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Oral History Number: 151-007
Interviewee: John Conaghan
Interviewer: Charles Milo McLeod
Date of Interview: August 17, 1986
Project: First Special Service Force Oral History Project

Charles McLeod: —103rd Public Affairs Detachment with John Conaghan from Buffalo, New York. John's a former member of the First Special Service Force. John, you're aware that this interview could be used in the future for research purposes by students interested in the Force, and you have no objection to that, is that right?

John Conaghan: No objection whatsoever. In fact, it might improve our fighting force.

CM: Okay.

JC: Future use.

CM: John, let me ask you a couple of questions to begin with. When did you first join the army?

JC: Oh, Uncle Sam called me in for a year's training.

CM: Okay, were you in the National Guard?

JC: No, I was a civilian, and they had the program in New York State—one year's training. My number came up, I went uptown in Buffalo to the recruiting depot, and they sent me down to the Fort Niagara. From Fort Niagara, I went to Camp Stewart, Georgia, and the first place they put me was in three-inch guns. So as I was there, I said as long as I was in service for a year, I always had admiration of searchlights. I always wanted to know what they was made out of, so I asked the corporal who was in charge of the three, I said "How do you get down the searchlights?"

Well he said off the records, he says, "You ain't dumb enough, and that's the end of line." Four days later I was in searchlights. In there, they had a searchlight that was parked against the building, and I says to Lieutenant Page (?), at that time I says, "Sir, what's that light do?"

He said "It's no good," and they declared it non-usable.

Well I says, "I come down here to learn about lights. Could I have your permission to tear that light all apart, find out what makes it take. I want to go on after seven days a week and two weeks. 12 hours a day and don't stand guard or KP duty [unintelligible], and after two weeks we'll see what happens." I said, "Will you call the colonel up?"

He said, "Sure," so they give me that two weeks. In two weeks, I brought that light right back up to par. You know what was wrong with it? Plain dirty. I think there was 1500 wires in it. They had the blueprints, and of course, I was part mechanic down where I used to work and that was no problem. All you had do was read. One wire on the number one post and right on through. You couldn't go wrong with it. We cleaned all the wires off and painted where it was supposed...the negative positive [unintelligible] was too far apart. They were three-quarters of an inch apart when they were supposed be a quarter-inch, and the light was supposed to be painted black in certain places and the mirror took nine bottles of liquid to clean. It was high-polished steel, which I thought was glass, and the glass you look through the see if the arc was adjusted, [unintelligible], and it was white. So I fixed the whole light up and got it all painted up and I says to the lieutenant, I says, "Let's take it out in the field. Let's try it out."

Well he says, "No good."

I says, "I'll tell you what." Now this is off the record. "You tell the Colonel that I'll kiss his rear end in the middle of San Diego at 12 o'clock noon if I haven't got the best light in the battalion." He calls him up, and the colonel told him, he said, "Well, by god, I like his style." Then they called all the rest of the lights out. We had 25 lights that come down. Get them all out [unintelligible] the area. They got all headsets on, and he says, "Private Conaghan, you want that light?"

"Yes, sir."

"Turn your light straight up in the air and put the juice on." He said, "The rest of you guys with the lights do the same."

All the lights up in the air, and I said, "Boy, don't that light look nice?"

"Geez" he said, "That is bright." So we waited and we waited, and the more you waited the more nervous you got. All of the sudden the colonel says, "Page. Go down there. Bring that Conaghan up to my office right away. Have the sergeant close the light down, wrap it up, and put it in the trailer, and get your can right up here. You Know, you heard you was a bunch of women on the line. Oh boy, is he in trouble. You know how the GIs sound. Well, it did bother me one way or the other because I figured I still had the best light in the battalion to myself for the work I put up. I get down there, I come out technical sergeant—T with three stripes. He says, "Son you saved the government 33,000 dollars. That's the best light to in the battalion. So what was wrong with it?"

One word, "Dirty." When they put it down and from that day on, every man that operated search lights they cleaned out the light after they got through. In the morning, that was the first job you did, you cleaned that light up for [unintelligible], and that was it.

CM: And this was in San Diego?

JC: That was in San Diego. I was down there 200 nights, searchlight battalion.

CM: What, that was 1940?

JC: 1941. So when Pearl Harbor got knocked off December the 7th, then there was a colonel from the First Special Service Force come down looking for volunteers, so I put my name in. He says, "How would you like to jump?"

"Well, sir," I said, "I never was in an airplane before."

"Well would you like to try it?"

"Certainly." So I signed in, and that's how I ended up in [unintelligible]. I think there was 39 of us left that. Everyone was [unintelligible]. So when we get up and they formed the companies, we had five first sergeants in the first company and all staff sergeants. We only had two privates, so what we had to do when the new order come out, we were all busted to privates. We had to earn our rates all over again. That's the only way you could...You can't have five first sergeants in a company. You know that. So we just took a bust because when we qualify jumpers we got 50 dollars jump pay, and we got our 22 dollars or 30 dollar for the the month. In other words they set up...The United States said we got 50 dollars, 50 dollars army pay. That was \$100 a week. A buddy says, "Well, geez, that was better than making 30 dollars a month..." or 78 dollars a month. I says, "I always want to know whether I had nerve enough to jump out of a plane," and I did. I found out I could do it. That's how I...Because the jumpmaster says, "If you make the jumps, the rest comes easy," and it did. We just had to know how to jump at the time we was [unintelligible]

CM: Thank you sir. [speaking to an unidentified person]

JC: So that's where we started from the training there, and then we had our *reveille* at 5:30 in the morning with the 125-piece would march up and down waking us up.

CM: One-hundred and twenty-five piece pipe band?

