

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES H. COOLIDGE
WORLD WAR II MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

FOR THE
VETERAN'S ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

INTERVIEWED BY
CYNTHIA L. TINKER

CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE
APRIL 20, 2010

TRANSCRIPT BY
CYNTHIA L. TINKER
JESSICA MAGERS-RANKIN

REVIEWED BY
CYNTHIA L. TINKER
JESSICA MAGERS-RANKIN
MCCALL SIMON

CYNTHIA L. TINKER: This begins an interview with Charles H. Coolidge at his office, Chattanooga Printing and Engraving, in Chattanooga and my name is Cynthia Tinker. I'm with the Center for the Study of War and Society and also sitting in on the interview is ...

RACHAEL R. LeBLANC: I'm Rachael LeBlanc from the University of Tennessee College of Arts and Sciences Development Office.

TINKER: Okay, uh, and today's date is April 20, 2010. And thank you for agreeing to do this interview Mr. Coolidge.

COOLIDGE: Alright.

TINKER: We like to start usually, you know, with your family background and, um, I noticed here that your mother was from Ohio. And what's your family heritage like? What do you know of your grandparents or your great-grandparents?

COOLIDGE: Uh, I didn't know my grandfather on the Coolidge side at all because he died at fifty-six [years old]. And he was brought here from Chicago and he ran the operation of the Dade Coal Company which is right across the line in Georgia and they had three thousand chain gangs, people working for them and they had, I guess, three thousand regular people that were not in the chain gang working. So it was a pretty big operation. But he got hold of a, I'm told, a tape worm that at that time they didn't know how to cure and he died. So he died at fifty-six. That's where my name comes from. They named me after him.

TINKER: Well that's interesting.

COOLIDGE: But he was a wheeler and dealer. Where the Hunter Museum is today, there were seventeen plots when they broke up Bluff View. There were seventeen pieces of land there and they bought the first piece of land, the Coolidge family did. So then they later rolled that [the house he built] across the street. There was a street there, it's not there anymore. ... Hunter has taken all that property now. But they rolled it across and eventually they ... tore [down] all the houses. They moved, they just destroyed 'em.

TINKER: I noticed your mother's got a Scottish name. Her family's from Scotland?

COOLIDGE: Right, I guess, somewhere. I don't know much about my family history. (Laughs)

TINKER: You don't? Did you know your grandparents on your mother's side at all?

COOLIDGE: I knew my grandfather and my grandmother. They both died probably within a few weeks of each other. I knew 'em, but I was very young.

TINKER: Did you know how they came to be in Signal Mountain?

COOLIDGE: They never were in Signal Mountain. They were in town [Chattanooga]. They lived off of Sixth Street up on the [trolley] car line that went up Sixth Street toward Cameron

Hill. ... [They lived where the trolley car line divided; one branch went] left and if you went to the right you went up on top of Cameron Hill.

TINKER: But they came from Ohio?

COOLIDGE: Well, she did, yes.

TINKER: Your mother did.

COOLIDGE: Right, and I guess her sisters and all. I guess all of them came.

TINKER: And, okay your father—now it says his first job was the Spencer Medical Company?

COOLIDGE: That's right.

TINKER: Is that here in town too?

COOLIDGE: Right here out in St. Elmo.

TINKER: Okay. How did he come to be in that business? Did he have much education?

COOLIDGE: He had a high school education. He was valedictorian of Chattanooga High School—and that's where I went to high school—in 1896, I believe. I could be off a year or two. The only reason I knew that [is because] when I was a kid I used to sell magazines and I called on this lady one day, you know I'd knock on doors on Signal Mountain gettin' them to buy *Ladies Home Journal* or the *Saturday Evening Post*. She said "You're the Coolidge boy," and I said, "Yeah." And she said, "Well I knew your daddy real well. He was in my class at Chattanooga High School and he graduated as valedictorian in 1896." And I said, "Yeah." That was the first I knew of it 'cause he never mentioned it.

TINKER: So he was a pretty smart guy.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, he was really smart.

TINKER: How'd he come to start the printing [Chattanooga Printing and Engraving] company?

COOLIDGE: They were in the Spencer Medicine Company and I guess the Chattam Drugs, is now Chattam Drugs, used to be the Chattanooga Medicine Company, and he and T. R. Preston, who when they left Spencer Medicine Company Dad went into the printing business and T. R. Preston went into the banking business. He was at Hamilton National Bank, which is now the First Tennessee. He went in the banking business, Daddy went into the other. So I don't know how he picked out printing, but that's what he did and that's where... [the family has made our living] for all my life.

TINKER: It sounds like you had a pretty nice childhood.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah.

TINKER: You enjoyed it, growing up here.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, I enjoyed the mountain. I lived on the mountain. I was born on the mountain, so the mountain's my home.

TINKER: Yeah, yeah.

COOLIDGE: I don't really live on the mountain now. I live half way up. If you know, there's a space house half way up Signal Mountain. Next right, fifth house on the right is where I live.

TINKER: That's where you live.

COOLIDGE: But there were six, seven houses there when I moved from the top down there, and I did it for convenience and the fact that it was a new home. I bought it at an auction and gave 'em, you wouldn't believe it if you'd see it, thirty-three thousand dollars for it. (Chuckles)

TINKER: Well did you, as a child, did you belong to the Boy Scouts or any groups like that?

COOLIDGE: No, I belonged to the pre-scouts, or whatever they called it then, but I never was much of a [joiner]. I had a speech impediment and everybody made fun of me.

TINKER: Was it like a stutter or ... ?

COOLIDGE: No, you couldn't understand me.

LEBLANC: Well we can now!

TINKER: Talk too fast? I mean ...

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, oh yeah, been a long process. (Laughter)

LEBLANC: Did you go through therapy? Speech therapy?

COOLIDGE: Yeah.

TINKER: Did your mother work with you on that?

COOLIDGE: My mother, everybody. They sent me to I don't know how many people. And finally one time when I was in the fourth grade my mother had a doctor-relative that was in Ohio and she said, "I think we'll go up and visit the doctor." And so she took me up there to visit them really, but while I was there he noticed how I couldn't talk legibly. I mean you couldn't understand me, so he says, "I want you to come into my,"—he had an office in his home, plus a downtown office. And he said "I want you to come into my office," and he had a chair there and I climbed up in the chair like a kid would you know, not knowin' what was gonna happen. And

he said, “How about opening your mouth and sticking your tongue straight up to the sky?” And I did, and about that time he had a pair of scissors in hand and I wasn’t lookin’ to see what he had and he (motions with hand) clipped it underneath.

TINKER: Oh!

COOLIDGE: Oh, oh!

TINKER: Oh, ow!

COOLIDGE: Oh, oh yeah, ow! (Laughter)

LEBLANC: He did it to loosen your tongue?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, to loosen the tongue so it could have flexibility. See, I could not (Makes trilling sound with tongue) my tongue was not flexible. It would just—it wouldn’t flex.

LEBLANC: It was too tight under ...

COOLIDGE: Yeah it was ...

LEBLANC: Which is very common now and then they just ...

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, it’s no trouble. It really didn’t hurt that—I mean it hurt, but it bled a lot. ‘Cause anything in the head, you know, mostly blood flows to the head.

TINKER: And that was all it took?

COOLIDGE: No, no, no. Then, I was in the fourth grade then, but when I went to—we only had six grades on Signal Mountain. You went one through six, or you could go in at any grade you want to, but at six you either quit school and went to work, or you went to town to school. So, uh, when I got in the seventh I had to go to town to school. Well, at the time my sister [Mary] had a friend [Elizabeth Guy], Mrs. A. T. Guy was her mother; she was a doctor’s wife, but he had died And they had a summer home up on the mountain, it turned out to be a winter and a summer home after he died. She had a chauffeur and all, she was living high. And so, she called my mother and said, “Mrs. Coolidge, Elizabeth tells me Charles can’t talk right.” And she said, “I’d like to help him.” And mother says, “Mrs. Guy, you don’t understand. We’ve been trying to help him ever since he was born, but he just doesn’t talk right.” And she said, “We’ve had his tongue clipped. We’ve tried everything.” And she [Mrs. Guy] said, “Well, I’m not going to argue the point, but if you’ll just send him over here in the afternoons I’ll teach him to talk.” And so when I got home that afternoon, mother said—and I knew Mrs. Guy, she had a son, George, that was a year younger than I am, but we used to play together and stuff—and so she said, “If you’ll just go over there Mrs. Guy says she’s gonna teach you how to talk.” And I, of course, I was young and innocent you know, I didn’t think much about it. I thought well, I wonder how many times we’ve tried this before. (Laughs) So I go in and that afternoon the first thing she said after we got in, of course, made the acquaintances and talked a few minutes, and

she said, “You see that up over there on the wall?” And I said, “Yeah, that’s a pitcher.” She said, “No, no, that’s not a pitcher. A pitcher’s what you pour water out of.” And I said, “No, that’s a pitcher right there!” And she said, “That’s a pic-ture!” And that afternoon I guess I said that word, pic-ture, a hundred times or more. But when I left, I remember the first thing I did, I had to walk about two blocks, and I got home and I went through the kitchen and my mother was standing there. And I said, “Mother, what’s that up there on the wall?” She said, “That’s a picture.” I said, “Right! That’s a picture!” And she said, “What is so remarkable about that?” I said, “I know how to say pic-ture.” (Laughter) And so she started one word at a time ... and later on we got to where we would read a sentence. But if I would mispronounce a word we stopped right on that word, no further, and we had to stop and I had to repeat it over and over until I got it right. And ...

LEBLANC: So she made you work on enunciation?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, every word had to be enunciated correctly.

TINKER: And how long did she work with you?

COOLIDGE: For three years.

TINKER: Three years.

COOLIDGE: And she never charged a dime.

TINKER: Well what a wonderful lady.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. Yeah. And I’ve regretted ‘til I die that I never went back and thanked her after the war. I never did go back to her. I mean, I—Elizabeth, her daughter and I were friends. I’d go to clubs, meetings, different places with them, but I just never—well she’s deceased now—but [I went] with Elizabeth, not her mother. And George got shot down in a plane during the war, so I guess I really had no reason to go back other than to say thank you, ‘cause that helped me when I was in the military. Otherwise, I’d still ...

TINKER: I bet it really increased your confidence.

COOLIDGE: Oh, I don’t know about the confidence. I had plenty.

