

Wallace Graves Interview

Service Company, 318th Inf Reg

(Library of Congress: Veterans History Project; interviewed by Wayne Aldridge)

(MS Word Audio Transcript [NOT edited, just transcribed])

00:00:02 Speaker 1

My name is Wallace Graves WALLACEGRAVES.

00:00:13 Speaker 2

Doctor Graves, what was life like or what were you doing prior to December of 1941?

00:00:20 Speaker 1

I was in college.

00:00:22 Speaker 1

And the life was wonderful.

00:00:26 Speaker 1

I was.

00:00:29 Speaker 1

In my sophomore year, I guess when the December 8th rolled around.

00:00:37 Speaker 2

Do you remember where you were when you heard the news about?

00:00:40 Speaker 1

The bombing that I was in the fraternity house in the kitchen.

00:00:44 Speaker 1

And the word came through shortly before launch.

00:00:48 Speaker 1

And everybody said, where's Pearl Harbor?

00:00:54 Speaker 2

How long after that did death you enlist?

00:00:58 Speaker 1

I enlisted in February 42.

00:01:03 Speaker 1

But I was in Ortc and.

00:01:09 Speaker 1

Since I agreed to go into advanced ROTC, I was kept in college until I got my degree in 1943.

00:01:21 Speaker 2

And what brings the service?

00:01:22 Speaker 1

So I was in the service and and but I but I but I was I remain in college until the summer 43.

00:01:31 Speaker 2

Where did you go first?

00:01:33 Speaker 1

I went to Tank Destroyer, OCS and Fort Hood TX 1st.

00:01:40 Speaker 1

But I had been recommended for the Adjutant General of OCS, so halfway through my.

00:01:48 Speaker 1

Tank destroyer program. I was pulled out to go to Washington.

00:01:53 Speaker 1

And then they changed their minds. And so I was hanging by my thumbs at that point, and the next thing I knew, I was an infantry, uh, division in Kansas, Salina, KS.

00:02:09 Speaker 1

Still, as a corporal.

00:02:12 Speaker 1

But during the active service I got promoted to Sergeant.

00:02:17 Speaker 1

I knew the.

00:02:20 Speaker 1

The drill on the field artillery because that was the branch in R2C. I I was in.

00:02:28 Speaker 1

And so there was a cannon company in infantry regiments at that time. I don't know if they still exist or not.

00:02:37 Speaker 1

I doubt it, but they were 105 howitzers with a barrel foreshortened so that the the piece could fire either directly or indirectly.

00:02:49 Speaker 1

And so it could be used against tanks and other direct targets, as well as indirect fire as regular 105 artillery pieces were used.

00:03:01 Speaker 1

And since I knew that why when I get into combat, I practically served as a as a well, I was a Ford observer.

00:03:11 Speaker 1

And.

00:03:13 Speaker 1

And so I could I could call the target information and have the.

00:03:19 Speaker 1

The guns out of sight, focusing on targets.

00:03:25 Speaker 2

When was the first time you saw combat?

00:03:29 Speaker 1

It was about 3, two or three weeks after VE Day. I don't mean the day. I mean the D-Day. And we were in part of the parts of the Saint Low battle and chased the German center crawl across northern France during the summer of 1944.

00:03:53 Speaker 2

Were you ever more scared one time than any other time?

00:03:59 Speaker 1

Well, there were times when when the the situation was was dangerous.

00:04:06 Speaker 1

But I can't.

00:04:09 Speaker 1

I can't remember, I guess not. While I was still a a free man, I got captured in September of 1944.

00:04:18 Speaker 1

Along the Moselle river.

00:04:21 Speaker 1

As a forward observer, I got too far forward one day and and looked around and found nobody but German surrounding.

00:04:30 Speaker 1

Anyhow, uh, I had a couple of scares when I was. When I, uh, escaped and then 1945 but.

00:04:42 Speaker 1

I can't remember. I was. You were always with with other of your comrades.

00:04:48 Speaker 1

During combat, and so I don't remember being terribly frightened at any given time while I was in active service there.

00:04:57 Speaker 2

Well, tell me a little bit about being captured.

