

Interview of Don Pickett.

Interviewer: I just go on and on. You stop me when you want to.

Interviewer: That's what we'll do. I'm not going to say too much other than just introduce you.

Crew Member: Can you watch your clipboard a little bit?

Interviewer: Yeah, is it in the way?

Crew Member: Yeah. Okay, we're rolling.

Interviewer: All right. Today, we have Donald Pickett with us, and we want to thank you for coming up to our studio. We appreciate you doing that and your service. Just tell us what you were doing on December 7th, 1941, and take us from there.

Don Pickett: We were at home on Kensington Avenue. The phone rang, my aunt Leone Bowling was on the other end and she said, "Don, are you listening to the radio? We're at war!" And that was the beginning of the whole thing. We -- I was at the University of Utah at the time, and we had quite a dramatic and interesting life from that point on, all of us. Everyone ended up in the war. There would be some who would say, "Well, I was in the service, but I only served in the United States," or something like that. Everyone, everyone was in the war. Whether you were in the service, or whether you were a housewife, a homemaker, it was a complete immersion in everything.

We were told in our ROTC class that we had to enlist in the Reserves in order to continue our studies at the university. However, we were given the promise that we would be able to -- by enlisting in the Reserves, we would be able to stay at the university and graduate after another year. That promise, like so many others, ended very shortly. And the whole class was called to active duty in April of 1943. This class, by the way, also included another great part of the university who were called up, and there are, in fact, we have a picture of all of that group called up that were from the university at that time. I remember one young lady at the university who said, "The day after that happened, there were no boys. It was gone." Wasn't quite that bad, but it took 650 out of the university at one moment.

Interviewer: And you said April 43, that was probably April 42, wasn't it?

Don Pickett: No, we were called, enlisted in 42. And then all of the call ups occurred in 43.

Interviewer: April of 43.

Don Pickett: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay.

Don Pickett: Yes. Our group -- we were processed immediately at Fort Douglas, and then trucked down to the railroad station. Put on the train, and shipped to Camp Roberts in California, where we were to receive basic artillery training. As we entered the area, we saw a sign which said, "Special Training Group." Well, we university boys figures, "Well, that's only proper, special." We thought ourselves as special. We were only half of the group. Within the next few days, the rest came who were from Texas, Kentucky, Tennessee. Many of them not yet able to speak English, but with that whole group that went through, you can't imagine the camaraderie that was there. We pitted against each other. We would play jokes. It

was just a fine group mixture that went through that. As we completed our training, expecting that we would then be immediately sent to Fort Sill, Oklahoma for our officer training; the word came that they didn't quite have room for us at Fort Sill, so they sent us back to the university for Army Specialized Training Program. And we stayed there for the fall quarter. I was standing in Dr. Parmely's class waiting to take my final exam in physics, was looking out the window, and one of my buddies saw me and hollered, "Hey, Pickett! You're on orders to go to Sill!" That was good news to me. I immediately walked out of the class, never took the exam, went over and checked the wall and I was on the orders along with 17 others, not the whole class. Just 18 of us were to be sent to Sill.

We went on the "hurry up and wait" basis. We had to get there. We spent Christmas in Sill, and waited until January the 2nd before our training at Sill began. And it was interesting, sometimes difficult. But we had friendly contacts. At least one of the tack officers, as they were called, was John B. Matheson, a graduate of the University of Utah just a couple years before. His name will come up again. We graduated April 30th, 1944. We took our leaves, went home. Oh, let me interrupt myself here. When we came back from Roberts, most important event in my life. I married my sweetheart, Helen. And many of the class got married at that time. Upon returning to Fort Sill for assignment, I can remember reporting in. Coming to a snappy salute. "Lieutenant Pickett reporting for duty at the field artillery school." The duty officer looked up at me and with a sort of a wry grin, "You can drop that artillery, lieutenant. Your whole class is being sent to Fort Benning for advanced infantry training." Well, it was interesting that during our training period, the rest of the class from the university came down to

report to Sill for subsequent class. They were there for about 24 hours, and all of a sudden, they were gone because they had been sent to Benning for infantry training -- infantry officer training. We made fun of them as they left. We were close. We made fun of them. They were going to be made into infantry officers, but we were finishing up as artillery officers. But we ended up at the same Fort Benning, but in the advanced officer training program.