TINKER: Oh, you had the confidence huh?! (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: I didn’t lack that. (Laughter) And another thing is that people—Patton says anybody that says he was not scared in war is a liar. Well, maybe I was, but I never knew it if I was. But I can remember coming down the rope ladders [off the ships] and making an invasion in Italy. In 1943 we were the first troops back in Europe after Dunkirk. So you can imagine three years later, we go in and we’re gonna attack Europe. They talk about Normandy. All you ever hear about, Normandy, Normandy, Normandy. Hey, we’d been in Europe eleven months before they ever ... [invaded Normandy]. (Laughs)

TINKER: For a year. Yeah. Did you—you've got an older brother and sister? Were you close to them growin' up?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, very close. My sister [Mary] is still alive. She's ninety-three, will be ninety-four in December. She lives in Pass Christian, Mississippi. And her husband's deceased. He died I guess ten or fifteen years ago. She's got two children. One of them lives in New Orleans, not too far from Pass Christian. And the other one lives in—is a school teacher, well both of them are school teachers—the oldest is a teacher down in, I don't know, some kind of a, I've forgotten where, but somewhere in Florida. I've been there to visit her, but I don't know. [Ft. Myers, Florida]

TINKER: So they were a good pair of siblings to have?

COOLIDGE: Right. And my brother [Walter, Jr.] was hurt in a motorcycle crash. Somebody cut over on him and caught the front wheel of the motorcycle.

TINKER: When was young? When he was fairly young?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, ready to be drafted.

TINKER: Oh!

COOLIDGE: Probably had already—I mean his number was in the pot. And it flipped the motor over on him and broke his leg. Broke it in three places and doctor, I won't call his name, [since] he was a friend ... until he died. But he forgot to set one of the [bones] when he [Walter] was in the hospital and it grew back [incorrectly] and it bothered him the rest of his life. He had to wear a steel brace on his leg, so they never would take him in the army. So when I came along, Pearl Harbor hit on December the 7th of '41, and in February they were only drafting at that time down to [age] twenty-one. The last draft age was twenty-one, twenty-four. So, I was twenty so I hadn't registered for the draft. So on February 16th all the twenty year olds in America had to register and I registered on February 16, 1942. And on June 16th, four months to the day, the very day, I was sworn into the United States Army. And I was working at that time a double shift. I worked for the printing company in day ...

TINKER: Well, you mentioned Pearl Harbor, do you remember that day ...

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah ...

TINKER: What you heard and everybody's reaction?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, oh yeah! I remember that day ... [because of] the fact that it was just made as an announcement that they'd bombed Pearl Harbor. Well I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was. Didn't make a whole lot of difference to me ... that day I already knew we were in war. But I already knew we were in war in '39. I know when I graduated from [Chattanooga] City [High School] I went to work full-time for the printing company and I became—by trade,

I'm a book binder and I'll show ya a couple of books out there ... the kind I used to make—and it, uh, I enjoyed it I liked it. ... And like I say I was working a double shift so work didn't ...

TINKER: So did you—when you knew we were at war did you think, well I'll be going?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: Did you know you'd be going one day?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, I never had any doubt about it. But what I was going to say is I graduated in '39. In September, the plant manager—I was out there working, I don't know whether it was the end of day or I was just out there working overtime or what—but he came out there and he said, "Charles, how come you haven't gone to UTC? Aren't you going to college? They've started college." I said, "I'm not going to college." He said, "What do you mean you're not going to college?" I said, "It don't take any smart individual to go over there and shoot Germans." And he said, "What are you talking about?" [Keep in mind] this is in '39. He said, "What are you talkin' about?" I said, "We're headed for war!" And he said, "What do you mean you're headed for war? Ain't nobody said anything about going to war!" I said, "No but I go to the movies every Saturday night. I don't go to see the movies. I go to see the newsreels."

TINKER: So you knew mainly from watching the newsreels?

COOLIDGE: Reels at the Tivoli Theater every Saturday night.

TINKER: Well, were your parents also talking about it?

COOLIDGE: No, no they never mentioned it.

TINKER: So, you—the newsreels?

COOLIDGE: Oh the newsreels told me ...

TINKER: Well that's interesting.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, I said I go to the newsreel ... you know, have a date or something, take her to the newsreel on Saturday, uh ...

TINKER: You could see ...

COOLIDGE: Yeah, I could see. I could look at Czechoslovakia and Hungary and all ...

TINKER: You could put two plus two together.

COOLIDGE: These Germans were runnin' all over everybody! And, you know, and they showed all the horror pictures, they way they'd run all over women and children and all that. I knew that ... well, I didn't know it wasn't true, but I mean I know they tried to show the worst of

everything. But Hitler was a vicious man, but you know you have to—there's other people involved when you start running over somebody with a tank. Because they resisted and they had no, really, they didn't have the equipment to resist. Those small countries over there.

TINKER: Right.

COOLIDGE: And I had sense enough to know ... [what was happening]. But I also had sense enough to know that in 1941 I'd worked a double shift and I was having to get off at eleven o'clock and catch an eleven thirty bus and go to the mountain. Then come back down the next morning to go work at the Chattanooga Printing, work there 'til three and then go up at the three o'clock shift and work for the TVA reproduction department. And so I knew that things were moving and that I had to make money. Well, I went to Detroit in 1941—I'd saved up my money, and I went to the bank and I said to the banker, the teller, I said, "I want seven hundred dollars." I had a savings account, and I said, "I want seven hundred dollars in cash." And she said, "What do you want cash for?" I said, "Well, I gotta go to Detroit and buy me a car." And so, I guess she told one of the guys that just sit in the middle, you know, vice-president or something, "Hey he's taking cash out of here." (Laughs) That was a lot of money back in ...

TINKER: Oh, yeah.

COOLIDGE: ... '41. That was like all the money in the world. And so anyway, he came over and he talked to me and said, "No we better give you a check." So I said, "What kind of check are we gonna take up there that they'll cash?" And he told me and I got the check. Got off work at eleven o'clock that night and my brother—you asked about my brother [Walter]—and another guy said, "Hey, we'll go up there with you." And so we walked from—I worked at Eleventh [Street] and Market [Street]—we walked down to Second and Market, and that's where the bridge was, where we went across Market Street. The others [newer bridges] weren't there. The [only] other ... [bridge] was ... [the] Walnut Street Bridge, it was still trafficable. I mean we had automobiles that went across it. So, anyway, we stood there and we finally got ... [a ride]. Well, about eleven o'clock the next morning we'd gotten probably as far as Dayton [Tennessee]. That's no further, I mean that's forty miles. I said [to Walter and his friend], "I'll tell ya, I told those people I was going to be back to work Tuesday." And I said, "I've got to make better time than this. Ain't nobody gonna pick us up with three people." I'd always caught a ride home [Signal Mountain] from school see, after I had to come to town [Chattanooga] to school. In the afternoon I'd get out on Cherokee Boulevard and go ... [hitchhike] until I got home. So I was used to catching rides. So I said, "Ain't nobody gonna pick up three guys out here on the road." I said, "I'm going to leave you all." And so I got about 100 yards from 'em and somebody stopped, and picked me up and took me, I guess up to about Knoxville, maybe a little on the other side. And I got out and I knew how to get to Detroit, but I didn't have a map or anything, I'd just tell people where I was going when I got in [their cars]. But I knew the numbers, see. So I caught a ride and after I got past Knoxville these three guys stopped. Well by that time, you know, that was eleven when we were at Dayton. I guess it was probably three o'clock in the afternoon when we go there, maybe later. And these three guys picked me up and had a limousine. Of course, I'm a blonde-headed little guy just off work you know, and no clothes, no nothing except that ... check for seven hundred dollars. (Laughs) And we're going along and they say, after two or three hours, they say, "Where are you going? Where you going anyway?"

I said, “Well, I’m going to Detroit, Michigan.” And they said, “What are you going to Detroit for?” “I said, “Well I’m going up there to buy a car.” And he said, “Oh, they’re not making cars up there.” And I said, “Well, that’s where I’m going.” And they said, “Well, you’re lucky, that’s where we’re going.” And so when we got close to the city limits, he said to me, the driver turned around and said, “Whereabouts in Detroit are you going?” I said, “I have no idea, but I told those two guys that I was with before you picked me up that I was going to the biggest hotel in Detroit.” “Oh! That’s the Book Cadillac Hotel! We’ll take ye right to the door.” And it was about thirty miles from the city limits of Detroit to the Book Cadillac. (Chuckles) He pulled in there, and that canopy over the door you know and a guy in a big coat and all walked out—now hey, this is all new to me. I’m just a kid! And the guy comes out, says, “Where’s your luggage?” I said, “I haven’t got any luggage.” (Laughter) But I knew [about luxury hotels]—the Signal Mountain Hotel at that time had been a luxury hotel when I used to play tennis. And the tennis courts were over by the post office right across from the hotel. So I’d go in, I was selling magazines too, so I’d sneak in the dining room at night and the bell hop knew me, see, and he’d take me around and he would see the bosses were coming or something and he’d run me out the back door so I wouldn’t get caught you know.

TINKER: Uh huh.

COOLIDGE: So I would sell my magazines, but they were selling the same magazines, so see they didn’t want me up there selling, particularly barefooted, ten or twelve years old, you now. (Laughs) So anyway, um, I’ve forgotten what I was tellin’ you now.

TINKER: When you got out at the hotel.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, when I got out. So, he ...

TINKER: Well, did you ever find out who these guys were that gave you the ride?

COOLIDGE: Oh I never knew. I just thanked ‘em profusely and got out. I thanked them. I never knew their names; didn’t care what their names were, they got me where I wanted to go. (Laughter)

TINKER: And your parents didn’t mind you just going off on this adventure?

COOLIDGE: No, see I’d ... pulled that shot on them once before.

TINKER: You did?

COOLIDGE: Yeah. (Laughs) They were kind of used to it. (Laughs) [They would say] “He’ll take care of himself.” ‘Cause when I got out of high school, the first year I got out of high school—around Christmas printing is pretty slow, at Christmas and January. So, the first of the year I was working, business got slow and I said well ... I have friend out at Arkansas going to college out there. Searcy, Arkansas. And I said I think I’ll just go visit my friend then. And so ...

TINKER: So you just took off and went to Arkansas?

COOLIDGE: In the wintertime! January! (Laughter) So I go out there and ...

TINKER: Do you remember what college it was?