00:05:01 Speaker 1

Well, I was a I say a foreign observer and part of a three man team that went beyond the artillery pieces to search out. Uh targets uh, to call information, back to to uh to bring artillery fire upon.

00:05:07 Speaker 2

And.

00:05:22 Speaker 1

And we had been in advance of our our gun location all day long on the 14th.

00:05:29 Speaker 1

Of September in 19 the 13th, I guess was September 1944.

00:05:37 Speaker 1

And had taken the little town on the Moselle river, which was fairly close to the German boundary line at at that time.

00:05:46 Speaker 1

And then we came back to our encampment at the end of the night, at the end of the day, and I expected to spend the night back with the guns. But about 10:00, the order came from regimental headquarters for one team to go back up to, to be available in case.

00:06:07 Speaker 1

The Germans counterattacked and took the town back.

00:06:11 Speaker 1

And so by my little tea was chosen to do that.

00:06:17 Speaker 1

And by the time we got back onto the hill, beyond the town.

00:06:24 Speaker 1

It was late and we were tired and we found an empty German machine gun emplacement already dug. So we piled into the hole for the night. But and we, uh, the three of us. Uh arranged for a watch.

00:06:40 Speaker 1

Is.

00:06:42 Speaker 1

Two hours at a time, but all of a sudden it was daylight and we were all asleep and there were small arms fire, uh popping around all over the place. And we also discovered that our radio, an SCR 300, had lost its battery power.

00:07:02 Speaker 1

And while we could hear people on the other end, we couldn't, they couldn't hear.

00:07:07 Speaker 1

US.

00:07:08 Speaker 1

So we tried to wait it, wait it out. We expected to have a counterattack that would come back and chase the Germans off.

00:07:16 Speaker 1

But it didn't happen. This was a Friday, and as I learned much, much later, they didn't reestablish connection with those forward until Sunday. Uh, meanwhile, uh, we had been. Uh spotted. Uh, uh peeping over the top of the policeman and so, uh, they sneaked around the back and stuck us up.

00:07:37 Speaker 1

We caught three of us.

00:07:39 Speaker 1

But we were we were waiting for some kind of there was an infantry battalion somewhere on that hill, but they weren't showing up either. So we decided to, uh, uh, to try to stick it out until something happened that uh made our ranks a little a little larger.

00:07:58 Speaker 1

But so we were taken off the hill and into.

00:08:05 Speaker 1

An interrogation center the next day.

00:08:08 Speaker 1

And then we were sent to a redistribution place where we were stationed for three weeks while they sorted us out and sent us to various prison camps.

00:08:20 Speaker 1

My camp was clear across Germany.

00:08:24 Speaker 1

Took us several days on a box car to arrive at our destination.

00:08:31 Speaker 1

The destination was side by side of a town called Kustrin Kus TRIN on the Oder River.

00:08:40 Speaker 1

Which was about 60 miles inside of.

00:08:43 Speaker 1

Of the German Polish border, but and a good distance east of Berlin.

00:08:50 Speaker 1

And there I spent the winter. Uh uh. From late October until the end of January 45.

00:09:02 Speaker 1

By the end of January, we no longer had lights in our in our rooms because the Germans were running short of fuel to run generators and whatnot.

00:09:14 Speaker 1

And the light suddenly came on on the 31st of January.

00:09:19 Speaker 1

And we were ordered then to move out of the camps and back toward Berlin.

00:09:24 Speaker 1

We had learned from a French compound of prisoners who had meds to smuggle a radio in some time earlier and got periodic reports from the BBC that the Russians had they broken through Warsaw and were on their way to Berlin. So we tried to delay our departure as long as we could, hoping that.

00:09:45 Speaker 1

The Russians would catch up with us before we got.

00:09:49 Speaker 1

Meanwhile, we discovered that the Commandant of the camp had deserted.

00:09:53 Speaker 1

And so there was a good bit of confusion.

00:09:56 Speaker 1

The authorities sent in an s s group from Berlin to get us on the road because they were a bit tougher than the guards we'd had.

00:10:07 Speaker 1

And we finally got out on the road to Berlin.

