceeded to to tarry into wine cellar a little bit too long. They most of them were pretty well intoxicated for the day is over. And I tell you, it made me feel mighty nervous, if we were going to cross a river and have everybody not all there.

But as things happened, we, we went we had to went out to the assembly area and picked up the boats. We had French rubber boats and what have you, you know, we had to cross with, and we had to paddle our own way over. But we had a couple of engineers to steer the boats and go with us, and we'd carry about 12 men in a boat. And we had to carry that boat down to the, oh, it must have been a couple thousand yards, maybe, from where we were, just a little village into a cross great flat before you get to the river. And we got on the riverbanks. and we were ready to. just waiting to get to to call, to go. And of course, we were supposed to get a final barrage by artillery. And when, we did that, our own artillery had a gun firing short. And we got the rounds right on the beach before we kicked off. And the only thing that saved us there was it was a marshy area,

and, and the projectiles went down in the mud. And so, it didn't spread too much. But I could feel the ground shaking under me. And we kicked off about 1:00 and headed across the river as hard as we could go and paddling and going.

And we hit, hit the, hit the beach, and we stormed that that beach and we thought we were across the river. And we went roaring through there, and we got up on it and found out that it was an island in the middle of the river. The boats had already turned to go back. And so, we had to, had to contact boats by hand to hand to talkie-walkies, and they came back and we had to start all over again. And finally, when we crossed the river. In the meantime, while we were coming out on this flat, it was a bright moon that night. But when we started out, this big black cloud came over and it was pitch black dark, then. So, we went, when we hit the beach on the German's side, we all took off and went in. And the first people we saw were some German guards along the dike and whatnot. And we started chasing them down and grabbing them when we could. And we found out we had caught the Germans completely by surprise. They were all in the holes asleep, and they had just guards posted. And it was one of my buddies and I took off after the German guard, and he ran like a turkey, we never could catch him.

But we stopped right by this dike, and we waited for a while. And here a bicycle started coming down. And this was probably the corporal of the guard, whoever was checking on them. And he had his rifle slung across his back and riding a bicycle through there. And we just waited until he got right close by, and my buddy threw a headlock, jumped up and threw a headlock on him, and grabbed him and pulled him in. We rounded up all the security that they had out, and at one time I had about five prisoners, I think. And so, one of the prisoners said, said, “Wait a minute. I tell my captain. My captain is sleeping in here.” So, he, he went and went in and he told us, said, “Wake up, captain. The Americans are here.” And the captain got out, got up and came out and surrendered his whole company. So, we rounded them all up in a barnyard and a fence and put a guard on them. And we moved on. But we had finished up had what we our goals were set up. We had reached the goal of 2:00 that day, so we had 4:00 in the morning. We were pretty well on the way. So, the next morning we started attacking up a dyke and the Germans, German machine gun was up ahead.

And the German machine gun was just spreading bullets all over the place. And, and here's some sergeant got up and started walking right on up towards it. And one of the guys said, “Look at that fool. He's already got 14 Purple Hearts already.” But, but they got that German machine gun knocked out. But in the meantime, while I was waiting, I had a sniper picking at me, and the bullets were hitting the ground all around me. And, hey, I got to get out of here. So, we, we everything started moving along pretty good. And then we continued on attacking inland until we met, met the Russians. And that was one sight, if you've ever seen one. They came out of the woods like a, like a wave on an ocean. They had all kinds of people in there, all the Russians and German prisoners, and they had refugees, and people who had been in captured. We got some of them members from the 82nd that was in there was captured and got back. And so, they all came through. And basically, when all of this happened, the, the German general surrendered his whole army to General Gavin. That's 145,000 men surrendered to one division.

Interviewer: And we're going to stop you there. All right. What we're going to do is you have to remember where you are, and then we're going to have you come back and we'll get to take you from where you are through World War Two, and then we'll pick you up and do Korea. All right? You got to come back. Oh, a good story. Real good story. Oh, that's what we're really after. Good stories. You got it.

Crews: Well, I hope I didn't talk too much.

Interviewer: This is exactly what we're looking for. You're doing exactly right. The only problem is we got on the people line. So we'll have to… we'll stop you today.

Crews: I've taken up a lot of your time.

Interviewer: Well, that's what you're supposed to do.