COOLIDGE: Uh, it was Searcy—Harding, H-A-R-D-I-N-G, Harding College. It's a Christian college I think. I don't know what kind [of denomination]. But anyway, I got out there and it was so cold I decided I'd go south, so I hitchhiked all the way down into Texas. I kept going further and further and further 'til I got down to San Antonio, Texas. That's way down there, almost on the ocean. (Laughs) And I got down there and I was gettin' a little low on cash. (Laughs) So we could get a job you know, any place, work a day [and] just get a little cash, then ... [I began working my way] back and I finally got to New Orleans. When I got to New Orleans, that's five hundred miles [from Chattanooga], but I felt like I was home by then. And finally the last ride I got was the worst one of all. I got [picked up] about—nine o'clock at night—I was down here about Gadsden, Alabama and a coal truck stopped. He didn't have any seats in the front and he said, "You can get back there on the coal pile." And I got back there and that wind blowin' all that ol' coal dust all over me. I looked like a black man when I got off. So anyway, we, uh, now where ...

TINKER: The hotel in Detroit, we'll go back there. So you got out ...

COOLIDGE: Alright. Okay, that bellhop met me, and of course I was familiar with bellhops, so I told him I wanted to see the desk clerk. And he took me in there and ... I said [to the desk clerk], "First I better ask you what the price is for a room." Now that's the biggest hotel in Detroit. He said, "I can fix you up with a real nice room for eight dollars a night." And I said, "Okay, that sounds alright." I handed the guy eight dollars. And the bell hop took me up to the room. Well, of course I didn't have anything, he just opened the door and said, "Here's the key." And I looked around in that room [and] it was a great big double bed. I'm tellin' ye, I'd never seen anything like it. And the carpet in there was an inch or inch and a half thick. You could sleep on the floor. And, course, you know that's a big hotel back then.

TINKER: Right.

COOLIDGE: So I stayed that night and next morning I'm out bright and early ... that Sunday, so I've got to look for a car. And I started finding out from people where the nearest car lot was or whatever. I wasn't going to buy a new one, I was just goin' to buy one up there. And so I finally started looking around, looking around and every now and then I'd check back with the hotel. I'd walk back to the hotel to find out if I'd heard from Walter and the other boy. And [the response I got was] "no, no, nobody's called for you." Well two o'clock came, I thought, "Well, surely they ought to have been here by now." And so I thought well, you know it's a possibility they'd go to the bus stop, the bus station ... Greyhounds ... So about four o'clock I decided I'd go to the bus station. So I go to the bus station and there they sit in the waiting area, "Where you been?" [they asked]. I said, "Well I told you to meet me at the biggest hotel." They said, "Oh we thought you was jokin' about that." I said, "No! I got a room over there." (Laughter) And so anyway, I don't know whether I showed 'em the room then or later, but anyway, I said, "We've

got to find a car today so we can get started tomorrow.” And, uh, of course they weren’t open on Sunday, so I had to wait until Monday. But anyway ... we found this car, it was a ’40 Ford maroon convertible and I liked it. And I asked—the next morning I asked the guy what he wanted for it and he wanted seven hundred dollars. That was every penny I had. (Laughs) And I said, “You couldn’t cut it just about five dollars or ten dollars so I can get enough gas to get home could ya?” And the salesman said, “No.” He said, “That’s the least dollar I can take on it.” And so, we waited until about five in the afternoon and I finally figured he’s not going to crack, I’ve got to give him the seven hundred so can get started. And so I gave him the seven hundred and we started down the road and drove all night trying to get back Tuesday morning. (Laughs) And, uh, anyway, we got back. It was a great trip and I got my car. To make a long story short on the car, when the war came along I had a girlfriend, which was only a year later. I had a girlfriend [Frances Seepe, who later became Mrs. Coolidge] and I told her, I said, “Well I gotta go into the Army. And I got a car and I may be able to use it down there or wherever I am and I may not. So what I’ll do, I’ll just loan ye the car or give ye the car ‘til I get back. But when I get back, I want the car back.”

TINKER: Right.

COOLIDGE: And, so I let—she took the car and started driving it and I was at Fort Oglethorpe [Georgia] for a week. Every night she’d come out and see me. And so, then I shipped out on a train and went ninety miles away at Fort McClellan, Alabama. [When I] went down there, one weekend I came home and she said, “Uh, I gotta give you your car back.” I said, “What do you mean you’re gonna give me my car back?” I said, “I can’t use it right now.” She said, “Well, Daddy said if I was going to court other men during the war and all that I couldn’t keep the car.” And she said, “I made a decision I’d rather go out with other guys.” (Laughs)

TINKER: Than have the car? (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: Than have the car! (Laughter) I bet she regretted than many a time.

TINKER: I bet she did! (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: I bet she regretted that a many a time. But anyway, I know one time when the buses went on strike she walked from the Southern Railway—she had a good job. She worked for Southern Railway at about two hundred and fifty a month. And that’s big, big money.

TINKER: Yeah.

COOLDGE: She had cried, when I was courtin’ her, she cried one afternoon when Provident was hiring and she went up to—all her friends were getting jobs up at, Unum now, but it used to be Provident Life and Accident Insurance Company, big company. Still is a big company here. And so she went up there and the personnel told her, said, “Well, we’re not hiring now, we quit. Yesterday we quit.” Told her [they] had all the personnel they needed. So she cried about it and that next day, or the day after she went, well she was going to Edmonson Business School, and she said Mr. Edmonson came out in the lobby and said, “Frances I want to see you in my office.” And so she went in the office wondering what in the world he wanted to see her about. And he

said, “I think there’s an opening down at Southern Railway. They’re losing some of their men because the draft is taking ‘em and they need somebody that can do secretarial work.” And he said, “I think you can do it alright.” So she went down there and applied. I took her down there and she went in and had the interview. And then I had to take her up to Newell Hospital for a physical and she got the job.

TINKER: Two fifty a month?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: Two fifty a month?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, two hundred and fifty bucks a month! That was fantastic back then. When I went in the army, pay was twenty-one dollars a month. We ain’t talking about a week now! (Laughter) Twenty-one dollars a month was the pay. ... People can’t comprehend [it]. I know Senator Thompson of Tennessee. I was up at the [Medal of Honor] Museum one day and he was talking to me, and I don’t know what brought the subject up. We were talking about different things, and I said, “Yeah, theses soldiers today getting ninety-nine dollars a month, they ought to try to do twenty-one a month.” (Laughs) And he said, “Twenty-one?” I said, “Yeah, that’s what we got paid when I went in.”

TINKER: Yeah. Uh, you mentioned that your friend went out to this Christian college. That brought to my mind—was your family very religious [when you were] growing up?

COOLIDGE: Oh yes. Oh yeah, very. And anything I did do during the war, I give God the credit. I mean Jesus walked with me every step of the way. You cannot believe what my men—they thought I ... [had] lost my mind. Because I would go anywhere, do anything, never worried that they were shootin’ at me. I still stay the Lord must’ve curved many a bullet that I knew absolutely they were shooting at me. I mean, I’m positive they were shooting at me.

TINKER: Right, right.

COOLIDGE: But they never did hit me. And I never got wounded in the war. I have multiple sclerosis now, and I, that’s from the pressure of working too long in combat, too long at working, and I just didn’t know you were ever supposed to let up. And I really always have enjoyed what I was doing and I gave it ...

TINKER: You were never injured?

COOLIDGE: [I] never got wounded in the war. Got more time on the front line than any living American. See you didn’t live long over there [on the front line in combat]. You only lived twelve days in the infantry. Twelve days is all ... you either get wounded, killed, or captured in twelve days ...

TINKER: Well do you think your faith also is what gave you such ...

COOLIDGE: Oh, oh ...

TINKER: ... confidence as a child?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. My mother and daddy were praying people. That whole Second Presbyterian Church—that's where I used to go and then I went to Signal Mountain Presbyterian now I go to the First Presbyterian [in Chattanooga]. Sometimes I go to the Red Bank Baptist Church because my son goes there and they alternate, [sons] John and Bill alternate off of where they go. So if Bill takes me I go to Red Bank Baptist. If John takes me I go to my church, First Presbyterian. But yeah, religion, that was the thing, you were supposed to read the Bible and pray every day, sometimes more than once a day. When they're shooting at you, you better be praying a whole lot. (Laughs)

TINKER: That's true. Well, let's get to that then. So you did your basic training at Fort McClellan?

COOLIDGE: Fort McClellan, Alabama.

TINKER: And you just probably took all that in stride too, didn't you?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, I took it in stride. (Laughter)

TINKER: Is there any particular memory that stands out?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, I accidentally hit myself in the leg with a bayonet. (Laughter) I cut my leg and I was in hospital for three weeks and they made me stay another cycle. It ...

TINKER: So that was your one injury then.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, that, but that ...

TINKER: But you did it to yourself.

COOLIDGE: ... that's self-inflicted. (Laughter) And they thought, you know, at first they thought I'd done it on purpose. You know people would hurt themselves, cut their hands off, or do something just to get out of [going overseas]—but I accidentally—I used to pitch softball out at Warner Park [in Chattanooga] and in pitching I always twisted to make the ball spin you know. And I must've, evidently, when I drew it back, like what would you do if somebody attacked you. We didn't have live ammunition. They wouldn't issue that in basic. And so [as a simulation] what would you do if somebody attacked you at night out here? You're out here on a walkway a half a mile or more before your next sentry. And what would you do if somebody attacked you? And we were kind of in the barracks waiting on our two-hour shifts and I said, "Well you draw the thing back," but when I came forward I hit my leg [and it] bled. Wow, that thing bled. Well, officer of the day said, "You better go back to the barracks, we can't use you like that tonight." So I went back to the barracks, boy, I liked to never made it through the night. That leg was hurtin' me, that leg was about to kill me. And, uh, so I guess I got them to sew it up

at night and then I went back to the barracks. And I suffered all night and I then I went—at five o'clock reveille and you wake up, you know, whatever it is—and I went up to sick call they call it. And the doctor looked at it, "Oh you gotta go back to the hospital. You gotta do something with that leg." It was all red, like fire. And so, they put me on the ... [stretcher] and of course a doctor—they put me in room, it was 108° in the shade down there that day. No insulation, no air conditioning. And they had me on a stretcher and he said, "Soldier, get up and get on the table." Well I struggled and struggled, and I said, "I can't get up." He said, "Well, help him up." He told some of the guys there, the ward boys, "Pick him up and put him on the table." So they put me up on the table. He [the doctor] looked at that leg, he said, "Well that's a pretty job of sewing, but it's terrible for your leg." And he started pulling those stitches out. He said, "Does that hurt?" I said, "No, I don't even know you've done anything." And he pulled another stitch, "Does that hurt?" I said, "No I don't feel anything." He pulled 'til he got them all out, then he started punching the side of the leg to get that oozing coming out.

