

William Abell Interview

Company I, 318th Inf Reg

(Library of Congress: Veterans History Project; interviewed by Joseph W. Davidson)

Interview with William Abell [28 April 2004]

Joe Davidson

Today is Wednesday, April 28, 2004. This is the beginning of a videotaped interview with William Ray Abell at his home at [address redacted]. My name is Joe Davidson and I will be the interviewer of William Abell during this taped interview session. The videographer is Dick Martin. This taped interview is part of the Veterans History Project being produced by the AARP Korean War Veterans Association, local chapter Lake of the Woods Virginia. William Abell is 78 years old and was born [redacted]. Mr. Abell, for the record, please tell us what war and branch of service you served in, what your rank was and where you served?

William Abell

Well, I was in the US Army, and I was in the-- during the war I was with the 80th Infantry Division and that's-- I stayed there, you know, all during the war.

Joe Davidson

Were you drafted or did you enlist in the service?

William Abell

I enlisted in the Marine Corps when I was 17 very early in my senior year in high school. And when I was examined, I went to be examined, everything was fine until I got to the eye examination and they determined that I was color blind and they wouldn't let me go in the Marines, but the man that was giving the test, he said, you would make a fine infantry man. So I went in the army.

Joe Davidson

Why did you join or why did you decide to go into the service?

William Abell

I think basically it's because everybody else was going, and I was so afraid that I would not pass the physical because I wasn't very big. I weighed 115 pounds, and so I was a little bit concerned but I never had a mark against me other than my color blindness.

Joe Davidson

Well, you mentioned that you were in your senior year in high school and you apparently didn't you would just have went directly into the service without graduating with your class at that time?

William Abell

Well, I had taken extra courses prior to this and I had enough to graduate. So when the time came for the graduation they had my cap and gown there, but I was on the front in Europe.

Joe Davidson

I see. Can you tell us a little bit about your first days in the service, your experiences in boot camp and the training you had.

William Abell

Well, I can even tell you going there, leading up to that. You know, I was very young and back in those days we didn't do any traveling. We had, you know, had no car, and I hadn't been 30 miles away from home up until this time. So I went in and everything was quite strange naturally and they sent me first to Camp Atterbury, Indiana and I was there, I don't know, maybe four days. Then I was sent to Camp Joseph T. Robinson in Arkansas. There were 79,000 of us there at the time when we got there. It was a relatively new place. It was tar paper shacks and there was a stove in each end of these shanties and we had to get up every morning. We were assigned dates to build a fire. We would have to build our own fire to heat the tarp black. It was all black and the smoke just hung down over it. I can recall that. But there was a sergeant that really impressed me. Of course we were all kind of young and he recognized this and he just buoyed up our spirits like you wouldn't believe, you know, he had such a way about him of making you feel easy and we really enjoyed having him as an NCO.

Joe Davidson

Did you have any trouble getting through this basic training as far as, oh, rifle training or just physical combat?

William Abell

I had no problem at all. I was expert marksman. I went through all of the training without any problems. The last two weeks of course when we first started they was just conditioning us but I was in good condition because I played three years of basketball and I was in really good physical

