Interview Top Level

John A. Adams '71 Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis.
Military Oral History Project.
Interview with Robert R. Fair by Cadet Gordon Holloway. February 17, 2009.

About the interviewer: Cadet Holloway (Class of 2009), a History major, will commission in the U. S. Army following graduation. He ultimately hopes to have a career as a military historian.

Holloway – The following interview is being conducted for the John A. Adams 1971 Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis as part of the requirements for HI 393—History of World War II. The interviewer is Cadet Gordon Holloway. The interviewee is Robert Fair, a member of D Company, 399th Infantry Regiment, 100th Infantry Division. Today is February 17, 2009 and we are meeting in the Marshall Library.

Holloway – How are you doing today?

Fair – Very good.

Holloway – Do you remember much of the Depression?

Fair – Oh yes.

Holloway – Can you explain a little bit about what it was like growing up during that time?

Fair – We had it easy because we had plenty to eat. We had a very middle-class home with a lot of emphasis on study and doing well in school. Most of my activities, in fact, were generated at the school or around the school and maybe the church. We would play or have social functions at one of the two places. The big thing I remember is that there was no money. When I mean no money, I mean no money. If we found a penny on the ground or we were able to get a nickel for something, it was great. By the time I was seven or eight years old I got a twenty-five cent a week allowance, of which ten cents had to go to the church, and a nickel had to go to the Sunday School so I would wind up with a dime a week.

That was enough to get me into the movies because the movies only cost ten cents for twelve and under. For adults, smaller theaters were fifteen cents and the larger theaters were a quarter. Finally, towards the end of the Depression, it went up to thirty-five cents for an adult to go to the movies. Movies were a big deal because that's one of the few escapes we had. By the time I was twelve, I was in the Boy Scouts and spent a lot of time in the Boy Scouts and that was recreational, as well as weekly meetings and community service. That provided a diversion. After I was twelve I went to Boy Scout camp four years in a row in the summer—two weeks each time. That initially cost $1.00 a day so you'd go for a week for $7.00. That included all your meals. There was plenty to do. We played a lot and had a good time, but we didn't spend any money because there was no money.

Holloway – Your time with the Boy Scouts and going to camp, did you enjoy that? This ties in with the next question. When you decided to join the Army, did that help you out in any way, shape or form?

Fair – Yes. I eventually became an Eagle Scout, and one of the merit badge requirements was a camping merit badge. You had to sleep out 50 nights. So, over a couple of summers, I spent a lot of time on the ground trying to find grassy spots. I didn't have to dig foxholes or anything. I had a cooking merit badge. Our scout camp was out in the woods on a river so we had many opportunities to live the rough life that you eventually lived in the infantry. I think it prepared me. There was a discipline and some order. We had patrols, which were like squads and we had organizations, which required us to salute. We did retreats and reveille, so it was sort of a mini-army experience.

Holloway – When you were officially going into the Army, how did your family react?

Fair – Well, I didn't quite answer the other question. From 1940 through maybe 1945 or even 1946, everybody expected to be in the Army or Navy or Marines or Air Force. It was almost a given. It was a matter of when we would do it, when would we get drafted, or volunteer or what. So I was expecting it as soon as I graduated from high school, or shortly thereafter. I really wanted to, at least, get a year of college because I was going to graduate from high school just after I turned 17 and you weren't eligible for the draft until you were 18.

The Army, as you probably know, came up with this Army Specialized Training Program—ASTP—and that was advertised starting around February or March of 1943. That promised an

accelerated college education and a commission as a second lieutenant at the end of that deal. First of all you had to take a test and qualify for it. In March of 1943 the posters were up in the high schools and a lot of us opted to take an all-day test on Saturday. On the cover of the test, I remember distinctly they had two boxes. One for Army and one for Navy. Army A-12, Navy B-12. After the test I was leaving with several of my friends and they had all checked Navy and I checked Army because of my eyesight. I didn't think I could get in the Navy being nearsighted. I sort of gave up and checked Army. All my buddies checked Navy—at least my three closest friends—and in due time we were all notified that we were accepted into the special program, and suggested if we wanted to participate we should volunteer and be sworn into the Reserves.

So, actually, at 17 it was the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program. I decided to go ahead and do that, and went down to the enlistment station and took the physical and the other tests and joined the Reserves. You didn't know when were you were going to be called up so I did some other things. I was called in mid-August of 1943. I got orders to report and, of course, as you may know, by that time I had been working about four months on the Alaskan Highway at Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory. My mail was always forwarded from home, like the orders from the Army to report. A very official envelope came to my house and my folks forwarded it to me in Yukon. I was to report on August 18th and on about August 17th I got these orders to report to Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

In the meantime I was draft-deferred as long as I was working on the Alaskan Highway. I thought it would be an adventure and I wouldn't have to worry about the Army for a while. So I actually spent a couple of days talking to the Army—they had an Army camp there. I talked to a major there and a couple of others and even the head of the whole Alaskan Highway project. I asked for an appointment with him and they sort of laughed and asked "What do you want to see him about?" But he actually let me in his office, which was huge, and he said "If you have a chance to get a college education at the Army's expense, you should definitely do it. I'll arrange transportation for you as far as Edmondton, Alberta." That's a four hour flight, so that's what happened. That very night I was on a plane to Edmonton and, on my own. I took several trains to finally get to Baton Rouge and I reported about a week late, which caused great consternation on the part of the Army. "You had orders to report." I told them the circumstances of getting the mail and getting down there, and so I was forgiven.

