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Oral History Number: 151-005, 006

Interviewee: Norm Smith

Interviewer: Charles Milo McLeod

Date of Interview: August 15, 1986

Project: First Special Service Force Oral History Project

Charles McLeod: —conducted the 15th of August 1986, with Norm Smith from Manitoba, Canada.

Norm Smith: Boissevain.

CM: Boissevain, Manitoba, Canada. Norm is a Canadian veteran of the First Special Service Force, and the interview is conducted by Staff Sergeant Milo McLeod from the 103rd Public Affairs detachment. Norm, you're aware that this interview may be used for research purposes by people interested in Montana military history or the First Special Service Force, and you have no objections to that, is that correct?

NS: I have no objections.

CM: Okay. When did you first join the service, Norm?

NS: I first joined the service in 1941. I enlisted in the city of Winnipeg. I was 17 years old. Had to lie about my age to get in, and I was with an artillery unit to start with. I took my basic and advanced training in Manitoba. I then went to trade school and automotive mechanics course. I took the first half of that in Winnipeg, then I went down to Hamilton, Ontario, where I received my advanced motor mechanics training. That is when the...I noticed it up on the bulletin board that they were looking for volunteers for paratroops, so I always wanted to fly. I could get in the air one way or another, and I volunteered for that and eventually that's what let us to come down here to be members of the First Special Service Force.

CM: That notice to volunteer for the paratroops, was that for the First Special Service Force or just for the Canadian paratroops?

NS: At that time, we didn't know what we were volunteering for. It was to be an airborne unit of some sort. They shipped us up to Ottawa, and it was there that they came around with the piece of paper similar to that one there that said, "Read this" and if it was okay, "Sign it."

CM: Sign your life away.

NS: That's right. We were volunteering for what could be a suicide mission. At that time, the Canadian paratroops had been training down at Fort Benning, Georgia.

CM: Oh, they had?

NS: That's where the first Canadian paratroop battalion trained. We figured that's where we were heading for was Fort Benning to take our training, and we got on the train and we headed west. We figured, well, that's not the way to Fort Benning. We came through Winnipeg and right through to Lethbridge, Alberta. The train turned south, and we ended up in Helena, Montana. We got off the—

CM: Were you one of the first Canadian contingents?

NS: We were the first the first Canadian contingent to come down here. One interesting thing when we got off the plane, off the train in Helena there were some of the local citizens were standing around to see what these Canadians looked like, I guess. We asked them where the camp was. They said oh about five miles west, so where's the jump towers? They said "We don't have any. We jump out of airplanes here."

CM: These are civilians that told you that or military?

NS: These were just some of the local citizens of the town that told us that. I thought it was kind of interesting when they said we don't jump off towers here, they jump out of airplanes.

CM: What was your first impression of Fort Harrison?

NS: [laughs] [unintelligible] come out here first was the...everybody was sleeping in those tents.

CM: Those tents over behind the brick kitchens?

NS: That's right. I forget how many of us were in the tents at that time, but it was different. [unintelligible] when the winter came along and those things, but what they did they...Those tents had a wooden bottom on the sides part way up. It took three of those tents to make...They nailed them together and put a roof on them, and that was our quarters.

CM: Even through the winter?

NS: Even through the winter.

CM: Pretty chilly, weren't they?

NS: Well, we had two of these little camp stoves in each one. One was sitting at each end, and as long as the fire was on there, it was okay, but by morning it was pretty cold in there.

CM: You arrived in August, didn't you, at Fort Harrison?

NS: I believe it was in the latter part of July when we got here.

CM: Okay, but it was pretty hot?

NS: It was hot just like it was out here today.

CM: And you started training immediately, didn't you?

NS: Immediately. I think I was here about maybe three days at the most when I made my first jump.

CM: What sort of training did you have before you did your first jump?

NS: The type of training we had, they had these mock-ups to familiarize with what the inside of an aircraft is like. It was just a plywood thing up on the stands about four feet off the ground with a door in it, and we'd get in there and they would show us how to leave the door of the plane. Then they had some other stands there. There were two feet, four feet, and six feet in height, and we get up on them and we would jump off them, and that's the way we're supposed to land. Then they have these other things, they looked like big swings with a parachute harness hanging on them. They'd pull us up on those and they'd tell you how to control your chute on the way down. Once you went through that, that was it. The next day out to the airport, and they took us up and gave us an orientation flight because some fellows had never been up in an aircraft before. They flew around the area. We had chutes on, but they said, "We won't be jumping today. We'll just let you get the feel of the aircraft. Let you look out the door." The next morning we went up and made our first jump.

CM: Were many people apprehensive about their first jump?

NS: I think maybe we were all a little apprehensive of our first jump.

CM: I know I was going through Fort Benning.

NS: I know I was because it seems so unnatural to step out the door of that plane.

CM: I was really surprised that I was alive when I hit the ground. [laughs]

NS: I'll tell you I was told I had to...When you to step out the door of the plane, you count three seconds, if your main chute isn't open, you pull your reserve. I never even thought to count the first time I went.

CM: Did you pull your reserve?

NS: No, I didn't. It just seemed like a split second, and there was that snap and that chute...You got the jerk and the chute was open, and you look up there at the most beautiful piece of silk you ever looked at.

CM: [pauses] How many jumps did you make as a part of your airborne training? One or two or—

NS: Two...We had to make two qualifying jumps.

CM: And then you got your wings?

NS: That's right.

CM: Did you get the same sort of wing or—

NS: Exactly the same. I still have them. I have still got the same set of wings that General Frederick [General Robert T. Frederick] pinned on me.