shape, didn't tire me out. Went through all that type training. And the last two weeks of training was live ammunition. They took us out and they put us under live artillery fire. We crawled under machine gun fire, and actually used M1 rifles just like we were fighting in a war. But we thought that would prepare us pretty well but it really didn't, you know, you can't get prepared for it. And when I graduated from basic training. They gave us what they called a delay in route. We got to stop off at home for seven days. I went from Kentucky to Fort--Meade, Maryland, from Fort Meade, Maryland to Camp Kilmer, New--Jersey and then into Camp Shanks, New--York, and at that time everything was very secret. One night, oh, late at night they fell us out to leave, it was after midnight, and we got aboard ship. It was the US-- I mean Her Majesty Ship Aquitania. 10,000 of us were on it, and they were very-- it's understandable then there was a lot of German Uboats. And we started across the Atlantic and one night we passed a ship burning that they had hit and they gave us instructions how to behave in case we were torpedoed. It was in the North Atlantic and it was pretty chilly and they said if we got in the water we wouldn't live 15 minutes. And also they said if you fall overboard, we will not slow down. We will leave you there, and, you know, to be sure we understood. And the 10,000 of us ate out of one mess hall and you can imagine what that was like and especially British cooks and the Brits have a, you know, it was different, put it that way. But they were nice, good guys to know, and we would fall out two or three times a day to prepare to abandon ship and all that, you know, training. We crossed the Atlantic, I think it took us seven days but we went alone. They said that this ship is fast, and it was. It was a big four stacker, and we landed in Scotland and then they put us on a train to go into southern England. We got into London at night and the night we got there they bombed it. Well, that kindly put me off of London and we went into the southern part of England and we weren't there very long until we prepared to hit-- go into France. We got aboard an open metal boat. I don't remember how many-- it wasn't big enough to haul too many but there were several of us on it. And we moved out and you could lay and look up and you could see all of these planes circling overhead and everything, you know, was going on, really active. We got just a little bit off shore and they didn't warn us at all. All at once it sounded like the side of that boat had been torpedoed. They had dropped anchor, and the chain dragging through that hole, it really got us all excited there for a minute. Of course we went on from there and we got to France and it was totally destroyed. The shore was totally destroyed. I wasn't there for DDay. They had pushed inland and we went ashore and then we started moving to the front. I'm not going to be talking much about the war but I'll let you in on my first day in combat. That really was an eye awakening thing. When I got to the front, they picked me and another fellow to guard a Jeep to another unit, and when we got there that Jeep had just left, but they said, "Come on. We'll put you in this one and you can follow them." And we would go into wherever it was, I don't remember where it was. But that Jeep ran into a roadblock and killed everything in it. That was my Jeep, the one I was supposed to be on. Well, that will sober you up. That will make you start thinking. So we stopped there and that night, when it got dark and it was a heavy forest there, we started to move forward and we got up to just about where that roadblock was and it was so dark you could move your hand like this {gesturing with his hand} you couldn't see your hand. And we were marching single file and we had our hand on the man's pack in front of us so we wouldn't get separated and we were walking along. All at once it sounded like there was about 20 guns cocked right in our ear and a man hollered "Halt." When he did it was just as if somebody hit you in the face with, I don't know what. Everyone hit the ground and fortunately it was an American unit that had come and taken that German roadblock. We went on through it and when we got out the other edge of that forest the moon had come up and we were

walking along and there was bodies laying along that road and we went forward a little bit and stopped and stayed that night. And then, you know, after that it was-- things were really, every day was the same thing over and over.

Joe Davidson

Can you recall where it was you landed in France and were there any cities nearby or a territory name that

William Abell

I, you know, they never told us where we were unless we just happened to see a sign.

Joe Davidson

Uhhuh.

William Abell

We never got you know, I was a private and nobody gave privates any information. Anyway, no. I don't recall. It was on one of the beaches, but I don't know-- I can't recall which one. It was-- I don't know, I think it was not far from Le--Havre.

Joe Davidson

Le Havre. Okay. When you were in combat in an area what was the food like? Did you get good food?

William Abell

Oh, well, I'll tell you what we ate. Every day we ate Krations. They came in a little box like a Cracker Jack box. For breakfast they had a can of eggs and bacon and then you always had some kind of a sweet candy bar or like a candy bar, hardtack and also you got four or six cigarettes in each ration. Then when we moved up during the fight when we would move we usually carried three days with us of rations and during that time, of course, eating that day after day you got kindly tired of it, as you can well imagine, and we would have what they call a 10in1s. They would pull us back and one box fed ten men, and it was really good. But, like I say, for breakfast we had eggs and bacon. For lunch we had the best cheese, a can of cheese, it was very good, and a cracker and another candy bar and six more four or six, I forget which, cigarettes. And then for supper they had one they called corned beef and apple flakes and that was hard to take. It was terrible. But, you know, you get hungry enough you will eat it. But an experience that I had and I can still recall it well, the first-- my

first three days in combat I had a knot in my stomach and I know I didn't swallow a bite for three days. Of course, after that they couldn't fill me up and I got to asking the other guys and everybody had the same thing. You know, you just get so tense that that's the way you feel. It's an experience, of course, that you just never get over. I think most of our fighting now, we did it in the daytime. Seldom did you fight at night. Of course there were exceptions to that rule, but every night on the front there was two men to a foxhole and we slept an hour and guarded an hour all night every night, and during the hour-- during the night we smoked all day and all night. In addition to those cigarettes that I told you about in the rations, they gave us two to three packs a day every day, and we smoked them all. We had the foxhole at night we would two of us, like I said, would be in it. We would put a raincoat or something over the foxhole and we'd stick our head under that raincoat and get a puff and then bring it out because you would smother under it there was so much smoke. So that's the way we ate and kind of the way we lived.