TINKER: The infection, yeah.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, that infection. And that's before they had penicillin; I guess, they had sulfur. And so, ... he called all the doctors in the ward. I don't even know how many that was. They were all crowded in that little room; the nurses were all there, and I'm laying there. And he said, "The first thing I want to do is apologize to the patient." He said, "I thought he was gold-bricking." That's what they called it in the army when you're trying to get out of something. "And I thought he was gold-bricking, but this man's not gold-bricking. His leg's in bad shape." And so he, you know, he'd already got the stitches out and he started treating it and getting the oozing out and put all that sulfur on it and said, "We'll put you out here in the ward." So they put me out in the ward and I guess I got one of the boys to call and tell my mother I was in the hospital. And she said, "Well, we'll come down Sunday." And, uh, there was one nurse that was real nice and she, I don't even remember her name now, but she was real nice to us—to everybody on the ward really—and so, then I stayed there ... a week, and [by this time] I'm beginning to wonder, "Hey, what's going on here?" And my leg's not getting any better. When mother came down I said, "Ask that nurse over there what's going on and how come my leg's not gettin' better?" So she and the nurse got in a conversation, "Well," she said, "Mrs. Coolidge, I'm going to tell you the truth about it. They thought they were going to have to amputate it." And she said, "It is gettin' better." And she said, "We hope we're going to save it." So anyway, my leg really started getting better. It took about three weeks. So that's how come ...

TINKER: It had gotten that infected?!

COOLIDGE: In one night! Bayonet, it was ...

LEBLANC: Cause it was dirty.

COOLIDGE: Huh?

LEBLANC: Obviously something was in there.

TINKER: Well it sounds like whoever sewed it up was dirty too.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, oh yeah, he said right there, he said the sewing job was a beautiful job, but the infection is still in there. And that's the reason he had pushed, and pushed, and pushed, trying to get all that poison out.

TINKER: Right.

COOLIDGE: And ...

TINKER: So you almost lost your leg from that.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, just a plain ol' pure accident. And the company commander, he thought I'd done it on purpose you know.

TINKER: Wow.

COOLIDGE: Well he did ... I've often wanted to meet him again to find out what he thinks now. (Laughter)

TINKER: (Laughter) Yeah! Imagine that.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, I got more time on the front line than any living American, he ... was trying to tell me I was trying to get out of something.

TINKER: Did you make any good buddies in basic training? Or was there anybody ...

COOLIDGE: Well, we all separated. As soon as basic training, you ...

TINKER: You all separated?

COOLIDGE: Well, a bunch of 'em of go here, and a bunch there, and a bunch there. When I got through basic—I'd missed a cycle, see, so I had to stay over.

TINKER: Oh, that's right. So you missed ...

COOLIDGE: I missed three weeks of the cycle.

TINKER: So then you're with a new group.

COOLIDGE: So, I, I couldn't do all that they had to do and so the cycles, as they were at that time, were eight weeks. The next cycle was only six weeks. So what's another six weeks, you know. So I go through the second cycle and they shipped me to Camp Butner, North Carolina.

TINKER: Camp Buckner?

COOLIDGE: B-U-T-N-E-R I guess it is, I—yeah Butner.

TINKER: Oh, okay, Butner.

COOLIDGE: In North Carolina. And I stayed there a week, or five days.

TINKER: Well what kind of training were you gettin' there?

COOLIDGE: Not any, there wasn't anybody there. (Laughter) There wasn't enough of us there.

TINKER: I guess the army was just in a hurry, right?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, well, they had to send you somewhere and they sent you where they might start a new basic training facility see. And then they didn't [train us there], so they shipped me from ... [Camp Butner], and whoever else was there, they shipped us up to Camp Edwards, Massachusetts.

TINKER: Camp what?

COOLIDGE: Camp Edwards, E-D-W-A-R-D-S. Edwards, Massachusetts. And it was the last day of, let's see, of November [1942] or around the last of November, and we, uh, got on the train. And every train's got a door at the end, you know, where you get out of the car, each car had its own door. And there'd be a sergeant standing there and he'd take whatever men came off and take them to A Company, or B Company, or C Company, or D Company, and on down the alphabet. And so when they got me ... [they sent me] to Company M, 141st Infantry and that's where I hooked up with them. Now they were activated on November the 25th. They were a regular National Guard unit ...

TINKER: Out of Texas, right?

COOLIDGE: Texas National Guard and—we were ordered to call it Texas-Oklahoma National Guard. I don't know what Oklahoma had to do with it, but it did have some Oklahomans in it. But, they were doing that service in the Guard because they got six dollars a month. That's pretty good. So that's the reason they all joined the guard down there. They didn't know a year later they were going to draft them. And they just made a proclamation one day, from this day forward you'll be in the regular army. And that's when they—on November 25, 1940. Well you see, I joined the ...

-----END TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

TINKER: Okay, so you're with the 141st ...

COOLIDGE: Yeah, so I got in off the train, we went into the CP [command post] and I walked in and the company commander looked at me and ... he said, "Have you ever been on leave?"

Have you gone home since you were in the army?” And I said, “No Sir, I haven’t been home.” I haven’t been on leave to go home. I had been home. But I ...

TINKER: Right. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: But I wasn’t supposed to have gone home. I wasn’t supposed to go but thirty miles ... [from Fort McClellan], but I had taken my ... car and I went home when I wanted to on the weekends. (Laughs)

TINKER: You did?!

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah.

TINKER: And you never got caught?

COOLIDGE: I never got caught.

TINKER: You are something else! (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: And I’d loan my car, during the week I’d loan it to the sergeants [who trained us] so that they took care of me, you know what I mean? (Laughs)

TINKER: Hey, that car really paid off didn’t it?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, that was the best seven hundred dollars I ever spent. (Laughter) So, anyway, he [the company commander] asked me, he said, “Well,” ... “This outfit’s going overseas.” And he said, “I’m going to have one of my guy’s here take you up to the room and show you where your bunk is, [then] you come on back and I’ll give you a ten-day pass.” So that sounds pretty good to me. So I take my stuff up there and button up all the shirts and all the buttons, so somebody won’t have to stay home Saturday night because we didn’t have all the buttons done. And I come back down there and he—there was a train backed all the way up into the property at Camp Edwards, [we] had our own train up there. So anyway, I got on the train and went to Chattanooga. I had to go to Boston and to New York, and New York to Washington, then home to Chattanooga. So anyway ... I spent about—well when I got home things were different. All of my buddies were gone and it was kinda sad, and so, I went back two days early.

TINKER: You told your parents you going to go overseas?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: Did you tell your parents that you knew you were going to be going overseas?

COOLIDGE: Oh, no I didn’t tell them. No, never give them any fear that they don’t have to have.

TINKER: Oh, well that’s true.

COOLIDGE: Just don't ever worry about what's going to happen tomorrow—'til it happens. (Chuckles) So anyway, I went back [to Camp Edwards], and of course it [our movement overseas] wasn't quite as quick as they thought we were going. ... I got back on the eighth or ninth [of December]. And December went, January came, [and it was] cold up there, snow on the ground. And anybody that's new, they give 'em all the crummy jobs, so I remember one January day they had to have firemen. See, we had no insulation or anything and we had to have firemen for every building that had a fire. And we had stokers in there. You had to stoke 'em you know, fill the bins, and all that. So it was sixteen below zero one day, and I was a fireman and I had the rec hall, which is our exercise place, and I had the aid station, and I had one other place. I had to run between the buildings—you know sixteen below will freeze your face.

TINKER: That's cuttin', yeah.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, that's cuttin'! And so I would stand around at the fireplace there until I ran to the next one.

TINKER: And then run to the next one? Stoke it ...

COOLIDGE: So at about two o'clock that afternoon the general showed up, said, "We're coming over, tell all the firemen to come to the rec hall." And he got us all over there and he says, "Everybody's unhappy with y'all's work, we're going to fire all of ya." Said, "Y'all fired. You can go on." And I said, "Oh, you mean we get to go home!" He said, "No! I didn't mean home." He said, "I mean you have to go back to the barracks." (Laughter) And anyway, they replaced us. And of course it wasn't us, it was the furnaces were not capable—there was no insulation.

TINKER: You couldn't keep it warm.

COOLIDGE: At the aid station the highest I got it—I had the captain come down one time when I was standing by the fire and he said, "It's only fifty up there." I said, "Well, you ought to go outside, it's sixteen below out there." (Laughs) And so, he said, "Let me see ..." Well of course, I knew how to fire a furnace 'cause [at home] we already had a stove like that. So I had the door thrown wide open so that air could really get there and keep that thing roaring. And he came in where the fireplace on the ground, and he looked at it and that fire was just roaring, and he said, "Well, the door's open, you gettin' plenty of air?" I said, "Yeah. If you can get anymore heat out of that I want to see it." (Laughs) Anyway, he said, "No, it's a good fire, that building just won't hold heat."

TINKER: When it's that cold, yeah, you can't even get it ...

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. Well, when it's sixteen below zero, it's sixteen below zero. And anyway, the general had done fired us all so we went back to the [barracks]—they got a new crew. I hope they did better than we did. Well, it kind of warmed up maybe two or three degrees the next day and it wasn't as hard to keep it warm, but when it gets real cold it's tough. But anyway, we stayed up there and we had inclement weather day. You know, instead of going out and doing exercises and ...

TINKER: You had to do it inside.

COOLIDGE: ...doing duty, you did it inside, or you really didn't do it. So that lasted [through] January. I know that I had never run through a place where you have to crawl on your hands and knees and go under barbed-wire fence, and guns a going off, and shells a going off ...

TINKER: So you never had any training like that?

COOLIDGE: I never had anything like that. So they asked us ... sent us out there and the snow was all over the ground, cold as blazes, and got my legs frostbit from here to here, but they didn't do anything about it. I wouldn't go to the aid station and tell them. I just figured I'd tough it out. And so ...

TINKER: So that late date? That was the first time you'd had any kind of training like that?

COOLIDGE: Like that, yeah.

TINKER: Wow.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, well I'd had some training down at Fort McClellan, but it wasn't like that. No, it wasn't cold weather down there; it was 108° in the shade down there. (Laughs)

TINKER: So that was January of '43.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, '43, and then February, same thing, cold, cold weather. And we could go to Boston or New York at night—I mean on the weekends. Not the weekends—from noon on Saturday until you had better be back Monday morning at five o'clock. So, uh, I didn't care anything about going to Boston or New York. But one weekend I did go down there, but it was a hassle to get there and a hassle to get back and all that.

TINKER: Was it?

COOLIDGE: Well, they had a train that took you in—you didn't know where to go when you got there. You know, [it] wasn't all that much fun, in other words, to me.