CM: Really? Did you have any sort of jump school graduation, or as soon as you made your second jump you got your wings?

NS: Well, they were jumping pretty fast here in those days, and about once a week they would have a, I guess we would call it a wings break. Everybody who had qualified we would be lined up there, and General Frederick, he'd just come down and pin them on everybody.

CM: Fredericks was quite a man wasn't he?

NS: He certainly was.

CM: I've never heard...I've done several interviews by Force members, and everyone I've ever spoken to has the highest regards and respect for him.

NS: I don't know anybody that didn't have real high regards for General Fredericks. He was a man that...He would never ask anybody to do something that he wouldn't do himself, and we respected him for that.

CM: Well, Norm, can you tell me a little more about your training here in Helena in the early days of the Force?

NS: In the early days? Well, just west of the camp there at Helena there's...It looks like a little knob on the ground that the top of there now there's a...I think they've got letters on there MMA which is Montana Military Academy. Well, I think we dubbed that one Muscle Mountain.

CM: Yes, it's still called Muscle Mountain to this day.

NS: Wish I had a dollar for every time I run over it. [laughs]

CM: [laughs] It was the Force members who dubbed it that. Is that right?

NS: Yes it was.

CM: Well, it's still called that today.

NS: Is that right?

CM: Yes.

NS: They did use that as one of our main areas when they were whipping us into shape, because when we came down here you didn't walk anywhere. Everywhere we went we had to run, and the one thing we did find a little hard at first was us fellows that came from prairies, the air is much lighter up here. At first when we started doing all that that running, it was hard to get enough air, but eventually we got acclimatized to the altitude and there was no problem at all.

CM: Who were you assigned to? What regiment?

NS: I was assigned to the First Company First Regiment.

CM: As what job?

NS: Well, at first we really didn't have any particular job. We just were given a...you could probably call it a basic training.

CM: Basic training, parachute training.

NS: We had our mountain climbing training, and of course, winter came along we had to do our ski training. Demolitions—all our small arms training. Then they started to get the fellows to specialize in different areas. I went to...took a radio operator's course. I still did my training with the first company, but after I finished my radio operator's training, I was assigned to regimental headquarters First Regiment.

CM: Okay. So all Force members took weapons training, and—

NS: Every one of us.

CM: Ski training?

NS: Everything. We had to just take everything that went along. With being in the headquarters detachment, we were assigned to a company to take our training with them, and it was the First Company that I took my training with.

CM: Okay. Did you have any idea what your mission was going to be once you had finished?

NS: No, that was kind of a secret, but it's in the history books what the mission was intended for.

CM: Operation Plough and—

NS: That's right, but we were not aware of where we were going. It was maybe a little obvious it was going to be mountainous terrain because we were training it was this type of terrain in the mountains, and they had all these dummy power plants built that we would go and practice our demolitions on.

CM: Yeah, weren't there a lot of old mining cabins and things that were blown up?

NS: Oh, yes. Yes, we blew up a lot of things around here. There was some of the roads that had been abandoned and there was a new road being put through. There's an old cement bridge sitting there, we would go and blow them up.

CM: Did the public ever get excited?

NM: I don't really think so. I think that anytime we went to blow anything up that if anybody within the immediate area, they were probably warned about it.

CM: How did members of the Force get along with the public, the residents of Helena?

NS: Just 100 percent.

CM: Helena really welcomed the Force with open arms.

NS: They really did. Actually, this is our home as far as we're concerned. It still is.

CM: I know a lot of Force members. Herb Goodwin and Joe Glass, both Canadians, ended up marrying women from Helena—

NS: That's right. There is—

CM: —settled down here.

CM: There were several of the boys that married Helena girls when they were down here, and they...Some of them they came back to Helena and lived there after the war was over. There's only one fellow that I know of that married a Helena girl, and he's living in Winnipeg right now.

CM: You became an operator, a radio operator, toward the end to your training, is that right?

NS: That's right.

CM: When you went to the Aleutians, were you with the headquarters company then?

NS: I was with headquarters detachment.

CM: As radio operator, were you pretty much privy to more information than the average man on the line, do you think, or being able to see a bigger picture of what was going on?

NS: Possibly. Yes, we could probably see, have a little better idea of what was going on than what the fellow out on the line would have.

CM: Did you find being a radio operator pretty good duty comparatively?

NS: I enjoyed it.

CM: Challenging, wasn't it?

NS: It was a challenge.

CM: Keeping things working and—

NS: Any of the messages that we sent—we were using Morse code in them days—and any message that we sent, we had to encode the message before we sent it, and if we received a message, then we had to decode that message before it was given to our superiors. That was our duty to do that.

CM: Encode and decode.

NS: Encode and decode. It was the M209 converter, I think, was what we used in them days. It was quite a complicated setup really, and yet it just looked like a small adding machine with a handle on the side of it then you turn the knob to whatever numbers it was. But you had to set up...We could signal operating instructions every morning for that particular day, and those instructions, there was a certain five-letter group that we had to put in there. Of course, everybody that was associated with radio they knew what this was for that particular day, but it be changed the next day. When that thing was changed, it just threw that code...I think it was

supposed to take 48 hours for them to break down the code, and by that time we had changed it a couple of times.

CM: Had a new one. It would change every 12 hours, wouldn't it, at certain times?

NS: It was every 24 hours I think when we changed. Of course, our equipment was...seems quite primitive now compared to the equipment they use today.

CM: At the time didn't the Force have number one priority on equipment?

NS: Well, we had a type of radio that I don't think anybody else in any army had. I forget the number of the radio that was at that time, but it was...Had been designed for parachute drops. It was a receiver and a transmitter. We run the receiver on batteries, but we couldn't carry enough batteries for the transmitter, so we used to one of those signal generators.