Joe Davidson

What time of year was this when you were

William Abell

This was winter '44.

Joe Davidson

Winter of '44. Now, did you pass from France into Belgium and then on into Germany?

William Abell

Into Germany, Luxembourg, Germany.

Joe Davidson

Was it cold in Luxembourg at that time in the wintertime? Did they issue you the right gear?

William Abell

Let me tell you what we were wearing and I'll start at the head and go down. We had a steel helmet. Then the helmet liner under that and then a wool knit cap under that we pulled down over our ears and we had a wool scarf and then next we had on a wool OD uniform. Beneath that I had a wool knit sweater and then very heavy longhandled underwear and, of course, we had wool socks and combat boots. Even so and then over all of that we had a field jacket with a liner and we had a

raincoat which we carried in our combat bag, if you can get, you know, just drenched and that's about the way it was. During the winter of '44, of course that was the Bulge, and I have a picture here that I could show you that the magazine, somebody sent me, that it shows and that's my division there {displaying photograph}. Bitter cold and I remember one day it was in the snow we got up early in the morning. We are moving up, and we started hiking. We had a combat pack, ammunition belt with eight or ten clips of M1 ammunition, canteen hanging on that. We had an entrenching tool. We had three to four bandoliers of ammunition around our shoulders. I had an M1 rifle. I had three rounds of bazooka ammunition because I was an assistant bazooka man. I had to do the loading and, let's see, what else was it that we had? Anyway, that gives you some idea of what kind of load we were carrying. We started early that morning and we hiked all day long, from morning until night, and they wouldn't let us sit down to eat. We ate walking. They said if we stopped you will never get up because it was cold and they said you will stiffen up. You won't be able to go on. So we marched straight through to just about night when we got there and there was one vehicle following us and we ask him how far are we going, he said about 35 miles in the snow. Now, you know, you can do more than you think you can do. We didn't dream we could make it but we did. Another interesting place that I'll mention to you was the Seigfried Line, I'm sure you heard of the Seigfried Line. It was a very impressive thing. As far as you could see there was what they called dragon's teeth and it went for, they said, I forgot how many miles. It went up to Belgium and we were in southern Germany at that time and then behind those dragon's teeth were pillboxes and the one that you were heading toward didn't shoot at you. It was the one next to him that would shoot, you know, crossfire so you couldn't get through it, see. But I read, and here it is, I'll show you a magazine here and here is a book. I don't know where this came from but I'm sure somebody sent it to me. There is the Seigfried Line. This is the pillboxes I'm telling you about and the dragon's teeth, but you couldn't see the pillboxes. They were so camouflaged you couldn't see them hardly at all.

Joe Davidson

That was from World War I, was it not?

William Abell

Well, Hitler built it, Hitler built this line.

Joe Davidson

I see.

William Abell

And there was 100,000 lost on the Seigfried Line.

Joe Davidson

Oh, boy. Did you have any problems with sleeping while you were in combat?

William Abell

No. I slept. You get so tired, you just fall asleep. That was all there was to it. You just couldn't stay awake.

Joe Davidson

Okay.

William Abell

We made a river crossing, I even forget which river it was, and we fought it, some at night, we got across late. So we had to fight at night to establish the bridge head. We stopped and sat down and I know I hadn't more than hit the ground and I was asleep. You were just wore out. During the night I woke up and there was not a soul with me. That whole unit had pulled out and I didn't know it and I started moving to try to find them and I found a barn and I went in that barn and dug down in the hay and stayed all night. And I got up the next morning and it was a horrible sight, you know, what had gone on during the time. Of course, I had been in on the first part after the crossing, but I walked all day that day to catch my unit. They was getting ready to turn me in for killed in action when I got there. So that shows you how you can sleep.

Joe Davidson

Oh, yeah. Was there in the 80th Infantry Division you were in were there many casualties? Did you take a lot of casualties in various combats you were in?

William Abell

They replaced our division, they said, completely twice.

Joe Davidson

Twice.

William Abell

Equivalent of replacing it twice.

Joe Davidson

During the time could you maybe think of maybe two or three of your most memorable experiences that you had as you were heading into Germany, combat experience or just any kind of experience.