00:10:12 Speaker 1

At the early afternoon and had been marching along heavily guarded until, uh, an hour or two had passed and suddenly there was a uh artillery and and small arms fire on the front of the column. The guards rushed forward on either side of us.

00:10:32 Speaker 1

And.

00:10:34 Speaker 1

To meet the what turned out to have been a Russian reconnaissance tank in the unit.

00:10:41 Speaker 1

And so, fortunately, I was toward the end of the line, and several of us were able to melt away into the into the fields and hide out. So that's how I escaped.

00:10:55 Speaker 1

Of the germ.

00:10:57 Speaker 1

And we had no place to go besides the camp. The camp had been deserted by that time.

00:11:03 Speaker 1

And we went back to the camp.

00:11:06 Speaker 1

And spent two or three days sending out forage teams for food.

00:11:10 Speaker 1

And meanwhile, the Russians had arrived and substantial numbers, and there was an air fight over the river going on. So we were really on the front lines there for a while. Finally, one of the group of prisoners.

00:11:31 Speaker 1

Who came from Chicago and who was a Polish descent?

00:11:35 Speaker 1

Thought he understood enough Russian to go out on the road and say we couldn't get a guide back through the Russian lines instead of being in the middle of no man's land where we had occupied.

00:11:50 Speaker 1

So about the 3rd of February 45, we all lined up after dark, a single file and left the CAP and started through the woods.

00:11:59 Speaker 1

And you could hear German being spoken on one side and Russian on the other side as we went along about midnight we were, uh, we stopped and the front of the column turned around and was looking toward the rear of the column. The Russian guides had disappeared, and there we were with absolutely nobody knowing.

00:12:20 Speaker 1

Any more about where to go or how to get there than anybody else did?

00:12:24 Speaker 1

So we broke up into little groups of friends, twos or threes or fives and decided to turn right. And when we had a road decide whether to go right or left. And finally about 4:00 at a my little group stumbled into a German village that was occupied by the Russians.

00:12:44 Speaker 1

And they were drinking everything outside and and having a merry time. And we found a house that was occupied by revellers and others and uh went up the stairs about 3 floors and found an empty room and fell on the floor. Went to.

00:13:02 Speaker 1

Really.

00:13:03 Speaker 1

Next morning I was awakened by a machine gunfire close by, and so I sneaked out over the of the floor and looked out the window, and there was a rush and had been drinking all night. I guess in an opera cloak and a black silk hat shooting pigeons off the roof just over my head.

00:13:23 Speaker 1

From that point on, and for the next two months, my friends and I were just on our own and uh, we managed to find our way all across Poland looking for somebody to take charge of us and the Ukraine down to Odessa on the Black Sea. As I say, it took a couple of months.

00:13:44 Speaker 1

And we had various adventures along that route.

00:13:48 Speaker 1

After we'd been there, there were prisoners from other camps who have managed to escape also sort of funneled their way down that direction and wound up in Odessa about the same time.

00:14:03 Speaker 1

An Air Force Colonel took our names and talked his way into going up to the mission in Moscow.

00:14:10 Speaker 1

And that's how next of kin were notified that we were on the loose and uh up to that time, my wife and my mother and other members of my family, uh did not know anything about me except that I was missing in action.

00:14:27 Speaker 1

State that I certainly deplored because I had filled out a little form when I first was captured and saying that I was a prisoner of war, but it was never delivered.

00:14:38 Speaker 1

So they had a tough time of it through that weather not knowing anything about where, where I was or if I was.

00:14:46 Speaker 1

After a week we got honest a land lease ship that was going to the Far East through the Suez Canal and we went as far as Port Saeed in Egypt and then uh, we're joined for the first time by.

00:15:03 Speaker 1

A US Quartermaster Corps.

00:15:08 Speaker 1

That pump is full of delousing powder and gave us good food and when we got there there was a little band playing the beer barrel polka on the on the Wharf there and the palm trees were swaying and nothing like frozen winter time in in, in continental Europe.

00:15:27 Speaker 1

We were the first American prisoners out of Europe and so naturally we were of interest to intelligence, so they sent units in for the next week to find out what we could tell them from the worms eye view.