CM: Oh, that crank one?

NS: That's the one you sat down on the seat and cranked it like a bicycle upside-down.

CM: I haven't used them. I've seen them in the movies.

NS: Well, I used it many a time.

CM: Did you find it challenging learning to deal with American equipment—weapons, that sort of thing?

NS: No, I didn't. Of course, we'd had our small arms training in Canada. Come down here, instead of using the old Lee-Enfield rifle we use the M1 rifle, which was a semi-automatic, and it was no problem getting get accustomed to the different type of weapons. It was very interesting, as a matter of fact, to be able to have the opportunity to get a hold of those other type of equipment.

CM: You also trained with foreign weapons, didn't you?

NS: Yes, we did. We had the opportunity to train on the various types of foreign weapons that would be used or least know how to use them.

CM: Tell me, did you know, at the time when you were going through training here, that the dog-sled training camp up at Rimini [Camp Rimini, Montana] was going on?

NS: No, I had no idea.

CM: You know about that at later times, don't you, that they were trained specifically to pick up Force members after Operation Plough after they dropped into Norway?

NS: That's news to me. [laughs] I never even heard anything about that.

CM: Okay. Well, also about ten miles west of Helena there was a training camp, and they called it the K-9 Corps. It was staffed by a lot of Norwegians to train sled dog operators, people to have sled dogs, and these would also be dropped in with the Force. If the Weasels couldn't make it out, they would take Force members out with dog sled. That was going on at the same time.

NS: It's quite possible.

CM: I wondered if you were aware of that.

NS: No, I was not aware of that. There was a lot of things that we weren't aware of. There was a lot of things that were going on that said we weren't aware of but 40 years later when you start reading some of these history books on various things, it's a pretty clear picture that somebody had really coordinated a lot of different services together to make it work.

CM: The organization is just phenomenal.

NS: It's amazing.

CM: After you completed your training, your first mission was in the Aleutians, and apparently the Japanese had pulled out. Is there anything any one thing that sticks out in your mind about the Aleutians—the Aleutian campaign?

NS: I was with the First Regiment when I went in there, and we went in on rubber boats. The Second Regiment was standing by on the island of Amchitka with their chutes on ready to come in as reserve if we needed them. We went in on landing craft. They were supposed to drop us off—I forget how many yards from the shore—but I think they're dropped us off about five miles out, and we paddled and paddled and paddled. We thought we'd never reach that shore. We had these Aleutian scouts—I think they called them—with one of those in each boat, and it was their responsibility to guide us into the island.

CM: Could you see the outline of the island?

NS: Not from the bow of the boat. I think the Navy chickened out that day, and they said, "That's it, fellows. This is as far as we are taking you." I would have suspected that we'd be close enough that we should have seen the outline, but there was nothing. It was just the black North Pacific.

CM: Cold?

NS: It was cold. That water's so cold if you were in it for ten minutes you...just forget it. When we went up there, we never saw the sunshine. It was cloudy and foggy rainy particularly pretty near every day, but that night when we were going to Kiska Island when we're almost at the shore, for some reason or another, the clouds opened up. There's the most beautiful moon you ever seen, and you can look out in the water and it looked like a bunch of ducks out there—all those rubber boats. I think when that moon came out I think the back end of that boat went down at least...We really made time.

CM: So if the Japanese had been there, it—

NS: We'd have been a bunch of sitting ducks out in the water.

CM: Could have been a warm reception.

NS: Oh, we sure would. If they had seen this, but it's a pretty silent way to come in.

CM: How long were you on Kiska?

NS: We was only on there about 36 hours, and they pulled us off. There were other troops that come in behind us, and they pulled us off and took us back to one of the troop ships. About three o'clock one morning, they said we got another mission. There was another little island of Segula that they had spotted something on there and thought it was possibly a Japanese radio tower, and we had to go and investigate. It was just like a little mountain top sticking out of the water. It wasn't very big. They took us off that troop ship on a landing craft over to destroyer and so destroyer that they had converted into what's called a Raider, I think they took one of the boilers out and left enough room in there you get about half a dozen men or so in there. It carried two landing craft on it. We got on that ship and they headed for this other island, and there was only just a small landing party. Again, I was...on that one was a radio operator. There was two of us radio operators on that mission. You had to have one to crank the generator while the other one was doing the sending. We landed on there, there was nothing on the island as far as the Japanese were concerned.

CM: Tell me, did you expect Japanese resistance?

NS: We didn't know. We had no idea. The report that we got was that it look like there was a Japanese radio antenna sticking up on this island. When we got there, there was a little bit of shack on there and appeared to be some trappers or somebody had been on there in the years before. I think there was a couple magazines in this little shack that were dated 1936, and there was two graves on the island and we found two rifles. One was the British Lee Enfield, and the other was a Russian make of a rifle.

CM: Might these have been military surplus and used as hunting rifles or—

NS: I think that they'd probably be used for hunting purposes. It appears that it had been some trappers on there sometime. How they got there, I don't know.

CM: Well, you weren't in the Aleutians very long before you came back to the States, were you?

NS: After that, we were only on there for one day. We went back to this little destroyer, and they took us back close the other one and transferred by landing craft to the other ship. Formed up the convoy, and we headed back to the U.S.

CM: Back to San Francisco?

NS: Back to San Francisco. They give us a train ticket and a ten-days pass and said, "We'll see you down at Fort Ethan Allen in Vermont in ten days. Be there." So the members, they spread out all over USA and Canada, and we congregated back there in...it would be...it must have been about probably September of '43.