JC: It had 125 pieces as far as I remember that's how big of a band they had, and they'd come marching down through with their skirts and everything on. They sounded good after a while. Then we'd have fallout at 5:30 with our shorts and our jump...When we qualified, we had our jump boots on, and the other guys who didn't qualify they wore their pants straight down. They had to separate the paratroopers from the...Then we'd have our two-mile run—the course to go through the—

CM: And that was around here at Fort Harrison?

JC: Yeah. We had the ten-foot wall and we had the rocket boat and we had the rope ladders and the tunnels and your ropes that you go over. An imitation [unintelligible] and everything, and then we run back. Then we get our fatigues on for eight hours feel, and we run over to the mess hall and sit down and have your meals. You have a certain time to eat, and then you'd fall back out and for roll call.

CM: John, a little bit about the training. The training was very intense, very hard. Was there any harassment—hazing?

JC: No, it's a funny thing about it. Of course, some of the officers...One officer had me marked down as a gold-brick in a lot of ways because when we run the two-mile course, instead of me going over the wall, I'd go around it. Well, I'm not going over that. They won't know the difference. One officer was behind me, which I didn't know, and I had to go over that wall ten times. I had to go over the wall alone ten times. He says, "Now, you'll climb the wall like the rest of boys will do." That settled that. If you thought you was getting away with something, you wasn't because the officers was smart too. They didn't keep all the officers up in front. They kept a couple back—hidden—so when some of us guys decided to take a detour, they marked you down and every time they marked you down he says, "We got a special detail for you, Conaghan. Over the wall. Ten times in a row." Ten times I had to go around that. That cured me of breaking the rules and regulations.

CM: You learn your lesson then.

JC: You learn your lesson, and then they started the teamwork. Like you'd go in town for a little...you saw a buddy was getting devil, you jumped right in. You knew damn well the odds were great, but you jump right in. We both come back with a black eye, not just the one, but they come back. If any man in like winter time when it's still snowing, we found one buddy who had maybe drank too much and fell in a snow bank. We'd pick them right up and took them right in because you know they'd be dead the next morning. We'd get them home some way.

CM: You said this is your first time back to Helena since you were here with the Force.

JC: Yes, 42...44 years now.

CM: Helena has changed a little as far as the buildings.

JC: The buildings changed a little, but the people never changed. The ones that we knew, maybe they're different now, but they were still wonderful to us all those years. They used to send out invitations for when we have our holiday and invite the boys up to their homes for dinner for the weekend. Of course, our outfit, we was only allowed so many men from each company. See there was 35 of us had to stay in the barracks, you know, in the [unintelligible]. Course, when you were the paratrooper, you didn't stand no guard or KP.

CM: oh you didn't?

JC: No there was no guard or KP for...We had had our weekend off when we were paratroopers, but the fellows that didn't qualify they could stay in, but they'd have to be...They could either go in our own MPs or go in the kitchen as our cooks. We never stand guard or KP. We did five days of straight field, all sorts of field. When we were through, we were through for the day, but we never had no KP or guard duty. That wasn't in the book. Our job, we had nine months to be a first-class fight man—fighting machine. That's what we put down, a fighting machine. We had to be paratroopers, we had to be skiers, we had to be mountain climbers, we had to be demolition expert, we had to have a...we had to know how to fire a Japanese, German, Belgian, English, Canadian guns. All that. Firing range we had to have the record on the rifle range. We had to take a test on the Thompson gun. We had to take a test on the .45, carbine.

CM: And the Johnson?

JC: Johnson—that was my favorite. I had that right off the bat. I love it. The little tripod on the front. You put the clips in the side. Am I right, I'm getting it right? Okay. I had that for so long then that jammed up. Threw that away and picked up a Thompson gun. That was my backyard. That's all I did was the Johnson gun and the Thompson gun. Once in a great while, I'd have a rifle, but there was a lot of them laying on the field from battle. I had two .45's on the side of me, and I had one under my armpit just for protection.

CM: It sounds like you liked those .45s

JC: Oh, those .45s are nuts. Whether you [unintelligible] the German pistol.

CM: Walther? P38.

JC: I think we called them the P38. They were a wonderful weapon, but they fired, I don't know what it was, 22 bullets in a clip. It was more clips than in ours. Ours was only 15 in the .45.

CM: The .45 had seven rounds and the Walther has 10 or 12 I think.

JC: The Thompson gun had 15 in the clip. You know, the long clip? What we did, we taped three of those clips together, see, and we had them in our pack. Then we'd shove it up and when we got into action, we pulled it out and put it back up and we had 45 bullets instead of 15. Sergeant Bennett (?) was right alongside me and he had a Thompson too, and we had them clipped together three at a time. When we got out into some field that raid there, I heard Bennett say "Holy smackers, we run into a hornets nest. There is a 150 of those kraut heads up." We put our backs together and we spread lead all over [unintelligible] and took off. The next day when we come back, it was over 50 bodies lying there, so we didn't do too bad. Of course when it comes to running, at one time they clocked me at 100 yards in 11 seconds and

Bennett's, who was bigger than I was, and I think he could do that about a second or two less. Boy, he could run.

CM: That was with rucksacks?

JC: No, we didn't have...We just had the...We didn't have the rucksack. We only used that to take our equipment up, but we had a lighter pack on. What we did mostly, we didn't have the packs at all. We just had our uniform with our ammo around here, and we put rations in our side pockets.

CM: Pockets of those baggy pants?

