

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 151-011
Interviewee: Frank Kessinger
Interviewer: Charles Milo McLeod
Date of Interview: August 15, 1986
Project: First Special Service Force Oral History Project

Charles McLeod: This is an interview with Frank Kessinger on the First Special Service Force and this is the 40th anniversary, isn't it, or the 40th—

Frank Kessinger: Reunion.

CM: Reunion, in Helena, Montana conducted August 15, 1986. Frank, you've read the release form and know that these interviews could possibly be used for research by people in the future.

FK: I have.

CM: And you have no objections to that?

FK: No objections.

CM: Okay. You're from Evans, Colorado, is that right?

FK: Yes.

CM: Are you a native of Colorado, Frank?

FK: No I'm native of Nebraska.

CM: Okay, when did you first join the service?

FK: January 21, 1941.

CM: Right after Pearl Harbor.

FK: No, before Pearl Harbor.

CM: Yes, that's right. I was thinking—

FK: Yes, Pearl Harbor was in November. December, it was.

CM: Yes, I think December.

FK: December 1941.

CM: Why did you join the service at that time?

FK: Well, I was kind of interested in the service and also I knew that I was the age to be drafted so I enlisted.

CM: Enlisted in the army is that right?

FK: Enlisted in the army. Yes, sir.

CM: In what branch of the army did you end up in?

FK: I enlisted, and I was a medic in the medical detachment at Fort Francis E. Warren in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

CM: Where did you go through basic training?

FK: At Fort Warren in Cheyenne.

CM: Okay, when did you first hear about the First Special Service Force?

FK: I first heard about it through a friend of mine who I was giving treatments to in the hospital, and about a few days later, I was called in for an interview and two days later I was on shipping orders.

CM: Didn't take much time, did it?

FK: I was recommended by a friend of mine who was asked who in the company would he recommend.

CM: Was it pretty well known amongst the unit you were in in Cheyenne that there was this Force being established?

FK: Hush hush. Nothing was known. When we left, we didn't know. I had sealed orders on file, and all we knew was the destination.

CM: And that was Helena, Montana?

FK: Helena, Montana.

CM: And five of you went from Fort Warren, is that right?

FK: Of the first troops, yes, they were all medical men.

CM: Okay, and when did you arrive in Helena?

FK: I don't remember the exact date, but it was around July the 20th or 22nd in there somewhere.

CM: In '42?

FK: In '42.

CM: So you were one of the first people here.

FK: I was one of the first nine enlisted men to jump. I trained with the officers.

CM: Okay, had the Canadians arrived yet?

FK: No sir. The next group of men that came in was the 124th Cavalry from Brownsville, Texas, and then I'm not sure, they seemed like the next group then was from Fort Warren from the quartermaster down there. The next, I believe, was the Canadians if I remember right.

CM: When you first arrived, did they brief you about what the mission of the Force was? Did they say anything about Operation Plough or—

FK: No, they just...When I was interviewed I was asked if I would jump and if I would go into hazardous duty and different things such as that, if I was afraid of doing them.

CM: Okay, and that's all the information they gave you?

FK: Yes. They said possibility and that was it, but I could read between the lines.

CM: Most of you have had a pretty good idea then that this was going to be an elite commando-type unit?

FK: Yes as soon as we started training, we knew something was, because it was...there was no doubt there was something new happening.

CM: Can you say a little about the training that you went through?

FK: Well yes, if you want to question me or anything that would be fine if that would be easier.

CM: Okay. You started training almost immediately after you arrived at Fort Harrison, didn't you?

FK: Yes, when I arrived there wasn't...The barracks weren't all finished, and as I say there was the first nine of us was three medical men, three communication men, and two riggers, and a meteorologist. Out of the three medical men, I was the only one that made it. I'm not sure what the deal was on the others, but at that time if you didn't meet the specifications and qualifications you were shipped right out. Nobody stayed around.

CM: There was a lot of arduous physical training, wasn't there?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: A lot of runs, a lot of physical training.

FK: Runs, a lot of hand-to-hand combat training, mountain climbing. We did skiing, and we learned to operate vehicles and all weapons. We was trained with as many foreign weapons as they had. We was trained with them, and we would train with knife fighting.

CM: You also had a lot of special equipment, didn't you, that regular infantry units didn't have?

FK: Yes, but as being a medical man, I wasn't allowed to. I was qualified on everything. As I understood once I was here, there was going to be one enlisted medical man and one medical officer with every 600 men and I was the one for the First Regiment.

CM: Boy, that's...The medics were spread pretty thin.

FK: Yes, but we were...We didn't know for sure, but we accepted the fact that there was a possibility that we were suicide mission.

CM: That, after the mission, you may have been expendable?

FK: Well, yes, or we would be interned and be on her own and go to another neutral country.