William Abell

I guess one very memorable part was Patton's famous dash to the Rhine. Our division, and I think it was the 4th Armored Division, made that dash 50 miles. We rode on the outside of the tanks, the infantry, and when we hit the front we were really moving and we didn't cause much damage. We got through it and I'm sure the Germans just ducked their head down and waited until we got by. Anyway, we got up, back on the Rhine. We stopped and then waited, set up a defense and waited for the others to catch up and it took them, I'd say, two weeks to get up there and then after that they moved us up to a hill, a rather steep hill, and they told us to get plenty of rest. We are going to assault the Rhine in the morning at 3 o'clock and we plan on having the division over by daylight. Get all the rest you can get. So I was laying down late that afternoon and my buddy came up and said, "Come on, Abes. I got supper cooked." I went out and he had found somebody's pet rabbits and had killed them and cooked them and those legs, they were at least that long, and they were so tough, you couldn't pull the meat off the bone. I ate the crust off but I thought that was kind of funny and the next morning we did, we moved out about 3 and instead of us getting over by daylight, we still hadn't gotten to the river bank on our side at almost night the next day. So they were there waiting and I'll show you a picture here of us crossing the Rhine and you can see how we went across. This, again, is a small metal boat. Most of our river crossings that we had we did it in assault boats that we carried ourselves. They were wooden and we paddled them ourselves. But this time we had somebody that was driving these boats. I mentioned a while ago during this time, of course, we only got to bathe about once a month. They would take us back into a field a, bathroom they called it. It was they had showerhead set up and there must have been, oh, I'd say, 25 or 30 showerheads but you get up to it and they would say, all right, take all your clothes off. And we took them off and threw them in a pile and there was a stack that looked like a big hill, you know, and then we would go into the shower. They let us stay for about five minutes, then we went out the other end and at the other end there was another pile of clothes, the clean ones. They said, all right. Pick out your clothes and we would go in and dig into that pile trying to find something that got close to fitting you. Well, I was kind of hard to find something to fit me. I wasn't all that big, but, anyway, we would dress that way and that was the way that we bathed. But you can imagine bathing once a month and living under those conditions how grimy you got. It was terrible. So we came up with a way of washing our clothes that the day we would be pulled back for some reason to rest or something, we would get some Jerry cans of gasoline off of the tanks or a truck and we poured it in a container and just swish our clothes up and down in that. That would get them as clean as-- you wouldn't believe how clean they got and also you wouldn't believe how fast they dried. We'd hang them up on bushes or a fence and I'll show you here a picture of one of our worst days. Now, you can see by the picture we were wearing anything that we could find in any of those houses. We

always had a lot of fun that day when we had our clothes washed. But that way, you know, you didn't get so terribly dirty.

Joe Davidson

Did you were they able to keep you supplied with all the ammunition you needed and firepower? Or was there a lack of supplies?

William Abell

We had it, we had all we could use. They really had a good system. They gave us all the ammunition we needed and really gave us all the food we needed. And I never could understand how they could get up there and do it, but they did.

Joe Davidson

How did people kind of entertain themselves when you weren't on the front line or when you weren't if you had any free time at all?

William Abell

Playing cards, shooting dice, stuff like that.

Joe Davidson

Is that right?

William Abell

You know.

Joe Davidson

Was there very much, like, if you were going through a town did you have any interface with the local people?

William Abell

You could go into one of the biggest cities, Nuremberg, Augsburg, or any of those and if you saw three civilians it was out of the ordinary. I don't know where they went, you know, how they got them out but they wasn't in that town that we could see. I remember one town in particular we had gotten into it and sometimes in those you would fight a few days in one city and we were moving out early in the morning and I guess that I suppose that it was the company commander or somebody looked down a side street and there was something going on there. So they pulled out my platoon and sent us down there to check it out, see what was going on. Well, when we got down there and it was about four or five blocks, they were apparently waiting for us because they cut us off and I ran in a door of one of the big buildings there and when I ran in I had my M1 down, you know, like you would carry it, and I ran right into the face of a German coming out, and this is where I got this gun. That day we were hemmed up in that house for about eight hours and it looked like we were going to have to give up and surrender. I threw the gun away because if they caught you with it they killed you. And when the fighting was over a boy brought it back to me and I couldn't carry it, you know, you couldn't carry something like that with what else we had. So I rationed a kitchen truck. He told me, he said, "you put it on the truck and we'll get it back to you when the war was over." Well, I didn't think I would ever see it again. I did. I put my name on it and when the war was over I got it.