00:15:41 Speaker 1

We had had.

00:15:42 Speaker 1

Of conditions inside Europe.

00:15:46 Speaker 1

After that we went to.

00:15:50 Speaker 1

To Italy for a week or so.

00:15:54 Speaker 1

And I was billeted in a a place in.

00:15:59 Speaker 1

That had been 1 of Garibaldi's.

00:16:06 Speaker 1

Barracks during the War of liberation in 18.

00:16:11 Speaker 1

Or thereabouts, and slept on a straw mattress.

00:16:15 Speaker 1

And then we took another ship from there to Boston, and we were the first prisoners back from Europe in Boston and uh, while we waited for transportation to for two months leave.

00:16:32 Speaker 1

We heard one night I was on a movie. I was in a movie on the post Mile Standish.

00:16:41 Speaker 1

When the word came through that President Roosevelt had.

00:16:45 Speaker 1

So that kind of tells you what the timing was.

00:16:49 Speaker 1

So that's a Cook's tour from my point of view of my experiences.

00:16:58 Speaker 1

During World War 2 and abroad.

00:17:01 Speaker 2

You said that you were captured. They interrogated you. What was that? Interrogation.

00:17:06 Speaker 1

Well, that was a kind of amusing to be if you could imagine it. We were, uh, sent to this uh uh building uh and uh. The interrogator was upstairs and uh, each one of us went up separately. He spoke very good English.

00:17:26 Speaker 1

Tried to put you at ease in hopes that you'd give more than your name, your rank and your serial number.

00:17:33 Speaker 1

We I hadn't been in the room very long.

00:17:37 Speaker 1

When a, A, A, a trio of US fighter planes came zooming over the town and and straight the the the avenue just outside of the building.

00:17:51 Speaker 1

So the interrogator was a middle-aged, fell up, was sort of nettled by that. It did it for his image. It wasn't good to have Americans shooting up the town right outside of his window.

00:18:09 Speaker 1

He told me that he had been living in the Philadelphia before the war for a number of years.

00:18:16 Speaker 1

That he was interested in being a pianist.

00:18:21 Speaker 1

But his father thought he ought to earn a decent living and pulled him back out to put him into the business world.

00:18:29 Speaker 1

And then he began to reflect, and he looked into the into the middle distance and finally said, you know, those were better days. And so I deviated from my instructions for one second that say they certainly were.

00:18:41 Speaker 1

There.

00:18:42 Speaker 1

Anyhow, that was the extent of interrogation that I could have told him very much of importance if I'd wanted to, but I stuck to the rules.

00:18:55 Speaker 2

You said that after you'd escaped and you were.

00:18:59 Speaker 2

Going across you had various adventures.

00:19:02 Speaker 2

Can you think of one of those adventures?

00:19:04 Speaker 2

That you have.

00:19:05 Speaker 1

Well, we were in a box car on one occasion, stopped along in a kind of a railyard. When the Germans came in straight the the box cars. And so we all piled out and and picked ran across.

00:19:22 Speaker 1

Multiple tracks to try to hide out. While that was going on and some of the people that were on the box car were wounded. Fortunately I was.

00:19:33 Speaker 1

Then another night when we were somewhere near Warsaw in the middle of the night, Russian Guards came and and forced our box guard door open. There are about six of us in the box car and ordered us out at gunpoint. Marched us down the the tracks.

00:19:53 Speaker 1

One of those lookout posts you've seen with the little rooms way up on STL.

00:19:58 Speaker 1

Builds.

00:19:59 Speaker 1

So each of us had the single file climb up of the the ladder, and there were about 3 Russians in this control tower, and the windows were besmirched, muddy and and and city and all.

00:20:15 Speaker 1

And we couldn't communicate with them. They didn't know who we were.

00:20:22 Speaker 1

But after a while they decided.

00:20:25 Speaker 1

They had more important business, but then when we all got all six of us got back and were left alone, we couldn't tell which.

00:20:34 Speaker 1

Which train we had been on. There were whole lines of, you know, 6 or 8 or 10 of them.

00:20:40 Speaker 1

So we got on another train hoping it was going our way and not the other way.