I spent a semester at Louisiana State University in the ASTRP with about 50 or 75 other guys from Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas—mainly Texas. In December I was sworn into regular Army—mid-December of 1943.

Holloway – That sounds like quite an adventure, trying to get everything situated. Going back a little bit, I'm sure you have gotten this question many times. December 7, 1941—a lot of people explain how they remember where they were and they knew exactly what they were doing. I assume you're the same way. Can you tell us a little about your reactions and where you were?

Fair – Absolutely. Two things. One is that I was at a movie on the afternoon of December 7—Sunday afternoon. I had gone down by myself to the movie. In those days they ran across--not unlike how they do today in the televisions—a trailer across the bottom of the screen which said the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. I didn't think a lot of that. They mentioned places that I had never heard of—Hawaii and the Philippines. I left the movie and went home. I was delivering a morning paper route at the time and my parents were looking for me because the newspaper had called up all our houses and said they needed all the carriers to deliver extras so I had to go immediately. The extra, of course, was like most extras. It had a front page with a lot of information and pictures. The rest of the paper was the same. I had to go out and sell extras. So I remember December 7th very well.

I remember how most of us were very confused and didn't know what was going on but by the next day or two, everybody knew. For one thing, the next day was a Monday and we went to a high school assembly. All students and faculty in the high school went to the assembly. The authorities had set up a big radio speaker in the middle of the stage so we could listen to President Roosevelt's speech where he was asking Congress to declare war on the Japanese.

Holloway – I remember where I was in high school on September 11th. That's somewhat similar. Going back to your basic training, you told me about your adventures and reporting about a week late. Do you have any other experiences that stand out in your mind about basic training, or advanced training. I know it was pretty mundane for you. A lot of hurry up and wait.

Fair – Yes, I remember a lot of that. In December we were all sent to Ft. Benning for basic training to a special area—the Sand Hill area out there where all the ASTP training was done. It was a regimental size, three battalions, and they were rotating through. The battalion next to us had finished

their basic training when we were about at the fourth week. Then a new group would come in. All the ones who had gone to LSU and all the ones who I was inducted with were in the same battalion and pretty much in the same company, so I knew most of those guys. There were two things. One is that basic training, I thought, was difficult physically—nothing that we couldn't handle. It was also difficult mentally because they gave us a hard time. It was their version of the Rat experience at VMI. They made us get down on our knees and crawl on the company street to pick up a cigarette butt that somebody had dropped. So the whole squad had to get down and get it.

But the other thing about it that made it not as productive, at least for me, as it should have been, was that we were just going to go through basic training and then back to college so we really weren't all that excited about learning all the details about fighting a war and the weapons. I treated it not as importantly as I should have, but again, that was pretty much the attitude of all of us. Of course, that got us in a lot of trouble even then and later. You had to have very high HET scores on these tests. They gave us other tests when we went to active duty. You had to score 115 or better—sort of an IQ test—to be in this ASTP college program, so that added another problem for us. That was sort of a mental problem because all the non-coms who were responsible for our training, if we did anything the least bit dumb, they would give us a hard time "Because you guys are supposed to be so smart. You are all college boys. You're supposed to know all this stuff. We've told you three times. Now why can't you remember it?" So that added another little twist to the whole thing.

Holloway – On your way over—falling right in line with your time after basic training—can you tell us a little bit about shipping over to England and then how you made your way to the front lines and that long progression?

Fair – I'll do it in two or three steps. First of all, after basic we were assigned to the 100th Division at Ft. Bragg. They broke up the ASTP. There was something like 300,000 people in this program, all over the country, but as you read later, in several places, they say that Eisenhower and Bradley and some of those people in Europe who were responsible, especially for D-Day and immediately after D-Day, were extremely concerned about casualties. The forecast for the number of casualties they were going to have for the invasion of France was, as it turned out, way out of line. They thought it was going to be hundreds of thousands of casualties when it was actually tens of thousands. They were worried

about replacement soldiers. In fact, they were very worried about it most of the war. Replacements were scattered at first, but eventually they all went to the infantry. As time went on, a lot of those got transferred back into the infantry because the infantry needed soldiers.

We had advanced infantry training at Bragg. We went overseas in a convoy—the whole division—and another division, plus other supplies. It was a big convoy to Europe. We were on that ship 18 days. It seems incredible. We were on it two or three days in New York Harbor and didn't go anywhere. Then we went down south—I guess that was normal—to go around the islands and on up past the Azores and up through Gibraltar and stayed close to the North African shore, then on up past Sicily. It took a long time and we were all thoroughly tired of being on board. They stuck you around like crazy—sleeping four bunks high. We had two storms and there was a lot of seasickness. I got seasick a couple of times. It was just terrible. But a nice day would come and you would immediately go out on deck and stay out on deck and if you could find a place to sit or lie down, you'd do that.