Joe Davidson

Could we see the gun? Is it a Luger?

William Abell

Certainly. It's what they call a P38. They called it a modified Luger. It was much more reliable than a Luger. A Luger would freeze up pretty bad and, you know, this one does not.

Joe Davidson

Is that a gun that a German foot soldier would use or an officer?

William Abell

Well, officers had it, squad leaders, some of the squad leaders had it. I don't know what that guy was that I took this one off of, I don't know, but they carried long boltaction rifles. But that day that I was just telling you about, the eight hours, that day we were within 50 feet of them all day. Right across the street we were looking out, there was a stone fence, oh, maybe three feet high, maybe, and they were behind that fence and we could hear them talking. You could hear them load their gun and one of our boys understood German real well. He would tell us when to get set. He could hear them giving the orders and they would come over that fence and a boy named my buddy's name was Dick. He and I were looking out this window and I said, "Dick, there's a man right under our window." He said, "No. It's somebody walking around upstairs." And we were standing and staring out, you know, and a few minutes a pair of hands came up over the window ledge and that

big old helmet came up and you have heard of freezing in action. There's something to it. He froze and we froze and just stared at each other for a while and then he jumped down and ran. You hear those old hob nailed shoes really moving out. But that went on and then late in the afternoon when we were just about getting ready to quit, you know, we were getting low on ammunition, a German Jeep came up the street with what looked like a bedsheet on it. An American outfit had cut around behind them and they were surrendered and they passed right by our window. It was-- there was a German general in it. That was one day that I can well remember.

Joe Davidson

During this period of time when you are in Germany now, were you ever able to really stay in touch with your family? Did you get letters from home and were you able to get mail back to them?

William Abell

Yes, we did. Most of the time you did about two dozen in a day and then you might not get any more for a two weeks but they came in bunches and I assumed that they just assembled them back and tied them together in a bundle and they would come and bring them to us. So that kept us in contact. I think my mother I don't think she ever missed a day.

Joe Davidson

Did you have as you were in the push to Germany, did you feel any particular pressures or stresses from the fighting? And did you ever have to go to the infirmary or did you get wounded at any time?

William Abell

I'm glad you mentioned that. I'll give you one for instance. I had gotten to where I couldn't sleep. There was something that was just keeping me awake night and day and I didn't know what was wrong. Well, the first lull that we had I went back to the aid station to find out what was wrong and I got back there and the doctor told me he said, "Well, pull off all your clothes and let's see. We'll see if we can determine what's wrong." Well, I stripped right outside and he picked up that wool knit sweater I mentioned and he pulled it between him and the sun. He said, "Come over here and I'll show you what your trouble is," and it was just full of body lice. We were just as lousy as we could be and he said I have got something, it's brand new, that will sure take care of the problem. So he handed me this can, it looked like a can of box of black pepper. He said, "Spread your clothes out there on the ground and sift this on them and then you can put your clothes back on." Well, I did, and that was the first time I ever heard of VDD. I put those same clothes back on. He gave me some extra to take back with me to the unit and when I got back there the guys wanted to borrow it. They all had them too, but it was really something because I was never disturbed again from the lice. I got a leg hurt, but, you know, and a hand. I got hurt in the hand a little, but they weren't too bad, so...

Joe Davidson

No serious hospitalizations or anything like that?

