

Ray Wagner

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Grasmehr: Good morning. Today is April 18, 2019, and I'm here in the Holt Oral History room with Ray Wagner, a World War II US Army veteran. And today, Ray is going to share his story of service about his military service with the US Army during World War II. Introduce yourself once again, Mr. Wagner.

Wagner: I'm Ray Wagner, I'm ninety-four years old now. [Laughter] And I'm glad I got through it.

Grasmehr: We're happy you made it through World War II and we're exceptionally happy that you're here today at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library to share your story at reminiscence about your service during World War II. Now, we'll take this interview in a chronological manner, and we'll start out with asking about growing up prior to your military service. Did your father serve in World War I or did other family serve in the war?

Wagner: No. No. Nobody served in World War I.

Grasmehr: Okay. Now, many World War II veterans entered the workforce after completed eight or nine grades in school because their families coming out of the Depression needed an extra income earner to help financially support the family. Was that the case in your situation at home?

Wagner: I believe so. There were six kids in the family, and I went to school. Finished grammar school, went to high school, and after two years, I transferred to another high school.

Grasmehr: Here in the Chicago area?

Wagner: Pardon? [Wagner later clarified: Yes].

Grasmehr: Where did you attend school? Was it here in the Chicago area?

Wagner: Yeah. Everything was in the Chicago area. Yeah.

Grasmehr: Okay... Now... So, were you...? You were born July 9, 1924, so you were in the workforce prior to Pearl Harbor, correct?

Wagner: Right.

Grasmehr: What were you doing? What kind of employment did you have during those early years?

Wagner: You mean before I went in?

Grasmehr: Yes.

Wagner: Let's see. I worked at a factory for about six months and then I went down into the shipyard.

Grasmehr: What was manufactured in the factory or what did you do at the factory?

Wagner: Oh, electrical clocks and so forth.

Grasmehr: Now, you say you eventually worked at a shipyard. Was that after Pearl Harbor was attacked and we got drawn into the conflict?

Wagner: It was during I believe, during Pearl Harbor.

Grasmehr: Okay, what type did you have at the shipyard? What tasks were you...

Wagner: I was... in the piping area, I was a pipefitter.

Grasmehr: A pipefitter, yes. On your honorable discharge form after the war, that is what the Army listed was your civilian occupation before entering service. A pipefitter. Now, we were talking prior to the interview where it was noted that because you worked in a shipyard, that was during World War II a war-related industry and you could have received a deferment to get out of military service. What was your attitude about the possibility of a work deferment instead of going into the military service?

Wagner: Well, I wanted to keep on working there because I was making some money and bring it home. I was living out of town at the time in Seneca, Illinois. I enjoyed the work and when they offered... certain pipefitters there--ones they wouldn't need, I guess--they offered them a deferment, if they wanted it. It wasn't on paper or anything else. They just called you in the office and asked if you were interested. And I says No, I didn't want the deferment for the simple reasons

that when I went back home for the weekends, all my friends were gone for service. So, I figured I was going to be drafted, and that's what happened.

Grasmehr: According to your enlisted record of honorable service and discharge, it says you were inducted May 19, 1943, and you actually entered the military because there would be a lag time for a few days before you entered the military on May 26, 1943. Where did you take your basic training at? Do you recall?

Wagner: At Fort Sill.

Grasmehr: Fort Sill, Oklahoma. And do you have any memories of what it was like going through basic training at Fort Sill?

Wagner: I have a lot of memories about it. I was out on maneuvers every single day out in the fields and woods and stuff like that.

Grasmehr: Now, the length of basic training changed somewhat during World War II. Some guys had four to six weeks of basic training. Some guys had eight weeks, some guys had longer. In 1943, when you went through basic training, do you have an idea of how long you were down in Fort Sill?

Wagner: I think it was three months, approximately, if I remember right.

Grasmehr: Okay. All right. Now, when you... you were... military occupational specialty. The job that the Army wanted you to do... becoming a truck driver. Was that truck driver training done at Fort Sill or did the Army send you to another post?

Wagner: No, I didn't have any training in it.

Grasmehr: Okay. So, you didn't get any specialty...

Wagner: I did drive trucks previously in civilian life, but I didn't have any training.

Grasmehr: Okay. So, they used your previous military experience as "Oh, you're qualified to drive?"

Wagner: Before I arrived at the shipyard, yeah.

Grasmehr: Wonderful... So, after you completed your training at Fort Sill, do you recall where you were shipped next?

Wagner: Yeah, we had five, four – I beg your pardon- days to go home and then I had get on a train to go to Fort Meade in Maryland.

Grasmehr: So that was nice that the Army gave you some time for home leave. What kind of activities were you doing at Fort Meade?

Wagner: There wasn't much activity there, we were only there for a couple of days I think before we boarded the Queen Elizabeth.

Grasmehr: Oh, so... you... after leave or before leave, you were assigned to the 111th Field Artillery Battalion?

Wagner: No, no. Not until I got over into England.

Grasmehr: Okay, so you did not ship as part of the 29th Division?

Wagner: I was considered a replacement.

Grasmehr: Understood. So, you shipped overseas on the Queen Elizabeth, a converted passenger liner; larger, faster...

Wagner: There was eight bunks in each cabin, and you couldn't move around on the boat, you know. They wouldn't let you up on top, very seldom.

Grasmehr: It's interesting that you had the experience of going over on a converted passenger liner 'cause those... those types of ships, unfortunately, could hold a lot more troops on there so you were stuffed in there.

Wagner: Oh, sure. There were a couple of thousand in there.

Grasmehr: Yes. You were stuffed in a cramped situation, but it got you overseas quicker.

Wagner: And they covered all the walls and everything with plywood...you never seen what it was like inside... I understand... this is what... we're down below in the cabins all the time and they didn't let us out. I understand that we were supposed to be there within five days, we were there in five and a half for the simple reason, they claimed that it [the ship] hit a... a patrol boat and put a gash in the front of the boat and they had to slow it up. That's what I understand. We didn't see the gash or what happened but that's what we were told.

Grasmehr: Okay. Now, the Queen Elizabeth was a larger passenger liner. It was more... it rode more stable-y in the ocean crossing.

Wagner: Yeah. It was all right.

Grasmehr: So, you didn't get seasick or anything?

Wagner: No. No.

Grasmehr: Wonderful. So eventually, the ship, the Queen Elizabeth made its way to England and upon arrival in England...

Wagner: We didn't arrive in England, we arrived in Scotland.

Grasmehr: Gourock on the west side of Scotland, and then a very common experience. Did you take a train down to... a different area of England where at that point did you join your unit?

Wagner: Yeah. We took a train about halfway down to--I think it was London--at London we changed to buses and went down to Plymouth.

Grasmehr: Okay, on the south coast of England. So...

Wagner: That's when I joined the 29th.

Grasmehr: The 29th. Now, the 29th Infantry Division was a National Guard division with soldiers from Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania that had been federalized. Since it had a lot of National Guard personnel from those states and a lot of these men knew each other, here you were, someone from Chicago that wasn't part of that group. Did you have any problems assimilating with them or did they treat you as an outsider?

Wagner: At first. At first, yeah. They didn't want you there. [Laughter] Mostly, the ones in my unit were all from Virginia and it seemed to me they all knew each other, even though it was a whole battery. But they... anyone from Chicago wasn't... I had a friend of mine there and he was from New York, he was [treated] the same way.

Grasmehr: Did you eventually win them over? Did you develop friendships in the unit after being stationed with them?

Wagner: Not friendships, not friendships. But developed hellos and goodbyes and do the job when we were out on maneuvers and everything.

Grasmehr: A great segue to the next topic that we will be talking about. So, when you arrive with the 29th or assigned to the 29th Infantry Division--at that point, you're assigned to the 111th Field Artillery Battalion as a truck driver. Now, the 111th Field Artillery Battalion was centered around twelve toed M2 or M3 105mm Howitzers. That would provide an extra amount of air support to the rest of the

regiments in combat. Prior to D-Day when you're training in England, what type of training would you go out to the countryside and do?

Wagner: I didn't get to go much training. They took mostly the Virginian guys – went out. They didn't want anybody from Chicago or New York, so some of us had to stay back but we did go in training off and on.

Grasmehr: But as a truck driver...

Wagner: They didn't let me drive a truck in the 29th.

Grasmehr: Okay. What--when you're assigned to Battery B of the 111th, what job did you have you doing?

Wagner: Well, you were assigned to a gun crew and had to do whatever they done. You know, you had just one guy, he done the firing and the cannonier that done the loading, everybody had to chip in to spread the trails and when we pulled into a place, everybody had to work. They assigned...

Grasmehr: So, you were, actually, part of the gun crew that fired the piece?

Wagner: Yes. I wasn't part of the gun crew, but they put me into the gun crew in order to do something.

Grasmehr: Yeah because you had received artillery training when you were stateside. Now, recalling setting up a Howitzer to fire, how long would that take to spread the trails and get it so that...

Wagner: Well, when we pulled into position, it would take maybe fifteen to twenty minutes. It would take a half hour before they could fire, by the time they elevated the gun and everything else.

Grasmehr: Now, in researching your unit's story to prepare for this oral history interview, one of the things I noted was... that the 29th Division had participated in some amphibious landing training on the south coast of England in the spring of '44, several months before D-Day. And what was interesting in the years after the war, it became... it became declassified. The story of the German E Boats attacking some 4th Division landing ship tanks with torpedoes during a landing exercise and causing a number of casualties among the 4th Infantry Division. In reading that story, though, of your division, your division also participated in that same type of training about three or four weeks prior to that convoy that got hit

by the German torpedo boats. Were you part of that amphibious training? In other words, did you participate in amphibious training before D-Day, itself?