CM: Morale was still pretty high at that time?

NS: Oh, morale was still good. Morale was pretty good most of the time.

CM: That's one thing I've really picked up on with the Force members I've talked to. Frank and I discussed this a lot was how the morale remained so high throughout the initial training with the Force and after the Aleutians even though that was a bust.

NS: There was something about it—it's something I can't explain—that the morale always seems to be a real good. At the time we got back from the Aleutians, I didn't know who's Canadian and who's American, and it didn't make any difference anyway.

CM: You were all in one common unit. What do you think accounted for some of that, Norm?

NS: What?

CM: What do you think accounted for the *high esprit de corps*, for the camaraderie, and for the creating of such a first-class unit.

NS: That's something I've never been able to explain. I don't know what it, what the reason was, but there was just something about the members that were in that Force that—

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

CM: —in the Force.

NS: I cannot explain what accounted for it.

CM: We mentioned leadership.

NS: Leadership, I think possibly, that was one of what...We had some of the best leaders that I have ever seen.

CM: From the very beginning?

NS: Right from the very beginning. They were a group of leaders that, as I mentioned before about General Fredericks, they were all the same. They wouldn't ask a man to go do anything they wouldn't be willing to do themselves, and you respect somebody for that.

CM: And the training was very rugged, very—

NS: The training very rugged, and we were...We were really in good top shape.

CM: And the training weeded out the duds.

NS: That's exactly what it did. I know if a guy didn't go out the door of that plane the first time, he was on the next train out of here back to where he came from. They didn't force you to go out, but if you didn't go out, you were gone. Never seen that fellow again.

CM: After ten-day leave and Fort Ethan Allen in Vermont, then you shipped to where, North Africa?

NS: North Africa. We sailed out of New York, I guess it was, and landed in Casablanca. We got off the ship there, and we sat on the dock for I don't know how long. Finally, this the little old train came along and these little box cars in there with [unintelligible] eight horses or 40 men.

CM: Oh the Forty and Eights. Those were used in World War I to haul troops.

NS: Well, you didn't put 40 of us in one of those boxcars but there's quite a few. What we had was a big Lister Bag hanging right in the center full of water. That was for drinking purposes only. We couldn't wash. We had a stack of C-rations at the one ends of the car, and we piled in there on our sleeping bags and for three days that's the way we travel.

CM: What did you think of North Africa?

NS: I was not too impressed. [laughs]

CM: It was certainly different than the Aleutians, wasn't it?

NS: Yes, it certainly was. It got very hot there during the day, but it got terribly cold at night.

CM: Oh, really.

NS: Oh, yes. We'd sleep in our sleeping bags at night because it was cool.

CM: That was probably the first time that most of the troops had been overseas, wasn't it, with the exception of the Aleutians?

NS: In the most cases. There was a few of the Canadians that had been over in England prior to joining the Force.

CM: Oh, really? Were there many Canadians who'd perhaps fought with the British at Dunkirk?

NS: There was possibly a few of them that had been in Dunkirk. They had been over there with the First Canadian Parachute Battalion, and they were recruiting men for the Force. Some of them came back and became members of the Force.

CM: Okay. I bet...that's interesting. So you went from Casablanca to where?

NS: Oran [Algeria].

CM: Oran. How long were in Oran?

NS: Well we were not in Oran too long, maybe a week and a half, something like that.

CM: And then the next...

NS: It was too long, you know.

CM: Not too impressed of North Africa?

NS: No I was not too impressed with North Africa at all.

CM: Did you have much contact with the locals, with the natives.

NS: We had very little contact. The only contact we mainly had with them was when we were on that train from Casablanca to Oran, we would maybe stop in some little town in the middle of the night and there'd be a bunch of these Arabs come along with these knives made out of

tin or something. They'd want to trade them for a blanket or something like that, but no, we had very little contact.

CM: And most of the fighting had ended in North Africa by then, hadn't it?

NS: The fighting was pretty well over in North Africa. In fact, I think it was pretty well finished in North Africa at that time.

CM: Okay. By that time, you knew North Africa was just a stop for southern Europe.

NS: That's right.

CM: Then after Oran, your next stop was in Southern Italy?

NS: We landed in Naples, and we landed there and got in the trucks and went out to Santa Maria. That was our base camp. It was an old, shelled-out Italian military barracks. We weren't there too long until we were on our way up the mountains. I think some of the officers and probably the platoon leaders went out and reconnoitered the area and had a look at things a few days prior to us all going up there.

CM: But this is where you first went into combat, is that right?

NS: That's right.

CM: What was the attitude of most of the troops before you went into combat? Were any of them reticent or reluctant?

NS: No, I don't think so. No everybody already...They were ready to go. That's what we were trained for and let's get at her.

CM: Let's get on with it.

NS: Let's get on with it and get it over with so we can go back home. I think that's the attitude that the majority of them had.

CM: How did the Force do in its initial combat with the Germans?

NS: We took Monte la Difensa, anyway, and everybody else had tried to take it and had failed.

CM: Did you take many casualties in that initial contact?

NS: We took a lot of casualties. I think it says in the record somewhere where our casualty rate was 126 percent, something like that. That didn't mean that they were all killed. Some of them were wounded two or three times, and they would still get back into the—

CM: In fact, talking with Frank, he was wounded twice.

NS: He was wounded twice, and he was a medic, but it didn't matter what your occupation was, whether you're a medic, a machine gunner, a radio operator, or what, you were all right up there. That was one thing about it, and your commanding officers they led their men. Colonel Frederick...or Colonel Marshall [Alfred C. Marshall] was my regimental commander, and I was very close to him being as I was in communications. He always had to have his communications with him, and I was with him an awful lot. Most of the time.