William Abell

No, no. I have a picture here that I think is rather interesting. This shows me having a little break in things. Actually, I was on a roadblock there and in our rations it was one of the bars of candy was hard chocolate, and what we would do, we would take our knife and shave it off into a canteen cup, put water in it, and it made the best hot chocolate you ever tasted. So we had that ever day, just about every day. Another thing that I didn't mention a while ago we had church services during in the war. Every time there was an opportunity the chaplain would come up and he and his assistant, they would get the message up to us some way, I don't remember how, word of mouth, as I recall. And Sunday morning he would tell us where to go, we would go back and have church. I can remember the little organ, I don't believe it was that long {indicating} and they pedaled it, you know, and we would sing songs and he would preach a sermon and we were all in church sitting on our steel helmets with an M1 rifle up in front of us and some of them had BARs. So we went fully armed to church. But that is one time that you had no trouble getting people to come to church. We had three different services. We had Protestant, Catholic and Jewish and we got to go as often as we could. Another thing I want to show you here, you can see here we were making a push through one day and that shows one of our tanks that was crossing, I forget now what stream that was. Anyway, it broke through, and so that tank was trapped there for a while. And, let's see, what else you might like to see. This is the way we almost crossed almost all the rivers. This is a method we used. You know I mentioned earlier that we carried the boats up and then paddled our own boats. Well, there we are, paddling the boats across because you couldn't you just couldn't have somebody on there on a river like that because they wouldn't be able to make many trips. When we got to the other side, at least in the first wave, we just got out and let the boat go. I guess they stopped it downstream someplace, but that's most of the pictures that I have to show you with the exception of this one. Here is a place that I'm sure you have all heard of. We took Nuremberg, and this is the Nuremberg stadium. This is known as Hitler's stadium and you have seen all the big parades and so forth. It was done in this stadium. We captured that and when we took it there was a big gold swastika on top of that gate and an engineer trooper climbed up there and blew it off and just blew it all to pieces. But I think-- I can't recall now if it was at Nuremberg or Augsburg where I found this flag. This flag I want to point out to you I believe it was-- I don't know if it was Nuremberg or Augsburg, or one or the other as I recall. Most of these were-- they were destroyed. We saw very few of them, actually, before we got there. But this one I got ahold of and I sent it home and I have kept it ever since. As you can see, it was sort of in a bad shape but I think it is something that makes a good souvenir. This, again, is the Nuremberg stadium and there was a lot of these flags there, as you can well imagine. You asked me a while ago to explain what these are. {Indicating his service ribbons}. Well, this one, this blue rifle with the wreath on it is the combat infantryman's badge. From the first bullet that went over your head you got this. You had to be in combat, and one reason why we were so glad to get it, it made us 10 more dollars a month. And these others, here is I think you can see them, most of them have been destroyed by time. As you can see, I don't even know what some of

them are, but one of them is the European Theater, two bronze stars, occupation medal and I don't really know what the others are. I'd have to look. But the one I'm most proud of is this one. (Pointing). I've got something here that I want to show you that I have had for over 60 years. We had captured a bunch of soldiers, German soldiers and, as I recall, one of them was an SS trooper which you didn't get very often. He usually wouldn't quit, but I took this off of him. I could just well imagine what he used it for, you know. I kept it and I have had it ever since. All of these things I have never-- that gun has not been fired in 60 years. So it's those things that you have that you remember but you have no real use for them anymore.

Joe Davidson

Were you ever given any kind of leave after you were in action? Were you able to either maybe go to some city for a few days just to

William Abell

I never got to

Joe Davidson

get out of

William Abell

I never got to. After the fighting ceased they let us go places.

Joe Davidson

What did you think of your fellow soldiers, the officers that you served under during the war? Any particular recollections of good or bad in the soldiering?

William Abell

Well, you know most of them were excivilians like I was. They were good. I will have to say they were very understanding. They lived with you, you know, every day, all day, all night. We was all together. So they were, they were good. After the war, of course my army commander was Patton through the war and I was close to him when he was killed. Then my after the war my regimental commander was General Westmoreland. I believe he was 27 and I was 19 then.

Joe Davidson

Did you keep any kind of a personal diary of your experiences as you went off so you wouldn't forget them or so you could talk about them later in life?

William Abell

No, I didn't. We just you didn't have time, you know, and you didn't-- you couldn't carry the stuff with you. The pictures that I have, it was just somebody that found a camera and took them until they ran out of the film and then they would throw it away. But there was just no way you could carry stuff with you.

Joe Davidson

Yeah. Well, are there any other recollections you can make about your, as you moved across Germany, perhaps? Did you reach Berlin?

William Abell

They took us from southern Germany north and we were heading right toward Berlin. We got to Chemnitz, which isn't far from Berlin, and they stopped us. We could have taken Berlin within a week but we were waiting they stopped us waiting for the Russians to come. Well, during that time, German soldiers was flowing through our lines by the hundreds, just constantly moving through our line, getting away from the Russian army. We didn't even slow them down. We just waved them on and they just went on. We didn't search them or anything and I don't know where they went from there, but we didn't stop them. And when the Russians came, you could hear them for miles and miles from the shooting. I know they were shooting every gun they had because you never heard such a racket. You could see why those Germans were coming our way.