Uneventful, but still from the first of October until about the 20th of October we were moving to Europe and we landed in Marseille, France. We were the first convoy to land in Marseille. The harbor was all full of sunken ships. Some of our guys had to go down rope ladders into landing craft to get off. Our ship was able to pull up next to a sunken ship, which was next to a wharf, so we would walk right out and across the top deck of the sunken ship and up on the wharf so we didn't have that problem.

We all had full field packs and we marched through the harbor area and through the city of Marseille—through the eastern side and then on to a big field where we bivouacked for about a week. That was a nice hike, especially if you had been on a ship for over two weeks. You weren't ready to walk 12 miles with a full field pack. It worked out and we spent about a week getting organized again. We had to actually get volunteers—you know how the volunteer thing goes—every day for several days, to go back down to the harbor to get a lot of equipment and ride the trucks back to the bivouacked area and bring the equipment. We got one day in Marseille and that was fun. One of the things was we got our first bath. You paid fifty cents and they had bath houses downtown. After three weeks shipboard, it was nice to get a bath. That was a big deal. That plus bottles of wine—some of us were 18 years old, just turning 19.

Holloway – Up to this point, had you been following at home, with your basic training, the progression of the war through North Africa, Sicily, Italy? Did that make an impact on you?

Fair – Oh yes. We were very anxious for news of the fighting. We spent some time prior to shipping out worrying about whether we would go to the Pacific or to Europe. We all wanted to go to Europe. We could understand the enemy and what we were doing in Europe. At that point we couldn't understand what in the world was going on in the Pacific, except it was horrible and we didn't want any part of the jungle fighting and the fight-to-the-last-man Japanese.

We were anxious and that continued all along. Every day, on our phones, we would get a little information that the Russians had done something, or we had done something. Of course, we were very anxious for the war to be over, especially before we got involved. Unfortunately that was not the case.

Holloway – A more technical than a historical question: as far as uniforms and equipment, I understand that the newer green uniforms were coming in. There was the older khaki and the wool uniform. Can you describe what kind of stuff you were wearing and the equipment, if you can remember? Was it just the Army uniform of the time?

Fair – Well, most of the time we wore what we called fatigues, which is sort of what the Army wears now, except they were all dark green—sort of like coveralls. We had regular leather boots. We did have other uniforms—olive drab uniforms—wool, and sometimes we would wear that. We had raincoats and overcoats and actually, as the winter came along, we had about every piece of clothing you could possibly think of. The worst part of being in the Army at that time, in my opinion, was trying to stay warm. It got down below zero at least once, and it was down in the five and ten degrees. They said it was the coldest winter they had had in northern Europe in years. If you see some of the pictures of the Battle of the Bulge, you can tell it. You were living in foxholes and you were very cold.

You add that to the fact that you were scared to death all the time—those were the two big problems. Just living, existing and living with a certain amount of fear. I always felt, myself—I told myself—that everybody is scared. It didn't make any difference who you are. Whether you were the platoon leader or the company commander, you always have a certain amount of fear. Hopefully it is well controlled and you don't have too much of a problem with it, but it's always there. It's always in the back of your mind, that some guy could come and shoot me in the head any minute. You are always worried

about that and it's a good thing I think. I guess that's the way it has always been in a wartime situation. It is today. You just can't get rid of it, and you probably shouldn't. It's probably good for you to be cautious, to be concerned.

What we had, basically, was what we could wear, and most of us had a backpack. It had very little in it. We always had a shelter half and a blanket. The shelter half would either go on top of your logged-over foxhole, or it would go on the ground. If you didn't have the shelter half to put on the ground, you'd put a blanket on the ground and maybe then two of you would sleep in a foxhole. You'd use the other guy's blanket to cover yourself with and try to stay warm.

Because you are always in a situation where you didn't know what was going to happen next, you rarely got undressed. You're in the same clothes, you loosen your boots maybe, but you don't take them off. If you've got an overcoat on, you probably take that off and use it to cover yourself, but you wear the same underwear, the same shirt for weeks. My wife has heard me say many times that one of the big deals in war—as silly as it sounds—was taking a bath and getting clean clothes, especially underwear, because that only happened about five times in five months. And you weren't even guaranteed clean clothes. You might get a chance to take a quick bath—the Army had these portable showers that they'd bring in periodically and they'd run you through in about four minutes. They would give you a little piece of soap and you'd take a bath and then put your same clothes back on again. But you wouldn't take them off because it was so cold all the time, and it was wet. It rained a lot and then it got cold, and then it snowed. It was just four months at least until it got to be spring. Existing was just very difficult. A lot of people didn't. We had a lot of trench foot, flu, sickness, so we were always down a couple of people in the squad. There was always somebody gone for one reason or another.

Holloway – This must have brought you very close to your platoon, your company. Can you reflect a little bit on that unit cohesion and some of your friends?

Fair – You got to know the people, especially in your squad--very close--and you got to know the people in your platoon pretty well. Beyond that you didn't know a lot of people. You knew a few others in the company—maybe a dozen others—and the only people you really could identify from the other platoons, for sure, were the officers. You had a half-dozen officers in a company. They were pretty prominent and they were around a lot. They were pretty much the same officers we trained with. You

knew them but I don't remember ever seeing—maybe once or twice—the battalion commander, the lieutenant colonel. He was very good and he got both the Silver Star and Distinguished Service Cross by leading the battalion, but I don't think I ever saw him and I know I never saw the colonel, and I know I never saw the general. I don't care what you hear or read, but you just don't see—the private, PFC, sergeant, corporal—doesn't see the senior officers. We were very pleased with the division and we were proud of our battalion and all these other things, but we were very close just to the people we were around all the time.