Wagner: Yeah, we were trained on the ducks.

Grasmehr: Okay. A great segue. A duck for those listening to this interview was an amphibious deuce-and-a-half truck, and as a deuce and a half truck, it could carry two-and-a-half tons of cargo. So, for these landing exercises and for actual D-Day, these ducks would be loaded on an LST [Landing, Ship, Tank] and then offshore, the ramp of the LST would open and the ducks would swim ashore. Had you ever... were you comfortable in riding one of those in these assault training exercises in water?

Wagner: No. No, I wasn't. [Laughter]

Grasmehr: Because when it was loaded, it rode low in the water, didn't it?

Wagner: With people.

Grasmehr: One of the things that I read for the actual D-Day assault was the amount of equipment that loaded into one of these ducks. By the time you add the weight of the 105mm Howitzer, a load of fifty artillery rounds, and each of those 105 rounds would weigh 100 pounds fourteen guys, fourteen soldiers, their equipment, and some other things that would get loaded on--when you do the math, all that weight combined is more than two-and-a-half tons.

Wagner: I know.

Grasmehr: So, it... in doing the research for your interview, some senior officers in the 111th protested that the load plan was loading too much weight in these ducks, but when they sent those protest up the chain of command, their protest were turned down... So... talking about those months leading up to D-Day...

Wagner: You want to talk about getting off the boat?

Grasmehr: Well, we'll get... Now... Yeah, let's talk about that right now. So, during the amphibious training, the bow doors of the LST would open up, the driver of the duck would drive off the ramp and hopefully you'd bob up and down. When you did these training exercises, how did the duck ride in the waves?

Wagner: It didn't ride in the waves. We didn't have no waves until we got off the boat there. When we were training, there were no waves out there. So, it just went out there and took a lot of water, but the pumps pumped it out.

Grasmehr: Oh, that's good, but I'm sure that caused...

Wagner: Because it was overloaded.

Grasmehr: Right. I'm sure it caused you concern when you started taking on water?

Wagner: Yeah, we had about... when we got off... when we got off on D-Day, there was--I would say there was about six inches of clearance off the water, and the waves just come right over.

Grasmehr: Well, we'll get to that when we get to the actual D-Day landing. No, it's interesting that even during the training exercises that you realized that this was going to be a problem.

Wagner: Yeah. Yeah.

Grasmehr: Now, in those months leading up prior to D-Day, did... you ever have time off from training--did you have any interactions with the local English population? What did--how did they treat you and the men in your unit?

Wagner: Well, they left us off at night. I think two nights out of the week. And you were free to go into town and, you know, up into town, you know. That's what you could do. There's nothing to do up there, but...

Grasmehr: The history of the 29th Division, they're initially stationed in an area of England called Devon and where you left from to head to Normandy was the Cornwall area on the southwestern coast of England...

Wagner: Yes, the port.

Grasmehr: So... in the months leading up to D-Day... were there rumors circulating among the guys in your unit about when and if the invasion might happen or...?

Wagner: Well, we knew it was coming but no one knew when. And everybody thought it would come unexpected, which it did.

Grasmehr: Right; well, it required a couple of factors. One was there were a little--the US military was a little behind of getting the number of LSTs--landing ship tanks--that were needed to support the operation of the amphibious landing, so that was a factor in setting the time for the invasion would happen. The needed the right number of tanks to be available and a number of them had either had been diverted to the Pacific or down in to the Mediterranean... at the Anzio Beach head that was cut off by the German lines in the spring of 1944 and the way they

resupplied that Anzio Beach head was with LSTs. The other factor was the weather, so between those two factors, even though I think the Allied high command would have hoped to have done the invasion in May, it doesn't happen in May and it actually occurs in early June. So, getting to that point... because of the bad weather, there were a few stormy days--rain and wind--a lot of the units loaded onto the vessels and then the chain of command said, "No, we can't go now." And these guys were sitting in these ships, you know, in port. What was your unit's experience? Did you do that loading and then hurry up and wait? Did you load...

Wagner: We did one day.

Grasmehr: Okay, were you kept on the ship in port?

Wagner: Yeah.

Grasmehr: Okay, okay. What was going through your head while you were in...?

Wagner: We didn't know because no one would say anything. Nobody would tell you anything, and the officers wouldn't say anything because they didn't know anything, evidently.

Grasmehr: [Laughter] Right.

Wagner: So, you just sat there and wondered what was gonna happen, you know. Are we gonna go or ain't we? That's the only thing you could think of.

Grasmehr: Were you worried? Were you apprehensive? Was your unit confident?

Wagner: Well, you are with a bunch of guys and you just sat there and some guys played craps, some guys played cards, other guys just talked. We couldn't go any place or go anywhere, and there was nothing to do on the ship. You couldn't go on top; they didn't want you up there. So, you just sat in the... the... interior of the LSTs, you could walk down there. Go through them and see a couple of tanks and stuff like that, but that's all.

Grasmehr: Now, you're just mentioning that your officers are just as clueless or maybe they just weren't saying and so nobody knew what was going to happen. What was-- you talked a little about how the others in your battery and in your field artillery battalion treated you as an outsider from Chicago, what was your impression of the leaders in your unit? Do you think they were good sergeants? What was your

impression of--your confidence level in your officers? Do you think they were good leaders?

Wagner: Well, the one I had I thought was a good leader. I don't know about the rest of them, but I guess they were all right because we wouldn't know them, we only knew our own leaders, you know. And we didn't know the guys that run the battalion. We didn't know the guys that run the division or anything else.

Grasmehr: Sure, but you were working with a gun crew in one of the batteries. What was your impression about the men in that particular battery? Their training level? Their ability to do...

Wagner: They were all right but just didn't like anybody from out of state. That was the whole problem.

Grasmehr: Understood. Got it.

Wagner: So, you never got to do your job that you were supposed to do, and you never got assigned certain jobs. Sometimes they'd go out on maneuvers and they would leave, maybe, six people behind, you know, and then they'd come back, and they were happy about everything they done. We were just sitting around, sometimes.

Grasmehr: Now Battery B of the 111th of the Field Artillery Battalion had just under 150 men assigned to it and you were in one-gun crew, a small portion of that company size unit, the overall battalion had six hundred plus men assigned to it. When you loaded up to prepare for the D-Day landings, did... what I've read was those twelve Howitzers, three batteries, four 105mm guns per battery times three, twelve Howitzers, plus one other duck, so there were thirteen of those amphibious trucks to carry your battalion ashore. Were all thirteen of those loaded in one LST, landing ship tank, or were they spread out across a couple of vessels? Do you recall?

Wagner: What do you mean? Do you mean in a boat?

Grasmehr: In the large ship that transported you from the south coast of England...

Wagner: Oh, they were all next to each other.

Grasmehr: Yeah, so did they cram the entire battalion into one LST?

Wagner: I don't know about the whole battalion was in there. But there some other people in there to, some other soldiers besides... the 29th Division. I don't know what they were.

Grasmehr: Right. So, the LST you're on sails from a port on the south coast of England of the night of, late on June 5th to make its way across the channel. The [US] Navy had cleared some lanes of some mine fields so the ships could pass through toward Normandy. And from what I read about your unit's landing, that the landing ship tank carrying you and your unit arrived off of Normandy about 2 in the morning on June 6. So, it's totally pitch dark, it's stormy so it's probably cloudy and probably couldn't see stars because it had been such stormy weather. 2am in the morning, the landing ship tank drops its front bow ramp and one of those amphibious duck trucks goes off the ramp and immediately sinks, losing one of the Howitzers. And that was a B Battery duck, one of the guys from your unit.

Wagner: I didn't know that.

Grasmehr: As with any assault landing, amphibious landing during World War II, it took a while for everybody, for all of the units to unload off the vessels that carried them off shore, and then the smaller landing craft would circle around for hours, waiting for everyone to get organized before heading to shore. So I was fascinated to read in the accounts of your unit's landing that even though they started unloading your landing ship tank at 2:00 in the morning, your unit was not assigned to hit the beach until 8:20. So for over five hours, those poor drivers in those ducks in heavy seas, three to five foot waves, were circling around waiting to head to shore. And the sad thing about... how heavily loaded those ducks, amphibious trucks were, that while you were waiting to go ashore... or head toward shore... another six of those ducks sank, they foundered in the heavy seas, because loaded down as heavily as they were, there was very low free board above water, and with three to five foot waves--and you said those ducks had pumps, but I guess those pumps didn't...

Wagner: They could never keep up.

Grasmehr: Yeah, so... so of those thirteen ducks for your battalion, you hadn't even headed to shore and you already lost seven of the thirteen--sunk. Then route to shore, another one sank because they anchored... a number of miles offshore and then they would head to shore. So that left four... ducks carrying Howitzers heading toward the beach, and you were on one of those. Talk about your unit's first

attempt to land? For the listeners listening to this interview, the area of Omaha Beach--Omaha Beach was about 7,900 yards wide, and there were a number of draws, ravines leading off the beach that these draws would come into the bluffs and hills, and it was anticipated that that would allow the US units to easily move off the beach. But the Germans in preparing their defense knew that these would be obvious high-speed routes that the Allies would try to move across the beach at, so they heavily defended each of those draws. In researching your oral history, I read a quote where... Field Marshal Erwin Rommel had, in one of his visits to the German defenses at Omaha Beach prior to the invasion, had been talking to Werner Pluskat, a German artillery unit commander, and Rommel had said this area -- Omaha Beach -- is where the Allies would come ashore. And Pluskat, the [German] artillery battalion commander asked Field Marshal Rommel, "Why? Why do you think that?", and he said, "Look at the terrain, it's exactly just like the landing in Salerno, in Italy." The Germans anticipated the Allies would land there and they heavily fortified those draws leading off the beach with anti-tank guns, machine guns... and your unit was scheduled to head toward the D3 draw, the Lemelin draw, in front of the French town of Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer, which was just south of the bluffs, south of hills--just south of the beach. So, your unit, those last four remaining ducks, was heading right toward the German defenses. Talk about as those last four ducks approached the beach.