JC: Yeah, baggy pants. The baggy pants would hold eight hand grenades, and then we put our C-rations in the other side of the pocket. When we go in combat, the rucksacks would be at our main camp at Santa Maria. Then we'd go out with our light packs on because we had to be free, but we'd have enough food on us to last us three days. We have one pint of water, and that's all we needed. Yeah, we was trained not to drink a lot of water. See, on your heights, you'd march down the road, 50 minutes at Canadian's pace, that's 140 steps a minute. You'd have ten minutes rest. You'd put your feet up on the roads you're at, came down in the ditch, so your feet was higher than your head. You lay there for ten minutes. You can get up and you can walk another 50 minutes and you never tired out, but that's 140 steps a minute, but you had the light packs on. As you did that for 25...and we walked 25 miles in 8 hours.

CM: That was with a rucksack too, wasn't it?

JC: That was with rucksacks that was still...90 pounds they weighed. In training, we wore that all the time. That was part of your equipment. Skiing, that as part of you equipment—with those rucksacks. We used to call that [unintelligible], but that was orders. You had to be rugged. We were rugged. We lost a lot of them on the wayside. Just couldn't take it no more, give up.

CM: It was real easy to get out of the Force, wasn't it? All someone had to do was quit.

JC: Just quit, just quit. The officer would come out, and he said, "All right, men." He said, "Now, do you wasn't to be a soldier, or do you want to quit? We go a job ahead of us now let go and do it." I don't know it just seemed that all the boys stuck together. That was it, and then when...For taking something like that, officers found that was sort of fallen off the wayside. Boom, he'd come up, he'd say, "Send the men into town for the weekend. Let them get plastered. Come back Monday morning. See what happens." As soon as we come back, full action. Full action. We were ready to go then we got it out of our system. That the way...And that's the way I look at it. It was team work. There was something there each one of us had inside of us. We didn't want to quit, and didn't we want to quit, but something kept pulling us. Well if that guy can go ahead, so can I. If that officer can put up with a bunch of no good buggers like us, then by god we will show you officers that we can do what they want us to do.

That's what made the team. Sure we had a lot of heartaches. We had a lot of officers bawl us out. We stood there and took it. Like every Thursday, we had boxing. If you didn't like and officer you put your name in the office and you could go in the ring against him, and he'd be stripped down to the waistline, and the best man won. If the officer got beaten, we shook hands. That was it. We had just as much respect for him as he had for us. That as it. That was team. One officer refused to fight us. They shipped him back to Canada. We got another officer. That how they separate the...That's why we had good Canadian officers, and that's why we had good American officers. That's how they got a lot of officers in the field. Now I think...I don't know, I think they offered me one or two lieutenant bars on the field, and I turned them down. I said, "I want to be one of the men." Then in Southern France when we come to... We came in the Southern France invasion, come to find out they forgot to teach us communications. Well, in my 209th that's what we learned, communications right off the bat, [unintelligible] telephone. I knew they taught me something about a switchboard, and when I got down there I told Captain Underhill (?), "I know something about that switchboard." I said "I'll set it up for you."

CM: Excuse me. This is in Southern France?

JC: That was in Southern France.

CM: Okay and what battle was this? Do you remember?

JC: That was the invasion of Southern France. That when we came in March 8. See there was two islands off the coast, I forgot what the name of the...Our job was to take those island to make way for the invasion of Southern France, and we figured that the Germans had a couple of 16-inch guns on there and they would interfere with our landing craft coming. With five minutes to wait until we knocked the last gun off, and the islands was safe and eight o'clock the invasion attachment from the navy brought them in to shore. The ones that came in on that landing was another outfit—we came right behind them—but they did the initial landing, but then we moved in up above Menton. Our job was to take the mountains. That's what we were trained for, mountain climbing, and we moved right up there, and when we took the mountain we cleaned the Germans right off. Well then, come to find out they didn't have communications, so that's where I set up there communications. I think it took me—

CM: Had you learned communications, what, in the searchlight unit?

JC: Yeah, that's where I got my training there, and all that paid off in the battle there and we had communications within 17 hours.

CM: Why don't you tell me about the switchboard, and how you set it up?

JC: Well for me, we had, I think there was 24...It was a small one. I think was 24 buttons, and there was just 24 lines. I knew I needed over half of that, and then in the back is where you plug

the line in and in the front in where you took the button out and plugged it into your different lines for your headset. When the light turned on, which it was running only on a battery or something, when that light came on, light from Company Number One, you plugged it into where the guy was calling in from Two Company, you just take that wire out and plug it in there and the officers could talk to one another. We had the walkie-talkies, but they were only good for three miles, so if you were further away or you wanted to talk with Third Regiment or First, you couldn't get communication so we had to have the wires go out there. My job was to lay all the wires, but my understanding was that they trained somebody, sergeant there on the board, I taught him how the wires were coming in and have him man it. Then as we called in and we tell him what company were calling in, and then they'd mark it down and put a little card on there and that's...Then we run two wires down to our headquarters down to Menton up to the board. Two lines, because in case one line got blown up the other line was still in operation. Then I manned all the wires in the field because I knew more running wire over to the Third Regiment, and that was blown in 12 places. Then I had to rerun another wire out and patch the other one coming back. That was my job. On top of that, of course off the records, I run across haystacks to dive into and I run into a mess of cognac and Champagne on my tour.

CM: Why don't you tell me about how the French used to hide the booze in the haystack?

JC: Yeah, they took all their good booze and they dug a hole under the haystack, and they put the booze in there and then they put a haystack on top of it.

CM: That was so the Germans wouldn't get it.