It was an interesting program because there also were some Air Force officers. One in particular had been somewhat cashiered out of the Air Force for flying his plane under the London Bridge. So, it was a catch-all of officers. A lot of anti-aircraft and coastal defense artillery officers were there because they had a surplus often, so they were converting into infantry officers. While there, it gave me an opportunity -- gave all of us an opportunity to, well, excuse me. After Benning, I received my orders to go to Camp Robinson, Arkansas where I had a platoon of new inductees and trained them in infantry. My wife and I had a nice apartment just adjacent to the state capital in Little Rock, and on occasion would have two of the young men up for Sunday dinner, and it became a contest to see who would be the best in the training that past week to be selected to have dinner with the lieutenant and his wife. And it was wonderful time for us as well.

Upon completing the training of the cycle at Robinson, as we came to the end of the cycle, a number of my men came up to me almost like a committee and said, "Lieutenant, is there any chance that we can all go over together as a platoon to Europe?" And I

said, "It probably isn't, but I understand." They were wonderful young people. I wasn't much older. We stayed just a few weeks at Robinson, and then I received orders that I was to be shipped overseas. My wife and I returned to Salt Lake on my last leave. I then flew back to Maryland where we were to be assembled, and it was interesting at that time that if you weren't on orders, you were free to go anywhere. And it gave me opportunity for me to go to the United States capital at Washington, D.C. I also went over one Sunday to visit at the United States Naval Academy where I had two of my friends; Frank Johnston and Warren Ma were cadets there. Along this line, I previously had received first alternate appointment to Annapolis. I turned it down because I had the dream of many years of attending West Point Military Academy. That wasn't to be. One little incident, and it will tie into something. I was bunked right next to an officer. He was a tank officer who had this idea that there was so many young ladies and so little time and the minute that he could leave the post, he was gone and wasn't back until early morning, and then he would leave immediately again. We started to call him, "Romeo." And I'll tie into that a little bit later.

I was awakened one morning. Romeo was cursing and throwing things into his bag, and, "Why didn't anyone tell me I was on orders?" And he was rushing as fast as he could, and Romeo was gone. Shortly thereafter, my orders were cut that sent me up to Camp Kilmer where I was processed with many other officers, and then the next morning, early morning; we were put into trucks and sent down through New York through the early mornings of New York to the harbor at Hoboken. We got there and as we were taken off the trucks, we saw this huge liner and it was the Queen Elizabeth. We were to go over to Europe on the Queen

Elizabeth. None of us would have objected. It took us five days. We landed at Greenock, Scotland over night to Southampton, then from Southampton just over the channel to Le Havre. We disembarked. We were marched from the dock area through a small portion of the town up to a wooded area on the outskirts of Le Havre. As we were marching up this narrow street, cobblestone, if there was any suggestion of the things to come, a funeral cortege came down from the other direction. It was a very old hearse drawn by two men followed by the funeral procession all in black. The next morning -- over night, it rained. It rained harder than any rain I've ever known in my life. We ended up just not trying to sleep on our bunks; we just had to sit there with rain dripping on us. Just as wet inside the tent as if we were outside. We were marched down to the railroad station, and I saw something that brought back a memory from my childhood days in Richfield, Utah. On celebration days as a little boy, I would see these parades. And there would be this happy-go-lucky group of men in an eccentric axle car bouncing up and down and having all kinds of fun, and yet there would be a sign on the side of the car which read, "The order of the 40 and 8." I never knew what that meant. As we got close to the railroad station and came up to the box cars we were to ride in, I looked up and here was a sign, "40 Hommes, 8 Chevaux." 40 men, or 8 horses. You could take your choice. I knew then I was going to be a member of The 40 and 8. The cartoonist Bill Mauldin in his book and it appeared in Stars and Stripes later had a cartoon. It showed a GI standing in the doorway of this boxcar. He is calling out to some men, they are going away. And he said, "Hey, vous hommes!" You men! "You left some of your chevaux!" Your horse. And it's one of his more memorable cartoons. We took off. We went to by train, heavy truck, jeep; went from France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Holland and ended up as what appeared to me as the last person to be dropped

off anywhere in (inaudible) Holland. That was of interest to me because my wife's folks were Hollanders and came over to the United States at the time of World War I.

As I reported in for duty, this very sharp Lieutenant Colonel Poiner. I handed in my cards. He looked them over and said, "Oh, lieutenant. Can I use you?" I thought, "I'm in trouble." What he meant was, I have been commissioned artillery. Advanced training in infantry officer, and then had trained infantrymen. That's all it amounted to. But I was assigned To Company A of the 7th Armored Infantry battalion of the 8th Armored Division. I was now Armor, not regular infantrymen, but Armor. And that was quite a distinction there.

Sally: Can I interrupt?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sally: Can I have him repeat that again?

Yeah, just repeat that armored division that you were assigned to.