CM: And that was part of the plans in the beginning, wasn't it?

FK: Yes, that was part of plans as far as I know. Now, a lot of us never knew which one, but we were taught to survive in cold weather, we were taught to survive in mountains, and we were taught amphibious training, which we took at Bedford, Virginia.

CM: You served as a medic throughout your service with the Force, is that right?

FK: Yes, sir. Plans were changed, and then they gave me more medics and I was a medic in charge of the First Regiment [unintelligible].

CM: Okay, who did you serve with with the Force again? The First Regiment?

FK: First regiment—First Regimental Headquarters—and my doctor was Major Niesen (?).

CM: Major Niesen?

FK: Yes, but he lives in France now.

CM: Really?

FK: Yes.

CM: Okay. What was the morale like of the troops?

FK: High.

CM: Even at the initial parts of training?

FK: Oh, yes. Of course, as the old saying is, a good soldiers a bitching soldier [laughs], but that is isn't true to an extent, only that the boys that did gripe a lot didn't mean it. It was to entertainment more than anything else.

CM: And there were not many problems with people getting along, were there?

FK: Between themselves?

CM: Yes.

FK: No. We had a few flair ups, but not to extremes.

CM: How about what the Canadians? Was there much distinction after they arrived, or did they blend in real, very quickly?

FK: Well we had some, but as you would from any unit. If you brought a cavalry unit into a quartermaster unit, you probably would see the same thing. It was a strange thing for the Americans of the conditions of the march, to the wearing of the kilts, and we had them come in from different branches of the Canadian army.

CM: And a lot of them showed up in kilts?

FK: We had some come in in kilts. Bagpipes were playing when they marched.

CM: Was there much humor or fun poked at them?

FK: Well at first, we laughed and kidded around, but I don't know of any trouble. There probably was, but what they did then, they were mixed right in with the companies and not just instead of putting all Canadian companies or all U.S. boys in one platoon. They were mixed, and they also mixed the platoon leader, the sections leaders. And the first sergeants and the officers also were mixed together.

CM: So that worked real well as far as unit autonomy?

FK: It's surprising what as some people thought that things like that would never work. It did, and some of the best friends of the Canadians were Americans, and the most American friends were Canadians.

CM: Yeah, that certainly seems to hold true.

FK: Yeah, today.

CM: A number of Canadians who moved to Helena for instance. Herb Goodwin and Joe Glass. A lot of Canadians moved down. You all wore the same uniform, didn't you?

FK: The same uniform, and our drill was changed. For instance, we started swinging our head...our arms up like that.

CM: Up shoulder high.

FK: The way we marched. Our about-face was done in a Canadian-style instead of the Americans, but it was American uniform.

CM: And American weapons and equipment

FK: When we stopped it was with a sharp, a real sharp click on the ground.

CM: Did you stamp your feet when you came to attention?

FK: Yes.

CM: I was in the Canadian Naval Reserves for a couple years—

FK: Then you know. [laughs]

CM: —so I have drilled with the Canadian style. It's very sharp at times.

FK: Yes, very sharp. As a matter of fact, the Canadians taught us a lot. They were a much better disciplined, trained in parading than we were.

CM: Operation Plough was scrapped before you ever had a chance to go.

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: When you did, when you first moved out, you went to the Aleutians. Isn't that right?

FK: Yes.

CM: Did you have any idea where you were going before you went there?

FK: When we went to the Aleutians? Yes, when we took out we did, but it was hush. I don't really recall exactly when I found out where we was going, but we knew it was North Pacific.

CM: Were there any parachute jumps in the Aleutians?

FK: No, one regiment suited to jump to follow us in. They took 600 men of us, split us up in three groups, and we went in in the middle of the night toward morning. Was supposed to take three mountaintops. Then after we were in there, they blew the harbor. We had men going ahead of us—demolition crews of our men—and they blew the harbor, and then the 10th Mountain Infantry followed us in.

CM: Oh the 10th Mountain Division was there? You know they've reactivated that?

FK: Have they?

CM: Up at Fort Drum, New York.

FK: I'll be darned.

CM: It's the 10th Mountain Division or 10th Mountain—

FK: See, they were trained at right out of Leadville in Colorado. Camp Hale, wasn't it?

CM: I think so. I didn't know the 10th Mountain Division went to Alaska or the Aleutians.

FK: They followed us in.

CM: You learn something new every day. Going back to jumping, when did you make your first parachute jump? Do you remember?

FK: I'm not sure it was the 1st or 2nd of August, and my second one was made either the 3rd or 4th in there somewhere. I may be wrong on a day or something.

CM: Could you tell me a little about your airborne training?

FK: Well, it was pretty fast. [laughs] We jumped out of mockups.