CM: So they wouldn't get the good stuff. They let the Germans have the cheap stuff. When they come up, Major Thomas (?), that was my major then at the time—of course he is now Brigadier general. He was my major, and I found out after from Captain Underhill that he loved Champagne. Well I found a stock about 40 or 50 bottles on this one haystack, so I kept that because the rest of the guys didn't like Champagne. It tastes just like cider—hard cider—and we didn't care for that. Well we did like good champ...cognac, so we found out that [unintelligible] was for the men up the line and all the men kept it. Now, on that front at the time, I think we only had ten men the whole ten-mile front and we held it good for about three months. The Germans thought there was over 500 guys because you know what we did, we kept sending the same guys up running all over the place and they thought that we had a whole mess of them when we did. See, there was this sort of a camouflage. Then one of them would holler out once in a while and say, "How's your booze?"

"Down to one bottle."

"Got it coming up." [Unintelligible]. The major always got mad at me for not wearing my helmet. Well, I said that was only good for stones. He says, "One of these days, you're going to get knocked..." Those Krauts couldn't hit nothing the broadside of a barn. Besides how in the heck are you going to die on the line when you're full of booze? We was trained to drink the

whiskey. We were trained to know what to do. They kept you from getting shell shock. That's where the guys get shell shock because they didn't drink, and every little shelling and bombing would drive you up a wall. Some of that, what we called the burp, [shooting noise] all night long all night long, and you hear the big stuff coming over. They'd drop those eight-barrel mortars all over the place, and that builds up your mind. If you don't have a few drinks under your belt, you're going wacky. That's what kept the team together because the Canadians was very good drinkers, and they could hold their stuff and we learned from them.

CM: And the Canadians were issued rum, weren't they?

JC: They was issued two pints a week of rum on the front lines or base camp. So as long as they...We didn't like rum so we took some Crown whiskey. When we wanted a drink, we'd go and get one. That's the way it was. That I think is what the main bond in any fighting force, when you find the men that's getting wore out and give him a pass in town for a weekend. That builds up the morale and gives him a chance to go find some nice women, make love to her for the weekend. When they come back, they're all fresh. They are ready to go.

CM: Ready to go. Go back to it.

JC: Yeah, that's right. Then when it comes to eating, we had to eat three bowls of raw carrots a week. That's to sharpen your eyesight up, and asparagus we got a lot of. That was good for your system. Okay. Then you had your basic food. We didn't have too much beef. We had a lot of pork chops and mashed potatoes we always had and gravy with it and very little cake. We had maybe one...They'd have like a flat pancake, no frosting on it, just a plain cake. But they had a certain food that they wanted you to eat, and they had plenty of chocolate milk and regular milk. That was the basic. They'd have it out in the field like that. But we had our own cooks, we had our own guards, we didn't have to do no KP duty or nothing. They had their own crew. They took it after the English army. The English had their own...the old men that do their own cooking. They didn't trust civilians. They had their own men trained to cook and take care of the pans and everything, and our MPs for us. They took care of us [unintelligible]. The other MPs in the other outfit didn't have nothing to do with us. We told them so. Our own MPs took care of our own men. They were strict, and if we did something wrong in town, it'd come out of your paycheck. Usually 100 bucks. You lose the whole paycheck that month. That was strict, but we had the respect for the officers all the time—everybody in command—right down to your corporal. In the Canadian army, the first sergeant has the jurisdiction over the first and second lieutenants in the Canadian army. In the American army the first sergeant doesn't have that, so he took the Canadian role. The Canadians had this [unintelligible], the officers, and if they weren't treating them...doing their jobs the way they are supposed to be doing, they transferred them out and they get another officer in.

CM: They'd ship them out?

JC: They say, "You want a transfer?" Most of them says, "Yeah." They go, and they go get somebody else.

CM: So that's how the Force worked then? Now the Canadian sergeants even had control of the first and second lieutenants in the American army.

JC: That's right, that's right. Then every Thursday, we had boxing. Everybody had to know how to box. Then once a week we had judo training, and I think at that time they brought up a Captain O'Neil (?) from the Chinese police force. He was an expert in that field. So we had to learn [unintelligible] judo from him. There was nine of us in the circle. He says, "Come on you guys. Take me." Oh geez, I never ached so hard in my life. He caught me unprepared—he caught all nine of us. We all ended up medics. Boy, he fixed us up good. [Unintelligible]. He knew how to handle these nine men—like that. Then they went over to Norway and they picked up a Lieutenant Wolfe (?), who was an expert skier. We trained from him.

CM: And that was here at Fort Harrison?

JC: For Harrison. All our training was right here.

CM: Was this O'Neil?

JC: Captain O'Neil was from the Chinese police force. He was down here—he was American—and he was down here for 12 years in the Chinese police force.

CM: Okay and he came here to Fort Harrison [unintelligible]?

JC: Yea to train us in judo and karate. They picked him up. I don't know where Colonel or—

CM: Colonel Frederick [General Robert T. Frederick]?

JC: Colonel Frederick. He was the youngest colonel we ever had. At that time he was just 35 years old, but he was good. He was for his men. Do you know, as far as I can remember, he was our number one scout. I think he got hit about 15 times.

CM: Is that right?

JC: In the field he got mostly bullets in the arm. Call a medic, patch me up and kept right on going. I don't think that one place we were sitting down for a raid, he came right alongside me and says, "Hey, son, how you doing?"

"Perfect. Where do we go next?"

"You ready to follow?"

“We’re ready if you are.” He was right up [unintelligible]. We had respect for him. If he could go in the front, so could we, and that’s the way it worked right down the line. Every officer had respect for one another and every one of us. One thing about the battles, nobody had any insignia. We knew who our officers are, we knew who our sergeant was. We didn’t have to be reminded. When we got into a town, the Germans said, “Well, geez, we got a bunch of privates out there. Who’s leading them?” Nobody knew. We knew who was leading us. That was it.

CM: No insignia in the field? No stripes? No bars?

JC: No, no stripes, nothing shiny, nothing. We knew who our men were.

CM: How about unit patches? Did you where the unit patch in the field?