Don Pickett: Yes. Company A, I was the officer of the Third Platoon, Company A, 7th Armored Infantry Battalion of the 8th Armored Division of the 9th United States Army. The commander of the division was General John M. Devine, and the commander of the Army was General Simpson.

Interviewer: Let me ask you one question. Were you, did the guys that you trained with, most of them went with you over in the same thing?

Don Pickett: No.

Interviewer: All new men.

Don Pickett: All new.

Interviewer: Okay.

Don Pickett: My Company was quartered in a saloon, or beer parlor.

Unfortunately, I became ill and was on a cot right in the middle of the beer parlor. But, interesting things happened. We -- in the middle of the night, because we had been given the warning that the Germans were dropping paratroop spies behind our lines. So there had to be a password. And everyone had to have that password. I was awakened in the middle of the night, and they were bringing in a prisoner who didn't know the password. Well, it wasn't a German soldier, but it was a black man in American uniform. And they were questioning him. "What's the password? Why don't you know the password?" And finally, he ended it all. He said, "Sir, do I look like a German?" That got him off the hook right there.

We were moved over to a little town called Sittard, Holland right near Roermond. And we came under -- we were under sniper fire. Word came that one of our men had been killed. His name was Smeltzer. I had never seen a dead man except perhaps at a viewing, I had a cousin who died. But I went tree to tree and bush to bush over to this building where Smeltzer was supposed to be. He was on the second floor, and I went up and looked down at my first casualty. He had been doing everything you are supposed doing when you're observing. He was back in the shadows, he had his binoculars, and he got a round right between the eyes and just fell backwards. Went back down, joined my platoon. We were at the side of a road. We were on the down side of the embankment of a road, and up above was a tank with a huge roller in front of it, and it was coming at the direction of an engineer officer telling it to, "C'mon, c'mon." And they had found a mine, and so the roller was to come over and explode

that mine. The officer was walking back wards telling him to c'mon. And as I laid there on the side of the road along with another man, we saw that there was a layer of gravel on that road. And we both jumped up immediately and started to holler, "Stop!" Because when that mine went off with that officer right close by saying, "C'mon, c'mon," that was going to explode right in his face. And it did. And he was out.

We were waiting there because we had been told that where the sniper fire had been coming from, we were to -- my platoon was to go over and take that building and rid it of whatever was over there. Well, it later on turned out that we were pulled back right at that moment because we were to be assigned someplace else, and it later I learned it took a company and a half to empty that building of the snipers and all. They were sending in one platoon, mine.

Interviewer: And how many men are in a company?

Don Pickett: Men in a company would be about, see, there would be 50, 50, 50. Three, four, five. 250 men. And 50 men to a platoon. We were pulled back because we had to get started in a new area preparing for the Battle of the Ruhr Valley and the Crossing of the Ruhr River. We weren't in contact with the enemy in our position for some time, and I mean a few days. But when we were quartered in this one house, you could go out, travel on the little side roads, and there were shells. Artillery shells, boxes of machine gun rounds, rifle rounds, just from blocks on end on road after road, the ammunition was being stored. Anyway, we were part of various encounters in the Ruhr. Eventually, we were in a solid position waiting for our crossing of the Rhine. The night before, the officers were all quartered in this one building, and a meeting was called in which all officers of the battalion were in this one big building, and we

were told exactly what would be the line of march and how it would be, and the huge artillery barrage which would proceed our trying to cross the Rhine. And one of the orders given, "Under no circumstance was anyone to break the line of march." And that was impressed upon all of us.

The next morning, we went out, loaded up, headed down to the shores of the Rhine, and the artillery barrage was tremendous that had proceeded us. We went on to the bridges that had been laid, and then up on the other side of the Rhine River. And just as my vehicle is going up, an American officer, a major came out. Put up his hand. "Stop. Sir, we have orders nobody is to break this line." "Lieutenant," and he pointed to the major leaves, and also took out his pistol. He said, "I'm stopping this. I've got to move this tank." He was an officer of a tank retrieval unit under duress. I stopped. He got the tank, the big tank retriever pulled us. Knocked that tank out of the way, which wasn't really hindering anyone, and then we went on our way. Unfortunately, the column had of course gone ahead of us. And we took what we thought was the road. We'd gone so far, and there was no column. And so we stopped by a field, and here my platoon and part of the company was right behind me. A Jeep came up, an officer explained that we were to stay there. The column had gone on, and we worked in the column later. We were beside this field. Out in the field were a number of (inaudible) German horses. They used a lot of horses in the German Army. Unfortunately, the barrage had included white phosphorus. And white phosphorus had broken over this field where these horses were. They were standing there, blinded, some of my men came up to me and said, "Lieutenant, we're just farm boys." And I said, "I understand. Go ahead." And they went over, and one by one, killed the horses.