Wagner: Well, first of all, when we come off the boat... I think we were the third boat off--third duck off--every one of them ducks sunk. Every one of them. I don't know who said they wouldn't, but by the time I got on the beach, there wasn't a duck on the beach. I didn't see a duck. You say some of them got in there, but...

Grasmehr: Only one of--well, on the way, what we learned from researching your unit, of those last four... three got hit by German artillery fire, or anti-tank fire, as they approached the beach. So, three of the remaining four sank. Only one... got toward the beach. Now, your battalion commander, and office named Lieutenant Colonel Mullen, he preceded your unit's wave coming in. He gone in with the first wave that had so many casualties in the seven o'clock hour, and Lieutenant Colonel Mullen had a very famous quote from once they realized the artillery pieces for your battalion wasn't going to make it ashore, "Well, we're all infantrymen now." So, talk about... how... In your story, it's very unique because you actually tried to land on Omaha Beach two different time. Talk about the first time you tried to make it make it ashore.

Wagner: Well, first of all, when we were in the ducks, the ducks sank. They started off, they ran a little bit, they went down a little bit, and all went down. We must have lost half of the men--drowned. I had one of these life preservers on that you blow up.

Grasmehr: Right.

Wagner: And I grabbed a hold of a spare tire that came up floating. I don't know where it came from. But it was a spare tire. I thought it came off a duck but think it might have been too heavy. But anyway, I was floating on that, and I looked over and here's a lieutenant and he's struggling in the water and I hollered to him, I tried to get over there and I finally pulled him onto the tire. But now the tire wouldn't hold both of us, and there was a switchboard that come past. I don't know where it come from, come off a boat or something but that switchboard came floating, a big switchboard, so we both got a hold of that. I we were floating in the water--I would say a good forty minutes, floating around. And finally, a little pickup boat come past and picked both of us up, took us back to the boat. We got back on the boat and we got--

Grasmehr: The LST.

Wagner: Now we didn't have now clothes or nothing, we were all wet, so they dressed us in Navy uniforms. Not the uniforms, but their work clothes, their heavy work clothes. And then they put us--they took us and put us on a Rhino barge; I don't know if you ever heard of them.

Grasmehr: Yeah. They're very low riding in the water and...

Wagner: But they're big, and there were two tanks sitting on this Rhino barge. I think they were driven by outboard motors if I'm not mistaken. And when we got in--by the time we got in, they had knocked--the 88s--had knocked one of the tanks right off the end. And they were firing at the Rhino barge and some of us got blown off, some didn't. But we all got into the water, just the few of us that were there, and we all got up to the beach. Now, we're at them little crevices up there, them little sandbars up there and that's what we're hiding behind.

Grasmehr: So, during the morning of June 6, the tide initially starts low tide and there's hundreds of yards of sand between the edge of the water and the bluffs overlooking the beach. But that tide comes in throughout the morning. So, by the time you were able to land, was there... did you--did it seem there was a lot of beach between you and the bluffs?

Wagner: There wasn't a lot of beach, no.

Grasmehr: So, the tide had come in?

Wagner: By the time we landed on the beach, the bluffs were right in front of us and the pillboxes were right up there, and they were firing right down at us, all the time. So, there wasn't much of a beach.

Grasmehr: So, the German defensive fire; machine gun fire? Mortars? Artillery fire? What kind of fire?

Wagner: It was 88s and they used the 88s out of the pillboxes.

Grasmehr: Sure. That's interesting that you mentioned the 88s. In your particular sector... the Germans had 75mm anti-tank guns on either your left, to the eastern side of... of the beach and at the far western end of the beach, there were 88s that were firing what they called enfilading fire, it an angle coming across.

Wagner: Crossfire.

Grasmehr: Yes, crossfire. And then machine guns. When you look at the actual German personnel that were available to defend those 7,900 yards at Omaha, east to west... the challenge of where you landed was a German strong--had three German strong points there. The German term for these strong points were resistance nests. There was a German infantry battalion headquartered--I'm sorry, a company, a German infantry company in that draw. The anti-tank weapons, the machine guns, and there were several batteries of 105s and German 150mm also that could fire at the beach where you landed. So, continue on with your story about coming ashore.

Wagner: The what?

Grasmehr: Continue with your story about when you tried to come ashore and land.

Wagner: Oh, that's all. We had to jump off the Rhino barge into the water and it was seven-foot-deep, and I still had my life preserver I did get in but a lot of them didn't. A lot of them got killed.

Grasmehr: Now when you loaded onto the duck, other than your uniform and the life preserver, were you loaded down with other sorts of equipment?

Wagner: Yeah, we had everything, yeah.

Grasmehr: So, your carbine. Okay. Well, going into seven feet of water heavily weighted down, were you a strong swimmer?

Wagner: Not that strong--well, it was enough to get into water that wasn't that deep. That was the idea. Well, later on, I was gonna say later on – I got back on the [pick-up] boat - but you were talking about them boats going around, the Nazi boats going around, but when I got on the hospital ship, that's when they had the two men submarines, I guess it was or one man submarine they claim, going around, running into the boats with these submarines. I don't know what they're called but that's what they said there was out there.

Grasmehr: German or Allied?

Wagner: Yeah, German, not ours.

Grasmehr: Hmm, I'd never heard that story before. But before we get to when you got medically evacuated, talk about--are there any other things you want to cover before talking about how you were wounded?

Wagner: No, it's just that when we got up the beach we had to look around for guns or something, and there was a commander up there. We didn't know who he was, and he was saying, "Come on, we gotta go, we gotta go." And he says, "Get some guns and pick up your stuff." And I just happened to meet this buddy of mine, he was there. I just met him up there. And the two of us crawled down the beach; not ran but we crawled up and down the beach a couple of times picking up guns. So, I wound up with a submachine gun, a Thompson submachine gun. And he wound up with a... a BAR [M1918 Browning Automatic Rifle], but he couldn't carry it. It was too heavy, so he dropped that off and wound up with an M1 [Grand].

Grasmehr: Now... when you're moving up and down the beach grabbing weapons...

Wagner: We weren't running or anything.

Grasmehr: No -- trying to avoid... now, how intense was the German fire that was hitting the beach area while you were doing this?

Wagner: It was all around. It was coming down all around.

Grasmehr: The interesting aspect of where your artillery unit attempted to land in front of the Saint-Laurent sur-Mer, the Lemelin draw... that... those three German

resistance nests held out late into the afternoon into June 6. That was one of the last areas at the edge of Omaha Beach that was held by the Germans. They held out longer there where you tried to land than other areas.

Wagner: Yeah, I know they were still shooting when it was starting to get dark.

Grasmehr: Yeah. Now the... would eventually led to... the American success at Omaha Beach was officer leaders of the 29th-- instead of trying to move men through these draws--these gaps in the bluffs that were heavily mined and covered by German fire--because there were only about eight-hundred Germans covering the 7,900 yards-- the Americans started eventually, after a number of hours, moving men.... Over the cliffs and bluffs between the exits. And because the Germans didn't have enough infantry troops to cover, they eventually were able to have success, you know, by avoiding those draws that were the obvious heavily covered areas by German fire. When you're on... on the beach... there's a point where US Navy had destroyers come close to shore to provide fire support for the American troops. In the midst of all that chaos, talk about the sights and sounds for the people listening to this interview that never experienced combat. Talk a little bit about the chaos of that morning and...I mean, I read accounts where the Navy's support fire started had started some fires in the grass on those bluffs overhead. So, there's smoke, it's loud, it's noisy, talk about what you're experiencing...

Wagner: We weren't experiencing anything. All we knew what it was happening from where we were. We'd hear from the battle ships out there. We'd hear them going them over the top of us and the same with the... the destroyers, when they fired, it went over the top of us, over the beach. I never got off the beach.

Grasmehr: Right. So, let's talk about... how it came that you were wounded and then had to be evacuated. What happened? How were you wounded, Sir?

Wagner: I just don't know. All I know is that it happened, and a shell exploded right close by where me and this guy were. Me and a buddy of mine were hiding behind this mountain of sand and the shell exploded right there. We were all right, we were talking, and all of a sudden, I look down and I heard the whole knee was bleeding.

Grasmehr: Which knee did you get hit it?

Wagner: The right.

Grasmehr: The right knee. Okay. Now normally in World War II, when a soldier was wounded, there was what they referred to as the casualty evacuation chain of... you'd be taken to an aid post or aid station and then evacuated.

Wagner: There was no aid station.

Grasmehr: Because you were just on the beach. They haven't developed that yet. So, because there was none of that normal casualty evacuation process...

Wagner: Two medics come to pick me up [the next morning]. That's all.

Grasmehr: Okay. And because of... the... wound that you'd received to your knee, did they give you morphine? Did they put sulfur on the wound or anything?

Wagner: No, they didn't do anything. Just picked me up and put me on the boat.