JC: No, all we had was the U.S. and Canadian—

CM: Yeah, on the arrowhead?

JC: Yeah, the arrowhead. Then we had the loose ones.

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

JC: We had the Black Devil patches, and we had some boys that was [unintelligible]. They'd sneak up and they'd kill the one German, and the other two would be alive. We put that patches on that man and leave the other two alive. What a moral builder that was when they woke up. Got so they couldn't sleep night or day. They kept throwing flares up to light up. Then we had a job when we was on Anzio beachhead, we had three roads out in front where our section that we had to eliminate—buildings. Of course, we had different names for those. We had Straight Road, Dago Road and Prostitute Road, and each one of those roads had anywheres from nine to 14 buildings on it. Well, the Germans would use those for the outpost. Our job was to sneak down in there to their outpost, wrap the building up with RS, which we carried 25 pounds in our pack.

CM: RS?

JC: RS, that's—

CM: What was RS?

JC: That was blocks of dynamite. It was in like, it was in and they had the priming cord hooked to them. See?

CM: SO RS was a high explosive?

JC: Yeah, that's what we had. So we go ahead, and we'd wrap the building up. I'd take my 25 pounds and put it around. The other guy would take his pounds and tied a knot in it. We'd run it all around the building. Then we come back and run the primer cord all the way to our...we have our little box, and we'd hook it on the rock post and then we'd sit there. We'd wait for the German patrol to come in. Well, then they'd come in, and when the last man in the building [unintelligible], grabbed our box and the building would go up. We'd eliminate the German patrol, and we be back in our area. Most of the time, we never even lost a man. So, every third night I'd be stuck on patrol. So it was routine? So the next patrol would go out and eliminate another building on another road.

By the time we moved out when the word come down that we were going to move out to Rome, we had six cows, and in that outfit we had about five butchers from civilian life. Our commanding offer said, "All right, boys," he says, "the order's come down that we are going to move out. We are going to try for Rome, but in the meantime we got all these animals. We're going to make our battalion ready and we are going out around the Germans and see how much good stuff we can bring back to drink." [Unintelligible]. We came back with the Battalion raid with about 300 gallons of good suds to drink, knocked out of the German kitchens in [unintelligible]. Never lost a man. We come back to Anzio beachhead, they butchered the six cows, we ate steak and got drunk for a week. Eat and drink right there. Of course, the Germans

threw the big stuff out, but we ate when we kept changing our time. First of all we start off at one o'clock, we'd eat. Then the Germans would start throwing it in at one o'clock, but we already moved it up to two o'clock the next day. Then three o'clock, then four o'clock, five o'clock, then we started at nine o'clock in the morning and have a meal, and that threw the Germans off. They didn't know when it was eat, see. Every time we changed it, we moved to another location. When the shells come, we was nowheres near it. It saved our boys. Well, we had to keep changing around all the time. Of course, there is only one thing that broke our heart. We didn't have no water to shave. I didn't shave for 98 days.

CM: Is that right?

JC: Even the lice wouldn't stay on us because we was so dirty, but didn't bother us. We still had our willpower in there. We had a job to do. Then after we got into Rome, then we fell back, got a nice shower, that made us feel like a new man. Give us a little time off, and then went training for the Southern France invasion. But then they gave us a week off. Just like Monte Difensa [Battle of Monte la Difensa], when we took that mountain, Mark Clark (?) says they lost 11 divisions of men to try to take that mountain. That's a lot of men they lost because they were breathing down, and he says to this day, he say he don't know how you guys took that mountain. It was 3,800 feet straight up.

CM: You were on that weren't you, John?

JC: Yes I was in Second Company when we made that raid. I was right in the middle of it like the rest of the boys.

CM: How did you take it?

JC: Hand grenades, Thompson guns, and these [unintelligible] guns and our rifles. Mostly hand grenades we dropped...They had seven machine guns in front of us, but their machine guns was turned the other way. They didn't think there was nobody coming up from the back.

CM: Is that when you climbed up at night with ropes?

JC: Yeah. It took us six hours to climb that. We climbed all night, and then we rest in the middle. Give us strength to get back up the top, but we had the two men up ahead of us putting the rings and everything up and we carried part of their pack with us. Then when we got up there my pack was mostly ropes, and then we threw the ropes down so the rest of the gang could come up. Then after we got all our equipment up, of course, we already eliminated the two German guards who was up there.

CM: Why don't you tell me about eliminating those German guards?

JC: Well we had—

CM: How was that done?

JC: We used a knife. Stuck them. That was all. We just dropped them right in their track. Took their helmet, pushed their body off the side, took their guns, and walked goose step just like they did. They looked around and they saw their guard, and they didn't come up and checkup or nothing. We just got all our equipment up on there. It was all pitch back, raining, foggy. Those Germans could see nothing because we already...we got our whole 85-man company up there and then we got the supplies up, we got the rest of the men coming up. At six in the morning, we hit them. We hit them with...Oh, it was...I imagine, I think it was maybe 15 to 25 hand grenades in each machine gun hole. We knocked them right out first. Then there was a lot of holes in the ground there, and we just tossed hand grenades in. We didn't go in after them. No, that was foolish. Hand grenades worked...did the damage much better.

Where we lost some men is when they started to turn the guns around further up and that's where we got the shrapnel and everything. When they found that they lost their foothold on that hill then that's where we was catching hell. In the initial attack, we had them. We eliminated the main ones, but then the big guns swung around and that's where [unintelligible] because we didn't have no cover. Only the fastest man would make it. That's how we...That's what we had. Then after we got down to the bottom, that's where our major got hit.