Now I've been a little embarrassed, myself, because I had a sort of arms-length relationship with most of the people that I knew in the platoon. I was that way because—I don't know why exactly—except I was always afraid that one of them would get wounded or killed and I didn't want to get too emotional or too tied up, and I think that's probably a good thing. I'm not sure of it. I'm a little embarrassed about it. We had a number of people get killed and lots—40 or 50 in our company—get wounded, but we had an arms-length feeling about it. It was sort of, well, what can you expect? He's wounded but he didn't get killed. That was good. Or he got killed and that's too bad. My driver got killed when I got wounded. He was a hell of a nice guy but I just can't get too emotional about it. I hate to say it but that's part of the game and it's a hard game, a tough game.

Holloway – Did this have any noticeable effect on the morale of yourself and the unit? Did it stay strong through these extremely hard times?

Fair – I thought our morale was pretty good all the time. One of the nice things about World War II, compared to some of the others like Vietnam and even today, is that we were making progress. We were taking ground. We were defeating in small ways, if not larger ways, the enemy. We were capturing them. We were killing them. So we were making progress. I'm sure it felt that way in the Pacific where, after all the horror, they had still captured the island. So, when you're "doing well" your morale is going to be better than when you can't see any results. Now we had a lot of times where we were defeated—where a company attack went wrong or an ambush—and there were low points, but the next day or the day after, it sort of turned around and we captured the village or the objective.

In general, I think, our morale was pretty good. We were the Red Battalion and we wore red scarves—torn up Nazi flags, actually—until we decided that maybe that wasn't a good idea in case we

got captured. The enlisted men had the same gripe about the officers, I'm sure, that they've had ever since Hannibal—the Army didn't know what they were doing, they were making mistakes, they were getting us in trouble, we're going to win despite our officers. That was just normal. We didn't really feel that way. We had a lot of confidence in our leadership. I know that doesn't happen with you all, where all the freshmen feel that everything the officers do is right. I doubt it. It wasn't true then, and it's not now.

Holloway – You talked a little bit about how your battalion commander was quite a distance away—your colonel—and then General Burress, VMI Class of 1914, so I'm interested in that. Do you recollect any opinions of General Burress during your time in the 100th Division?

Fair – Well, he was the general from the time the division was formed. Generally speaking, the division's morale was good, as I've said. The assumption was that he knew what he was doing. A few pronouncements that we ever read about from him said all the right things. One of the things that he said several times was that he was anxious to accomplish his mission with the least loss of lives and we appreciated that. We loved that. We got a little feedback from time to time, that things were pretty good at division headquarters. That they liked Burress a lot and he knew what he was doing. If you read a lot of history of World War II, out of the 80 or 90 divisions in the Army, you are bound to read about some division commanders who didn't know what they were doing and didn't do very well. We always thought highly of Burress as a person. Not one that we knew or saw, but as a division commander—a leader.

Our regimental commander, who we never saw, a full colonel, was later a division commander as a brigadier general, and our assistant battalion commander—Lentz—was eventually a battalion commander—not of ours, but another one, as a lieutenant colonel. As I said earlier, our lieutenant colonel was very brave. He was a West Pointer. The first really big fight we had was at a town called St. Remy. There were a couple of towns with that name in France and this was the one in the eastern part. We had to capture that town and we had to go from where we were about a mile or two miles down roads and across open fields to this other town. There was a little rise on the right side where the Germans were dug in. They had good field of fire with machine guns. So the battalion, as usual, with two companies and a third in reserve, started down this road and through these fields and the machine guns fired and they used a lot of rocket launchers and anti-aircraft laid flat as these screaming things came across. It was our first engagement and the two companies just stopped, and the colonel, who was

observing from the back, charged out, literally, in front of them both and yelled and hollored and led the two companies in to capture that town. Everybody knew that—whether you saw it or not—and within three or four weeks he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Immediately we felt we had several layers of very successful people. Our regimental commander got promoted to division commander eventually after Burress left after the war. The assistant battalion commander was made commander of the third battalion. Our battalion commander was made the colonel and had a couple of nice awards. Even our company commander was made assistant battalion commander, or major. So we generally had good leadership, although we also had some that were problems.

My platoon leader—Schrader—was a first lieutenant and at Bragg we thought he was by far the best platoon leader we had worked under. He seemed to know everything. As soon as we got to France and at that first objective there, he just retreated into his shell, so to speak, and within a week or four or five days, he was removed and we got a new platoon leader. This, in spite of the fact he was so good for several months. They took him to regiment or some sort of job where he didn't do anything. At least he didn't lead anybody. I observed that. I thought "Geez, what's the matter with this guy?" Anything that had to happen, he would deal it off to somebody else, a second lieutenant or to one of the platoon sergeants or somebody.

In general, when you had good leadership, all the way up to Burress, it's going to permeate down to the fact that, hey, we're lucky. We've got good leadership and they're going to take care of us. That's the way most of us felt.