Grasmehr: Okay, so they evacuated you offshore.

Wagner: Yeah. Now how they got me out to the boat that took us across, back across I don't know. I don't remember whether we got on a rubber raft, I don't know what it was.

Grasmehr: They probably... those smaller landing craft. They would probably put you on one of those to ferry on an LST. What was common...

Wagner: We didn't go to an LST.

Grasmehr: To a larger transport?

Wagner: Yeah. Right to a... It was a commercial boat. Somebody's boat. [i.e. a smaller boat].

Grasmehr: But it...

Wagner: And it was about, I guess, eight or ten of us on that boat. That's all.

Grasmehr: All right... so... They evacuate offshore, they move you along to a larger vessel, and at some point, after gathering a number of casualties like yourself, they head back to England.

Wagner: That's where I said they claimed there were these one or two-man submarines that were going in between the boats and running into the sides of the boats.

Grasmehr: I've never heard that story before, but we'll follow up and see. That might have been a rumor.

Wagner: That's what we understood while we were on the boat. They were telling us to get ready do get off the boat in case one of these happen and put a hole in the boat.

Grasmehr: Right. Now looking... Part of the US Army's documentation for units during World War II was a document--a report called the morning report. Now researchers use--they reviewed those morning reports to note daily activities in a unit. And one of the things that's noted on those morning reports - it'll note individual soldier's names and why they left the unit--evacuated because a wound, etc. or sometimes officers get transferred to another unit. That sort of thing is noted on these morning reports, and for June 6, 1944, the morning report for your unit mentions that... you were evacuated and it gives the acronym, let me find it here, LWA, which in Army parlance refers to lightly wounded in action, and sometimes a more serious wound is noted SWA, seriously wounded in action. Given the pain you were feeling getting hit in the knee, would you have considered it a light wound? Or did you think it was serious?

Wagner: Well, I could [barely] walk, you know. I don't know what you'd call it if... I'd call it a light wound because it could be fixed, and I'd get back.

Grasmehr: So, at some point during June 6, after attempting to land on Omaha Beach, you're hit by a shrapnel from an artillery shell--

Wagner: That's what I figured it was, yeah.

Grasmehr: That hits your right knee and you're evacuated offshore and that vessel you're on, eventually sails back to England. When you arrive back in England, I assume they sent you to some field hospital or general hospital?

Wagner: General hospital.

Grasmehr: Okay. Talk about your recuperation process... time... your treatment. How did they treat your knee?

Wagner: They treated me real good. They were... they put me in a ward and there must have been, oh say, forty or fifty people in the ward; some with no legs others with no arms, and they were treating everybody. Of course, mine wasn't as bad as some of them. So, they came first. It was a case of treating them first all the time. So, you just laid there for a long time before they treated you. But they were all good. They were all good: the nurses and the doctors and everything else.

Grasmehr: Now... those morning reports that we were just talking about, eventually, if you're going to be in the hospital for more than a couple of weeks, your unit--the 111th--would do an administrative notation where you were temporarily dropped from the unit roll so they no longer had to track you back at the 111th while you were at the hospital in England. So, on June 21, a couple of weeks after D-Day, the morning reports note that from hospital... where you'd been evacuated for lightly wounded in action incident, you were dropped from the unit rolls. And that's just a normal administrative notation. Now... we'll research this further, but we didn't note any other notation in those morning reports until September 9, three months after D-Day when it was noted that you were moved from a replacement depot back to duty with your old unit. Battery B 111th. Now... in early September, the Battery B of the 111th after fighting... after the 29th Division fought for months around the heavily contested city of Saint-Lô in Normandy and it was rough going for the 29th fighting through that bocage country. The Germans stoutly defended the terrain around There was a series of hills, high ground, there, combination of high-quality German Airborne units, Fallschirmjäger, good terrain to defend, and just really good terrain to attack through those bocage hedgerows... the 29th Division had a rough go working through that area. But they finally captured Saint-Lô in late July of 1944. Eventually, the 29th Infantry Division moves to the Brittany Peninsula where after [General George] Patton's 3rd Army had been activated, one of the... priorities because the US military required thousands of tons of supplies on a daily basis, a priority was capturing a good port where they could move supplies through, and Cherbourg had been demolished before the Germans surrendered there in late June, 1944. So, the Allies were looking for a good port. Now on the Brittany Peninsula, the Germans had a number of U-boat bases there, on the south side of the Cherbourg those Germans... units hold up in those two cities, the Saint-Laurent and the Saint Nazaire held out until V-E Day. But your unit the 29th was taking participating in siege operations in a town further west of the Brittany Peninsula in a town called Port de Brest.

Wagner: Right.

Grasmehr: And it had fortifications there that had been built in the 1700s and because these stout fortifications the Germans were defending, your artillery battalion was trying to help shell the German defenses that they brought in a couple of battleships to try to shell these fortifications. But at that point, the siege to try to capture Brest, which had a good port and so the allies wanted to use that port to move supplies through that...those siege operations lasted from mid-August until

the city's surrendered to September 16, I believe. So, the 29th Divisions there participating in that siege, your old unit, the Battery B of the 111th, is there doing fire missions. When you rejoin the unit in September '44, one of the things I want to ask is...The recuperation from your knee wound; did it inhibit your ability to do certain duties?

Wagner: Oh, sure.

Grasmehr: So, at this point they reassign you from working with one of the artillery Howitzer to what did they have you do when you rejoined the--?

Wagner: Well, they just had me carry the gun, my own gun and go along with them as more or less like protection, I guess.

Grasmehr: Okay. At this point, were you a truck driver? Were you driving the deuce and a half that towed these [artillery pieces or guns]?

Wagner: Now, I wasn't driving then because I don't remember three months being in a hospital though. [i.e., Grasmehr estimated the duration on morning reports and Wagner recalled a one-month stay in the hospital.]

Grasmehr: Okay, we'll look into this further. I mean, usually every time you change status it would show up on these morning reports. There may be another morning report from July or August...

Wagner: I remember... about, at the most a month being in the hospital. That's all I remember.

Grasmehr: Yeah. Well, the quote on the September 9 morning report states, "From a replacement depot to duty with Battery B 111th Field Artillery Battalion." So the replacement system, because of the heavily casualties that the Americans were experiencing in 1944, the replacement system was kind of broken and later on as you get toward 1945, if you'd been away from your unit for hospitalization for more than two weeks, later in the war, they wouldn't send you back to your old unit. They'd send you to whatever unit needed somebody. So, it's interesting that at this point, in September '44, they did send you back to your old unit, Battery B.

Wagner: Yeah. But I didn't remember being off that long, you know, because I joined the back up just as they were finishing up in Saint-Lô and from there we went to Brest. And when we cleared out of Brest 'cause I went through the submarine

pens they're looking around, you know, because after it was and I went looking around the submarine pens, there were two subs there and then.

Grasmehr: You just said something... that I think is very interesting because it was earlier noted in conversations with your friend Jim Mescall that there were two Ray Wagners in your battalion?

Wagner: Yes, I remember something about that, yeah,

Grasmehr: The other Ray Wagner may have been the... the one that re-joined your unit in September, and you re-joined at in Saint-Lô. That may be the confusion in examining the morning reports.

Wagner: Yeah. Come to think of it I remember... I think he spelled his name a little different: W, O, G, N, E, R.

Grasmehr: Well, we'll look into that, but the reason we thought it was you is because it mentioned from LWA to duty with your unit. So, we'll have to go back and check to see if the other Wagner had been wounded also because if it... The reason we thought it was you was because of that LWA, which was the notation that they used in the morning reports when they sent you to the hospital in England. All right, so...

Wagner: But that was in Brest now, now that was the end, and from there we traveled. Now we start going, I think we went through Paris.

Grasmehr: Let me get to that... There was an incident that was brought up in the research of your unit's history about the assistant division commander for the 29th... that while your division was operating in the Brittany Peninsula near Brest that the... the assistant division commander had set up a field brothel for the personnel in your unit...

Wagner: Oh, I didn't know he done that. That's the story.

Grasmehr: Yes. As we looked into that incident, it was only going in operation for five hours until it got shut down. But it was an interesting thing to note.

Wagner: It was Gerhardt, I think.

Grasmehr: Right, General [Charles H.] Gerhardt. A World War I veteran and I think he might have gotten the idea--the British Army in World War I had field brothels set up when the soldiers would have a few weeks off from the front before going back to the front lines. Maybe that's how the idea came to be. [Laughter] All right,

we're continuing now discussing Ray Wagner's oral history with the 111th Field Artillery Battalion. To review to this point, Ray's 111th field battalion attempted to land on Omaha Beach in a heavily defended German sector and the duck amphibious truck that he was assigned to sank offshore after being picked up, taken to a larger vessel given...

Wagner: LST.

Grasmehr: Yes. Given dry clothes, you attempted to land again, there was still heavy fire when you landed, and as you were on the beach, a German artillery shell landed near you and wounded you in your right knee, resulting that you had to be evacuated back to England. After a short convalesce back in England with a general hospital, in which they awarded you your Purple Heart, you returned back to France, Normandy where you re-joined your unit in the Saint-Lô area for operating in the bocage country before your unit moved to the Brittany area to take part in capturing the German-held Port of Brest. Once Brest fell and surrendered in mid-September, the unit then moved far to the east across France to the German border. Do you have any recollection of your unit moving from Brittany across France to head to the German French border?

Wagner: Oh, sure. Took a while, too.

Grasmehr: Talk about that.