CM: That's what I understand from Burhans' book [*The First Special Service Force: A War History of the North Americans, 1942-1944*, by Robert D. Burhans].

FK: And that was it. And learned to fall or roll when we fell. Then we were given a short training on how to dip our chute and drop our risers down so it would break our fall. Straight out ahead of us. It was a minor thing.

CM: Parachuting?

FK: Yeah.

CM: Were there many injuries during jump school?

FK: Well some, but I don't know. I have nothing to compare it with. I cracked...I broke a leg, but I didn't know it until about a month later, and I thought it was a sprained ankle. I never turned in anything for it. I was wrestling with a fellow on a hard floor, and when he threw me, my leg, I had a kind of a sole on the shoe—you know, like on a jump boot—and it caught on this wooden floor and it twisted and it broke. They found then it was a break that I'd been walking on for a month or six weeks.

CM: So that fall finally snapped it.

FK: Well, what snapped it, I heard it snap when he twisted me. I was wrestling a man that outweighed me about 60 pounds.

CM: How long were you laid up for, Frank?

FK: Two days.

CM: [laughs] Two days?

FK: I was in the hospital two days, or else two nights and one day, I forget which.

CM: And then back on duty?

FK: Yes, I took up a pair of crutches, and I didn't want to leave the outfit, so I took off after them. I attached myself because I was the only medic to the First Company First Regiment for training purposes, and so I would just...I could pull sick call in the mornings, and then I'd take off on crutches and I would go out across the field as fast as I could and throw myself several feet at a time.

CM: [laughs] What sort of training would you do on crutches?

FK: Everything that I could.

CM: Hand-to-hand combat?

FK: I had a cast and anything that I could. I would train myself on climbing ropes hand over hand, and I would go out for the special training—weapon training and stuff like that.

CM: How long did it take for that leg to heal?

FK: As I remember I had the cast off in two or three weeks.

CM: Well, that's not too bad. I remember I broke my leg once, and I was in a cast—it was a spiral break—and it in a cast for about two months. Just miserable.

FK: Yes, I broke my leg once since then, and I haven't...Of course, I was 64 or 65 years old, I broke it that time.

CM: Let's go back to the Aleutians. When you were there, the Japanese had pulled out.

FK: Yes.

CM: So there wasn't...You didn't have any casualties from combat. [knocking sound]

Excuse me, do you want to get that?

[Break in audio]

CM: Now about the Aleutians, you didn't have any enemy...casualties from enemy active.

FK: No, sir.

CM: But how'd the men do up there? Were there any medical problems, cold weather?

FK: No it was a time of year there wasn't. I think we had one broken leg and something like that, and we had weapons fired at us from the 10th Mountain Infantry.

CM: Oh really?

FK: Because we were told that they were told that we had been hand-to-hand combat, but what was left of us they split us up in intelligence as far as I knew at the time. We were told there was between 8,000 and 11,000 Japanese on the island. We were supposed to take three mountaintops—600 of us. We split up in 200-men groups and went up the mountains and with our packs, and we were supposed to hold it until the main invasion caught up with us.

CM: And the 10th Mountain Division mistook you for Japanese?

FK: Yes, at a few places. I wasn't fired on, but a friend of mine was. He asked what the trouble was, and they said that, what they told him, they said, "We were told that what was left you would be hand-to-hand combat" but that could have been hearsay see. That could have been an excuse.

CM: After the Aleutians you came back to the United States and went to Vermont, didn't you?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: And then back to North Carolina?

FK: No, then we shipped out.

CM: Shipped out for?

FK: We went back to...We shipped out for Casablanca.

CM: North Africa, and took the...You took the train, didn't you, to Casablanca?

FK: Took the [unintelligible] to Oran, and from Oran we went to Naples. After Naples, we were bivouacked into, I think it was Santa Maria, but you can quote that or check that on the records what the right name of that place was there. It was a small college that was [unintelligible] down south.

CM: What were you in a staging area there?

FK: Yes.

CM: Did you have much contact with other troops, either American or British?

FK: No, not then. No, we were preparing—

CM: You were kept pretty much—

FK: —for a short time we were on the move up.

CM: How many days were you there, or how long were you there before you went to the front?

FK: I'm not sure, but it seems like possibly two weeks, but I could be wrong on that.

CM: What did people think about going into combat for the first time?

FK: They weren't worried.

CM: Weren't worried at all?

FK: No, as a matter of fact we were dumb, I guess. [laughs]

CM: Well, you'd been pretty well trained, and—

FK: I think to me in checking with other units since, I don't believe there was ever anybody trained better than us. I'm not saying we were better than everyone. I'm not saying that.

CM: It certainly sounds like your training was.

FK: Our training was really to the best of training.

CM: Do you have any idea what accounted for that high quality of training? The leadership?