In there, we spread way apart so we didn't run, and our orders was we never bunch up. Each man had to be at least 25 yards apart so the most we could lose is two men. We still had our crew. That was the understanding, we never bunch up. See that's where the navy makes a mistake. They take a whole bunch and try to take a hill. One shell wipes out the whole platoon. We didn't believe in that because we...the most we put into a battle like that would be five men. Most of the time, it was just a three-man patrol because then we'd have if we lost those three men we still had our whole platoon yet to work on the other project. It was touch and go there for a while, but then after we got down on the ground, I was, I'd say I must have been three quarters of a mile and it was broad daylight then. Into the valley part is where our good major got hit, but he never knew what hit him. Air burst caught him just perfect.

CM: Out in the open?

JC: Right out in the open. He was trying to line up his map and everything to where the Germans was possibly going to be and when the shell come it hit him dead center. On that time, they had another man there with a bazooka. He was getting ready to fire, and he never fired. That thing blew up too. But from that day on, that gave us some strength. Now, we say we are going to fight them in earnest now. Now, we've we got the initial done. Now, we're home free. We got rid of being scared on that first battle. But every man would be afraid on that front line, I don't care who he is, but if you don't think about it, you're safe because you had too much activity right now. You think for a minute, then they says, "Hell, I got some buddies up ahead of me. Let's go after them." It's a team. That's the way I always looked at it.

My person. I just had enough will power to be there, but if the good lord didn't want me there, I'd be down on the [unintelligible] hill with the rest of them. We had the will power and we had the man power and we had the guts. That what it boils down to. And we had the booze.

We had to have the booze because that was morale builder. The Canadians and the English always had their rum with them [unintelligible]. What bothered me the most in the world, we run into bunch of English soldiers, midnight. "Well, men," he said, "we got to stop build our fire and have our cut of tea and crumpets." Oh geez!

I says to the lieutenant, "Come on. Let's get the hell out of this area because," I says, "when they build that bomb as far as those Germans are going to throw that big stuff" and they did. We was a half a mile away when that big shell came hit that fire dead center and killed everything that was down there. I says to the Canadians, "How in the dickens can you..."

"Oh," he said, "We don't worry about it. We got more men." That was the answer.

Well, I said, "You know darn well we aren't going to build no...You bet your bottom dollar we ain't going to build no fire. Not at night." Because the Canadians liked their tea instead of coffee. You know, of course, we liked our coffee. That's what I call teamwork—the way I look at it. When I came back here for the first time in 44 years tears out of my eyes—home. I said, "I hope the fellows that's here will take what I told them right now—take it with a pinch of salt—study it, think hard about it, and you come out with the best fighting force in the world."

CM: Everything I have heard about the Force, that's—

JC: We had the best navy. The navy got us where I had one version where we were on this one [unintelligible] ship. Big Bennett (?) goes up to the captain, and he says, "Do you think this tub will take us where we want to go."

He says, "Don't you call this a tub. This is a ship."

"Oh is it?" He got a kick out of that.

CM: Was this on the way to the Aleutians?

JC: Yes. It was on a Liberty ship, and he goes up to the captain and he said, "Sir, do you think this tub will get us where we want to go."

"Don't you call this a tub. This is a ship."

"Oh is it?" The funniest thing about it, they had all new men on it. They all got seasick, and we had to take over the duties of the ship.

CM: All the navy guys got seasick?

JC: Yeah! We had to take over the kitchen. We had to take over everything. Then on top of that at that time, we had to watch out for icebergs. They had a post in the front of the ship, they tied me to that because we ran into a storm and it was 80-foot waves. Every time the ship goes up in the air and it'd go down, I'd suck in the wind and then that water would hit me. See? I had two hour watch. We hit that 80-foot waves, and when we went down and come back up, the ship would go like this. When we finally got to the Aleutian Islands, we lost five plates on the ship, and all our food stuff was floating around in the bottom of the boat. All the food stuff was floating around. Well the captain said, "Well, I'll tell them now they better make better Liberty ships."

Well they says, "You ought to be lucky that that thing held together." But we never had no more trouble. We got all the way out there and no [unintelligible], we came back. We left he Canadians back home when we out there. We just took the American part of the Force out there.

CM: Why?

JC: We didn't need them. We figured the operation didn't call for the Canadians out there. As far as I know, I don't think they brought the Canadians out there. They kept them back home in case something happened, they could still carry on our duties that were lined up. I don't think the Canadians come out, well, I don't think so. I know I looked around. Unless they changed it, but it seemed like that they left some of the Canadians back because we didn't have the force that we was supposed to have.

CM: On the Aleutians?

JC: On the Aleutians. It seems to me that something was missing, and one of the guys said, "Well they didn't bring the Canadians." We didn't pay no more attention because our second company, our second platoon, was in C47s on Amtchika for backup crew. We set in the airplane for 6 hours with our parachutes. We jumped in for backup crew, [unintelligible], but we never went for it. After six hours, they called it all off. They says, "The operation's done. We're going back home." That was it. We took our parachutes off and put them in the plane, and they put us on the boat and we went on back home. The planes took the chutes right back home. We sat there, and I think in that time, I was smoking, and I went through five packs of cigarettes and the other guy next to me didn't smoke—he chewed five packs of gum. We got more nervous as we walked around in there. We couldn't figure out what was going on. All of the sudden [unintelligible] says, "Okay, boys, we're going home. We're going over to Germany," he says, "The Japs walked out on us see, so now we go over to Germany and they can back up only so far." So that's where we went. That's [unintelligible]. We had live ammunition when we come into San Francisco. They forgot to take the ammo away from us. We climbed on board this train, we was heading for Helena here. Come to find out they had another combat troop in

here. It was engineers was in here, so we couldn't get that. So Colonel Frederick, I think, flew to Burlington, Vermont, and he found a camp up there so we was on board a train so we rode all the way up there. In the meantime, they didn't take my ammo away from me. I leaned out the window. I was knocking glasses off the telegraph pole for practice—moving back and forth. I hollered back, and we had a machine gun set on the back, hollered back, "Hey, Joe, missed that one—machine gun." Well, we almost had court martial. They were going to court martial the whole bunch. Six million dollars worth of damage to the railroad. There wasn't a light working on that railroad when we went through. I think they killed about six cows. Oh, brother, you never heard the last of it. From that day on, we had to be good boys. That was it, but we had all the ammo. We wanted excitement. We had plenty of booze on the train. You know when the guys start feeling good, and they got a live...Brother, I said...we had it. I said, "We got keep quiet." That's that.