TINKER: Yeah, did you feel like you're lost when you're there?

COOLIDGE: Well ...

TINKER: Did you see any shows at all? The few times you went?

COOLIDGE: Oh I'm sure I did. Well, I only went one time and I wasn't impressed. It was so cold there I wasn't impressed.

TINKER: When did you, uh, when did they tell y'all you were gonna be shippin' out?

COOLIDGE: Well, they kept tellin' us we were going over, be ready. (Laughs) Well, January, February, March—March came and then they started having us cosmoline our guns. We had machine guns, you had to put cosmoline, that means you're going over salt water.

TINKER: Cosmoline?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, they ...

TINKER: I've never heard of it.

COOLIDGE: It's just like a thick grease or oil and you put it all over the gun, so salt water wouldn't make 'em start rusting. And we ... did that. But eventually, near the end of March they put us on trains one day and took us down, ninety miles away to New York or wherever it was, and we knew we were going overseas then.

TINKER: Well, let me ask you, before we get on the trip. This time, you're waiting time there, were you still following the news about the rest of the war?

COOLIDGE: No ...

TINKER: Or were you just completely in ...

COOLIDGE: I was just completely cut off.

TINKER: ... in your world?

COOLIDGE: I was in my own world then.

TINKER: Yeah, okay. Okay, so, ya'll go over ...

COOLIDGE: Well, we get on and go down on the train [to New York] and get off and ... [As we moved to the ship] if they call your name, you have to—if they call "Charles" you have to say "Coolidge." If they call "Coolidge" you gotta give "Charles" and so forth. So you get on the boat and fortunately for me the officers of M Company all knew me, not like all the other guys. They knew me. And the reason they knew me was because every weekend these guys that lived in New Jersey, and New York, and Pennsylvania, they'd all want to go home on the weekend 'cause they were close. So they'd come to me and say—You know you have a K.P. list every day and [if] their name shows up on a Saturday or Sunday, they'd say, "Well, Coolidge will take it for you, if you'll give him ten dollars he'll do your K.P. duty for you." So I ...

TINKER: 'Cause you didn't care about going.

COOLIDGE: I wasn't gonna go anyway, so every Sunday night it's a requirement that an officer go in to be sure you're getting the right kind of food. In other words, an officer is not supposed to be fed any better food than what ... [his soldiers] get. So the officers would bring

their wives in, if they were married, and I would have to wait on them at night, on Sunday night—wouldn't be nobody else there because the rest of them, they would go to the PX or something, buy what they wanted, rather than buyin' ol' army food.

TINKER: Right.

COOLIDGE: So, I had to wait on 'em, and course they all got to know who I was. That was a good thing later on, and so, I did that until March, near the end of March. We loaded on the ships either the thirty-first of March or the first [of April]. I think we loaded probably on the first and left on the first or we loaded on March thirty-first and shipped out on April, 1st of '43.

TINKER: And what was the trip like?

COOLIDGE: Oh, wonderful! Good sittin' back there on that boat and watching ... [the white caps and the wake] behind the boat—beautiful. And I was enjoying every bit of it.

TINKER: You probably enjoyed it when you got to warmer weather didn't you?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah! (Laughter) Well, it wasn't quite as cold after you get out over the water. You know, the sea doesn't freeze [there]. It gets frozen is when it gets colder and the salt water don't freeze.

TINKER: What did y'all do to pass the time?

COOLIDGE: Oh, played poker, and threw dice, and all that gamblin' stuff. And I loved all that. (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah.

COOLIDGE: I hate to admit it now, but I did love it. (Laughter)

LEBLANC: You enjoyed the cards and the dice?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I was a card player. I'm not much on dice, but I loved the cards.

TINKER: So, and then you arrived [in] Africa?

COOLIDGE: Yeah.

TINKER: How long did the trip take?

COOLIDGE: Thirteen days. Left on the first, got there on the thirteenth. I debarked on the thirteenth at Oran, Africa. They were still fighting in North Africa then. They went all the way up to Kasserine Pass, and we had some of our outfit go to Kasserine Pass [in Tunisia] but I didn't go.

TINKER: Oh really?

COOLIDGE: No, the whole division didn't go. And we run the Germans out of—they did, they ran 'em out of—well, I lot of people don't realize, but the 1st Division, and the 3rd Division, and the 9th Division, and the 34th Division, and the 36th Division, that's what we're in, and the 45th Division, and then in February the 88th came over. We seven divisions fought the war for the Americans, or the U.S. 'til D-Day. Now there were paratroopers, there were a lot of these groups that were attached to the 36th, tank outfits and all that. But as far as divisions, there were only six of us, and later like I say, on the twenty-eighth of [February], uh, they might put a few days early on that, the 88th Division, that fought the war up until June 6th [1944]. And that was good, but the more men you had up there ... more people are going to get wounded. [And of] course when you start to make a drive you like to have some resources behind you. You like to have everybody behind you. They used to sing over there, "They're comin', they're comin'" and I said, "Well you better hurry up, there won't be anybody left." (Laughter) That's what we said after Rapido River, you know, we lost 2,300 men in one night. Hey, do you know, if you look at the facts and the figures it's alarming.

TINKER: Oh, I know it.

COOLIDGE: We lost, out of 8,000 men that made the attack across the Rapido, we lost 2,300. But if you look at Normandy, they lost 2,600 men and women, but they had three million go in. They had three million go in! We only had 8,000 try to cross that Rapido.

TINKER: What did you all—What was the main thing you were doing while you were in North Africa? Training some more?

COOLIDGE: Well, we were training and we were, uh, going out every day shooting bazookas and shooting machine guns, and going back from Oran, Africa all the way back to Casablanca, ridin' the rails back and forth actually faking the Germans as to how many troops we really had over there. That's what I always called it, I don't know what they called it.

TINKER: Just giving them a little bluff, huh?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, we were acting like there were a whole lot of us when there wasn't but one division. (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah. Did you ever have a little bit of time off?

COOLIDGE: No, well if I did—No, I didn't I have any time off.

TINKER: Not really. I mean like to notice the culture or interact with any of the locals? None of that?

COOLIDGE: Oh no, no. No, we were always out in the boondocks, sleeping in holes and pup tents and all that stuff. It's a tough way of life, but we always had the cards and the dice.

TINKER: You always had the cards—that's right. (Laughter) Well when did they—When did you all know that you were gonna be landing in Italy.

COOLIDGE: Well, I'll tell ya how I found out positively. They [the Army] didn't tell us. [But when] we were gettin' on the ships over in Africa, [the] civilians, they would be yelling at us, "I hope you like your trip to Italy!" "I hope you like your trip to Italy!" It's a secret; it's a secret, but the Africans all knew, or whoever they were, the French, they all knew where we were going, but we never had been told.

TINKER: 'Cause you all were cut off. They knew the news.

COOLIDGE: Oh, they had everything. We didn't know anything. We didn't any news media with us. Lord, you never saw ...

TINKER: But the locals knew what was going on.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, everybody knew. Everybody but us.

TINKER: So that's how y'all found out you're going to Italy. (Laughs)

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, yeah. (Laughs) The locals tell us, well, y'all are going to make an invasion over there. Well if you study it, if you look at the map there.

TINKER: Yeah. [Picks up map]

COOLIDGE: When you see the boot, the boot goes down in there and the toe of the boot—can you tell?

TINKER: Mm hmm. [Looking at map]

COOLIDGE: You see, we were going to land. Well, you see, Patton and Eisenhower, and one other general, were in charge of taking Sicily. And Patton was a hard-nosed guy. I can tell you a story about him.

TINKER: Well go ahead and tell it if you want to.

COOLIDGE: Well, I can tell—well, I don't mind telling it now. I was just gonna tell you about ... I can't remember whether we were in Africa or whether we'd already made the invasion of Italy. But we're in column moving along, route step ... you know, maneuvering, and this jeep—now I didn't know Patton from Adam's apple—and so, this jeep's coming along, it never stops. And Patton gets out. M Company is the last company in the battalion, and most of the time the mortars were behind me, and maybe they were that day, I don't remember. Out jumps this general, and I could look on the front[of the jeep] and knew it was a general, but I didn't know it was four-star general. I just saw the stars and I knew, hey, this is a big man. So he jumps out, and this Lieutenant Needleman, who I knew real well—because as a child, all my life I'd had

migraines, migraine headaches. And so every few days I used to have to go to the aid station and get aspirin and codeine to keep going along without any problems, you know.

TINKER: Right.

COOLIDGE: And I never faked anything, I just ... So after a period of time, this Lieutenant Needleman and myself became acquainted. And eventually he said to me one day, "I'm just going to give you a packet with aspirin and codeine. Every time you have a headache just take the aspirin and codeine." So I was taking three aspirin and two codeine at a pop. In other words, if I'd have a headache in the morning, I'd just pop them three aspirin, and two codeine, and swallow water and that was it. And then if I had it at ten or twelve or two in the afternoon, I'd pop three aspirin and two codeine. My wife [Frances] says that's the reason I got the medal, I was doped up ... (Laughter) One of my officers [Lt. Ainley] that was in my platoon came to visit me two or three times. And one time he and his wife were ... [at our house] and we were eatin', and Frances was in the kitchen, and we have a cut-through window where you overlook the railroad, Lookout Mountain, and all that—I got a great view—and she was in the kitchen, she said, "Well, Lieutenant Ainley, I know how he got the medal [Medal of Honor], dadgum guy was hopped up on three aspirin and two codeine. (Laughter) Boy he jumped off that sea ... (Laughter) and he said, "Mrs. Coolidge, don't you ever say [that again]! That man knew what he was doing all the time." We laughed about that for a long time, 'til she died I guess. But, uh, it was—where were we?

TINKER: Ainley and Patton ...

COOLIDGE: Oh, Patton ...

TINKER: ... Patton pulled up.

COOLIDGE: So right behind me is this Lieutenant—oh, I've got Ainley on my mind, but, uh, anyway, the lieutenant [Needleman]. He walked up to the lieutenant ... At that time the law was your chin strap was buttoned beneath your neck. And, they're doing it again now, but it took 'em years and years and years to go back to it. And the reason they do is the strap under the neck now will break on a concussion. Like a shell goes off and explodes, the belt will break. Otherwise, it would've broke your neck in World War II. So Patton jumps out and says to this lieutenant, he says—now he's a medical lieutenant, he's in the medics. And they were right behind us, 'cause as I say, M Company is the last one in the thing other than the medicine people. And Needleman is the doctor's name, I couldn't think of his name a minute ago, but Needleman ... Patton didn't know him from Adam's apple, and he jumped out and says, "Lieutenant! Fasten your chin strap." And Lieutenant Needleman said, "Yes sir, I'll fasten it sir, but when you leave I'm going to unfasten it sir." I mean he told Patton that ...