FK: I would say leadership, and I think self-confidence and pride and the biggest share of the [unintelligible] had a lot of nerve.

CM: It doesn't sound like it was the type of unit just your average person would join. You'd really want to be, have a desire to be one of the best.

FK: I suppose it's possible.

CM: Like Special Forces today.

FK: I would say it's like the Special Forces today that you had a desire to make yourself known as an individual. Then the pride in the unit, there was a lot of pride.

CM: Now, that's really obvious just by the numbers of people who show up at the reunions today. It's a very big part of the people's lives.

FK: I'd like to make the statement that I think any boy could do the same thing we did if he so desired. Any unit could be as good.

CM: So it wasn't i a unit of supermen. It was a unit of people—

FK Definitely not. I weighed 132 pounds. I had one man weighing 115. He would go until he fell going up the hill and then ask somebody to pick him up if he couldn't make, or he'd crawl until he could get to a rock and get back up with a 90-pound pack on him.

CM: There's just that intense personal desire.

FK: Just the desire to do it.

CM: The quitters were pretty much weeded out.

FK: Yes, they weeded them out fast.

CM: When did you first go...When did your unit first go into combat, Frank?

FK: I think it was the 2nd or 3rd of December in 1943. I don't remember the exact date.

CM: And that was against Germans?

FK: Germans in Italy.

CM: Do they still have...Were there still Italian allies with them at that time?

FK: They had one...As far as I know, they had one regiment with them or division and that was called the Marco Marines [San Marco Marines], I believe. I was told that.

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

FK: In that combat there, I was wounded the second night after we jumped off. I was picking up a man and put him on a litter, and I got an artillery.

CM: Shrapnel?

FK: Shrapnel, yes. I was wounded in three places.

CM: How long were you incapacitated?

FK: I believe it was 70 days that time.

CM: And when did you rejoin the unit?

FK: I rejoined the unit then on Anzio, and I was there—

CM: So you got out of the frying pan into the fire.

FK: Yes. [laughs] I was there probably a few days because I became very sick going up, and I thought it was seasickness. I got there and they found I had the jaundice, and they sent me back for two weeks and then I rejoined them again. I was on Anzio...I'm not sure, it seems like about two months, and then I was wounded with a machine gun.

CM: At Anzio?

FK: Yes.

CM: From when you were hit the first time and 70 days later, had the makeup of the unit changed much? Had you taken a lot of casualties?

FK: The casualties were very heavy. A lot of replacements, and a lot of the boys went back to the States.

CM: Because they had been wounded?

FK: Of course, they had been relieved of duty and such as that. Yes, sir.

CM: The replacement who came in, were they airborne qualified too?

FK: Some of them were, and some of the boys that came in—they were short then of airbornes—so some of the boys came in with what was left of the Rangers who were nearly annihilated on the push to Rome when the Anzio beachhead was made.

CM: So it was almost an entirely different unit when you came back.

FK: Yes, there was some of us old men, but it had changed quite a bit.

CM: Still the morale remained high?

FK: It remained high, and they blend right in.

CM: They picked up on the pride of the unit?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: No animosity between Americans or Canadians?

FK: The same thing. Friends as always and fighting together.

CM: After you were hit at Anzio, how long were you out for then?

FK: That's the reason I said I wasn't sure 70 or 71 days because one time I was gone 70 days and the next time 71, so it was approximately 70 days again.

CM: Where'd you rejoin them after that?

FK: I rejoined them then just when they'd drawn back from Rome and in Southern France in the training area for the invasion....Not Southern France, Southern Italy for the training for the invasion of Southern France.

CM: Okay, and you took part in the invasion of Southern France?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: How did you land in Southern France?

FK: WE went in on LSTs [landing ship, tank].

CM: Did you have other units supporting you too?

FK: No, we went in the initial landing to take the islands for the...to take away the guns that protected the mainland.

CM: So you were the initial attack then?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: And I suspect casualties were pretty heavy on that one.

FK: Pretty heavy.

CM: Were you wounded again after that, Frank?

FK: No, I lost one of my sergeants that was under me in Southern France, and the casualties was high in the companies.

CM: But still you had replacements keep coming in?

FK: Yes. Sometimes our companies went down to very small units. Like on Anzio, we had a...As I remember, I don't believe there was that our regiments was over...It doesn't seem like they were over about 300 men. There I don't remember the exact numbers because they was coming and going.

CM: Form 600 initially?

FK: Yes.

CM: The replacements who came in, some of them were Rangers, some of them were airborne qualified.

FK: Yes.

CM: Did you get many replacements just out of replacement depots who were assigned to the Force?

FK: That I don't know because I wasn't in headquarters, and you never...For some reason or another, we never asked a man that was fighting beside us what he was he was qualified for unless he chose to tell us.