CM: Being a radio operator, you also carried a weapon, didn't you?

NS: Oh, definitely.

CM: What kind?

NS: I carried my .45 automatic at my hip all the time. I didn't go anywhere without that, and I was also carrying a M1 rifle, but with all the radio equipment we were carrying they were pretty heavy to carry. I was very happy when they come out with these M1 carbines because they were much lighter. I usually carried one of them.

CM: Tell me, was it full automatic or semi-automatic?

NS: It was semi-automatic. It was—

CM: Later on they came out with a full automatic.

NS: Yes, but those were only a semi-automatic. They were just very similar to the M1 rifle only they were a smaller—

CM: Smaller round.

NS: Smaller round. They were .30 caliber, but the casing was a lot shorter. The casing.

CM: And definitely a lot lighter to carry than the M1.

NS: Oh, they sure were. Some of them even had folding stocks on them. You could fold the stock and sling it over your shoulder, and they were much nicer to carry.

CM: How effective did you think the carbine was?

NS: I think they were very effective. They wouldn't have the range of the M1, but they were a very effective weapon.

CM: And all members of the Force carried a .45, didn't they?

NS: They carried .45s and a knife.

CM: Tell me, do you still have your knife?

NS: Oh, I haven't...We had to turn them all in.

CM: Oh you did?

NS: Yes, I'm sorry to say.

CM: I've seen a couple of them around.

NS: I think maybe some of the fellows—

CM: There's a few Force members who managed to keep one or two.

NS: We always learned these things...It was too late, you know. They say you have to turn that in so being a good soldier, I did what I'm told and I turned mine in, but if it could have got lost somewhere along the road you know. [laughs]

CM: Tell me, Norm, did you get wounded in any of the campaigns?

NS: No, I never got wounded.

CM: You're one of the fortunate few.

NS: I was very fortunate few who got through the whole operation—never missed one of them—and I was never wounded. I consider myself very lucky.

CM: What do you think some of the most intense moments in the Force were, or personal moments to you, if I could ask that question?

NS: I think one of... [pauses] The first night on la Difensa, and we were going up the mountain...Incidentally, it was my birthday too.

CM: How old were you there?

NS: I think I was 19 then. I think I was 19 or 20. One of the other communication men that was with me, we were stopped and were told to dig in. it was pretty tough digging in those rocks up there in the mountains in Italy. We decided we would dig one hole for the two of us. We were taking turns doing a little bit of digging there, and I guess they started to throw the mortars in. It was my turn to be down in the hole digging when this mortar shell landed very close, and the other communication man, he was wounded. I got him out of there to a first aid station, and next morning when they were taking the wounded down one of those mule trails, they started to shell the trail and he was on the stretcher and he got it again. Of course, he was killed this time.

CM: It was just by a stroke of luck that that wasn't you.

NS: It seemed to be just my luck. I was in the bottom of the hole at the right time. The next morning when daylight came I could see my hole, it was about six inches deep and about maybe three feet long and hardly a foot wide or a couple of feet wide. So [unintelligible] real big hole dug, but you can make yourself pretty small. It was just pretty near impossible to dig a foxhole in that.

CM: Why because of the rocks?

NS: Because of the rock, yeah.

[long pause]

CM: Did you experience a great deal of turnover in your unit by people who would get wounded and sent back and replacements coming in?

NS: After the la Difensa mission, we lost a lot of men.

CM: And these were original Force members?

NS: They were all original at that time, and then they started bringing in replacements. They bring them in from various US and Canadian units to—

CM: But they'd also bring in replacements from the Canadian units.

NS: Oh, yes. They brought them in from both armies.

CM: Were they all parachute qualified?

NS: No, they weren't.

CM: Did they become so?

NS: No. No, it was just the originals that were parachute qualified. Unless maybe some of the Americans may have come in from a parachute regiment, then they would be probably parachute qualified, but I'm sure that there was...None of the Canadians that came in as replacements were ever parachute qualified.

CM: But when they'd bring the replacements in, it wasn't part of their training to have them airborne qualified?

NS: No, it wasn't.

CM: But training still continued even after your initial combat.

NS: Oh, yes. Yes, it did.

CM: Training continued to be very important.

NS: It was continued as an ongoing thing actually.

[long pause]

CM: Training did continue to be an important part all the way through the existence of the Force?

NS: Oh, yes. Although there wasn't much time for training as long as we were in Southern Italy, because we'd just be nicely back off one mission and they would push us in on another one. Any time they had a tough hill to crack, that's where they put us.

CM: You didn't have much time for rest and relaxation?

NS: Not too much. We didn't get really that much time for that until after the operation in Rome.

CM: After Rome? After Rome, what sort of things would the troops do for rest and relaxation when you did get the opportunity?

NS: Well after the Rome operation they took us back to Lake Albano, which is a few miles south of Italy, and for about a month we didn't really do with much of anything. Then they shipped us down to southern Italy to a place called Santa Maria de Castellabate, and there we went back in to training again and we were training there for the Southern France invasion.

CM: What sort of training did that consist of?

NS: I think it was mainly getting us back into shape again.

CM: Physical condition?

NS: That's right, because we laid around for about a month. Because we had had all the training prior to that, our amphibious training and everything which we took at Camp Bradford in Virginia. It was just more or less routine training to get everybody really back in the top physical condition again.

CM: And maybe getting the new replacements accustom to—

NS: Getting new replacements [unintelligible] oriented with the type of operations that we were doing.