We got back in line eventually and had numbers of assignments. So many different little -- some cities, some towns, some farming communities. That's the way Armor works. You do not face a fixed enemy fortification. You break behind the lines as fast as you can, and then you do your job piece by piece. We came up to a large farm cluster. Off to the distance, we could see the steeples of large churches. And we were told that that was Dorsten, the city of Dorsten. While we were just waiting, a GI came running down the road from Dorsten. And we could see a large farm building off to our left front with a, oh, it was perhaps a thousand yards away. This GI came running down. They were the recon unit. They had hit a mine and had immediately come under fire from the building. Their Jeep was turned over, and they were -- had taken cover behind the Jeep. But one of the men was injured badly. And this man who escaped and was running down was calling for a medic and for help. We could hear the injured man. We could hear his cries over the field. I immediately took five volunteers, "You, you, you, and you." And we broke cover and started across the field. And it was impossible. The fire was so heavy, we just had to go back. And so, it was getting dark. And some of the men were starting to blacken their faces. It started to rain. I walked from group to group of the men. Some were reading Bibles, some were writing home. They were talking softly. They were reading with the blackout flash lights. Had to walk from group to group, and it's the usual. "Hey, lieutenant. Is it true the Germans --" "Lieutenant, are we ever going to get a pass to Paris?" "Lieutenant, what's going to happen next?" I walked over, and there was one young man just standing alone, looking toward Dorsten. I walked up beside him. I didn't say

anything, just -- we just looked toward Dorsten. And finally, and his voice was still young. I can remember his words, "Lieutenant, are you scared, too?" That was Private Bressel.

Right after that, the captain came in his Jeep. Gathered the officers and the senior non-com's around the Jeep and gave us our orders. Explaining that was the city of Dorsten, off to the left was the Elbe Canal. Off to our right, way off to our right were Companies B and C, and we were to jump off next morning, dismounted, across this field, and get into Dorsten. Once in there, I was to leave some men at each street that intersected the railroad. And that was the objective, was the railroad itself. He gave us our orders, "Lieutenant, third platoon on the left. Albanese on the right, Porter in reserve. Any questions?" No questions. "Oh, one other thing, gentlemen." That's what we were called. "Officers will not sleep." I hadn't slept for so long, I couldn't remember. But officers were not to sleep. We were to receive at 06:00, there would be an artillery barrage of 100 rounds per minute for 15 minutes on the city of Dorsten. We were hunkered down in a willowed area by this where we had spent the night, and we were told that at exactly 06:15, a high air smoke round would be exploded. That would be our signal to jump off.

Exactly on schedule, the smoke round went off, and the officers gave the orders, "Get out, get out. Let's go." We started across the field, running as best and fast as we could, and didn't get too far. And they opened up on us with machine gun fire from a flack tower off to the far right. Each platoon has a machine gun squad. They open up on the flack tower,

and the firing stopped. When that stopped, I gave the order, "Get up, let's go." And the men immediately jumped to their feet and right behind me, three sharp rounds of fire. And a man screamed. The assistant machine gunner in picking up his weapon had accidentally tripped the trigger, and Bressel was moving right behind me and he took the rounds. Nothing we could do, we had to continue because medics would take care of any wounded. We got into Dorsten, went street to street down to the point of one of the large cathedrals, and then a German 88 spotted us, and started to lay down some fire on us. I took one of my men. We went to the top of the church to see what it was, and so then the Germans may have spotted us, or a spotter spotted us, and they started to direct the fire to the church. So, we got down very fast. While I was up there though, I looked across the Elbe Canal and saw a contingent of English Brits, soldiers. So when we got down to the ground, I took a little bridge across the Elbe, went down across this little row of houses, and sure enough, here was about a squad of British. I explained our situation, "We've been cut off," which we have "with counter fire. If we need any help, can I call on you?" Sorry, old chop. It's tea time. That was my experience with the British.

We went back, and then I took some men with me and we started to go in an underpass of the railroad up to a point where a number of roads just came in at that point. But as we got up high enough, I saw what looked like a huge pile of horse flesh that some horses had been caught in the artillery. Horses don't wear helmets, and they don't carry rifles. We went to the right to go back toward where we had first joined the railroad tracks, and walking along, everything seemed so peaceful. I was on one side of the little street, some other of my men were on the other side going behind houses. And I saw -- I was quite a bit in front of all the group. I

looked across the street, and here were -- would be about a squad of German soldiers milling around behind one of the houses. They hadn't seen me. Hadn't seen any of us. So I got the attention of the sergeant with the group across the street. Gave the hand signals, and they carefully went out and intercepted the Germans. They completely surprised them. In the ensuing, very short fire fight, one German was shot. The others gave up. Then, in going back to join the rest of our outfit across the railroad tracks, the Germans surrendered and carried their wounded men on a piece of corrugated iron. Why I remember that, I don't know. But they did.