Holloway – Definitely. You were talking about this officer at Ft. Bragg, training. As far as your own training, how do you feel that that prepared you for what was to come in France and onward? Was it sufficient? Was it lacking?

Fair – I thought it prepared me pretty well. A lot of what you get in basic training and in advanced training, is physical. You did a lot of marching, hiking. You have other physical kinds of contests—expert infantry badge, etc. We always thought that if they couldn't think of anything else to do, they'd take us for a five mile hike. And of course you had calisthenics. I thought I was in good shape on that score. I was one of the better ones in our platoon or in the company, as far as completing our 25-mile hike without any

trouble or on the forced marches. I thought that prepared me pretty well and, frankly, I thought I was alright. I was an expert on the carbine and I was quite qualified in the mortars and the machine guns and heavy weapons in my company. I always wondered what I would do if I was in the middle of an attack and I was with an unfamiliar weapon. I'm not sure I'd know what to do. We didn't get a broad spectrum. We saw everything and we even had a chance to fire everything, but we didn't really spend much time on some of these sophisticated weapons. We fired things like machine guns and bazookas. It took us two or three minutes to get the bazooka wired properly. I thought "Oh my God, if a tank was coming down, he'llrun right over us before we'd get the damn thing fired." We didn't have a lot of weapons in those days. I don't know about now. The few I had to use, I think I knew what to do.

Holloway – So you feel that you were sufficiently trained?

Fair – Yes. I couldn't fire my .45 very well and had to go back and try it again and that's the only weapon I had a problem with, but I don't think that was unique. The .45 pistol that the Army had in those days—I'm not sure you could hit anything with it if you were very far away.

Holloway – Going back to some of your time on the front lines. Can you describe, on an average day, your time from waking up through your day? What were your daily rituals or what you would do?

Fair – I would have to preface anything I'd say by the fact that my memory is that you don't do anything of consequence most of the time. It's not like a TV program where you see them charging and fighting. There is some of that but you spend a lot of time just being alert and otherwise not doing much. Your day, at least in our situation, was paired with two people in a foxhole or you'd pair up even if you were sleeping on the floor in a beat up house. One of those two people would be on guard all the time. If it was a house, he would be just inside the door. If you were in a foxhole, one of you would be awake and alert and looking out and seeing what's going on. We tended to do two hour shifts and that would be true 24 hours a day. At one time I lobbied hard with my buddy to do four hour shifts so we could, at least, get some sleep before being awakened again. So you do spend half your day—half your 24 hours—being alert, on guard.

What would happen with us is that we frequently—not always, but frequently—got hot chow in the morning and at night and then you ate rations during the day, if you were in a position where it wasn't too dangerous. If you were, then you just ate rations. If you got hot chow it usually came up before it was

light, so you might eat your breakfast at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning and then you'd take turns. Your buddy would go and in 15 minutes or so he would come back and then you'd go, so somebody would be there all the time. You'd eat dinner after dark, so if you got hot chow at all, you wouldn't get it until about 6:00 or 6:30. In the winter time, 6:00 is dark.

The rest of the time you weren't in a position where you could do anything. You couldn't get four people to sit down and play cards or anything like that. You dozed around a lot. If you weren't on guard, you were sleeping most of the time, so you might take a morning nap and an afternoon nap. Usually if there was much in the way of fighting, it tended to be in patrols and they were always at night—dark, or first thing in the morning. Usually if you were on patrol, if you had to do any of that, you'd be pulled back for the next day and somebody else would take your place there so you could just take it easy because you would be up all night. That's not a happy situation either, to wander out in no-man's land.

We were always concerned about mines and you never knew. We had a number of people in the whole division—maybe a couple of dozen or maybe 30 or 40—over time, who had stepped on a mine and gotten a foot blown off, or killed. You were always worried about that, or the fact that there would be a German right next to you who would shoot you. We always worried about that, and usually you didn't find anything, or you determined that they were there where they weren't supposed to be and you came back. The truth of the matter is, you didn't do a whole lot most of the time. Of course, you had to be moved around, either marched or be trucked to another area or sector. A lot of the time you were trying to just live. If it's pouring rain for days on end it seemed like, or snowing, you just had a terrible time trying to stay dry or fairly dry. We weren't in a position to build fires or gather around. We were encouraged not to gather around.

It is really not all that exciting, except that you're always concerned that something could happen. A couple of times something did happen. We got attacked a couple of times. Very viciously. And then we attacked several times. We were moving up and sometimes got a lot of people hurt doing that.

Holloway – That's very interesting. I've heard that the daily life of a G.I. did consist generally of a lot of waiting, excitement, and anxiety. As far as your time when you attacked, and got attacked, can you explain what was going through your mind as a young man being sent over to Europe, fighting against the

Third Reich, essentially? With your experiences in combat, what was going through your mind? Can you enlighten us some?

Fair – Well, there were mixed emotions. First of all, I wondered "Why me?" My three best friends had all gone in the Navy. They were still in college. They eventually got a degree and got commissioned, about the time I got discharged from the Army. So I say, "Why me?" although I had a lot of company because there were a lot of others in the same boat, even in our company and platoon. "I wish I didn't have to do this and when is this going to be over? I don't know if I can stand it another day." All that type of thing. At the same time—especially as time went on—I felt pretty good about myself. I'm doing something that not everybody can do or will do. I'm having experiences that even these best friends are not having. I've always felt that way, even after I was out of the Army, and to this day. I spent a lot of years afterwards, never referring to the fact that I had been in the Army, never referring to the fact that I was wounded, or anything else. I just didn't want anybody to know that particularly. But I was proud of it and I felt good about it. Now, more recently, in my old age, I have gotten back to not caring what people know or don't know. At the time there is not a lot of time to feel sorry for yourself.