CM: I never heard about that.

JB: Well, that's under the table—under the table. Then we had the colored guy that was making up our beds. We got him drunk. We put him to bed. We made our own bunks. Then the train captain was going to fire him. We said, "You fire him, and we are going to throw you off the train and take the train yourself."

W says, "We put him where he is." Oh well, he says...We gave him I don't know how much money to keep his big mouth shut, and we took care of the colored boy. When we got the train in Burlington Vermont, everybody was happy. Nobody said anything about the repair of the railroad or not—hush up.

CM: But didn't the railroad contact the army?

JC: They did, but it didn't do them any good. He said, "We're on a mission." The boys actually then they got drunk and accidentally shot up something by mistake. They were dreaming about something, and so you know how the army can pass over. "Oh, well," he says, "that's all right." He said, "We're looking after our army men." That was it. Boy, I thought we was in the bag then. Oh brother!

CM: They forgot to take your ammunition away.

JC: Yeah, they forgot to take the ammo away from us. Would have been all right if we'd have put in the one boxcar and left it there, but no, we was in such a hurry to get across the country, they forgot all about that ammo. So we didn't pay no attention. We just carried it with us on board. Of course, we had the locks on all our guns so they couldn't be fired accidentally, but at the same time I said...well no, I says, "All that training they're going to either put us in the can throw the key away, and we lose the battle then." Everything went smoothly, and that was it. I said, "Thank god for that." I says, "Boy," I says, "I thought we was in the bag right then."

My boy, [unintelligible], he says, "Boy, Jake," he says, "we got out of that one." He said, "We better not mess up again, or," he said, "we won't find out if our experience did us any good. We're a member of a nice team. Let's not spoil it." That was it.

CM: You were wounded the Force, weren't you, John?

JC: I was wounded up on the fifth hill. Our first aid man got double pneumonia. Captain Underhill had to send him back, and then he called me up. He says, "John, I don't want to break your heart, but you are now our first aid man." He says, "Boy, Jim just got double pneumonia. He's got to go back."

"Okay." [unintelligible] I heard a guy holler "I'm hit." Put the bag on to go up over the hill. The Germans dropped eight mortar shells on, and one of them got me. Blew me 20 feet in the air. When I come back on back, got up, looked myself all over. Big hole in my knee—above the knee. Pants legs were all in shreds. I looked around at the rest [unintelligible], but my legs didn't look right. They were black from the knees down. I didn't pay no attention to it, see. So I had eight miles to go back to the first-aid station to be sewed up where we were. When I got up there, they put me in a hospital. I had frozen limbs. Two months and four hospitals.

CM: Frozen limbs?

JC: Frozen. They were frozen. It was coal, and my feet blowed up like elephant feet. The only way to eliminate that is they put you in a bed, put a net over your feet with a 25-ball light in there with heat on it. Wool blanket over it, and you lay like that for two months for the steady heat on it. Then your feet were supposed to turn from black to dark purple. They're getting better. If they didn't then, then gangrene set in and you lose both legs—gangrene. But the one officer come in there, and he was what we call a 90-day wonder. He says, "Oh boy, amputation. Get out of here before I hit you in the head with all that [unintelligible], he says. "Gangrene hasn't set in yet."

"What do you know," I said, "We're all trained first aid men, so get out of here." In two months, my legs turned from black to dark purple, and they come out. Then they wanted to put me in a rear echelon. Oh no! I said, "I volunteered for the paratroopers, and that's where I'm going." From there to Anzio beachhead, and I was in three more battles. No, wait...I was in four [unintelligible]—reinforcements out of the hospitals. There wasn't a man in those hospital that didn't come back up with us. When we was able to make it, we went back. When Captain Underhill says, "Well, we're getting our strength up, and we're getting our boys back again." [Unintelligible]. [unintelligible] crying and everything. We were home again. As far as the team is, it was home. What broke our heart up, they was supposed to...When the war was over, all of us were supposed to come back to Helena, put on a nice big parade for the Helena people, and be discharged, but they didn't do that. They messed us all up. They took 60 of us from Southern France and put us with the 11th Airborne. They took the Canadians and put them with the Canadian force. They took the rest of the men and made a 274th Infantry outfit. Got dear old

England in on the mess. Put some of their men. Then they took Norway, the job that we wanted in the first place because we was trained for it. We never did get. Up in the 11th Airborne, and we were only there 24 hours when they found out I was in the wrong uniform. I had overshoes on, and my feet was cold yet—

CM: You had overshoes on?

JC: Yes to keep my feet warm. I had four pairs of socks on because I still had...I was still frostbitten, because when you freeze your feet once the cold will bother you all the time. So you got to put wool socks on to keep you warm. When you put four pairs of socks on your jump boots aren't going to fit.

CM: Right. Where'd you join the 11th Airborne?

JC: From Southern France. They transferred us by truck up to Belgium.

CM: Okay, and this is in the winter?