We joined the group, joined the rest of the company there. And we were just waiting, and Sergeant Hartwell, my platoon sergeant. Just a wonderful man. He came up to me with a few of the other men. And he said, "Lieutenant, we found something we think you ought to see." All right, so I followed him. He took me over to a house. It was a two-story. And some of the tiles had been knocked off the roof. But I followed the sergeant and the men. Took me up a stairs. They opened a door. It was a bedroom. There was this large down comforter on the bed. And Sergeant Hartwell said, "Lieutenant, we think you ought to use this." I walked in and I sat on the bed and I put my head down and I don't remember a thing after that. Sometime later, maybe 15 minutes, Hartwell touched my shoulder, "Lieutenant, we're moving out." And we moved out to our next assignment.

We would go -- small community. You would even be on a road in column. And the only reason you would think you were on this road was to draw fire. Let us know where

they were. And then we would respond. We went from Dorsten to a little place called Sittard. We were -- just brought up very rapidly early morning and just practically being given our orders as we were getting out of our vehicles and on our feet. Finally, we were where we could look out and see what our objective was, and my platoon was attached to a segment of tanks. So, in fact, in essence, I was under the command of a tank officer. But he -- we could get where we could see across this field, and he explained that those low buildings over there, there were a number of long, low buildings. Green. "That's your objective, you're to clean out those buildings. But under no circumstance are you to lose contact with the elements at your right. We were the far element at that moment. We could see off to the left. The air corps had knocked out a German tank, and it was still burning. At the moment that we were to jump off, we did so. Not mounted as I would have hoped, but on foot. We started running toward the buildings and across this wide field, and why so many engagements had to be run across fields, I never know. They let us go about half way and opened us on us with machine gun fire. Sniper fire. We hit the ground, and what we hit was a newly plowed field, and if anyone thinks you can't hide a human body in the furrow of a newly plowed field, they're wrong. That human body gets down there and gets under cover.

But, they caught us. And my assistant driver was also the assistant machine gunner. They got him immediately. Lying flat, but trying to look and see what's going on, and I saw the machine gunner who was working with Fortner. Fortner was dead, and his closest buddy was the driver. So, they were very close together. Well, it turns out, they lived on the same block, and Fortner was engaged to be married to the driver's sister. And as I looked up, Johnson

was his name, was on his hands and knees crawling around Fortner's body crying, "Mama, mama." We needed the help of the tank. I called to the other platoon officer with his face practically in the dirt, but I told Porter, "Take over my platoon. Take over my command. I'm going for the tank."

And he acknowledged, again, with his face in the dirt. I jumped up, started to run back, and it was like a huge popcorn machine was over my head, all I could hear. But there was a huge mound of dirt that I spotted right in my line, and I fell behind that mound of dirt. I later on found out these were sugar beets. What they do is they harvest the sugar beets and then for the winter, they put dirt over them and then process them in the spring time.

I still hadn't gotten far enough back. There was another mound. I took off for it, fell flat on my face as I was able to take cover, and here are two boots, GI boots, right up in front of my face. I couldn't talk, I was -- I couldn't get my breath. I looked up, and here's Lieutenant Colonel Poineer. He was there with some glasses. "Lieutenant, where are you going?" You can imagine -- and I couldn't yet talk. But finally, I said, "The tank, the tank. I've got to get the tank." "Oh, son. It's over there. Go for it." What he must have thought. Anyway, I got the tank. I brought it up, we put fire on the area, the tank did. Knocked out the flack tower, and as soon as the tank was up as close as the men, we all jumped to our feet and started toward the buildings. Nothing we could do but just slam through the doors and start running down the hallways, opening doors, kicking them in. But as we came in, the first thing we saw was this

large hall, recreation hall with a stage. And hanging from the ceiling, the biggest, largest swastika flack I've ever seen in my life. It was huge. But we paused for only a moment because we had to get down and kick in doors and do everything we could as quickly if we could if anyone was there. I went into one room, and there were two daggers. One with an SS emblem on it, and another with an SA. And there's also a German P 38 revolver. I picked them up, turned to one of my men and said, "Took care of those for me." And then we finished the cleaning.

Interviewer: We have about 15, 20 minutes. So we went to get to the machine gun -- is that the flack tower? Is that the one that? And then we want to get to your experience -- (inaudible).