CM: Was there any distinction between the original Force members and replacements when they came in, or were they easily accepted?

NS: Oh, they were accepted. There might have been a few days that they seemed like outcasts, but they were accepted.

CM: Were there any jokes played on the new people or?

NS: Well of course we were doing that all the time anyway.

CM: I know when I was in Vietnam, the new person would join the squad, and they were the new guy until someone else came along to take that spot.

NS: Oh yes, sure.

CM: Sometimes it might be a week, or sometimes it might be three months or until after the first or second firefight—after they'd proven themselves. But there's a period where they're in limbo.

NS: Yeah, that's...Well I think maybe we were inclined a little bit that way to. Of course, there was always the odd joker in every outfit that they pulling tricks anyway. You probably found that in your unit too.

CM: Oh yeah. It's part of what makes a unit go.

NS: That's right.

CM: And you have to maintain a sense of humor and—

NS: Oh yes, definitely.

CM: Comradery. A sense of humor changes, and the jokes change. What's appropriate in a wartime situation really wouldn't be appropriate today.

NS: No, nothing...No, it wouldn't because, well, we had a different outlook on things in them days.

CM: Could you give me an example of some of that, maybe some of the humor or the outlook the men in your unit shared? That may be a tough question to answer.

NS: Yeah... [pauses] I just can't think of anything just on the spur of the moment that—

CM: Okay, why don't we toss it around, and if you think of something, let me know.

NS: Why sure.

[long pause]

CM: What was your feeling toward the Germans at that time during those campaigns—Italy, Southern France?

NS: Well, they were human beings the same as we were. I always considered that they were fighting for what they thought was right, and...This is the average German soldier I'm speaking of. When you come up against ones like the SS and the German paratroopers, now, that was a little different situation. They were definitely a different type of troops to come up against because they were probably being trained from the time they were ten years old to be more, oh, shall we say...Well, they didn't hesitate to shoot a guy as if he was maybe wanting to give up or if he's wounded or something like that. He would probably try and take another guy with him.

I think there was one instance—it was when we were on the road to Rome—where we were running across some German paratroopers. There was one of them, he was very severely wounded, and he still picked up that old Schmeisser. He was going to take somebody else with him before he went. He wouldn't give up. Maybe that's what I'm trying to say.

CM: They were pretty hardcore troops then.

NS: They were pretty hardcore troops. That's exactly what they were. Of course, we were too.

CM: But there wasn't a tremendous amount of hate toward them as individuals?

NS: Oh, there's times when we said we hated them, sure, because if you see your buddy being shot, why, sure you hated that character that shot your best buddy. But once they were...if you did to capture any prisoners, maybe you didn't like them, but I wouldn't say that you actually hated them. You treated them like human beings.

CM: And you don't have any animosity toward the Germans today, do you?

NS: No, absolutely not. I've figured some of them were darn good soldiers. As I said, they were fighting for what they thought was right. It was their belief that they were doing the right thing. I don't think that they were as well-informed as to what was going on in the war effort as what we were because I remember it was somewhere in Italy where we had captured some German prisoners. This one German made the remark, he said, "You may win the war in Italy," he said, "But you'll sure never win here in North Africa." Now, they were not aware of the fact that the war was already over in North Africa.

CM: That's interesting.

NS: So I don't think that the frontline troops there had the same knowledge of what was going on in the war effort.

CM: Did the Germans know your unit? Did they know about the Force?

NS: Yes, they did. They were very aware of it, especially on the Anzio beachhead. I guess they got the first taste of us when we went into la Difensa. But when we got to Anzio, we were sitting on one side of the Mussolini Canal, and they were sitting on the other. We eventually kept moving them back until there was about two miles in between us, and it was...I'm not speaking for myself so much but as the Force as a whole, but every night I think there was patrols that would go out and we left a calling card. I forget whether it was in [unintelligible] or insignia in German that I think it translated to, "The worst is yet to come."

CM: Okay, what? Just patches and stickers around, or—

NS: Leave them and...You'd go out on the patrol and they'd leave them in someplace where they knew that the Germans would be maybe...They sent out patrols too. In fact, when we were in Anzio, we used to go out and gather the eggs at night.

CM: Gather the eggs?

NS: Well, it was a farming area, you see. They evacuated all the civilians off of there. The livestock was just left there, and there might be a farmhouse out there in no-man's land somewhere there's a bunch of chickens around there. So we'd want to have a few better rations. We'd go up there to gather the eggs, bring them back with the odd chicken, and we were very unhappy if the Germans got out there and gather the eggs before we did. [laughs]

CM: The Germans sent out patrols at night too?

NS: Oh, definitely.

CM: Would you ever meet? Make contact at night?

NS: Oh yes, they made contact. There'd be clashes out there at night.

CM: Would you ever have illumination?

NS: Every once in a while they would come over, and they'd drop some of these flares and stuff like that.

CM: Parachute flares?

NS: Yeah. If they thought that we were doing something that we were maybe going to get ready to move on or something like that, they'd come over. They'd drop some of those parachute fares to illuminate the area. They didn't know what we were doing. They were always a little bit afraid of us I think.

CM: It sounds like the Force certainly did have a reputation amongst the Germans.

NS: We said that some of the German officers had offered the ten-day furlough to anybody who would capture one alive.

CM: Was the same attitude expressed in Southern France too?

NS: Southern France to me was a lot easier campaign than what it was in Italy. Of course, we didn't have mountains to contend with. Well, we did have mountains there but not the same as we did in southern Italy.

CM: Where you couldn't even get the mules to—

NS: well we used to get mules down there too. If any peasant came along if he had a mule and we thought we needed it, we would take it.