JC: This was part of the winter, and they were ready to...They just came over from the States. They were only over in Belgium 90 days. They were all green men, and the officer said, "They're so excited, they're shooting themselves." When the medical officer found out that we already in some major battle, he got a hold of Captain and we had a nice dinner and they sent us back Frankfurt for home. They said, "We don't want you in here. We want those kids to learn what fighting is." You know, "We're not going to have a party if you go into another battle. Isn't it about time you guys went home?"

Well, we'd like to get home. We said, "When we get home and feel better, might make up our mind going into the next battle. We haven't seen you folks for two years." Give us a nice big party. Oh, did they have the booze there! Good old cognac. That was our backyard again. That's what we missed. We didn't have the booze. That was our ration all the time. Just like the Canadians. We leaned on it.

CM: What? Was cognac?

JC: Cognac and [Seagrams] Seven Crown whiskey. I said, "You got any cognac?"

"Yeah."

"You got any Seven?"

"No, we're out of that."

"Then give us the cognac."

CM: You were also in the 82nd, weren't you John?

JC: Back home after the war with the 82nd—in Buffalo for the 82nd division of the...Our meetings would happen every third Saturday every month. I joined them three years I'd go, and they only had 23 men and two women in the auxiliary. Today, we got 233 men and 37 some women. We did pretty good. Of course, I go around with the First Special Service Force sweater on—the sweatshirts. When I go over in Canada, they says, "Hey, I was in that."

"Well get your can over there to the 82nd and sign in" Then I told them [unintelligible] so they wrote the story. There was another man we found. I think I found 25 82nd airmen right in the Buffalo area. I said, "Well, I was with the 11th."

"Well, get over there. There's about seven or eight from the 11th that are in there." So they all signed in. That is how we got all them in. Team work. When you're a paratrooper, you're paratrooper all through life. It don't make a difference if you're in the 50 states. We had men here come in from Hawaii, Australian, New Zealand.

CM: In the Force?

JC: Yeah! One came from Greenland, one come New Zealand, two come from Australia. Home.

CM: Oh, came here for the reunion.

JC: Yeah, they were all Force members, but when it broke up they liked Australia better so they went down or when they went for a trip, they liked it and they stayed. Some from Greenland, some from...Well, a lot of them Canada—Alberta and up around there. We got five men from New York State that was in there. Home. When they hear reunion, they start getting on the phone and getting lined up for the transportation.

CM: Especially Helena, Montana.

JC: Yes. I got a fellow that runs a gas station. He's in the Air Corps Reserve. I says, "You think you can go to your commanding officer, get one of the big army transports that you wheel tanks and everything in, pick our boys up from Buffalo all the way through to Helena, Montana, and take our cars right along with us? One big...Then you come up and stay right with us and then bring all home."

He says, "The army used to do that, and they don't do it anymore." We got up and take all our transportation with us, which would have made it nice. We'd pay. Us guys would chip in for the pilot and everything and pay for the gas and everything. But they wouldn't do it so we had to do the best we can to get out here. I don't want to drive the 2,500 miles because the doctor advised me not because he says, "You're not as young anymore. It'd be better if you had a

couple drivers." Don't forget I'm past 73 years old, and by gosh, I am still trying my best to stay up. You should have seen our boys cry when we had that parade in front of the monument and to see the old First, Second, and Third Regiment flags. We had a nice bunch up there.

CM: Boy, you sure did.

JC: Nice bunch. Maybe some of us guys are a little out of shape, but we was there.

CM: Tell me, what was it like the day they disbanded the Force?

JC: Oh Jesus, we cried like babies. There was nothing we could do about it. We [unintelligible] but there was nothing we could do about it. He said that was orders from the higher up. He says, "You boys got to follow orders right to a tee." Six of us, we just cried like a baby and went to see Belgium. Jesus Christ, what are we doing up there. The 11th Airborne. Cleanup crew. We said, "Where's our Norway job?"

"Oh, no," he says, "England wants to get in on that." So the rest of the Force men, they made an infantry unit as the 274th, and then England got in on the gravy train. That's where we wanted to go in the first place was Norway. We never did use the skis. That's what broke a lot of Force men's hearts. We trained on these mountains, lived outdoors for two week 50 below zero, suffered everything that went along with it, and then lost the chance to go skiing in—

CM: In Norway.

JC: it's true. Our minds was set for that job. That's what we was trained for, and then to have the whole thing dumped on somebody else's lap. That why when we come up and we think about it, we cry a little bit. Can't help it. Can't help yourself.

I'm home see. [unintelligible]. Now, I read in a paper now they just got some mining equipment in. Now, they just found gold in those hills. It was in the paper, and they said they got the, what the hell, big shovels that will take 85 tons of the crack out. Holy smackers. The equipment we had right there, we would have had our own tunnels. It was nice to have a talk with you and try to pass on the experience that I had and all the heartaches.

I think I buried three myself. I sat right down and cried like a baby, but there was not a thing I could do about it. I think I had 15 buddies from when we were overseas and I think had three or four left. Of course, they got hit and in the hospitals and we didn't know where they were. We was hoping they would come back. But in our little platoon, we had most of our men come back. They were all hit, but they had the spirit yet. We had the officers there. That's what counted. Of course, they wanted to make me lieutenant in the field. I said, "I'd rather be the man, be a regular man."

They says, "It's a good thing they didn't make me an officer in Southern France because," they says, "who are you going to bring in for communications?" That as my field [unintelligible]. They said, "We got to have communications." That's what keeps the team together because those walkie-talkies weren't worth a plugged nickel only for three miles. Most of the time, they didn't even work. I always asked the Major, he says, "When you go in town," he says, "[unintelligible] in town, be sure to bring back some transportation." The last time I brought back a—

[End of Interview]