Don Pickett: I have been talking too much, I guess.

Sally: Excuse me, what time is it?

Interviewer: It's about 20 after 10. We have to end about quarter to, I think?

Sally: Well, I wanted to when he's in this spot, wanted to ask him about the camaraderie of his platoon and just kind of the spirit of fear, but responsibility knowing you had to move on despite. Can you speak to that and how you as a lieutenant really had to motivate people as you're making your rounds and checking on different groups? There's a lot of fear and a lot of unknown, it sound like. What were your feelings, being the responsible lieutenant for these boys?

Don Pickett: I think I'll cover that in just a moment then.

Sally: And I'll be asking you a couple more questions, but you have to look at Rick when you answer it. You will be looking at Rick.

Interviewer: Look at me when you answer the question as though I asked it.

Don Pickett: Yeah.

Sally: Okay.

Don Pickett: After we finished this, we were then told, "Oh, by the way, this is an SS officer candidate training center." So we were up against something rather different.

The vehicles were brought up, and we were on to our next assignment at Tottleworth. We came under fire, but were told that we were to take this small group of buildings at the edge of town of Tottleworth. We came under fire from 88s, and I went head first under a tank, looked up, and here is Romeo. The firing stopped for a moment, and I joined my platoon that was in a little house. The door was off from the backyard, and then mortar rounds started to come in hitting the backyard. We could see them. It was a little nerve-wracking, and one of my men lost it for a moment, and inside the house, the plaster had come off from the lathing, and he started to climb the lathing, screaming. We helped him down, and I told a couple of the men, "Take him back to kitchen, he'll be all right." The compassion of the men for that other man, it's hard to describe. There was no thought of any kind of, "He's a coward or he's breaking." They were helping a buddy.

We went from, at Tottleworth, had to go up and again, we went in across this field and along this road by platoons, and the usual deal was, "First platoon first, then you hold your position. Then second platoon goes through, you hold your position. Then Pickett, you, the third platoon go." By then, you know what's going on. But I would have preferred not being the

third platoon at that time. But, we went in toward this objective and we came under fire. I advanced with my platoon on foot. Lieutenant Vanny Albanese from the first platoon came back walking toward me shaking his head. And his helmet was off. "Pickett, I've got the souvenir of all souvenirs." And he held up his helmet, and there was a sniper round right through the helmet. It hadn't raised a hair of his head, but had gone right through the helmet. We went up, there was a huge mound off to the side with a trench going toward it. And I had to determine what it was, and just then, a Jeep came up and I was told, "Lieutenant, here are your new replacements." And they gave me three new men, still with creases in their trousers, and I still had this mound on my mind. So I said, "Well, we've got to go up and see what's in this mound." I said, "You come with me." Pointed to one of these men. And he said, "M-m-m-m -- me sir?" And I said, "Yes, you." Along with a couple of others, we went up to the top of the trench and came to the back door of a pill box. We had just overrun the Siegfried Line. I didn't know what to expect there, so I had one of these men fire a couple of rounds toward the door. Nothing. So, I called out, "(Speaking in German), come out." "(Speaking in German) don't shoot." And they came out with their hands up. I sent them back with one of the men, but I didn't know that that was all. So I said, "Keep me covered." I went down the steps, hard right, iron door at the end of a little walkway. I opened the door, threw in a white phosphorus grenade, closed the door and stood there, stupidly. White phosphorus creates tremendous explosion. That door was going to blow me against the wall. So I started to run. I got as far as where I would have walked up the steps, but it wasn't necessary. The explosion lifted me up and deposited me at the top of the steps.

That night, we slept in the pill box with white phosphorus on the ceiling, and the odor of white phosphorus you will never forget. But it was quite an experience.

Interviewer: Were there still Germans left inside there?

Don Pickett: No.

Interviewer: It was empty.

Don Pickett: No Germans left, the ones that were left were taken out as prisoners. Oh, while the prisoners were standing out there in front of me, I said, "Empty your pockets." And they reached in and handed us their money. And I said, "No." But one reached in and handed me brass knuckles. And we had in our home because an uncle of mine, the first German prisoner he had taken in World War I, he retrieved a pair of brass knuckles. And here I am getting brass knuckles again another war later.