Joe Davidson

Were you as you headed up to Berlin, as you were going through the mountains, did you get close to Austria?

William Abell

Yes, I did. Now, that's southern.

Joe Davidson

Southern.

William Abell

Yeah. I went into Austria. I want to show you a picture of where when we went into, it's actually Hitler's birthplace and right here it is. That is Braunau, Austria. We took that town and actually went to his home where he was born. I thought that was kind of interesting. It was one of the experiences that I can remember that was things that you won't forget and I want to show you here a picture of what the towns mostly looked like when we would go in. They were totally levelled to the ground. I'll show you something that I don't remember where I got it. I took it off of a uniform somewhere, but that's the insignia of the famous SS troops, skull and crossbone. They usually had to every German outfit they would usually have three or four SS, and we understood that their main duty was to make sure that the others did what they said, because they would shoot their own group just as quick as they would shoot us, you know, but they were always big guys, you know. Initially, at least, they were all over six foot, I think, and they all were blue eyed. They were true Aryans and they made a vow and they were branded. They had a brand on, I believe, and, like you mentioned a while ago, when we got in taking the concentration camps, the first one, of course everybody was kind of anxious to go in, a couple of things here I want to show you. This is Dachau. As you can see by this, there is a little shed there in the middle and the tree. They would take a prisoner who misbehaved and in that little building there there was a German Shepherd dog or German police dog. They would hang him on that tree and then open that door and he would come out and tear him up. Just over from there was a kennel that must have had 12 or 15 dogs. They would take prisoners that misbehaved or whatever. They would stand them out in the middle of that and open the doors. Well, we killed all those dogs that day, and here-- this is the smokestack where the bodies went out of-- the smoke went off of the bodies from the crematorium. I think my buddy made that picture. But that was the most horrible thing that I saw, was those concentration camps.

Joe Davidson

Were the people that you liberated they must have all been in pretty tough shape from the--

William Abell

Well, I have a magazine here that somebody sent me, I don't remember who it was, but here it shows what some of them looked like. When we got, I think it was Dachau, they estimated there was 10,000 dead on the ground and the civilians at Dachau City, or the Town of Dachau, they said that the machine guns went all night the night before. You just can't believe that mankind ever comes to a point where they can do that. There's some more pictures here that shows this. There's a picture of Buchenwald that we took showing the inmates that were in it. Now these were guarded for the most part by SS, but they were just skin and bones, and here we are. They warned us before we got there, they said don't feed the prisoners, said it might kill them. We gave them everything we had, you know, but you can see it poking through the fence there. Here is one of the crematorium ovens where when I went in, in front of each one of these ovens, and I forget how many ovens it was,

there was a pile of human ashes up shoulder high and you could see scratches in the wall where they had scratched and it was just unbelievable.

Joe Davidson

Were you actually in Berlin

William Abell

No.

Joe Davidson

as the army went in I know that some sections were in control of Berlin. Were you--

William Abell

No.

Joe Davidson

in Berlin either?

William Abell

No.

Joe Davidson

Okay.

William Abell

Immediately after we met the Russians well, not long after that they surrendered. They scattered us up and down the highway to guide and direct the surrendering German army into a place where we brought them together to delouse them and process them and discharge. That was something that was unbelievable as well. When they came through, we got-- I think it was the Sixth German Army in our sector, and we guided them through, I believe it was every fourth truck there was a German officer. This was per instructions. This is the way they had to do it, and he had an automatic

weapon. It seems a little bit strange to us, you know, for him to be passing by with a machine gun and we were standing on the side of the road. Anyway, his mission was to keep order in that convoy and he sure did it. And right below where I was guard, our guard post there was a small stream. You could go down that stream and you could have got a half a truckload of weapons out of it where they had thrown them off those trucks, you know, before they got to camp where everybody was going to put them. But he maintained order.

Joe Davidson

Are there any other experiences or maybe photos you have that you want to show us of the experience you had in Germany or have we pretty much kind of covered that area now?

William Abell

Well, following the war, my division was slated for the Pacific, but they felt us out right after the war and they examined us to determine who was physically able to go to the Pacific. Well, after the examination they determined that I would have to stay in Germany and then, of course, a lot of new troops were coming in then, and they wanted me to be a librarian. So they sent me to school to be a librarian and here is my picture of the library that I actually it was a bombed out building and I had it repaired and fixed up and that was the library. That was a great experience. I really enjoyed that work.