TINKER: You witnessed this?

COOLIDGE: I heard word for word!

TINKER: Wow! (Laughs)

COOLIDGE: Word for word. They were right beside me! And the jeep kept going, and Patton kept walking, and the Lieutenant kept walking, and I kept walking. And so he repeated it. The same thing he said. And Patton, once again, said, "Lieutenant, fasten the chin strap." And the lieutenant for the third time, says, "Yes sir, I'm going to fasten it sir, but when you leave sir, I'm going to unfasten it. Don't you realize that if I have this chin strap underneath my chin and a shell hits and explodes, the concussion will break my neck? And I'm not willing to die like that." And Patton never said a word. He turned around, of course the jeep's still going, walked over to his jeep, and day or two days later we got an order from headquarters that from this day forward, all chin straps will be fastened behind the helmet and not under the chin. So he listened. All ...

TINKER: That's a great story.

COOLIDGE: I said he-e-e listened! He [Patton] understood! That lieutenant set him straight. And if he'd been shy, it never would have happened. And I learned a lesson that day I never forgot. That I'd tell my men, when I was in charge of my men, I would always tell 'em all, "If I'm not here, and if I've gone to get rations, or if I've gone to a meeting, or wherever I've gone," I said, "If some officer comes in here and tells you something," I said, "You ask him, don't wait until I get back and ask me. Ask him or tell him because I don't want to be responsible. I want you to be responsible for your own life." And that's one thing—as lieutenant wrote me a letter one time, Lieutenant Ainley, after the war—well I've got it here in the desk drawer—that "the men all respected you," he said. And I always laugh about it, I say, "Yeah, they respect me because they have to." (Laughter)

TINKER: That's a good story.

COOLIDGE: Oh, I gotta lot of good ones.

TINKER: Yeah, okay, well do you want to tell us about the first assault? The ...

COOLIDGE: The invasion?

TINKER: Yeah.

COOLIDGE: Well, it's like any other invasion. You climb down that big ship that brought you over the ocean from Oran that lets you out over there about five miles out in the ocean. And you climb down. They drop a little boat down there that will hold about fifteen to twenty men. ... If the boat was [already] hooked on the side [prior to the invasion], you can put your equipment like a—the tripod on a machine gun weighs fifty-one pounds. And the gun weighs forty pounds. And then the ammunition bearers all carry twenty pounds of ammunition in each hand, plus their rifle equipment, and blankets, and whatever they gotta carry. And so everybody is pretty well loaded. But when you go in you climb down this rope ladder, and it was not smooth water, it was kind of bumpy that night. September 9th, '43. And I'm gettin' about half way down and I keep watching the swell of that ocean bringing that boat up and down, up and down, and I said I've got to let go of this rope, but I'm going to wait until I see that boat coming up you know. And

I'm going to try to guess that it'll just about be at my feet when I let go. And that's what I did ... we had a lot of guys break their legs and stuff getting off the ship.

TINKER: Really?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, hitting the boat too hard. Oh yeah, that's a terrific jump.

TINKER: Were there any drownings?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, in the water. You go in and you—see I don't whether it was right there, but we were practicing one time and we hit a sand bar. We were in North Africa then, we hit a sandbar out, and they unloaded. They thought they were on the beach. They unloaded and after we got over the sandbar the water was deep between ... [it] and the shore. And they got in the water and a lot of them drowned.

TINKER: Do you remember what month that was in North Africa?

COOLIDGE: I would say it was probably August, July or August of '43.

TINKER: Ya'll were practicing the ...

COOLIDGE: Oh, the invasion, yeah we were practicing the invasion ...

TINKER: And hit a sandbar.

COOLIDGE: Yeah. And ... they unloaded us on the sandbar instead of on the land.

LEBLANC: The soldiers that couldn't swim ...

COOLIDGE: Yeah, well, some of them couldn't swim with the equipment they had on. And it was just too much for 'em. I don't know how many, but I know that we did lose quite a few.

TINKER: There was quite a few?

COOLIDGE: Well, I say quite a few. I—any—a man's a man, but ten or twelve, that's getting up there. I don't remember what the count was. And they didn't want you to know the count. You don't get any information you don't need.

TINKER: That's right.

COOLIDGE: (Laughs) That don't help you in the attack. But anyway, we went in and we got to the shore. And when I got to the shore—I forget whether we were on yellow beach or what. There was red beach, yellow beach, blue beach ... and your little group goes in. Well, when our little group went in we had three rolls of barbed wire on the beach. The Germans had barb wired the beach, so as you went across, supposedly the mines would be attached to it and so forth, and when you stepped on the wire or something it would explode. Of course, you can't do that for

500 miles. I guess you can do it. But anyway, that's the way all the beaches were all mined and wrapped with barbed wire. So, my corporal stepped on the first roll of barbed wire. And the next gunner, one of them, the first or second gunner stepped on the second one, and for some reason I stepped on the third one. And none of the mines went off and we crossed on over.

TINKER: And ya'll are under fire this whole time too.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, yeah!

TINKER: And what was the ... Did you have any air support or was it just naval?

COOLIDGE: We pulled—no, we didn't have navy. We didn't have nothin'. The reason we didn't have anything; we had plenty, but we didn't use it because we were pulling a "sneak" invasion. We were going to "sneak" in on the Germans. They ...

TINKER: The one that all the Africans knew about.

COOLIDGE: All the Africans knew about it, all the Italians knew about it, everybody knew about it but us, so we're going to pull a sneak invasion. And here we go, right into the valley of death. And so we go in and we get past the first three barbed wire fences and here comes some German tanks. And we had a buddy of mine, Mickey Hopkins. He climbed up on one of these tanks and the other tank shot him across the stomach. And I can remember him yellin' "Shoot me, shoot me, shoot me!" And we said, "Oh no, no, you'll be alright, just put that tourniquet, that pack on ..." That pack, you know, when you get wounded, you put that on. But he died. I mean he never made it. They cut him in two, the machine guns. Oh, they were a lot of 'em gone. That was just one of the first I saw. Course we went on in and we ...

TINKER: About how long did it take you to get across the beach?

COOLIDGE: Oh you get across fast! (Laughs) Somebody's shootin' at you, you get across ... pretty fast.

TINKER: So once you got past the barbed wire it was pretty ...

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, it was just all open land except for the rock walls and the—just natural—We were going to try and capture the road and the railroad track. That was our objective. And so we went in and got that. Then they had a little high mountain behind us called Mount Altavilla. And we captured—the 143rd [Regiment] I think got Altavilla. See, I'm breaking the division down now. We were the 141st, 142nd, and 143rd, only division that I know of in World War II that had a fourth regiment. And our fourth regiment didn't go with us, they went to the Pacific. I never knew them, never have heard of them, but all I knew is that the 144th, what we were told, went to the Pacific. But I didn't even know that any of 'em had anything but the first, second, and third. But our division I'm told had—but it never is mentioned in anything that I've seen. Hearsay, you hear a lot of hearsay in the Army. "We're gonna get relieved tomorrow." (Laughter!) That's the most famous of all. "You all just hold out 'til tomorrow, we'll be relieved." "Better hurry or we won't be here." (Laughs) So we go on in. We take the first step

and then we were on the right flank going in, coming up the boot, we're on the right flank, which was supposedly would be the easy flank. So we go in and take that [objective], and then when we ... [secure the right flank] they bring two and a half-ton trucks which have been landing on the beaches. And they come and cart us to the far north. As far up as they had gone, they carted us all the way up that way so we could fight toward Naples. And eventually we got to Naples, it was a few days longer than they thought, but we got there. And the part that would just break your heart is to see, when you went into Naples, there was not a window pane in anything. Everything that had glass in it—broken. And those Navy guns, those fourteen-inch guns, sat out there on the destroyers and the big ships, sat out there and bombarded Naples with that artillery. And that artillery just shattered everything. I mean, the concussion you know. Like that lieutenant said, that concussion will break your neck if you have a strap under [your chin].

TINKER: What was the ... were there any people left there?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Well they all go ...

TINKER: How did they receive you?

COOLIDGE: They go into the cellars. Any cellar, you're pretty safe.

TINKER: Were they happy to see ya?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah! Oh yeah, they were happy to see ya. And we were giving them chocolate candy too you know. But we weren't eating our own and we were giving it to them.

TINKER: Yeah, the kids and stuff?

COOLIDGE: Oh, the kids loved it! Oh man, they had a ball. And we'd go through the town and we didn't have any trouble in the towns, unless you really had to fight for one. I know right before we hit Rome I got a Silver Star in Velletri, the next little town ...

TINKER: I was going to ask you when you ... the Bronze Star, when did you get that one?

COOLIDGE: When I was home about a year or two later. (Laughs)

TINKER: I know, but the action took place where? (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: I have no idea. (Laughs)

TINKER: You don't know?!

COOLIDGE: Oh, I don't even know.

TINKER: Well we'll have to dig out your citation to see if we can figure that out.

COOLIDGE: Now the Silver Star I got at Villettri in Italy. That was—we had a little battle there.

TINKER: Yeah, a little one?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, they was all little. (Laughs) They're short-lived if you can out-fire the other crowd.

TINKER: They were short but deadly, right?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

TINKER: Okay, so after Naples ya'll had a little—you were just moving forward?

COOLIDGE: Well we were just moving forward, but always the high mountain. Those were murderous. I mean, you'd just be sick if you could see the bodies that—we'd carry rations up to the ones that made the attack. You may have the one, but I mean somebody's going to bring you rations. You go up these mountains, you know, and carryin' a great big carton of K rations or C rations and take it to the troops up there, then you come back.

TINKER: So there wasn't much time between Salerno and San Pietro?

COOLIDGE: Oh no, it was just ...

TINKER: I mean I bet that flew by.

COOLIDGE: Oh, it all flew by. It really, the whole war flew by. It was ...

TINKER: Did you have any down time at all from Salerno to San Pietro?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, I'm sure that they'd bring us back off the front to take a shower, give us new clothes, and send us back.

TINKER: And that's about it.

COOLIDGE: That's it. That's the breakdown. But if you get back like when we took Rome—I'm trying to think whether we did it at Naples. After we took Naples we may have gone ten miles, fifteen or twenty miles, you know, 'til you hit their resistance line. But the real resistance line is the big one up there at Cassino. That's where they made their stand, the last stand before Rome, other than Anzio. Course Anzio [in] they made a big mistake up there. What they should've done, uh, you know, hind sight's always so much better than foresight, but had we gone in Anzio and gone in force we'd have gone to Rome and we never would've had all that trash down there in the bottom. I mean, not trash, but war.