That was Tottleworth. Then, I'll get quickly to it. And I hope I can have the time. We're driving along a highway, far back a Jeep is coming, just off on the side of the road driver honking the horn coming up to where I was in lead position. Finally, he got right opposite me, and I could see it was a press corps Jeep. And the reporter, who ever on the rider's side, looked up at me and said, "Hey, lieutenant! We just got word on BBC," that's British Broadcasting, "that elements of the 8th Armored are the nearest to Berlin of all Allied forces. And you're it!" And I said, "Thanks, I'll tell my grandchildren." We were then taken out of line and headed up into the Harz Mountains. We had reached the point where we would be in what is called, "Occupy and Administer," and also clean the Harz Mountains of any stragglers. For whatever reason, Lieutenant Pickett was designated as to be the one that would be the

bürgermeister for this period of time. As I look back, I wonder at some of the things that happened. "Why me?" But anyway, we had very limited instructions on what we were supposed to do. Basically, we were told at a very short meeting, "You go in, you sit in the bürgermeister's chair, and let history take its course." And the final instruction was, "Now, we assume all you officers who are to take the responsibility speak German." And you could see eyes going like this back and forth. None of us spoke German. But, I went in the next morning. The bürgermeister, tall, dignified gentleman. Dr. Otto Moser, was standing by the side of the desk. He pointed to the chair. I went over and sat in the chair. We tried to chat for a moment, and then he was gone.

Interviewer: A bürgermeister is like a mayor.

Don Pickett: A bürgermeister is like a mayor, mm-hmm. I didn't know what in the world I was going to do or how I was going to do it. The next morning, a very fine lady. Gray hair, tall, stately came in. Her commandant, "Can you use me? I speak English, German, French, Spanish, and Portuguese." Oh, could I use her. This was Frau Occerman. And what a charm she was. The problems came because in the town, there was a slave labor camp. There were three French prisoner of war camps, two hospitals, sanitariums, and the town was bursting at the seams with people who had been sent from Hannover and some of the other cities that had been bombed out. We went in. I immediately took her on. A day or two later, a young man comes in. He was very nervous. Blond, blue-eyed, Frau Occerman went out, talked to him, and he was shaking his head. She came in, her commandant, "This young man won't talk to me." Well, if he won't talk to you, he won't talk to me. She went out, gave him the message, and finally his shoulders sort of drooped and he followed her in.

She sat there in a chair by the desk, and this young man -- he absolutely vibrating with fear. He looked over at Frau Occerman. He looked back at me. Finally, he walked over, he put his lips right next to my ear and whispered, "(Speaking in German), I'm a Jew." Now I understood, and I, through Frau Occerman, I had to reassure him over and over, "You are free. Never be afraid." This was followed by a man who came into the outer office. Frau Occerman said her commandant, "You got to hear this." Well, bring him in. This man came in. He was wearing a purple and gray striped outfit. He had just escaped from a concentration camp. This was Dr. Schmidt, and he started to tell me his story, and I interrupted and said through Frau Occerman, "Will you write me your story?" "I have no type writer." We got him a type writer. He went with the type writer back to the hospital where he had escaped to, and a few days later, came back with a document. The title of which was, "(Speaking in German) -- Seven Years in a Concentration Camp." And that was his story. And I've had that over all these years, and you can see it. I've had a translation of it. It's quite a story.

Sally: Rick? We are really tight here now. Do you want me to get Colby to sit upstairs with the next interview at 11:00 and delay them?

Interviewer: We got about 20 minutes.

Sally: Is it 20 to 11 right now?

Interviewer: The guy's name is Nance.

Sally: Rick, I really need, at this in this interview, Don to talk about what I asked earlier. Just the camaraderie, the fear, how he managed these young boys. You seemed

fearless. It seemed that you kept going through mission after mission and assignment after assignment. Can you talk about --

Don Pickett: Well, I think I can address that in one incident here as to the camaraderie.

Sally: Can you talk about that incident right now?

Don Pickett: Yes.

Sally: Okay.

Don Pickett: After we left the high way where we were so close to Berlin, we were sent to St. Andreasberg, but before getting there, we were given what was to be our last --

Crew Member: Can we have you look --

Interviewer: Look at me.

Don Pickett: Our last combat assignment. And with my platoon, I -- we were mounted. Went into this canyon, and you can think immigration canyon, but bring the mountain closer. We went in there, accompanying with one tank, and the objective, "Go through this canyon, there's an out on the other side, and as soon as you swept that, your combat assignments are over." Fine. We start through. As we look ahead, we see this huge cliff. The road goes right to the base of the cliff and then off to the right. We get so close, and machine gun fire opens up on us from the top of the cliff. It hits one of my men. He gets what they call the golden round. Got him in the buttocks. That means he goes home. There was a -- the fire stopped for a little while. Men were hunkered down behind trees. Sergeant comes up to me, again, with a group of men, "Lieutenant, can we talk to you?" I was up in the gunning mount. "Sure." I got down to their level. "Lieutenant, we know that you know you're going to come out