I want to mention something that was very important to me. These ASTP guys, all of whom were pretty intelligent—incidentally, most of whom have been very successful—businessmen, doctors and lawyers—were around and so there were always people in the same boat, intelligent people. Almost all of them had been at least a semester or two in college—maybe a couple of years—and they were very good people to know, to talk to, to commiserate with. Of course, most of the people were not that way. Most of the soldiers were farm boys, or from the inner cities—which I didn't have much in common with. But thank God I had this other group who were going through the same experience I was. They didn't let you feel too sorry for yourself. That made the experience a lot better.

I don't know how it would be today to be with a group of 30 guys in a platoon, none of whom had been to college and many of whom were not the brightest kids around. I think it would be a different kind of environment and a different kind of leadership required. We got a little of that because a lot of us ASTP guys were not above questioning an order or asking why we were doing this or not doing that, whereas you wouldn't get that from some of the others. It made a difficult situation a little better. I think, frankly, most of the ASTP group knew what the objective was and they made pretty good leaders. At

least two of my very best friends got battlefield commissions and there must have been several others, and most of the others became sergeants. They turned out to be good leaders even though they were 19 or maybe 20 at the most—mostly 19—but they were good soldiers and they knew how to be good soldiers because they had listened during training. So that made life a little better I think.

Holloway – What was your opinion of the German at that time—the average German soldier? Was it more of a—he's just like me, he's trying to fight for his country—or was it more of a sense of hatred—he's trying to kill me?

Fair – There were at least three types of German soldiers that we fought against. First of all, a lot of the privates—PFCs—were not even German. They were Bulgarians or Hungarians or others that were conscripted into the service and were there because they had to be there. They were forced to be there. Then there was the average German. He was young or older. By young, I mean a lot of them were 16, 17, 18—and older I'm talking 35 to 40, somewhere in there. They did a job. I guess they had to. Then there were the SS. That's the way the Germans—at least in our little area—worked it. They sprinkled SS troops throughout the division, so you were very likely to have a sergeant who was SS in charge of eight or nine of these other two types. They were more scared of the SS guy than they were of us. If you could get the SS guy, or a couple of them, you had a much better chance of success. The rest would tend to surrender, especially the older German—especially the displaced persons that were having to fight. Some of the younger kids were not willing to give up. They were still caught up in the whole situation. As far as talking to them, they reminded me a lot of our soldiers. They looked the same, they talked the same, most of them did not speak English, but some of did. We had translators who would interview them in our presence. It depended on who you were fighting.

At one point they had—as part of their attacking force on the 2nd of January—brought a division down from Norway. It was a German division. They had been in Norway and done some fighting, but not a lot. They were your typical Army group. They didn't have Hungarians, Bulgarians, etc. They were all German. They had been in training for several years, they were good soldiers, and they did well. This is the fall of 1944 and the winter of 1944-1945. I could argue that most of the better German divisions—soldiers—had either been taken out of the war one way or another or perhaps were fighting on the Russian front and that was to our benefit, I think. We don't say much about that but I don't think we were,

overall, fighting the prime German divisions, which is just as well because we got enough trouble as it was, but it helps.

Holloway – Are there any instances, with your time on the front line, that really stand out in your mind that you always think about or talk about?

Fair – In very late December the German attacked and they were having trouble breaking through. This attack was meant to draw U.S. forces away. They would attack us on one side of our division, and then on the other side. The idea was that those two attacks would come and isolate our division as well as some other troops. We had some activity around our foxholes. A couple of days before we had intercepted a German patrol and that was unusual. The Germans killed one of the U.S. guys. Then we took some artillery fire that came close to our foxholes again—very accurate, and rather surprising. It didn't hurt anybody but it dug up some ground.

So it was more activity than usual and we got the intelligence that there might be an attack, and sure enough on New Year's Eve and New Year's morning—at night—they attacked just to our right. They were about 300 or 400 yards away from where I was—to the right and around the corner. You couldn't see anything particularly, except tracers on both sides, and a lot of noise. They had some mortar fire, and it just went on and on. Pretty soon it sort of died out and it died out partially because they were successful on our right flank and had driven a wedge down our right flank, so our people had to pull back. So the attack was going on further away from us so you didn't hear as much. Our company commander and his staff were captured.