Wagner: Well, we stopped in Paris. We were in Paris for oh, I think one night. And then we kept on going. I.... well, I had that map that had the actual route.

Grasmehr: Now in September of '44... it's been well established that there were still fuel shortages where both the British wanted priority for the fuel that was available for their troops, Patton wanted priority for the fuel for his troops... Did your unit ever experience any difficulties of getting fuel so that it could move from point A to point B?

Wagner: Not really. We usually went for a couple of hours, then we'd stop, maybe overnight, then go again and do it off and on, you know, all the way, all the way. We would set up the guns every once in a while, because they were firing guns and 88s. At that time, we would have enough fuel for everything, so we never had a problem with the fuel.

Grasmehr: All right. The... Eventually... the front is in western Germany where the Germans are heavily defending against an Allied advance. It was rough going because the

Siegfried Line defenses were in western Germany – those defense had been built in the 1930s, prior to World War II... the... in the autumn of 1944, the 29th Division is attacking eastward with the goal of moving through the Hurtgen Forest area to head east to try to reach the Rhine River. Of course, that didn't happen in the fall of '44 because the German defenses stiffened, the... it was a very wet autumn with a lot of rain and mud that helped the German defenses. And it was tough going for the American advance in the vicinity of the Hurtgen Forest... So, your artillery battalion, the 111th, is conducting fire missions against the Germans throughout the autumn of 1944. Did you ever experience incoming artillery fire where the German artillery would fire back at your unit?

Wagner: Oh, yeah.

Grasmehr: Talk about those times where the German artillery fired in the vicinity of where your unit was.

Wagner: The thing was if you heard it, you were all right. If you didn't hear it, you had to watch out. And that's what it was. Some exploded near you, some exploded way behind you.

Grasmehr: Now you mentioned, occasionally, moving the battery to go to another location to fire. Was, once the front line stabilized in the fall of '44...

Wagner: No.

Grasmehr: Did you pretty much stayed in one location? You weren't moving around much?

Wagner: We moved around all the time.

Grasmehr: Okay.

Wagner: All the way up until we got into Maastricht, Holland and then Belgium and then Germany.

Grasmehr: Okay. Now you talk about... Let's just discuss--when your unit was in Normandy or Brittany or even when you were passing through Paris, how did the French civilians treat the men in your unit? Were they welcoming? Did they--

Wagner: Yeah, they were happy about it. They were welcoming. Of course, they did that when the Germans come in, too. It was the same thing, you know. I just figured that it was just no different.

Grasmehr: And I'm sure the Dutch population when your unit was operating near Maastricht were very happy.

Wagner: Yeah, so were the Belgians, yeah.

Grasmehr: But when you were operating in western Germany, how did... did you ever have any interactions with the...

Wagner: Well, I wasn't in western Germany. I was in there up until we hit the Roer River.

Grasmehr: Okay.

Wagner: And that's when I got transferred. So, I didn't get into the middle of Germany or anything.

Grasmehr: Sure. Well, you mentioned the efforts toward the Roer River. The objective of the Allied advance toward... the objective of the Allied advance in that area was to attack toward a series of dams that were providing hydro-electric power for the Germans and it was considered a strategic objective. That's why the Allies were trying to advance in that area. Now... do you have any other memories that you'd like to talk about when your battalion was operating in that area performing fire missions in support of the 29th, before you got transferred?

Wagner: Now, not really. But I wasn't doing any heavy work in the battery. You know, I wasn't carrying ammunition or nothing like that.

Grasmehr: Sure. What did they typically have you doing?

Wagner: Well, like I say, they gave you a gun, I had the carbine, of course, everybody had one of them and I would do odds and ends. Whatever I could, you know.

Grasmehr: Proving local security while they were?

Wagner: If I could help them, if one guy picked up a shell and he stumbled or something, I'd go over there and help them, and I'd carry half of it to him. I just couldn't do anything where I'd put weight on my knee.

Grasmehr: Right. Now the... the 105mm Howitzers, they had a range of a little over six miles, 10,000 plus yards effective range, a little over 11,000 yards maximum range. Do you recall Battery B being very busy with fire missions? You were moving a lot, were you also doing a large number of fire missions?

Wagner: Oh, yeah. I would say the battalion--the whole battalion--was busy all the time because if we weren't firing, the next battery was. And up until we crossed over on top of them, it's jumping over another one. That's about what happening. I think that's what's happening.

Grasmehr: Well, what would typically happen in these assignments, each of the 105 mm battalions for the 29th Division would support one the regiments. So, your battalion would typically support the 116th Infantry [Division]?

Wagner: And the 115th [Division]. That's what we were supposed to do when we come in on the beach. But 115 lost three-quarter of our men, so did the 116th.

Grasmehr: Right. Yes, those first few waves at Omaha Beach had heavy, heavy casualties.

Wagner: That's what happened when I got up to the base there, it was chaos, like you said. Nobody knew anything.

Grasmehr: So... when you were back with your unit, did you experience any lingering pain from your knee?

Wagner: Pardon?

Grasmehr: Lingering pain from your knee wound while you were--

Wagner: Oh, sure. All the time. Yeah. In fact, when we went to... Germany, by the time we got in Germany, just outside of Aachen, my knee blew up about that big.

Grasmehr: Became inflamed and swollen?

Wagner: Just swollen. Water, I guess. But eventually, it went down again. It went up and down on me all the way.

Grasmehr: Now you mentioned that... at one point... Well, we found that... the 283rd Field Artillery Battalion is attached to the 29th Division in November of 1944, in early November. So, in late November on November 25, you get transferred from your previous assignment with Battery B in the 111th Field Artillery Battalion on November 25, 1945 you were transferred over to Battery C of the 283rd.

Wagner: It was November? I was not... I was in line in December, yet in Germany.

Grasmehr: Right. I'm sorry. The 283rd battalion is transferred to start supporting the division, the 29th. So, there's a period in November and December of '44 where

both your battalion, the 111th and the 283rd are both assigned to the 29th, during [the drive eastward toward Julich and Duren].

Wagner: We didn't know that. I didn't know that.

Grasmehr: Right. And... continue your thought when you were saying at one point you... Now, we see... in the morning reports where you were assigned to the 283rd in January of '45. Do you think you were assigned there in December instead?

Wagner: Yeah, in December around Christmas time.

Grasmehr: Okay. So, the 283rd is... supporting the 29th Division also and supporting 19th Corps, which is part of the US 9th Army, which is pushing in the Roer River area, north of the Ardennes. The 283rd had a slightly different mission than your previous unit, the 111th. Whereas the 111th solely worked with the 29th Division, the 283rd spent its time in the European Theater being attached to a number of different divisions.

Wagner: That's why they called it a "Bastard Battalion." Yeah. [Laughter]

Grasmehr: And then there are times where it wasn't attached to a specific division but attached to a corps.

Wagner: Or an army.

Grasmehr: Yes. With the field artillery doctrine, you'd have a number of field artillery battalions assigned to the corps headquarters and they would designate these artillery battalions is what they referred to as general support units. Any of the three divisions in that corps could call upon those field artillery battalions for extra firepower. So, there are times during the 283rd's time in the European theater where it's supporting a division, there are times when it's attached to a corps headquarters to be used as needed and there are times when it's assigned...

Wagner: Well, being a lowly private. I wouldn't know that. [Laughter]

Grasmehr: No. You were just going from point A to point B.

Wagner: I just went from—[Laughter]

Grasmehr: Right. Now... the... There's heavy fighting going on in December of 1944 and January of 1945 in the Battle of the Bulge. The 29th Division is operating north of the Ardennes, still trying to attack through that heavily fortified forest area east

of the Hurtgen Forest, trying to advance through that Roer River Valley region... But the... as part of the heavy fighting in the Ardennes, the 28th Infantry Division was heavily... decimated in the fighting in the Ardennes. They get pulled out of the Ardennes and in January of 1945, move to southeastern France to attack-- help support attack a German held area known as the Colmar Pocket. It was a German held bridgehead west of the Rhine River. So, your unit moves from that Netherlands, Belgium, Germany area in the Roer River Valley all the way to southeastern France to provide fire support against the attempt to defeat the Germans at this Colmar Pocket. It's a lengthy process and it takes several months. So you get... while you are with the 283rd, you move to that area of southeastern France and right after you move there... there's a famous incident that happens in the 28th Division area, in which one of its soldier, Private Eddie Slovik, got executed for desertion.

Wagner: We heard about it. That's all.

Grasmehr: Yeah. How did you hear about it? Were there rumors? Scuttle buzz going around?

Wagner: Just rumors going around. We didn't know whether it was true or not.

Grasmehr: Okay. What did you think when you heard that news that they executed someone for desertion?

Wagner: I don't know what I thought. I guess at the time you think he deserved it. Then again you don't think he deserved it; you know. It all depends on the situation and we didn't know what the situation because he didn't hear. We only had that he... they put him in a firing squad We never had the reason or anything.

Grasmehr: He'd deserted that previous autumn.

Wagner: That's what I understand now.

Grasmehr: He'd been detained, they court-martialed on November 11, he had written a letter to General Eisenhower asking for clemency, that was denied, and then he was executed on....

Wagner: Why didn't the execute this other guy that went over there, and he brought him back?

Grasmehr: I don't--I can't answer....

Wagner: They didn't do anything. Him, they let him go.

Grasmehr: I can't answer that. Now the winter of 1944 and '45 was the coldest winter it had been in Europe since 1939-1940.

Wagner: I know!

Grasmehr: One of the things that researchers see when looking at the casualty reports, there's not only the battle casualties—

Wagner: -- frozen feet.