TINKER: You mean if they had just skipped Salerno and all that altogether?

COOLIDGE: Well no, I guess they had to have the naval port. See, we had to have a port.

TINKER: But you think they could've skipped San Pietro and all that and just went on to Anzio.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah! Oh yeah, gone up there and gone in there with ...

TINKER: There would've been a lot of lives saved.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. [But] you would've lost a lot of different lives. But that would've been the way. But you can look at that war and size it up. In the first place, what were we ever doing over in Italy? But you need airports, and you need closeness to where you can get P-51s to attack and give you air superiority. You know over in Africa when we first got there the Germans had air superiority over us. But shortly thereafter we got the air superiority and that changed the whole complexion of the war. But that didn't mean the Germans quit strafing and bombing. They still came over and strafed you and bombed you. Because when something's coming out of the sky going three hundred mile an hour with them machine guns blazing away at you, even though they're going fast they're wounding people down there. They know where you are, they can see ya. Anybody that moves can be seen. That's the beauty of being able to stand and not be shot at, I mean, they won't shoot at you if they don't that you're a human.

TINKER: Well what was it like at San Pietro? What—now I know ... the 143rd, was that regiment the main push?

COOLIDGE: [Right] they were the thrust ... at San Pietro.

TINKER: ... and then you all came around?

COOLIDGE: Right. We came from one side and they came down this one. [Points to map]

TINKER: But they made the first main thrust.

COOLIDGE: Right. They made the thrust and [then] we came through. And our tanks got knocked out on the double-s curve, and ...

TINKER: Oh yeah, the road, the windy road that came down?

COOLIDGE: Right. That's right.

TINKER: And those tanks were with you all?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, and they got hit. The first one on the curve got hit and knocked out. Course that blocks the road, you know. And, uh, but San Pietro was just infantry fighting. You gotta go in and they're going to fight for every house or everything they've got and you just gotta have more fire. In fact, a photographer and myself were standing and talking at San Pietro while the 143rd was coming down and then we were going to come in from this side. [Points to map] And shortly, an hour or two later we did go up through that way. Went through the fields and up to where the break [in the line] was.

TINKER: That was a pretty deadly place wasn't it?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, yeah. And ... we went through olive trees. They had olive trees everywhere and we would dig out in there. But you know in that field where we were, the Germans were sittin' up on the high mountain looking right down on us and I can tell ye for a fact I had a machine gun that was sitting out, not at San Pietro, but another place, and we could go down to the creek where the water came off the mountain and we'd get up underneath the big cliffs and all. We knew they couldn't hit us down there, so we'd go and brew our coffee and whatever, you know. And so I had my machine gun sitting up here and I had a boy by the name of McDonald, and I had a blanket that had dropped down—see we dig in the machine gun, then we have a hole that we dig down in behind it, and it'd gotten water three or four inches deep in it. And the blanket had kind of dropped off and gotten, uh, gotten kind of wet and soggy. I mean, you can squeeze the water out of it. And as I got out of the foxhole I threw the blanket over a bush that was right beside it. It was the mountains, and it was a bush, and I just threw it over. And I ... it's almost straight down, and you go down to the creek, and you cross over and go to the other side. And I'd just gotten down [to the creek] and I looked up, I heard this explosion, I looked up, and there goes that blanket up in the air. They'd hit that blanket with one shot.

TINKER: Wow.

COOLIDGE: And here comes McDonald, the guy that was on the gun; he comes running down and he says, "Coolidge, have you lost your mind? They hit that—put that blanket out there on that bush and they hit it in one shot." ... That wasn't the last I saw of McDonald, but that was the last I saw him on the front line. He went ...

TINKER: He probably didn't want to hang out with you anymore after that did he? (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: That was the last I—no, I saw him in the rear. I never saw him on the front line again. He was from Ohio.

TINKER: Okay, so what was your main memory of San Pietro? Like what did you take away? Looking back on it now, did you feel like ...

COOLIDGE: Well, you always gain on everything. I remember going through San Pietro and as we got to the outside—see, we always take the town and we always go straight through 'cause we're going on toward Rome anyway.

TINKER: Could you tell, though, when the Germans started to retreat? Was there just like an immediate relief?

COOLIDGE: Well, no, no, no, they always leave the rear guard. And the rear guard ...

TINKER: So they keep shelling and ...

COOLIDGE: Oh! Shelling and bombing, they can always get away with that.

TINKER: So even though they're doing that you know when they're leaving?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, the real fire is ceasing to be so heavy. And, yeah, but we went through San Pietro and we were walking on the other side of San Pietro, I said to Aaron ... I said, "Aaron, how would you feel," – he had six brothers in the German army. He moved to New York and they got [drafted] him in the American army. He had six brothers in the German army. And we were walking through, great big guy you know, in my squad. I say my squad, I was a private too, but he was in our squad, and I said, "How would you feel if you walked right over here and walked over your [brother's] dead body?" He never said a word except, "I'd a hell of a lot rather walk over his dead body than have him walk over mine." That's the very words he used, "I'd a hell of a lot rather ... walk over his dead body than have him walk over mine." Well I knew he had brothers in there, but five minutes later the Germans came over and strafed and bombed us. You know what they got?

TINKER: What?

COOLIDGE: They gave him a million dollar wound.

TINKER: He got a million dollar wound?

COOLIDGE: He got a million dollar wound.

TINKER: Five minutes after your conversation?

COOLIDGE: Five minutes, maybe less. You know where he got hit?

TINKER: Where?

COOLIDGE: You know that bone that goes down the back of your ankle? That back bone.

TINKER: Like your Achilles?

COOLIDGE: Just about that much bone got knocked out (motions with fingers about an inch).

TINKER: So he got out of there?

COOLIDGE: Well, certainly he got out of there! (Laughter) Got a trip back home. He got the trip everybody was looking for!

TINKER: He must've thought you were his good luck charm. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: Yeah! He got the million dollar wound.

TINKER: Well, let me go ahead and stop this since we're about to run out of tape.

-----END TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

CYNTHIA L. TINKER: This begins tape two of an interview with Charles H. Coolidge on April 20th in Chattanooga. Okay, so we're on the other side of San Pietro.

CHARLES H. COOLIDGE: Right, alright, and you've already got him wounded with a million dollar wound ...

TINKER: Yeah, so we've covered the million dollar wound.

COOLIDGE: ... and we went back and then we dug-in in the olive grove down there. The Germans sittin' up there shelling us every time we wanted to move, and we stayed there I don't know how many days, 'til we made the next push.

TINKER: Oh, let me ask you real quick ... When I was online yesterday I watched this thirty minute documentary film, they said it was directed by John Huston, *The Battle of San Pietro*. Have you ever seen that?

COOLIDGE: No.

TINKER: You haven't? It's apparently, I was reading about it, it's very well known. The Army, uh, refused to show it at first, like they were just going to keep it under-wraps because it showed so much of the real thing that they didn't—they told him he was anti-war and all this. And then George Marshall actually stood up for him and said, "No this is ..."

COOLIDGE: Showin' it like it is.

TINKER: Yes! And it was ... I'll have to try to get that for you. Would you like to see that? It's only thirty minutes, but it's all ... they said it's the only film to show a complete battle, a complete infantry battle.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, oh yeah, we had a lot of 'em.

TINKER: So, I'll try to get that for you.

COOLIDGE: I got interested in them, I liked them. (Laughter)

TINKER: Okay, so the next big push. Now this coming up, this is the bad part, right?

COOLIDGE: Well ...

TINKER: Is when you hit the Rapido River.

COOLIDGE: Rapido River, oh yeah, that was murder. Now we had been relieved before we went up there.

TINKER: So you did have a little break?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, we had a little break before we got there. Then they took us up there to try to cross the [Rapido] river.

TINKER: Was there talk among the men ... before y'all started trying to do this? Like was everybody saying "This is not a good idea"?

COOLIDGE: Well, we didn't know really what we were gonna do. They just tell us, "we're going to go up and we're going to take this little town over here." It's on the other side of the river and we got to get up there and get it. The British are on our left—and you know now, like I say, here's the old hind-sight again. But the British over on our left had broke through and had we known that we could've all gone over and run right through that spot ... and we'd [have] cut the roads and all. But no, they didn't tell us. They let us go ahead stupidly and make a frontal attack and our division commander didn't want to do this. [Major General Fred] Walker did not want to do this.

TINKER: The river?

COOLIDGE: Oh, no. He wanted to go to the right and go up on Mount Cairo, which we later did, and go from Cairo over to the monastery and down into the town. And no-o-o-o, Clark, Mark Clark was an army commander and they'd been buddies all through their military careers from West Point on. And one would get ahead and then the other would get ahead, and all the way up the chain of command until Mark Clark got to be a army commander in charge of the Fifth Army. And here Walker is a division commander and he had to take orders from Mark Clark so ... Mark Clark decided he's going to make a frontal attack across the river. Never been successful in the history of warfare, but we gonna do it. (Laughs) Tell us? No they didn't tell us. All we knew to do was what we were told to do, or try. But we lost a lot of men at that river [and] that was so unnecessary. I mean, that's what breaks your heart. See, I lost my whole platoon practically.

TINKER: Did you?

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah. In fact ...

TINKER: Yeah, I was reading it said out of the one company—do you remember which company this was? I was reading this article that said it went from a hundred-eighty-seven men to seventeen.

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah

TINKER: Captain Zerk Robertson was the company commander.

COOLIDGE: Yeah well, it'd be a rifle company. And then we would be attached to a rifle company.

TINKER: I mean that's a loss.

COOLIDGE: Oh, that's nearly all of 'em.

TINKER: That's a whole company.

COOLIDGE: Well, that's what I say. That was just with M Company. [Explaining why casualties were not higher- because of rear echelon member of company] The only reason we had ... [less casualties] is because the mortars were generally about a half a mile behind. You know you shoot mortars and they go way up in the air and then they come down and you can judge what you're gonna hit because they got forward observers, and so forth, but as far as—see if we hadn't had those thirty-four men, thirty-six men back there, our casualties would have been a whole lot [more]. And of course in a weapons company all your jeep drivers are [also] always in the rear. They don't come up on the front line unless they work with Charles Coolidge.

TINKER: Did you actually start the cross? Were you in the river?

COOLIDGE: I got my feet wet in the river.

TINKER: But that was it?