We didn't know what was going on. Nothing was really hurt but with all that firing going on we were all alert and spent a very restless night. The next morning, again, it was quiet. No hot chow came up. Our sound power phones—that's the way we communicated in those days—were all connected through the company CP to the various areas. That was a lifesaver all night. If you were on guard, you could listen and see what was going on and sometimes they could even read the headlines from the newspaper to keep us informed. But no sound power phones, no communication of any kind and finally, after it got daylight—maybe 7:00 or 7:30—I went back to try to find out what was wrong with our phone lines and try to connect the phone lines. I was doing that when the assistant battalion commander—Major Lentz, later lieutenant colonel—came whipping through the woods and said "What outfit are you

in?" My staff sergeant came up, saw him and met him and there were eight of us, I think. We had started out with a section—it must have been about 14. That was a week earlier and by this time I think there were eight or nine of us there. We split up in foxholes and abandoned ones. So the sergeant tried to tell the major that there were only a handful of us and the major said "You've got to move over and protect that draw. Make sure nobody comes up, and if they come up you are to fight to the last man." That's not a very nice kind of order. The sergeant said "We're a handful." He said "It doesn't make any difference. That's an order, soldier." Then he moved on out. We abandoned all our stuff and got our weapons and moved over to the draw and then nothing happened.

The people who were pulling back, came back by us and they were withdrawing slowly, so that lieutenant said "You just join us." We did for fifteen minutes or so and pulled back and our sergeant again said "Hey, you know, we don't know you and you don't know us. We're not sure what we ought to be doing anyway. Why don't you let us go and find our company and join them?" He said "Fine." So we took off. The continuation of that was that we took off down the road away from them and an airplane came strafing down that road. It looked like a P-47, but it was a Nazi or German plane. That scared the living bejeebies out of us. So we hustled on down and walked for quite a ways and some of us got picked up by a jeep and taken back another mile or two to another little town where we found our company. The end of that saga was, again, that about six of us were designated to walk down to the edge of town and guard that road and make sure no German vehicles came up that road. We did that for a couple of hours and by this time it's 10:00 at night.

Then the order was that we were going to go back to where we were, more or less. It was so cold it was incredible—icy—and people were slipping going down hills and some were falling. We went back to where we had come from—a little further back—so that was an interval of about three days when we didn't get any sleep. We didn't have any bedrolls. We had left all that stuff. It was the highlight, or the lowlight, that I can think of. Although there were others like that too, but that was one of the ones that I can remember.

Another one was capturing a hill, which was very key. We lost a lot of guys—maybe 12 or 14 killed, and another flock wounded. We captured that hill and they tried to retake it and we fought that off. I didn't have anything to do with it. Then we stayed on top of that hill for two or three days, still not

knowing whether the Germans were going to counterattack or what they were going to try to do. So that was another, but there were several like that.

Holloway – I remember that your unit, the 100th, was called Sons of Bitch. How did that come about? I know they were famous for fighting in that area.

Fair – There is a town in eastern France—B-i-t-c-h-e—and they pronounce it Beach. But the G.I.s are such that they wouldn't let that go by so they called it Bitch. That was, at that time, one of our division objectives and it was quite a fortress town. It was part of the Maginot Line. At that time there were half a dozen bunker types—one of them had five levels underground—with little dispensaries and barracks and ammunition. That had tended to turn those around, so instead of aiming towards Germany, they were aiming at us. We couldn't go into this town until we had eliminated these strong points—these concrete bunkers. The 398th got the job of eliminating those bunkers. It took a couple of weeks. In the meantime we sat right there. Bitche was just down the road and you could see it, but we waited for these to be taken. About the time they were almost taken, the Battle of the Bulge started.

They finished taking the last one around the 20th of December and, in the meantime, when Patton's army pulled north, we spread out to take some of their space, and we stopped the attack on this town of Bitche. They attacked us from there in January and it was the middle of March before we actually moved into the town and by that time we didn't have any trouble at all. It was one of the bigger towns in that area, probably had around five thousand to eight thousand people. It had a little college. Of course, after the war, some of these smart guys decided they would establish a society, which was all sort of tongue-in-cheek kind of deal, and they called themselves Sons of Bitche. They had little cards. It didn't do anything particularly. It's just there and we still call ourselves that. I think I have a card here—I'm not sure.

At Ft. Jackson, for instance, over the last several years, we give a scholarship to enlisted people to go to college--$1,000 scholarship—and I've gone down there just about every time. They are very appreciative and it's always awarded in a ceremony where the commander of Ft. Jackson is present. Both the times that I have gone down—the last two times—I've been down four or five total, the major general who is the commander of Ft. Jackson, is always present at these awards and he gives some other awards. At the conclusion of our awards ceremony I asked if I could give an award to the general

and I gave him a card. As the card says, "Now you are a legitimate Son-of-Bitche." Everybody in the audience just thinks that is great. I ought to do that here. I haven't done that, as many times as I've been with your superintendent. It's not fun unless he's got officers and others sitting around. Of course this last time I did it, the guy laughed and said "Well, everybody in the audience already knew that." It doesn't have any meaning or anything, other than just giving the cards.

Holloway – What were your thoughts on VE-Day when you had heard that Germany had surrendered?

Fair – I was wounded on the 11th of April and I was sent back to an Army hospital in England. There were a couple of orthopedic wards there for the wounded. That's where I was on VE-Day. I was in bed as everybody else was. They were not an ambulatory kind of group there in that ward. It was very exciting and everybody was very pleased. As far as we were concerned, speaking generally I guess, we sort of expected it anyway because the resistance on the American front has just about ended. The Russians were still cleaning up Berlin so we didn't have too much to worry about. It was very exciting. We were confined so we couldn't do anything except laugh and say "How about that? Good deal." We didn't have any festivities or anything like that but we were very excited and very happy and very glad it was over.