[pauses]

CM: As I remember from reading Burhans' book, Southern France was very, very hard fighting. Fighting in the mountains, a lot of packing heavy loads.

FK: I thought Southern France was easier than my friends had had while I was in the hospital in Italy.

CM: Really?

FK: The casualties weren't as high. We lost some of our key men in Southern France, but we moved fast and we had help. The Free French [Free French Resistance Movement] was fighting behind the lines, and we would meet them and we'd go on, but we moved fast.

CM: Did you do a lot of night operations then?

FK: Not as much in Southern France as we did on Anzio. We would go out on night patrols there in colored face, black ourselves down and—

CM: That is where the Black Devils came in?

FK: We had a no man's land there of...I'm not sure. It seemed like at some places two miles between us and the enemy, but we harassed them.

CM: What did the Germans think about your outfit? Do you know?

FK: Well, what we could find out, they didn't understand just what we were—

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

CM: What did the Germans think about your outfit, Frank?

FK: Well, they couldn't understand us, and they were amazed at what we did from the standpoint that they thought we were crazy, I guess, [laughs] because they even offered some of their men a leave of absence if they could take one of us prisoner to be interrogated.

CM: Oh, really?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: They didn't know you were a joint American-Canadian unit?

FK: Yes, they knew it was Canadian and American for some way. I don't know how they found out. They probably...You know, after all they had spies behind the lines as we did the other way.

CM: Were many Force members taken prisoner, do you know?

FK: Not many that I know of. The first I know of they'd taken was—and I went with them on the push to Rome because I was in the hospital—but that was the first I knew of any taken.

CM: Okay, but apparently you did have quite a reputation with the Germans.

FK: Yeah, I guess so.

CM: How about the civilians in Italy and also in Southern France? How did members of the Force get along with the locals?

FK: They seemed to get along real good with them. We didn't have any trouble. I never did and my group. They were probably—and I imagine all American soldiers and Canadian and British were the same—if we found somebody destitute or somebody without food, I think we'd take the young child in and keep him with them and travel with them sometimes if they had no home and stuff. Then they'd make them stay behind the lines when we went in. For instance one time in Southern France, we were relieved by the other regiment for us to reorganize, and we started scrounging food. We run into a young French girl there about 15 years old, and she fixed us a good meal and we spread it out there. The boys set at the head of the table, and nobody dared touch her. It was just one of those things. It was just like their little sister.

CM: It sounds like they treated you pretty well.

FK: Yes, so we got along I think going through...Well, there was times, you know, that in the heat of the battle you lost your temper. Probably did things we shouldn't have.

CM: Things like what?

FK: Such as one man, a German, threw up his hands to surrender and why the boy did it—he'd had been through several days of action or several weeks—and he got up and...I should say not several weeks, several months. He got up to take him prisoner and just didn't stop to think, and the Germans cut him down. His buddy got up and went across there with the Tommy gun and pulled him out by the heels and slaughtered them when he pulled him out. Things like that. They didn't fight back. He just tore him up like a mad man.

CM: I've seen that happen.

FK: You know.

CM: Changes the whole way you think about the world and life. You see a different side of yourself.

FK: We had had men that went AWOL from the hospital to go back to the front lines when they were told not to. We had some refuse not to go to the hospital. We had men had a chance to go home, refuse to go home and ask to go back to the unit when they never had to see another combat day.

CM: The Force really was a powerful organization that way.

FK: Yes, if you asked them why when they come back, they'd say, "Well, you boys are here. You're my friends."

CM: That's hard for a lot of people who haven't been there to understand.

FK: Yes.

CM: It's not how the general civilian populous thinks about the military or warfare.

FK: Those same people would write to the boys that had already gone home with legs gone or something like that. They knew they couldn't and tell them not to be a fool and stay away.

CM: Now, it was shortly after Southern France that the Force was disbanded, wasn't it?

FK: That's right.

CM: That was a pretty sad day, wasn't it?

FK: Yes. First, the Canadians left and went back, and then we moved from Southern France to Northwestern France, and that was the time of the Battle of the Bulge. When we got up there they took all staff—buck sergeants and below that were jumpers—and sent them into the 101st Airborne, 82nd Airborne, and I believe, some of them went to a battalion also. One of the airborne battalions, but I don't know. Then there was some of us volunteered to go—staff sergeants and officers.

CM: Volunteered to go where?

FK: With the airborne into Bastogne. There was—I don't remember all—but there was five of us volunteering to go to Bastogne.

CM: That was with the 101st?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: Well what time was this? Was the 101st already in Bastogne?

FK: They were surrounded but on one side [unintelligible], and we went up there and helped them come back out. I think I carried the orders for the men up there...I was ranking down. I don't remember the exact number, but I think there was around 180 of us that went up there and Major Niesen went up and Major [unintelligible] went up. I don't remember the other two of the five now of us that went that volunteered.