Grasmehr: -- from shrapnel and bullet wounds but cold weather injury, what the Army refers to as non-battle casualties. Talk about... Did guys in your unit get evacuated for frostbite?

Wagner: Yeah, some of them did.

Grasmehr: How did--did you think you had adequate winter clothing? Did you have--

Wagner: We never had enough clothing. I used to drive to camp, and I would have to only drive maybe an hour and then somebody would have to take over because my feet were frozen. That's how cold it was.

Grasmehr: Now when you were driving, what vehicle were you driving?

Wagner: The command car.

Grasmehr: Okay.

Wagner: That's what they had me do when they transferred me, I drove for the captain, then.

Grasmehr: Okay... What did you think of that captain?

Wagner: He was wonderful. He was one of the best guys I've ever known. His name was Williamson. Really. He was from Florida. He was one of the best--I couldn't ask for a better guy.

Grasmehr: Well, that's good that he took care of the guys in your unit.

Wagner: He was with the guys all the time.

Grasmehr: Wonderful. Now after operating in the... against the German defenses in the Colmar Pocket for several weeks in late January 1945 and early February 1945, the 283rd gets moved from supporting the 28th Infantry Division and they get

attached to a different unit, the 75th Infantry Division. This is like you were talking where they kept being moved from unit to unit to support them.

Wagner: Wherever they needed you.

Grasmehr: Right. So, this was--the 75th was a division in the 7th Army. So, it's in the southeast of France near the German border there that was still German held until late March of '45... Now as... we move forward and it's March of 1945, did the... did the men in your unit sense that the Germans were coming to the end of their tether? That the war might be over soon? Or were the Germans still stoutly defending in that area?

Wagner: They were defending at every area, yeah... It wasn't as bad as what it was in other areas, you know, but...

Grasmehr: Well, you still in that area of Germany they're still defending those Siegfried Line fortifications that were built in the '30s. So that helped them defend against, you know, the American attack... Then... Now after supporting the 75th Infantry Division, your artillery battalion is assigned to support a couple of different corps commands in 7th Army, and then support the 44th Infantry Division for a few days.

Wagner: [Laughter] I didn't know all that. We wouldn't have known that.

Grasmehr: You were at the low-end of the chain of command. You're just driving and moving with the unit. There is a point in late March of... Well... Further north in early March, the 1st Army had captured the [Ludendorff] Bridge at Remagen and then after that happened, they were able to expand the bridge on the eastern bank of the Rhine. But the Germans were still heavily defending west of the Rhine. Montgomery, General [Bernard] Montgomery was preparing for the British to co-assault across the Rhine and General Patton was preparing...

Wagner: He was mad. [Laughter]

Grasmehr: For his own assault crossing. So, there is a point in late March 1945 where Patton's forces cross the Rhine and then the 7th Army that you were assigned to follows and moves east of the Rhine River. At this point, you had... the 283rd Field Artillery Battalion had been assigned to yet a different division. The division that you had spent the most time with during the war other than the 111th, the 45th Infantry Division. Now the 45th Infantry Division was part of the 7th Army, a part of 15th Corps, and at this point from late March through the end of the war,

they're moving--advancing through southern Germany. Do you have any recollection of when your unit crossed the Rhine River? Did that make the guys in the unit feel a certain way that once you got east of the Rhine--?

Wagner: We crossed it sometime early because we went swimming in the Rhine.

Grasmehr: Really?

Wagner: Yeah. The whole battalion, well, not the whole battalion, the whole battery took a break and we all went swimming in the Rhine, yeah.

Grasmehr: What an interesting story!

Wagner: Now I don't know when that was. That would have had to be afterwards.

Grasmehr: That would have been late March.

Wagner: Crossed over, yeah.

Grasmehr: Yeah, because the 3rd Army units did their assault crossing, probably, the 26th of March in that area, between – south of Mainz – St. Goar Boppard area. Then the 7th Army that your 45th Division was assigned to, then followed on after Patton's units advanced a little east and your unit headed--there's another river that flows into the Rhine River in the Frankfurt Aschaffenburg area called the Maine River. And your unit after crossing the Rhine River advanced toward Frankfurt and the next town further east, Aschaffenburg. And then... after that... the 45th Division advanced toward a large German city, Nuremberg. And that was the next big area that your unit seized and was operating in. What recollections do you have of those days advancing through southern Germany east of the Rhine?

Wagner: I don't know. I just thought it was real quick that we were getting it done, that it was moving that fast because we'd set up the guns one way, next day take them down, move again. And that's what was happening.

Grasmehr: Were the Germans still resisting like they had been were west of the Rhine?

Wagner: Yeah. They were still firing, yeah. They were firing their artillery, all the 88s were coming in.

Grasmehr: Okay... Now... The 45th Division continues moving through southern Germany and at one point... they moved southeastward toward Munich... and... per the US

Army's official history of the 283rd, the 283rd was in the vicinity of the main camp at Dachau on March.

Wagner: Right.

Grasmehr: I'm sorry, April 29th.

Wagner: We opened the gates.

Grasmehr: Talk about that.

Wagner: As we were moving, we come upon this thing and guys start talking about this that we got to go see it. We weren't shooting at the time, but we were moving all the time. So, went up there and I'd seen, I don't know who it was, opened up the gates and all these guys come out and we didn't know what the hell it was. And then we realized it was Dachau. I think we stayed about a mile away. But we went back...but a couple of us went back and we went toured through the whole thing and then we left there. Then the other Army come in, well, not the Army, the support units come in and took over everything.

Grasmehr: Right, because as a combat unit you had to keep moving and advancing.

Wagner: I was telling him [CPT Jim Mescall, friend of Wagner, who was present at the interview] that when we opened up the gates, they all start coming out, you know. They, all the people, they wanted to get out. They wanted to get away, half of them were dressed, half of them were undressed, some of them didn't have no shoes, some of them didn't have no clothes on, and this one guy that I-- a funny thing happened. He come out and he went over and took the uniform off a dead [German] soldier and put it on. One of our guys turned around and shot him.

Grasmehr: Oh, no.

Wagner: He thought he was a German. You know. The guys didn't know, it was so tense, then yet, you know. We were still worried about him. We thought, "Well, jeez he come out of the Dachau, maybe he was one of the guards or something. So they shot him. Here he was a -- he was a guard from Dachau.

Grasmehr: That's sad. Had your unit... prior to April 29, other units elsewhere moving through Germany were starting to come across these camps, types of camps, and liberate them; had you prior to encountering Dachau's main camp that day;

had there been other stories that you were aware of, I mean in **Stars and Stripes** or anything else?

Wagner: Just that there were internment camps, that's all they said, you know. They never published the fact of what was going on. I think that they had more of it [i.e., news] here in the States than we had.

Grasmehr: When your unit... was there in the vicinity of the main camp and you had the chance to look at the facilities there, what were you thinking about what you were seeing?

Wagner: I didn't know what to think. You just seen all the dead bodies and you'd seen the furnaces and everything they had there. You didn't know what the hell to think and the sooner we got out of there, the better off we were. That's the way I felt; you know. I didn't--I wasn't sitting there and saying the Goddam Germans killed all of these people or nothing. I didn't even think of that. I just happened to look at the stuff and wanted to get out of there. I didn't want to see it.

Grasmehr: Did the men in your unit... did it cause them to become angry with [what] they were seeing? Or were they shocked?

Wagner: No, we were so moving all the time and we moved through there and as we moved through, that's when they opened it up. We're still moving out, yet our outfit's still moving, so I just went back there on my own, me and these two other guys went back there on our own just to see what it was because we didn't know what it was., actually. You know, we'd seen the people come out, they didn't have anything, you know they were skin and bones and everything else. So, we went back and that's when we seen everything, you know. But we didn't stay long.

Grasmehr: It spooked you? You were shocked, you were horrified you? How did you react?

Wagner: Oh, we were moving anyways, so we got back right away.

Grasmehr: Right. So, you were--other units then moved into the area at Dachau and your unit continued to advance.

Wagner: Yeah, there were support units there. There was some --some armed units there that come in the same time we did. After we left, all these other support units come in that were gonna take care of it, you know.

Grasmehr: Now, you... we're now at the final week of the war in Europe. And your unit is... May 1 was your last day attached to the 45th Division and the last week of the war, you attached to two other divisions: the 42nd, who had also been at Dachau that day when your unit got there on April 29 and so the last week of the war, you were attached to the 42nd Infantry and the 3rd Infantry Division. Two other 7th Army units, and your unit is continuing advance southeast of Munich toward Austria and... let's talk about the events leading up to the action that occurred on May 3. On May 3, you participate in a combat action that would later result in you being awarded the Bronze Star. That incident involved defense of what considered a key bridge and then capturing a large number of German personnel. Let's talk about that incident. Leading up to May 3, were the Germans still defending stoutly in the areas you were advancing through?

Wagner: Yeah, at the time. Yeah.

Grasmehr: Okay. On the--on the morning of...or the day of May 3, what actually were you ordered to do?

Wagner: Well, it wasn't ordered to do anything, they asked for volunteers.

Grasmehr: Okay. What were they asking you to do?

Wagner: To go on patrol.

Grasmehr: All right. The... So, what did this patrol find or run into?

Wagner: Pardon?

Grasmehr: What did this patrol find or run into?