CM: Did you have any problems with packing the mules? Would they ever throw their loads off?

NS: Well, not if you had one of those pack saddles on there. About the time we got up to the close to Monte Casino, we got some of these new FM radios. We thought it was a real improvement, but they were fairly big bulky things to carry because you had your battery pack

in one box and your radio was the other one. I got ahold of a pack mule there with a pack saddle on it, and I had the radio on one side and the batteries on the other and one of these whip antennas.

CM: [laughs] Had a portable radio.

NS: A portable radio.

CM: Just feed it.

NS: That worked fine until one night we were looking down on the Loire Valley and there was a tank battle going on down there. That was quite interesting to sit up in the hills and see these tanks fighting, but I guess they must have found out that we were in the immediate area and they started shelling us. I took cover, and my mule ran away.

CM: [laughs] You lost your radio.

NS: Well I didn't lose—

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

[Tape 2, Side A]

CM: Where were we? Oh, we were talking about the mule and the whip antenna.

NS: Oh, yeah.

CM: You also mentioned that you had a rodeo on Anzio beach. How'd that come about?

NS: As I mentioned before there's a quite the livestock that'd been left on the beachhead there—on the invasion. We were sitting up on the line there for...It must been close to five months from January until May when we made the breakthrough to on the road to Rome.

CM: Five months on the line? That's without a break, isn't it?

NS: There was no break. There's no place to go anyway because—

CM: That's five months of constantly slugging it out?

NS: That beachhead was just like a semicircle on the side of the Italian coastline there, and we had the extreme right end of the line and there was Germans in front of us and the Mediterranean behind us. We couldn't go anywhere anyway. We just had to sit there. Just before they made the final push to go break through to Rome, there some other—I don't even know what outfit it was now—but they came and they relieved us. We went back into the rear area, which is about maybe a half a mile back. That was rear area.

CM: Still within artillery range, wasn't it?

NS: Oh, definitely, but we were pulled back there for, to get a bit of a rest, and some of the fellows that were...Thought we'd have a little bit of fun and we got this...lined up a few of these old oxen and some horses and stuff like that, and we had ourselves a little bit of a rodeo there one afternoon.

CM: Did you have many old cowboys in the outfit?

NS: We had quite a few...I guess they didn't have any cowboys, but we had quite a number of fellows who were in the U.S. Cavalry.

CM: Oh, really?

NS: Some of my best buddies were from the 124th Cavalry from Brownsville, Texas.

CM: That was still in the days of the old horse cavalry, wasn't it?

NS: Yeah. They came up here as members of the Force, and they were pretty much horse lovers. So we had ourselves a little bit of a ball there. I'm sure the Germans thought we were nuts because they'd probably been watching everything that was going on.

The one thing about the beachhead, during the day everything was pretty quiet as a rule because they didn't want to start to do too much firing with their artillery because they would spot them.

CM: And then they could counter fire?

NS: That's right.

Unidentified Speaker: [unintelligible]

CM: Almost done.

NS: But the daytime was usually fairly quiet, but then it was nighttime when all hell would break loose. We usually had a couple of aircraft that would be patrolling the beachhead during the day. They'd go down at night, and then you'd hear the German bombers come over.

CM: The Germans would bomb you at night?

NS: Oh yeah, they would come and drop a few bombs at night, and their artillery would open up. Of course, ours would too. It was quite a fireworks there at night usually. Although, towards the end the German bombers, they started getting less and less all the time. I think probably the last month we were on the beachhead we very seldom had too much problems with their air force. They were running out of planes.

CM: Okay.

[long pause, followed by break in audio]

CM: What stands out most in your mind about the First Special Service Force?

NS: Just the fellows that were in it.

CM: That sure seems to be reflected even today you know by the turnout—40th anniversary.

NS: The 40th anniversary. There was a turnout we got here.

CM: Yes, from basically all over the world, wasn't it?

NS: All over, that's right. All over the North American continent [unintelligible]. I have seen that a lot of other organizations that don't seem to be as close knit as what the members of the Force are.

CM: When the Force was disbanded, where did you end up going?

NS: I went back to a Canadian holding unit in Southern Italy, and from there, being one of the original Force members, I was an orphan by this time. I had no outfit. I was shipped back to England, and the replacements that we had got, they were shipped back to the units that they came from. But being an original member of the Force, I was sent back to England. They shipped me out to a training center there, and I was in there as an instructor until the war ended.

CM: That was fairly common wasn't it with a lot of the Canadians? Well, and also Americans. That they'd end up in a training capacity. They'd already been through enough action that—

NS: Well, I was not really too unhappy about it. I was quite happy to be back to England there. Although, I didn't like those doggone V2 bombs that they were sending over about that time, but they ceased a little while shortly after I got there. We didn't have any more of them coming in.

CM: What part of England were you in?

NS: In the southern part, south of London. We were on the southern coast.

CM: Is that where you spent the rest of the war?

NS: That's where I spent the last five months.

CM: Okay. Did you ever think about staying in the Army?

NS: Yes, I had give it some thought, and then I don't know...We were kind of fed up with it at that time and when I got home, I was only too happy to get my discharge and get back into the civilian life.

CM: If the Force had stayed together, do you think you might have stayed in?

NS: If it stayed together, I would have stayed on.

CM: That's kind of a universal question I ask the people, and many people have said the same thing, that had the Force remained they may have stayed in the military.

NS: Oh yes, I definitely would because to me, the Force, that was my life.

CM: And it's still a large part of your life today, isn't it?

NS: That's right. It still is. That's why I drive down here to attend the reunion. I—

CM: Tell me did you go to Halifax too?