The other problem we had, but I didn't have it because I was wounded severely enough that I was going to have to be discharged anyway, was that the Pacific war was still going on, especially in May and June. The Army had its hands full on Okinawa and they were just getting beat up like crazy. You read the newspapers and Okinawa was probably the worst fight the Army had throughout the whole war. There were like 50,000 casualties over a period of several months. The next question was, the war isn't over, let's not get too excited, and we'll have to reform some of these 50 divisions or whatever we have in Europe, and send them to the Pacific. The 100th was one of those as it turned out. Maybe by June or early July it had received orders. The 100th was in the process of being reformed at the time to be sent to the States, and then to the Pacific for the invasion of Japan.

Everybody had started reading about this and hearing this rumor, and of all the casualties they were getting at Okinawa. They couldn't get too excited because if you got too excited you'll go down further when you learn that you have to go to the Pacific. All that stuff were rumors mainly. We didn't

have any official data at that time but all the rumors said the invasion of the mainland of Japan was going to be very costly, so that was hanging over everybody's head. The hope was that we could be discharged. The Army had the point system and if you got enough points, you could get discharged. The point system was such that very few of our people—none of the ASTP guys would be discharged, because they hadn't been in the service long enough. It was muted—the celebration.

I was sent to a hospital, eventually, in the States and I was there when VJ-Day happened. It was a little bit different on VJ-Day because that was the end of the war and everybody was much more excited. This was in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It was not a very big town at the time and there wasn't much in the way of festivities. It wasn't like New York City, Time Square or anything like that where everybody was going crazy. There was quite a bit of excitement for that, but not as much for VE-Day.

Holloway – That's understandable. After you were finally discharged from the hospital, back in your civilian life, did you find any problems trying to readjust? Did being in the hospital help you a little bit?

Fair – No, the hospital didn't help at all. You have got to remember that so many other people had been in the service. Like, when I went to school to the University of Virginia, everybody that lived around me in the dormitories had been in the service. So you were not unique. My roommate had been in the service. People on both sides of me had been in the service. Just up and down the line in the dormitories, most of them had been in the service. There was a little bit of a problem with mainly the freshmen and sophomores who had come directly to college. I don't know about Williamsburg, but back in the late '40s after the war, most of the Virginia high schools, including the ones at Charlottesville, only had 11 grades. A lot of those kids graduated from high school when they were 16 and came on to college. So you had all the veterans—who actually were a majority—and then you had this other group that were 16 and 17 years old, who were freshmen and sophomores. I don't know if you have people here who have been in the service and then come to VMI to school—even a year or two in the service. My experience at Virginia was even by the time they were juniors and they were becoming student leaders, they were still only 18, and we were 21 or 22 years old and veterans and that produced a little bit of a friction at times. The 19 year old student council representative would say "You were supposed to do thus and so," and he's talking to a 22 or 23 year old who had been in the service three or four years and

had seen a lot of active duty. Some guys didn't take it too well. But the adjustment really happened, to some extent, because there were so many others in the same boat as you were.

As I said about these other three good friends—best friends—who went in the Navy, by the time I started my freshman year in engineering at UVA in the fall of 1946, they had graduated from college—one from Northwestern and one from Rice—both good schools, and had been commissioned. Two out of three had been sent to Harvard for a 13 week accounting course so they could be supply officers. One of them had graduated ahead of the other and he had done that and had been on a destroyer as a supply officer. Same age I was—20 at that time—and had been promoted to lieutenant JG, like first lieutenant, and I'm just starting school. They had four years of experience, either in the service or in private business or graduate school, while I was trying to get an undergraduate degree. It bothered me a little bit but we were still good friends and still saw each other at home.

Holloway – Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you would like to hit on? If not, that's fine.

Fair – While I wasn't exactly happy with how this ASTP broke up and being assigned to it—a combat infantry division—even at the time or afterwards, I was very proud of the fact that I had served in that capacity. While I didn't say a lot about it, as time goes on, I am even more proud. I had nothing to do with the 100th Division Association for 25 years or so, but as I got older the more proud I was of the fact that I had served. I have an older brother who didn't serve. He was an engineer and he was assigned when he graduated from college during the war, to a company that was making munitions, so he was deferred. We were very close and still are but even at the time, and especially as the years go by, I can tell that he really feels bad that he wasn't in the Army. All of his buddies were in the Army just about, and he felt that he missed out on something and I do too. I think he did miss out on something. All this stuff about three years of service and being delayed going to college—that all evens out after awhile.

Actually, it probably did me some good as far as education and discipline is concerned. Frankly I am very proud of the fact that I would have loved to have been an officer, but I was 18 years old. I hardly knew how to do anything. It's like taking a plebe after his first year at VMI and making him a second lieutenant. What does he know? He's 18 or 19 years old. I would loved to have done that and I saw some of my friends who were but they had better situations, they were maybe luckier, they were quite

good, but the rank doesn't bother me, particularly. You see these guys and keep up with them in the association. There is PFC O'Donald who is a very successful lawyer, Art Knight PFC who is a doctor, Morry LeVine who is a doctor and he was a PFC or T-5. They all value their experience. I don't have anything else to say.

Holloway – That's perfect. I just want to thank you for your service.