CM: that was in the snow right around Christmas?

FK: Yes. Well, it was after. It was in January.

CM: January. Bastogne was where, what, General McAuliffe [Anthony McAuliffe] told the Germans, "Nuts!" [response to the German surrender ultimatum]. So you also served with the 101st?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: Again as a medic?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: And what was your rank at that time, Frank?

FK: Staff sergeant.

CM: Okay. Well, did you complete your service in World War Two with the 101st then?

FK: Yes, I was discharged...I was one of the first sent home on points in June. I was discharged from the army on July 2, 1945, in Wentworth, Kansas.

CM: We were still fighting the Japanese at that time, weren't we?

FK: Yes, sir, but they knew something that we didn't know. We thought we would all go over there, and then we were told that it's not over so...Why we didn't know but something was cooking—big.

CM: It sounds like somebody knew. Tell me was the morale in the 101st at that time anything like the Force?

FK: They had a lot of guts and I don't want to cut them down, but I don't think they were trained nearly as good. I thought—this is my opinion—that they went more on guts than any strategy. They didn't know how to do a lot of things.

CM: I'm just throwing my opinion in here too, but like the Marine Corps for instance, compared to Special Forces—Army Special Forces today—Marine Corps is full of guts and 17 and 18 year old kids where Special Forces are well trained. They have guts, but they use a little common sense and—

FK: Yes, I want to make a statement now that I didn't bring up before beings you took [unintelligible] marines, about the marines. We took two marines in with us one time, and one Navy ensign and I stood beside a major.

CM: Took them in where?

FK: Into one of the islands. It was Kiska. The Navy ensign was pretty well shook, and the major...I sat beside him in the night there and he slapped him and wrapped him on his can to make him mad enough to go up the mountain. We took off and the marines couldn't carry their packs, and we doubled up. I know it because I helped carry some of their pack beside my own. We took in as scouts...They sent scouts, Alaskan scouts, and we kept up with them going up the mountain and they had nothing on them. We averaged around 90 pound per man.

CM: Did you have those steel-framed rucksacks at that time?

FK: I guess they were steel.

CM: Yes those mountain rucksacks.

FK: They were old. The first ones made.

CM: You also carried a lot more weapons than a regular infantry company.

FK: Yes. In the Pacific, the medics even carried weapons. I had an M1, a .45, a combat knife, a couple bandoliers of ammunition on me besides my medical pack.

CM: Frank, why did the medics carry weapons in the Pacific?

FK: Because the medics were usually—and the officers—were the first people killed by the Japanese.

CM: Did you carry a weapon when you were in Europe?

FK: Only when I'd go on night patrol, and I wasn't supposed to.

CM: Okay.

FK: I carried a .45.

CM: Would the Germans respect medical badges?

FK: I was wounded twice. One time I was out in no man's land hunting for a man, and I didn't have a badge on but I had my medical bag. I swang it so that they wouldn't see it...so they could see it, and they snipped at me and they machine gunned me. I was out about two mile.

CM: So they really didn't care.

FK: Yes, they respected more than the Japanese. I don't know if they would have at the beginning of the war, but they did then because we could do the same thing they could. We respected the Geneva Convention, unless, sometimes the tempers.

CM: Yes, but it doesn't sound like the Japanese on Kiska would have respected the Geneva Convention.

FK: No, we didn't think so. That was our opinion. But on a night patrol when I would go out with my...I carried a .45 for protection because they couldn't have seen me from anyone else.

CM: Right. Did you go out as a medic or did you go out as—

FK: As a medic. Yes, sir.

CM: You didn't just go out on a night patrol to go out on night patrol?

FK: No, I'd go out as a medic on a night patrol, and with me, if I didn't have a gun available, one of them would give me a .45.

CM: At that time, the members of the Force all carried .45s. Is that right?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: As well as a combat knife?

FK: Yes, we had our knife.

CM: Case V-42s?

FK: Yes, sir. I had one of them I carried all the time.

CM: And then either an M1 or Thompson?

FK: Well, the Thompson and M1. Now in the Pacific, I had an M1 but I never carried that in the European Theater. I did this for night patrol for self-protection. I didn't go out to fight. I went out to protect myself in case I needed to.

CM: Tell me, was there ever occasion to where you'd lend service or aid to wounded Germans?

FK: No, I never did.

CM: Would you leave them for German medics?

FK: I never contacted them. I never had...I think, I don't recall all of it, but there was a time or so they had come back through but somebody had taken care of them. I didn't myself. Only....Well I'll take that back. In Southern France I took care of an officer, a German officer, when we took the [unintelligible]. We knocked this pillbox out, and it was a big placement on the hill that they had a big gun in it. When they knocked it out, I took care of him when he come out, and then sent him back. But I was his first aid, then let him go.