NS: No I couldn't make it to Halifax last year. Something else came up and I couldn't make it, but I did make it back to Europe two years ago.

CM: Okay, that was where, in Rome?

NS: Rome. It was the 40th anniversary of the liberation of Rome, and with us being the first troops into Rome, we were there for this dedication ceremony when they dedicated that plaque on the old wall there by [unintelligible] gate I think it was. To me, that was really a highlight going back there.

CM: It's changed, hasn't it?

NS: I couldn't recognize anything other than the old Colosseum in Rome that really looked familiar.

CM: Were there any civilians who remembered the Force in Italy?

NS: Oh, I'm sure there was. When we went back that two or three years ago, I'm sure that some of the Italian civilians would probably have recognized or remembered us, but I think we were probably remembered more in some of the places in southern France.

CM: Why would that be?

NS: Well, possibly because some of them were the Free French Resistance members.

CM: Okay, and you worked very closely with the Free French, didn't you?

NS: We worked very closely with them, but with the Italians I wouldn't trust them as far as I could have threw him over there because—

CM: They were still the enemy weren't they?

NS: Well, they were, and they weren't. They were the enemy and then they had surrendered, but you couldn't trust them. I think they had to hate it...When you went into a town, they had two flags, one in each hand. They had the German [unintelligible] flag in one hand and the Allies flag in the other, and whoever was going through that's the flag they were waving. So I really

didn't have too much use for them because they were kind of a turncoat outfit. Just whoever was winning that's the side they were wanting to be on, but we did the work quite closely with the French Resistance Movement. One of the most touching things in that trip was, when we were down there, we went up to a little village way up on top of the mountains one Sunday. It was one of the villages that we had liberated, and we had a memorial service up there. There was a plaque on the wall of the...on this...The village is built on a side of a mountain, and they got these stone walls down there. There's this one plaque that is unveiled there on Sunday, and we had a memorial service there. There's a lot of the former Free French members were at that ceremony, and it was very touching.

CM: I can imagine it would be.

NS: The dedication of the plaque in Rome was the highlight of the thing as far as I was concerned, but this other little memorial service was the next highlight—

CM: The icing on the cake. That was a pretty sad day when the Force was disbanded, wasn't it?

NS: It certainly was.

CM: Did you guys have much warning that the Force was going to be split up?

NS: No, we didn't.

CM: Did it take everyone by surprise?

NS: I was rather surprised, but the war effort was going well. I guess they probably could see no further use for us being trained for the type of work that we did.

CM: More massive land armies and tanks and artillery.

NS: Yes, that's right because they were in flat terrain and they just ran along with tanks and things like that.

CM: Small raids and commando-type operations.

NS: There was no need for any that type of thing anymore. I don't know why, but I imagine that was the reason that they disbanded the Force. It was a sad day as far as I was concerned.

CM: That seems to be the general consensus.

NS: When they had that last raid, we were all lined up, and then they said, "Canadians fallout." Look down the lines and who was going to fallout. We didn't know anymore.

CM: Well, at that time was it still pretty much half and half?

NS: Pretty well, yeah. The sad part was that most of your buddies were probably Americans, and vice versa, I guess. We'd been through hell together. You kind of hated to leave them.

CM: One thing I remember reading in the book is the Americans received a different rate of pay than the Canadians.

NS: Oh, definitely.

CM: That even though you were in this force with American weapons and uniforms you still received the Canadian pay.

NS: You still received Canadian pay.

CM: Was that a bone of contention?

NS: No, not really. Sure, they were getting more money than we were, but [unintelligible]. The Americans got paid once a month and the Canadians got paid twice a month. Halfway through the month everybody's broke, and the Canadians get paid. We'd all go out and live her up, and then when the Americans got paid, well, they'd pay us back again. Really that was no probably at all. We never really had any problems as far as I was concerned. I was just so doggone happy to be with a bunch of guys like that that pay wouldn't mean much anyway because when you're over there what can you spend it on?

CM: Well, Norm, what do you do now?

NS: I am a parts manager in an automotive dealership.

CM: Okay. Is that pretty much what you've done the last 40 years since you got out of the Force?

NS: No, I've done just about everything. I finally started to put some of my mechanic training to use. I worked in an automotive drag for a number of years. I got tired of doing that, so I was out skinning cats (?) for a few years, and I figured that's enough of that racket, so I was in a fuel oil business for a few years. I got tired of that too, I guess, so I then went back into...I started truck driving. Drive semis for a few years. Then I finally figured that's no racket for no fellow like you, so you better start doing something else, so I got into automotive [unintelligible] again. I was asked to take work in the parts department, which I did, and I finally got to be a parts manager.

CM: But nothing in your life quite as exciting as your days in the Force?

NS: Oh, definitely not. That's the real highlight of my life, I'll tell you. That's where I got my education.

CM: [laughs] Yes, I know what you mean. I got mine in the military too.

NS: That's right. I don't know why, but I think it's being in with the groups of people from all walks of life. There's always somebody that's got a little better idea than somebody else has, and you pick those things up and you get real good education in there.

CM: No matter what your background is everyone is equal, and you're based upon what you can do.

NS: That's right, absolutely.

CM: Not on who you are or how much money you have, and it's a very real, very intense life for a very short time.

NS: That's right.

CM: Two or three years. But it does stick with you.

NS: I think if I had to do it all over again, I would do exactly the same thing.

CM: Norm, I sure appreciate you taking the time to talk to me about your experiences.

NS: Well, I've enjoyed talking to you.

CM: Do you have anything else you might like to add?

NS: I just can't think of anything offhand.

CM: Okay.

[End of Interview]