Joe Davidson

How was the library used?

William Abell

Oh, the guys just flocked to it. You know, they were hungry for something to read.

Joe Davidson

Is that right?

William Abell

And then here is the picture of me going home. That's me sitting in the door with my leg hanging out.

Joe Davidson

Can you remember the day that actually that you were discharged from the service? Where were you at that time and what was the experience at that time?

William Abell

I was discharged at Fort Meade but, no, I don't know the day. I don't really know offhand. But when I got home I was in school within no more than two weeks.

Joe Davidson

Then did you go to college after you came home?

William Abell

Yes. I went through a twoyear college first and then I went to University of Kentucky School of Engineering and I got my degree in engineering. And then I went to some graduate schooling at Catholic University in Washington. So Uncle Sam, when we were discharged, he treated us pretty well, I think. You know, we didn't demonstrate on the mall or anything like that. We just went home and tried to get back into life but he paid us, he paid my way through all my school and gave me 65 dollars a month to live on. He paid for all my books, and also the first 52 weeks that I was home I got I forgot now what the amount of money was-- we called it the rocking chair club. He paid us for one year to get settled in and get jobs and stuff like that. But I have no complaints, and also, when Dorothy and I got married, it's been 54 years ago, he helped us get our first house. So I think he-- I think he appreciated it.

Joe Davidson

Did you make any close friendships in the service that you were able to continue throughout your lifetime that maybe people that are still around today or any lasting friendships?

William Abell

Yes. I've got a friend now that lives in North Carolina or South--Carolina. He and I have been in contact ever since. We are both getting a little bit old now but we still contact each other once in a while.

Joe Davidson

That's good. Do you belong to any veterans organizations?

William Abell

No, I don't.

Joe Davidson

After you finished your education, what kind of career did you have and what did you do with yourself?

William Abell

My first job after graduation was the Corps of Engineers. I knew early on what I wanted to do for I believe from the time I was 12 year old. I remembered the engineers walking around on those dam projects, you know, with that pith helmet on and the boots and that kind of impressed me. So I went through engineering and I went with the Corps and I stayed with them for four years, I believe it was. And then I got a letter one day from Washington asking me if I would consider coming to Washington to work there. They sent a man to Louisville to interview me and they hired me within a week. And I had to report up there within two weeks and I had to sell a house in the meantime to go, and Dorothy was eight months pregnant. So we got in our car and packed a basket of baby clothes and headed out and just went along. We headed out and we would figure out when the time came would we go to the next town or go back to the one we just come through, whichever would be faster. Well, we made it without any problem and our first daughter was born within about three weeks after we got there.

Joe Davidson

Do you did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general and influence your thinking about--

William Abell

It sure did, and it still does.

Joe Davidson

Well, you know, we have had several wars since World War--II.

William Abell

Yes.

Joe Davidson

So did it give you any kind of feelings about whether war is good or bad or how we should conduct ourselves?

William Abell

Well, I think all wars are bad. I know World War--II was bad but it was necessary. I know that Germany posed a threat to the world, and everybody had to, you know, go and do all they could to help overcome that big problem. But the way I combat-- what combat taught me was that before you go to war, you should look at every possible option. You should discuss them. You should consider what the consequences might be before you start the shooting, otherwise, you know, it loses a lot of people, a lot of people.

Joe Davidson

Do you attend any reunions from your military days, the fellows that you were discharged with or were there

William Abell

You know, the infantry just could hardly do that because we were pulled from all over the country and then, again, you know, it's just hard to get them together.

Joe Davidson

Oh, yeah.

William Abell

Now, you take the sailors, they were closeknit group, you know, on a ship. They can have reunions, but it was almost impossible for army to have them.

Joe Davidson

Well, is there anything you would like to add or that maybe we have not covered in this interview that you can think of that you want to expand on? Or do you think we have covered pretty much everything in your experience?

William Abell

I think we have pretty well covered it so far as I'm concerned. It was an experience that you will never forget, and I'm glad that I really glad that I was a part of it. I feel proud to have been in the army.

Joe Davidson

Well, thank you, Ray Abell, for sharing your wartime experiences with us, and we wish you good health in the future and, Ray, it was good to spend the day with you.

William Abell

Well, I thank you all for coming and it was a real pleasure to have you here in our home and glad you could come.