CM: this may not be a fair question and don't answer it if you don't want to.

FK: That's okay.

CM: But after your experience being wounded twice, do you still have any feelings of animosity toward the Germans?

FK: Not today. When I came back, I did, and I'm German. Not all German, but a majority German. My mother was German. My grandfather come from Germany—my mother's side.

CM: My father's a World War Two veteran too. He was in the Battle of the Bulge, and he doesn't maintain any animosity today, but—

FK: Oh, I don't, now. When I came back, I didn't think much of them, but still I knew that I was wrong in thinking that.

CM: It's amazing the pain and suffering and what one can go through in a war or combat situation and the intense personal feelings, and then a few years later, it's behind them.

FK: Well, I finally settled down and realized that they were doing a job just like I was, but when you're out there you don't think that.

CM: I know.

FK: You know.

CM: I'm still not sure how I feel about North Vietnamese—

FK: See, yeah—

CM: —and that's almost 20 years ago.

FK: —it's the same way. There's no difference.

CM: Well, Frank, if...Do you think if the Force had remained intact, do you think you might have stayed in the military?

FK: I don't know. I was offered commission twice or offered a chance for commission if it was open, twice, and I turned it down.

CM: Was that in the Force?

FK: What?

CM: Was that in the Force?

FK: That was when the Force broke up and then again in the 101st, but it would have been a medical man. But it was signing for another year in the service, and I would have been in Paris for 90 days and I didn't really want to put my name in.

CM: You liked the Force, but really didn't want to stay in the military as a—

FK: No, I came home when I had the chance. Sometimes afterwards I wished I'd have stayed, but things have been better this way.

CM: Tell me, what do you do now in civilian life?

FK: I'm retired.

CM: Okay. Well, what did you do for a career?

FK: I was a small businessman, and I've worked for grocery chains in management. I've worked in a nuclear plant as a guard my last few years after I sold my business. Previous to that, I had run restaurants and drive-ins—A & W—and I ran a Mini Mart.

CM: A pretty diversified career.

FK: I tried to learn everything I could. [laughs]

CM: [laughs] It sounds like the Force was certainly a good basic training.

FK: I think the army was the best training I ever had. I was a green farm boy that didn't know branch of the service from the other when I went in.

CM: It certainly sounds like you saw it all.

FK: A little bit. But I had it lucky to where what most of my friends did because I was wounded in the hospital when they went through a lot of the major campaigns.

CM: Well, it sounds like you certainly took part in some of the major ones.

FK: Well, I tried to do what I could.

CM: You made it all through Southern France.

FK: Yes. I wasn't wounded again there or in the 101st Airborne. I went all through.

CM: It sounds like you certainly saw the war in Europe.

FK: Yeah, I saw 11 countries in Europe, Africa, and three islands in the Pacific.

CM: [laughs] It's amazing where you can travel in the army, isn't it?

FK: Yeah, and not even care if you are there or not. I made some big mistakes by not going ahead and doing other things, but when we'd relieved, I'd just say, "Hey, I want to rest."

CM: Speaking of that, when you would get relieved or have time off, what sort of activities would the Force members do? I'd imagine everyone was so exhausted—

FK: Yes.

CM: —that you would rest.

FK: They'd give them weekend passes, and then they'd retrain us and things like that and reorganize. We so much reorganizing to do due to casualties. It was a lot.

CM: You mentioned training. Sounds like training was always an important part of the Force. Even after a campaign.

FK: Yes, the training amphibiously before we went into Southern France. Our first invasion was made in rubber boats. The next one was LSTs.

CM: The first invasion. Was that at Kiska?

FK: Yes. Rubber boats we went in there.

CM: Okay. Then where was your next amphibious invasion?

FK: Southern France because Anzio was already before we went up there. They were already there.

CM: Okay. You went in on LSTs in Southern France?

FK: LS infantry. When I say that landing craft infantry other than LSTs, and that's what we went into Southern France on.

CM: But it sounds like the training was always kept up because there was such a turnover by Force members.

FK: Yes. Even when we was holding a line in Anzio, new men come in, we would train them because the line I would take platoons when I was at Gusville (?)—we called it on the line—and I would take groups of recruits back and train them medically. We tried to train even our riflemen and everyone—the platoon would take back and train. We train them sometimes I'd just go back [unintelligible] down in a gully or something.

CM: Would you cross-train your riflemen to be medics?

FK: We give them some medical training. Every rifleman had some medical training also, and it was very successful. They took care of their own a lot because sometimes we couldn't take care of them all.

CM: Went by the just large number of casualties?

FK: Yes.

CM: Can you think of anything that you'd like to say about the Force?