Wagner: Well, I went with this lieutenant, the two of us, and he split us up, there were four other guys, four other guys and he split us up. I went with the lieutenant and we spotted a... one German guy and he made him come over and talk to him. He didn't kill him or anything. And he says, "Go back and tell your commander that we want him to surrender." Now how big this patrol--not patrol--how big this unit was that he belonged to, but he says, "Okay. It would take him awhile to get back". You know, he's pleading with us not to shoot him or anything. And he says, "It's gonna take a while to get back there because they were, maybe three quarters of a mile back. So, he went back and brought the commander out and my lieutenant and myself went up there. He, the lieutenant commander, and that's when the commander says, "That's what they're gonna do, they're gonna give up."

Grasmehr: Well, let me share....

Wagner: That's when my lieutenant called in the rest of the unit to come over and help because we couldn't take him back.

Grasmehr: Well, let me read your Bronze Star Medal citation from the Army: "Private First Class Ray Jay Wagner, Battery C, 283rd Field Artillery Battalion, under the provisions of Army regulations 600-45, you're awarded the Bronze Star Medal for meritorious achievement in actual combat: Citation, Ray Wagner, Private First Class Field Artillery Battery C, 283rd Field Artillery Battalion for meritorious achievement in actual combat on May 3, 1945, near Edgerndach, Germany, Private First Class Wagner upon learning that SS troops were planning to destroy a vital bridge volunteered to assist in the prevention of its destruction. Encountering heavy enemy small arms fire at the bridge, he maneuvered into position and delivered continuous fire on enemy defensive positions across the river. With the bridge secured, Private 1st Class Wagner joined in the attack on the town and assisted in the capture of 125 Germans. Residence: Chicago, Illinois. Signed WT Sexton, Brigadier General US Army Commanding." This was a 3rd Infantry Division general order. So, it states that prior to these Germans surrendering, there was a heavy firefight.

Wagner: Oh, there was, yes. I didn't even remember that we were supposed to save the bridge because they never told us that. They told us we're going out on patrol. They don't tell you everything. [Laughter]

Grasmehr: Exactly. [Laughter] Now encountering heavy small-arms fire on the bridge, you maneuvered into position and delivered continuous fire on enemy defensive positions across the river. What were you firing back at them with? Your carbine? Your rifle?

Wagner: We had carbines and pistols. That's all we had. That's all we carried.

Grasmehr: All right. So, during this firefight, you had help from other guys in your unit.

Wagner: Yeah, the other four guys that were with us. Yeah.

Grasmehr: Four guys! That's not a whole lot of friendly help for a firefight. Were you a little nervous or apprehensive?

Wagner: The rest of the battalion, you know, was back there too.

Grasmehr: Sure. Now... in previous combat, you'd been under direct fire on D-Day on Omaha Beach, you'd been targeted by artillery fire in the vicinity of incoming artillery fire throughout the campaign, was this incident the May 3 the first time you'd been under direct infantry, small arms fire since Normandy?

Wagner: No, direct fire, even the Germans on D-Day were firing with rifles and everything.

Grasmehr: Right. So, they'd fired...

Wagner: It wasn't as bad as this. This was worse because it was--because you were closer, you know.

Grasmehr: Right. Well, that's interesting that you say it was more personal on this May 3 action because the enemy was closer than on, you know, the action at Omaha Beach.

Wagner: Oh yeah. It were because it didn't take them long to go back and get his commander.

Grasmehr: Right. Now this was a Waffen-SS Unit, very elite German troops. Was this the first time you'd encountered these Waffen-SS soldiers or had any--

Wagner: First time we did, yeah.

Grasmehr: What did you think of them? Now the news reels that you see at the end of the war, the German defenders are teenagers and older men in their forties and fifties, but these Waffen-SS were heavily armed young guys.

Wagner: Yeah. That's why we wanted this other group to come up there with us, right away, because we didn't know what to do, you know, just a couple of us guys there...

Grasmehr: So, that incident that you would later be awarded the Bronze Star of Valor for happened on May 3, 1945, Germany surrendered a few days later.

Wagner: See, I didn't even know that. I didn't know what the dates were or anything else. We didn't...they don't tell us what date. [Laughter]. We could have waited.

Grasmehr: Now how was it that your unit heard the news that Germany had surrendered?

Wagner: The what?

Grasmehr: What were you doing, or do you remember the circumstances where the guys in your unit first heard that Germany had surrendered? Do you have any recollection about that day?

Wagner: Oh, I don't know if it made any difference to 'em. I knew they were hoping for and they knew it was coming, you know. No excitement or anything – they didn't say, "Hooray, they finally surrendered" -- because it seemed like there was still pockets of fighting going in different places, you know. We thought this ain't over yet, you know.

Grasmehr: Right. Now one of the awards and decorations you earned that I saw that you brought in was the Army of Occupation. After V-E Day, after Germany surrendered, do you have any recollections about what your unit was doing during the post-war occupation? Were you in Germany? Were you in Austria?

Wagner: I was in Alsace-Lorraine.

Grasmehr: Okay.

Wagner: And the town was Furstenfeldbruck [i.e. in Germany, about 200 miles east of Alsace-Lorraine. As per 283rd Field Artillery Battalion unit history, the unit was stationed there at this point.] That's where I left from and at that time, well, let's see. I was just thinking of something. What the hell was I just thinking of now?

Grasmehr: So, Alsace-Lorraine is west of the Rhine River. So, you finished the war east of Munich, but your unit then moved after V-E Day.

Wagner: Yeah. We went down Alsace- Lorraine.

Grasmehr: Now during those post-war months before you shipped back home, what type of activities were you doing during the post-war time?

Wagner: Weren't doing anything. When we moved, the move took a couple of days, I guess it was. Then when they stationed us here at this town, they just let us do what we wanted to do because there was nothing else to do. There was no fighting going on and, you know, there was no exercise to do. Nothing you could do. So, the commanders were making us do exercises.

Grasmehr: One of the things that some Army units got tasked to do during the post-war occupation was a function called constabulary, in which not quite military police, but you had a....

Wagner: I know what you mean, but I didn't see any of that or knew anyone who did because I was out of there. I was one of the first ones that got out.

Grasmehr: Because you had enough points accumulated for your time in service?

Wagner: Yeah, I was very--I wasn't there in the town for two days... Yeah, a lot of guys didn't remember them points, but I remembered them because that's how I got out because I had the points. Nobody else in the outfit got out.

Grasmehr: Well, there comes a point in November, Germany surrendered in May of 1945, Japan surrenders... the ceremony in Tokyo Bay in early September of '45. At some point in November, you get orders that you're going to be shipped back home. Talk about moving--what port did you ship out of?

Wagner: Marseille.

Grasmehr: Marseille, okay, on the French Riviera. What do you remember about that process of departing from where your unit had been stationed to the process of going to the port [of Marseille]?

Wagner: I just remember, I think, it was a train ride. I think it was a train ride. When we got to Marseille, they put us in a place where we stayed overnight, and the next day, we were put on the liberty ship.

Grasmehr: Okay. Not as roomy and comfortable as...

Wagner: Oh no, twenty-one days to come back. Twenty-one days. And the thing was... you know, there was rumors, then, liberty ships were falling apart all over, you know. They were the Kaiser's ships.

Grasmehr: Yeah, they'd been built rapidly.

Wagner: Yeah, and they were falling apart and everything and all these guys on there were worried all the time. 'Course I had my dog with me, so I didn't care too much.

Grasmehr: Your dog, talk about that.

Wagner: I picked up a Dachshund from some family there, they had a little Dachshund, there. I said, "Do you want him?" She says, "Yeah, but you can't have him though." I said, "I'm gonna take him anyway. Give me the papers" And she didn't want to do that so I talked her husband and said, "You better give me them papers or we're gonna raise hell with you." [Laughter] So, he gave me the papers

for it. So, I took the dog and before I got on the boat, I had the medics, one of the medics give the dog a shot so the dog would go to sleep. And I put him in my bag, you know, in the back and took him on the boat. Well, on the boat I could leave him out then because we were out there - they can't take him back. So that was all right. So, we got all the way back and I'd got to Virginia, which is where we landed. We landed in Virginia...

Grasmehr: Norfolk, maybe?

Wagner: I don't know where it was.

Grasmehr: Newport News? One of those ports?

Wagner: It was a big port, whatever it was. And while we were there, we were gonna be there overnight, I know. And we were--the sergeant come up to me and he says, "Let's go see a movie." And I said, "Well, okay." So, I got my duffel bag alongside the bunk. Everybody that come back on the boat had these bunks in there. I put the dog in there and, you know, closed it up. He could still breathe and everything, and I had three guns in there. When I come back, the guns are gone, the dog was gone. And we come back and find out that these guys, the cavalry there was robbing every guy that come back. And nobody ever done anything about it. I talked to the commander down there and he says, "We don't know who done it, we know it's going on." So that was the end of the dog and the end of the three guns that I had. I had two more guns stuffed at the bottom, they didn't get them. But they got the German Luger, the one that I wanted. I lost that. [Laughter]

Grasmehr: Now how long were you in that eastern Virginia area before you shipped back to Camp Grant [in Rockford, Illinois] to demobilize?

Wagner: In Camp Grant, I think about two days, three days.

Grasmehr: So, did you took a train from Virginia to Camp Grant? How did the Army send you from point A to point B?

Wagner: I don't remember. It was a train. Yeah, I'm sure it was a train. Yeah.

Grasmehr: Okay. And once you arrive at Camp Grant, near Rockford--

Wagner: And got processed there and everything else. Then, they gave us three-hundred dollars, I guess it was three hundred dollars and they gave us a dollar and a half

transportation fee, which didn't cover it. You know. So, we had to take a bus back to Chicago, here, and then I took a cab from downtown to the house.