00:20:45 Speaker 1

And it kept going east. Thankfully, it's a.

00:20:49 Speaker 1

That was that was kind of a scary night.

00:20:52 Speaker 2

You said that when you.

00:20:55 Speaker 2

Got back. You were debriefed.

00:20:59 Speaker 2

Which was worse? The debriefing that you got from the Americans and the interrogations that you.

00:21:05 Speaker 2

Got.

00:21:05 Speaker 1

Oh well, that was a that was a pleasure. We one day while I was in prison camp, a fella showed up and he didn't have military shoes on. And he said that he was an American. Uh newspaper reporter that had got caught in.

00:21:24 Speaker 1

And a parachuting of that occurred in September and that he was obliged to come around and interrogate American prisoners in the camp. Uh because otherwise he would be shot as a, as a trader, not being in uniform and all, but something didn't seem quite right.

00:21:44 Speaker 1

About that. And apparently he'd been used in other camps because the the State Department, people on military intelligence, people knew about him and asked his question. Well, by that time, uh, we were, we were free and on our way home, we hoped.

00:22:02 Speaker 1

And he felt kind of mean to to talk about it, you know, or give any information even after I got home and the phone rang one day and it was somebody from Washington that was still building a case against his fellow.

00:22:18 Speaker 1

But otherwise they were just open exchanges of information about where we'd been and what we saw, and there was nothing, uh.

00:22:29 Speaker 1

Tough about it, you know, it was just a a chat about our experiences that we had.

00:22:35 Speaker 2

While you were a prisoner of war, what was your daily routine like?

00:22:42 Speaker 1

You know, being a prisoner of war routine varies enormously depending on a number of factors. One was whether the camp had been in operation for a long time or not.

00:22:57 Speaker 1

If it had been, the chances were it had a lot more equipment, facilities for exercise and games and what?

00:23:05 Speaker 1

But most of all, whether or not you have been in the Air Force, the lift waffle was the elite force in Germany. And so they treated others captors captives who had been in in air services far better.

00:23:24 Speaker 1

In forestry.

00:23:26 Speaker 1

Another another difference was whether or not you came from the United States, England, France, or whether or whether you came from Russia or uh or or Middle Eastern countries. They treated the Russian prisoners in our camp. Uh, despicably.

00:23:47 Speaker 1

So it happened that the camp I was sent to late in the war had had no Americans in it before we arrived, and there was absolutely no athletic equipment. There was, uh, one meal per 24 hours, which was a bowl of soup out in the yard and a wooden cask.

00:24:07 Speaker 1

And of course, we all lost a lot of weight. I wouldn't mind doing that again, except that it's pretty arduous to keep the diet going for.

00:24:16

The.

00:24:18 Speaker 1

So we just had to fill our day the best we could. We had a little lending library going on because while mostly everything you owned was taken away from you when you were captured, your rings, your watches, your your money, your everything like that.

00:24:37 Speaker 1

Some some of the captives had had their.

00:24:41 Speaker 1

Paperback books and things. So we organized a little little library. I have thought up a in those days. They had 15 minute programs on American radio from 6 to 630. Fred Waring had a 15 minute hour and then that somebody else had another.

00:25:01 Speaker 1

15 minute hour whispering Jack Smith, I think, and he eye organized. Uh, a a little entertainment every night because the fellow that was on the that slept on the floor next to me had been a.

00:25:19 Speaker 1

Had owned a jewelry store in Philadelphia.

00:25:23 Speaker 1

And he had at one time dated a girl whose father had a music store.

00:25:28 Speaker 1

And during the courtship, he had learned a lot of popular songs as of the 20s, he was a good bit older than we were.

00:25:36 Speaker 1

And some of them were funny, like when Francis dances with me and collegiate and and stuff like, yes, we have no bananas. So I built a little uh, uh. He'd rack his brain all day long trying to remember the words of one of those songs. And then I'd introduce it with a big flurry.

00:25:54 Speaker 1

You know.

00:25:55 Speaker 1

There was one deck of cards, I think, in a room for 35.

00:25:59 Speaker 1

But when anybody got the movie or edgy, we'd hike around the compound and and get that kind of exercise.