FK: Well that's it. There are the things, personal things I'd just as soon not say because of the way people would take it and things like that so I'd just as soon not unless I was asked specifically of some things I would answer. I had a lot of things happen from...like being with the boys, and some of the things we did for entertainment and while on the lines to keep up the morale. Some of us were quite cutups and pulled things that were probably almost insanity, and I'm sure that you probably did the same thing.

CM: A very, very different type of humor comes across and types of behavior that would be totally unheard of or ridiculous under normal conditions.

FK: Under normal conditions you'd never have done it. I've seen other people do the same thing. We'd just do something that...And I found out that it paid off in this end point that I was lucky enough not to have cracked up where some of my friends did.

CM: You did have people crack up?

FK: Yes, sir.

CM: Just from battle or mental stress?

FK: Yes. Probably it was a lot of concussion and mental stress, and it was something that we never held against the other man because we knew that some people just had to...just like losing your temper, you had to bring it out.

CM: If people cracked up, were they sent out of the Force, sent to the hospital and—

FK: Well, some guys. We didn't very seldom send men to the back line...to the back off the line unless they were mental fatigue. Then sometimes we would keep them right with us. The medics, we would throw a cot down in an old building and talk to them and give them aspirin and stuff like that to settle them down and back up again. [The same way with colds or almost pneumonia sometimes. We'd put them on a cot or put them in a hole with a sleeping bag and give them aspirin and water and just make them drink liquids—fruit juices or anything—and it seemed to be very successful. You know, anybody that was wounded beyond mental or beyond

help—physically or mentally—they went right to the back. We'd evacuate them right out, but it's hard to explain. For you, maybe not, because you've been through it, of how people will react when they're under constant bombardments and constant machine gun fire. It's a little different than just something thrown at you at random occasionally.

CM: I would imagine there was a lot of sacrifice by the troops, almost heroics at times.

FK: Yes, you would be surprised.

CM: And heroics that were never written down or never recorded.

FK: Yes, and people turning down citations and instead asking for a casualty friend of theirs to get what he was supposed to get instead.

CM: Like what?

FK: Well, like a man maybe written up and he'd say...or they would come to him and say, "We'd like to write you up for a citation."

He's say, "No, how about doing it for him. He got killed." Then they'd ask you then to write it up, you'd write it up, and it would be sent posthumously to his folks.

CM: And it might be a Silver Star or a Distinguished Service Cross.

FK: Yes, sir. Anything.

CM: When in fact all the individual did was get killed in many cases.

FK: Well, no, usually they would do it on a man that was outstanding.

CM: No, I mean the man who was outstanding would get written up, but the medal would be sent to his parents and it just happened that perhaps he didn't do something outstanding. Am I following you correctly?

FK: Well, no. Let's put it this way. Let's say that a man was out there and he was doing something beyond the line of duty which usually they wrote him up if he was wounded or something and they would try to get something through. We didn't have a lot of Silver Stars and such, and there was some that not an awful lot was written up. Then sometimes that person would say "No, let's not do that, so-and-so deserves it more than me," and then they would pick out some of the outstanding things he did which was just as good—equally as good—and he would be...It would be sent to his parents. I've known of that happening in cases.

CM: Thanks for clearing that up.

FK: What?

CM: Thanks for clearing that up.

FK: That is what I meant. Again, like people were told to go that...that was it after they were wounded and that they couldn't do combat duty again, and some of them would say, "No," and they have been known to go AWOL and go back to the front lines. Then they would accept them or just absolutely refuse to be sent home. It's quite a thing, and I'm not sure that it's any different than any outfit than it was in ours. I'm sure that other outfits did likewise and other people—soldiers. You probably could tell the same thing on some of your friends in Vietnam.

CM: I've seen similar situations.

FK: You've seen the same thing.

CM: In fact, I had orders to go home. I was getting out of the army, and I extended for 30 days just because—

FK: That was very common in a unit. We had an officer one time that was taken prisoner for a short time, and while he was taken, we threw up an artillery [unintelligible]. They all took cover, and he broke and got away from them and came back. They sent him back to the hospital, and he goes AWOL in the hospital and went back up to fight on the push to Rome. That's what I am speaking of.

CM: You tell people today that you extended for 30 days in Vietnam—

FK: They think that you're bragging.

CM: Or you're crazy. And I certainly am not bragging.

FK: No, but they think that. People don't understand the pride and the friendship and the comradeship that goes along in the action.

CM: You almost have to have been there and been part of it.

FK: Like you, have to know what it is.

[pauses]

CM: Can you think of anything else, Frank, that you'd like to say?

FK: No, I can't right now.

CM: I'd like to say I sure appreciate you taking the time and sharing your experiences with me.

FK: Well, I hope this is something that will do you some good.

CM: It certainly is. I think it's an excellent interview. I've learned a lot—

[End of Interview]