Grasmehr: Talk about the reunion with your family after being overseas. When you had been with your artillery units, had you written home? Had you kept in touch with them by letter or did they--

Wagner: I wrote home and I sent some stuff home --I sent a lot of German stuff home.

Grasmehr: Did they ever send you any care packages?

Wagner: [Wagner later added, no, he did not receive care packages. Here he describes what he sent home.] Yeah. Yeah, they let me send home a whole Nazi uniform. A whole uniform with the cap and the badges and everything. I sent that home and sent a couple of... knives that the jungens used to have, the kids. A lot of little junk that I found along the way. You know, we couldn't pick up stuff, we didn't have time.

Grasmehr: Right. Right.

Wagner: And this was the last minute that I found this stuff.

Grasmehr: Now when you were overseas with your field artillery units, did your family send you letters? Did they send you care packages or cookies or anything?

Wagner: No, they didn't send no care packages. In fact, we mailed back and forth letters. But I couldn't write anything - they wouldn't let them through, you know.

Grasmehr: Right. Censorship.

Wagner: There wasn't much going on.

Grasmehr: So, you get back to Chicago, talk about seeing your family again after...

Wagner: Well, I get back and I find out that my sister is still in service, my brother is still in service, and my younger brother, he's going to service. Everybody was going into service. The family was a happy...we had a good family.

Grasmehr: Now, final part of what we'll talk about, the post-war years. After World War II, did you join any veteran's organizations?

Wagner: Just one, just the Purple Heart.

Grasmehr: So not the American Legion or the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars]?

Wagner: No. No.

Grasmehr: All right... After the war, did the Veteran's Administration look at your wound?

Wagner: Yeah, I had to go in for approximately six years straight, once a year, to see a doctor once a year, and he had to drain the knee.

Grasmehr: Oh.

Wagner: Yeah. I would be out on the dance floor and I would just fold up on me. It would just fold up on me and I'd just fall down.

Grasmehr: At least you could be on the dance floor. [Laughter]

Wagner: [Laughter] Well, I wanted to be there.

Grasmehr: Now... did they--did the Veterans Administration award you a disability rating for your...?

Wagner: Yeah, they said they were gonna give me fifty percent and evidently, the first check come through and it was fifty percent. The next one come through and it wasn't. So, then they called me up or rather I called them up wondering what the hell happened. They said, "You're not entitled to fifty percent." I said, "Why not?" "You're not hurt bad enough." So, they took the fifty percent away. I never went back to appeal it. You know, I could've appealed it, but I never went back.

Grasmehr: Wow.

Wagner: So, I'm on ten percent even now.

Grasmehr: Did you use any veteran's benefits like the GI Bill or anything like GI education after the war?

Wagner: No. No, my brother wanted me to go fly but I didn't want to go there. I was too busy running around, you know.

Grasmehr: Now, you'd been a pipefitter at the shipyards prior to entering the Army. What type of job did you get when you came back home?

Wagner: Well, I drove for an oil company, I went to work for an oil company, but I went to work for them only in the wintertime. In the summer, a friend of mine bought a trailer and brought it up to Wisconsin Dells, and we'd go up there and spent the summer up there. This went on for about four or five years. Finally, I decided I had to get a job. [Laughter]

Grasmehr: Now... It's common for veterans to experience post-traumatic stress after coming back home if they have bad memories of... their time in combat and their time in service. After coming back to the US after the war and the years afterwards, did you ever experience any?

Wagner: The only thing that I experience was when I hear an airplane over the top. I'd cringe because we used to be in foxholes down there in German by the Roer River and at night they'd come over and bomb us. We were in foxholes, at the time, we weren't in houses at the time. We were diggin' our own foxholes and the ground was so damn hard, you know, but that used to scare the hell out of me, and I'd cringe, you know. I wouldn't do anything. I'd just hear them and just... That's what worried me, that's the only thing. Outside of that, it didn't, you know... My memories were there, but I didn't dwell on them.

Grasmehr: After the war, did you have any friendships with other veterans? Did you ever talk about your war time experience with your friends and family? Oftentimes veterans, we hear from veterans' families: "Oh, he never talked about his time in service after he came home." Did you ever share anything about your experience?

Wagner: Not really. I mentioned that I was in service, that's about all. He [Jim Mescall] just found out about it himself. I just didn't think about talking about it.

Grasmehr: In the years after the war, did you ever attend any unit reunions? A unit reunion for the 29th Division or the field artillery unit, did they ever have any reunions that you attended?

Wagner: The hillbillies didn't want you over there. [Laughs] No, there were no more... just my buddy in New York and I went to go see him a couple of times, and he'd come to Chicago, but that was all.

Grasmehr: All right, let's...

Wagner: He went all the way through it. He got all the way through it but never got hurt.

Grasmehr: Now one of the things we brought in today was the Legion of Honor that the French government awarded you. I was reading the letter from the local French consul general in which-- it's dated back in 2011 that the French government in the years since World War II, they award the Legion of Honor to... US military personnel, who served in any of the campaigns that resulted in the liberation of France in 1944. So, you're credited with four different campaigns that were part

of the liberation of France, it's great that they awarded you the Chevalier level of the Légion d'honneur, the Legion of Honor. The Chevalier level, there are five different levels of the Legion of Honor, so you are a knight... of the Legion of Honor,

Wagner: That's what I understand. He told me that.

Grasmehr: Which is wonderful that the French government recognizes American veterans that way. Now I heard that a few years ago, you recently had the opportunity to travel back to Europe and on your trip back to Europe, did you get to go to Normandy?

Wagner: No.

Grasmehr: You did not. Okay. Where in Europe did you get the opportunity to visit?

Wagner: What?

Grasmehr: Where in Europe did you get the opportunity to visit?

Wagner: Oh, Jesus. We went to France, we went to England, we went to Italy, went to Turkey...

Grasmehr: Now was that trip the trip that you had the heart attack when you landed?

Wagner: I didn't get the heart attack. [Laughter]

Mescall: When we went in 2017, he's asking about, you're confusing with another trip. He's asking about the one we went in 2017 with Ray Grana, remember?

Wagner: No, no, he's asking me where I traveled after... You just want to know where I traveled?

Grasmehr: So, have you been to Europe more than once?

Wagner: Oh, yeah. Yeah. All these times, yeah.

Grasmehr: So, in all those trips to Europe, did you ever have the opportunity to travel back to Normandy?

Wagner: I wanted to but never did. [No].

Grasmehr: Understood.

Wagner: I did [finally], with him [Mescall] when he decided, he'd go, and I went. [Mescall organized a trip with Wagner to Normandy, in 01-2017].

Grasmehr: All right.

Wagner: The two of us went there. It was too late then.

Grasmehr: Here at the museum and library, we focus on collecting, preserving, and sharing the stories of the men and women who served in the Armed Forces of the United States as we refer to them, the Citizen Soldier. And we always ask at the end of the interviews, what military service has meant to the individual veterans that we talked with?

Wagner: I'm glad I went. I'm glad I come out. [Laughter] But I think it was one of the best things that I think today--I think that everybody should be made to go to service for a year or two, just like in Israel. No deferments, no nothing. All these college kids that didn't have to go during World War II should have been made to go. They were sitting home playing with all the women that I should have been doing, and going to bars—and they were, let's see, what else were they doin'? [Laughter]

Grasmehr: So, you...

Wagner: They were enjoying themselves while we were over there.

Grasmehr: Well, fortunately you survived your wounding on D-Day at Omaha Beach.

Wagner: It still bothers me. I still have to get it drained every so often. They just drained it here... I went in about six months ago. Was that six months ago I went to the orthopedic doctor? Yeah, he had to drain me, he pulled out two vials of water like them

Grasmehr: So, after all these years that artillery shrapnel cause you problems?

Wagner: I can walk but...

Grasmehr: Yeah, I was amazed when you came in here how well you get around. When I heard that you'd been wounded in the knee, I didn't know what to expect when meeting you.

Wagner: Well, it bothers me, but you have to get around. [Laughter]

Grasmehr: So... we've covered what you were doing here in Chicago prior to your military service, we talked about your training, we talked about... the preparation for D-Day, the actual D-Day assault, and then after your recuperation in the hospital, re-joining your artillery battalion in Normandy, and moving across Europe, and the fighting in the closing months of the war. Are there any topics that we haven't covered that you'd like to...?

Wagner: Now, I think that's about it, but I get this lieutenant when we got them SS guys. I give him a lot of credit because he's the one that instituted that. He said, "Hey, let's go out on this patrol and get something done." And he's a little guy and his name was Thurston I believe, something like that. [Wagner later clarified that the name is LT Armstrong]. I can't think of his name. And I never heard from him after that. I've never heard from the commander after that. Not the commander, my battery--my battery captain. He was down in Florida I wrote to him twice but never got an answer. So, I don't know whether he passed away or what happened.

Grasmehr: Now your Bronze Star was awarded in June of '45 while you were still part of the occupation force. Was there a unit parade?

Wagner: I wasn't part of the occupation force.

Grasmehr: Okay. Was there a unit formation where some colonel or general awarded you the medal?

Wagner: No, he just told me, and I didn't know it. When I got back to the States, they wrote it on my discharge.

Grasmehr: Interesting.

Wagner: Had no idea. [Laughter]

Grasmehr: Well, Ray Wagner, PFC. Ray Wagner, US Army veteran World War II, thank you for sharing your story of service with us today.

Wagner: Well, I'm glad to be here.