of this alive. Is it all right if we stay close to you today?" Well, just about -- I said, "Let's just do what we're trained to do." Off to the right, "Lieutenant, lieutenant!" I go over. They have spotted a German soldier who was hiding behind a tree. "Shoot the tree," I said. "Sir?" "Shoot the tree." He shot the tree, and the German soldier slumped down. The firing was still above us. I took Sergeant Johnston. We went underneath the protection of the cliff, off to the right, a creek running along the way. And we could hear the firing up too our left and the further we went, the more we could pinpoint it. So finally, we were behind it. And we were climbing up to get directly behind the machine gun mist. I was ahead of Johnston. Suddenly he said, "Lieutenant, look out!" I dropped face back with my weapon, and here was a little cave we had overlooked. And out of the cave came a squad of German soldiers with their hands in the air. I told Johnston, "Take them back and get back to me as fast as you can. Take them and turn them over to who you see first." And we were still getting fire, so I got to where it sounded like I was directly behind the fire, and started to climb the side of that part of the mountain there, and the leaves were wet from the rains that they had had and the falling of the leaves the fall before, and just as I got where I thought I could see what was going on, my feet went out from under me and I had to crawl the rest of the way on my hands and knees. I looked up, and here were three young German soldiers manning two machine guns laughing. Talking and laughing. And I was at the most 25 yards away from them. There was a tree between me and them, so I immediately got behind that tree, and they were still firing, Johnston hadn't shown up. So, I called out to them, these soldiers, "(Speaking in German), put your hands on your head." They were so surprised. They looked around, couldn't see anything. So I figured I better start ordering my men, or do something. So I started giving orders to my men what to do. My men who weren't there, of

course. And these young German soldiers just burst like a covey of quail, and started to run off to the right. Just then, Johnston showed up, he had what he called a grease gun.

Sally: I have to interrupt, sorry. We need to wrap. But he needs to finish this story, too. But is it Stanley Boyd next?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sally: Don, we are going to have to bring you back because you just got great stories.

Don Pickett: Your pleasure.

Sally: We never had to do this.

Interviewer: He is in the middle of taking these guys over, can he just finish? (Laughter).

Sally: Yeah, he's going to finish this, and if he can talk about -- I don't want them to be up there waiting and not think somebody is going to come get them. So if you can pick up there and talk about crew, camaraderie. If we can get that, then we can pick it up.

Don Pickett: All right, thank you.

Interviewer: Sorry about that. You are right there talking to these --

Don Pickett: Okay, Johnston just then showed up and I got out from behind the tree, and these young men were going down to the right, sort of from the higher point to a lower point, headed toward into the trees, and Johnston sprayed them with the grease gun, but fortunately they were going down, and the grease gun was going up. And so he didn't hit any of them. It wasn't the point to kill people. Anyway, we went after that, then into St. Andreasberg, and then I of course told you about that.

Interviewer: How old were you when you were the bürgermeister there?

Don Pickett: I was 22.

Interviewer: 22. Where were you when the war ended?

Don Pickett: Well, let's see. I had gone to Czechoslovakia and Austria.

When the war ended in Germany, I was in St. Andreasberg. In fact, I walked over to the house where my platoon was billeted. It wasn't too far from the bürgermeister's place, and the men were around shooting the breeze and they had souvenirs and one of them had a German pistol that he was showing around, and I told him, I said, "Now, the war's over. And when it's over, there will be passes. Take advantage of them." And I said, "In fact, the day may come when you'll come back here." And they were ready to kick me out of the room for ever suggesting they would ever want to come back to Germany. Well, the 8th Armored Division has had returned every year for the last many, many years and they have gone back. But anyway, as I was walking, got out as far as the street, I heard a shot go off. The young man with the souvenir didn't know it was loaded, and it killed him. And you know, as I think of that, Erich Remarque's book, "All Quiet on the Western Front," ended somewhat like that. That was the day the war ended, and that was my experience that day.

Interviewer: Don, tell us, from your experiences, how has being in that war changed your life?

Don Pickett: Well, I was blessed to be able to come home to my wife, and we started our family. And if anything, I would -- a great pride in my country. A great pride in so many people that are here. It changed my life to realize the value of life. We have life as a gift, and we -- I cherish that gift.

Interviewer: If you wanted to leave a message to future generations that may view this, what would it be?

Don Pickett: Value the family. Be a family. And be a family of love. I'm so blessed.

Interviewer: The thing that touched me, it seemed like you had a lot of respect from the men that you were leading as well. Coming to you. That was touching, the guys, "Can we hang out near you," because you seemed to have so much confidence. Don, I'm sorry we have to cut this short. We've got another interview here --

End of recording.