00:26:08 Speaker 1

But it was just mainly waiting, hopefully trying to think of some way to get out, but we are far too far into the interior of Europe. Uh, to to really have practical escape for escaping. We are hundreds of miles from the Americans. Even when we did get loose.

00:26:28 Speaker 1

They hadn't even crossed the Rhine in the end of January 45.

00:26:33 Speaker 1

So that's how we spent our days.

00:26:37 Speaker 2

How was the morale of the POW?

00:26:41 Speaker 1

It was. It was good. I think occasionally there'd be an altercation, but people were too, too hungry, really, to fight each other. So they go outside and decide to cool off and come back in the room with arms around each other's necks.

00:26:58 Speaker 1

Uh.

00:27:00 Speaker 1

Most people were hopeful that the actually at first you fully expected patent to come over the hill and his tanks, you know, went to liberate everybody with its sight.

00:27:11 Speaker 1

But as week followed week, we knew that was not a a very reasonable expectation.

00:27:20 Speaker 1

So we were young and we were we were hopeful. We were Americans by George. And so we went from day.

00:27:30 Speaker 1

To day, you know.

00:27:33 Speaker 1

And we, as I say, once we got into the final prison camp assignment, we got uh, uh, periodic reports through the French who had dropped a little notes across the across the fence. Uh, that they picked up for BBC about where the lines were went.

00:27:53 Speaker 1

When I was interrogated at.

00:27:56 Speaker 1

Oberg, the military map on the wall, showed a little line right around uh shurberg that had been there all summer long. The Germans, for their own sake, didn't want to move the lines back to where we were really. When I got captured.

00:28:14 Speaker 1

So it was a, it was a matter of of getting occasional word, uh, fairly reliable. We thought about progress and we knew that that sooner sooner rather than later. Probably the war would be over.

00:28:33 Speaker 1

When I got back, as I say, we had a 60 day leave and then they uh.

00:28:41 Speaker 1

The US authorities reassigned as we had a few points left. At first we thought, well, we'll go to Japan.

00:28:50 Speaker 1

But it was, but pretty soon the Japanese capitulated. At the end of the summer, and so it was just a matter of uh, of uh, of doing something I was assigned to a classification office and managed the dental around uh all day long and fill in the day.

00:29:08 Speaker 1

And I, my wife and I lived in Mineral Wells and we had good friends there, so that was between Midsummer and December of 45. And then I was, uh.

00:29:20 Speaker 1

Had discharge from the service and went on my merry way.

00:29:24 Speaker 2

Here, 60 years plus since that war.

00:29:27 Speaker 1

That's right.

00:29:29 Speaker 2

How how do?

00:29:30 Speaker 2

You feel about your your service to your.

00:29:32 Speaker 2

Country, when you look back.

00:29:35 Speaker 1

I have no regrets about it. In fact, I thought it was a war that had to be fought. I've had serious uh concerns about some of the wars in the meanwhile that we've been involved with.

00:29:50 Speaker 1

But.

00:29:52 Speaker 1

It was a war that.

00:29:56 Speaker 1

Everybody was involved with, directly or indirectly.

00:30:00 Speaker 1

And it it had been building.

00:30:04 Speaker 1

For several years in the 30s, as Hitler became more and more ambitious so that she had a hunch that, uh.

00:30:12 Speaker 1

Sooner or later, America would be involved as it was.

00:30:16 Speaker 1

And.

00:30:18 Speaker 1

I I didn't know of. I mean, it wasn't like the Vietnam War where you had people scrambling into Canada and and being terribly reluctant about a draft there or like the present war where there's no draft, but uh, and most people are not involved directly in the current war in Iraq.

00:30:37 Speaker 1

But.

00:30:39 Speaker 1

A lot of civilians that were also in in war support activities and it was a great, uh, great spirit of cooperation and and teamwork that existed during that war. The World War 2 that hasn't been repeated. Thank heaven.

00:30:59 Speaker 1

In the meanwhile, but still was enough to give everybody a sense of purpose of a righteousness.

00:31:07 Speaker 1

Of good morale.

00:31:12 Speaker 1

You're welcome.