COOLIDGE: I had better instinct than to cross that river when all I had to go across was a rope that already broke. And that river was swift. It was narrow. People think about, oh big river. No, fifteen feet across, maybe twenty.

TINKER: It's that it was a swollen river.

COOLIDGE: Yes, swollen river comin' off a high mountain. Boy! That water would take you the way you see an ocean wave hit you and carry you. That's the way that whole river was; was [like] an ocean wave. And if you got across, very, very few ever got back. And the ones that got back were by miracles you might say 'cause they had to come across that river without the aid of a rope.

TINKER: So everybody pretty much blames Mark Clark?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, no question. Shouldn't [have] ever done it, and [he] knew he shouldn't.

TINKER: He was never reprimanded for that was he?

COOLIDGE: Well, they took it to Congress, but Congress said it was an act of war.

TINKER: Just let him off?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. The people of Texas were mad. I mean bitter mad. And that's the reason after the war they took it to Congress, and Congress said he acted on information he had and that it was a mistake. Well, they don't even say it's a mistake they just say ... [it was stupid]. [Let me tell you about how a lot of us felt about Mark Clark.] I had a lawyer friend of mine that was killed with Audie Murphy. I'm sure you know Audie Murphy?

TINKER: Oh yeah, yeah.

COOLIDGE: Okay. Well, Audie Murphy and Raymond Prater—Raymond Prater was an attorney in Chattanooga. And [after the war] my wife and I were going to see another attorney and we got off [the elevator] at the second floor and there stood Raymond. We started talking for a minute and he said, “Hey, wait a minute, I’ve got to go. I’m going to down to Atlanta to meet Audie Murphy and we’re going up to North Carolina.” And he said, “Well, I’ll talk to you later, I’ve got to go.” And I said, “Okay.” And so he left me. That was ... I guess on a Friday afternoon. And I picked up the paper on Sunday morning and there was a headline: “Audie Murphy Killed in Plane Crash in North Carolina.” Raymond Prater was killed in it.

TINKER: And he was a friend of yours.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, he was good ...

TINKER: Well had you met Audie Murphy too?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, I knew Audie Murphy. Audie Murphy’s been here to see me. Yeah, Audie Murphy was a great guy ...

TINKER: Prater had grown up here in Chattanooga?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, he went to school and all here, Raymond did. And, oh in fact Raymond met me down there one day when Mark Clark, was coming in to town [Chattanooga]. He was going to be at the Tivoli [Theater] and he said to me, “Well, don’t you want to go meet Mark Clark tonight?” He said, “Why don’t you go bless him out?” and I said, “You think I won’t?” and he said, “No, I know you will.” (Laughter) I said, “I don’t see no need of it; he’s going to try to defend what he did. But he knows he did the wrong thing.”

TINKER: Okay, so, after the Rapido River ...

COOLIDGE: We went up on Mount Cairo the way Walker wanted to do it to start with, met very little resistance, took Mount Cairo, and stayed up there until February the twenty-eighth. And, of course, the German’s shelled us, but most of the time [since] it was so high—the shells, they went all the way to the valley and you could hear them coming over, and you could watch ‘em [go over]. Sometimes the shells are so big, you’re looking straight up in the sun, you could see the shell comin’. One time I saw one in slow motion, like a kick-off of football and it spins like this. I was laying there on my back, lookin’ up, and taking a sun bath really in February, on the backside of that mountain, and I said to the other guy, “Look at that! That shell’s spinning just like somebody kicked off a football in a football game.” And we watched the thing go to the valley and hit and explode. Didn’t hit anybody; it just hit the field. But they were just shootin’ to harass; that’s what we called harassing.

TINKER: Even though it was warm during the day I bet it was really cold at night, wasn’t it?

COOLIDGE: Well, we were pretty well wrapped.

TINKER: Were you? How was the food?

COOLIDGE: Same old stuff; C-ration, or K-ration, or a D- [survival] bar.

TINKER: So you all never had much of the local ...

COOLIDGE: Oh, no. Not in the winter time, anyway. You know the bread-basket of Europe is down in there in south Italy. But they had plenty of farm stuff down there. We'd get tomatoes. We would get plenty of fresh tomatoes walking through the field. One time we had to take up a collection 'cause we busted so many watermelon and cantaloupe. We'd go through, you know, on the maneuvers and instead of bending over to cut a slice of watermelon we'd just kick it with the boot. If it looked good we'd eat it, if it didn't we'd go to the next one.

TINKER: So you all took a collection up to ...

COOLIDGE: To pay the farmers who complained because we ruined their watermelon patch. Grapes, oh grapes!

TINKER: I bet it was nice to have watermelon and grapes. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, watermelon, grapes, tomatoes. Yeah, and that's over in Africa, you know we had all that stuff over in Northern Africa. All that stuff. Course after you got in Italy—see it was gettin' September, October, [and by] November the crops are gone. Of course, up in the mountains you didn't have any crops growing anyway. All we had up there growin' was artillery shells. (Laughs)

TINKER: So you all had a little bit of a break before [the Battle of Monte] Cassino?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, I guess a few days. Maybe two or three to get a bath, and to go back to Naples for a one-day visit, and stuff like that. ... Not much, [but] somewhere you couldn't get killed.

TINKER: Really?

COOLIDGE: Well if you go back and forth you're liable to get killed, liable to get hit [by] an artillery shell or something, or if you get strafed and bombed. I mean if I was—like I'd be just as safe in Naples ... or Rome later on, as I would have been in Chattanooga. We just don't, you don't hear all [about] these terrorist bombings and all that—didn't have that back in World War II. You exterminated those kind of people. You caught 'em; you don't ask questions 'cause dead people don't talk. So if you get caught doing ...

TINKER: Yeah, and they can't try to kill you either.

COOLIDGE: No, that's right! (Laughter)

TINKER: Well, uh, do you want to tell us about Cassino?

COOLIDGE: Well, Cassino, I never got into the town.

TINKER: So you never even got in there?

COOLIDGE: I never even got into the town 'cause they took us up to Anzio.

TINKER: Oh! So your regiment—did any of your other regiments?

COOLIDGE: No, we never went in, well, they might have gone into Cassino but we drew back and got replacements. Anytime you go back you gotta get replacements.

TINKER: So then ya'll started getting ready to go to Anzio.

COOLIDGE: Yeah. Well, we came back up to the front again, but, uh, we did get ready to go to Anzio because we were the one they called to break out of the triangle. They call it an "iron triangle."

TINKER: Well what did you think about that whole monastery issue? You know, how we didn't ...

COOLIDGE: Well, we wouldn't bomb it.

TINKER: We just—the Germans were in it and we didn't ...

COOLIDGE: Well, they swear that the Germans were never there.

TINKER: Who swears that?

COOLIDGE: The guy I talked to at the monastery [when we visited in 1986]. He swore to me when I was over there ... [forty] years ago that the Germans were never there. And he told me that and I said, "You know what you're talking about?" He said, "Germans never occupied this thing." I said, "Well, what do you call livin' in it and shootin' from it?" and he said, "Oh they never shot from here!" And I took him out and took him over to the side and said, "You see that hill over there?" I said, "You know where Mount Cairo is?" I said, "I've been right there. I've fired at 'em," and I said, "They fired back. Where do you think those shots were coming from?" "Oh no, no Germans never ..." I said, "I don't care what you think. You can tell these tourists anything you want to, but you better not tell one like me that was there. I was on the side of that mountain."

TINKER: That's a sore point.

COOLIDGE: I said, "I was there." Well my son [Charles, Jr.] was there and, you know, he's retired from the Air Force. He was a three-star or whatever when he retired. But he was with me, and they cooled me down and everything. (Laughter) I don't want anybody to tell me a big lie about what ... [happened].

TINKER: Yeah, and they were firin' at you from the monastery.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, [but the tour guide was telling people that the Germans] ... never were there. But what we did was a smart thing at the monastery. We were on Mount Cairo. The British were always with us. Strangely enough, the British are good fighters, they really are. A lot of people fuss at 'em and "They can't do this, they can't [do that]" but the British that I've been around were always good fighters.

TINKER: Absolutely.

COOLIDGE: And so, what we did up there, we knew we weren't gonna bomb it [the monastery]. And so, shoot, I'd tell the officers, "You got to go back there and tell them to turn it over to the British." We turned it over to the British and the next day they sent fifty-four [U.S.] Flying Fortresses over the monastery and bombed it. I said, "You just got to hit 'em ... And if that's what ... [we need to do] we'll turn it over to the British," so we turned it over to the British. They took ...

TINKER: Let them take the heat.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, let them take the heat. We don't care what people say about bombing the church. I mean I feel something, I'm a Christian.

TINKER: Well, yeah.

COOLIDGE: But I mean, the Lord will take care of you. He'll cause the bombs to explode or somewhere else if He don't want 'em to destroy it. But I mean, He got us in the war. He knows what's going to happen. I don't say He got us in the war; we got ourselves in the war. But, uh, my faith is pretty strong and I never had any fear of walking around on the front line. My men will attest to that. I've got ... [a friend from my platoon] still living down in Florida. In fact, my son went down there this weekend to sail [and] he went to see this man. My son called me yesterday morning three times trying to get his address so that he could go by and see him.

TINKER: What was his name?

COOLIDGE: Jack McKill

TINKER: Can you spell that name?

COOLIDGE: M-C-K-I-Double L

TINKER: Okay, McKill. He was in your company.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, he was in my platoon.

TINKER: In your platoon.

COOLIDGE: I was a platoon leader then, so he was in my platoon.

TINKER: Yeah. Well, let's move on to Anzio and Velletri then, and you can tell us about what you did to get that Silver Star.

COOLIDGE: Well, I don't know how I got it but I got written up for it by my lieutenant.

TINKER: You have to know something about how you got it. (Laughs)

COOLIDGE: Well, I just fought like I always fought. I just thought that's what they were paying me for, to fight and kill Germans. But anyway, we went to Anzio and they sent us with

the sole purpose of breaking out at Anzio. They can call it anything they want to but I knew why they were sending us and I knew that we had had ... [been in a static holding action] from February to June—we went up there [to Anzio] the last of May. And when we went up there, we were on the ship going up and the ship ... [brought us] up to the dock and we got off. [As opposed to how we normally went ashore.] Axis Sally came on the radio every night and we all listened to her.

TINKER: Did you get a laugh out of it?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: Did you laugh?

COOLIDGE: Oh, well we knew she knew what was going on. Oh, she's smart, she knew. And so this night, or day, we were listening to her and she'd said, "Well we know where you men of the Thirty-Sixth are tonight," or today, "You're out on the high seas and you're headed for Anzio. And when you get there, the first man that hits his feet on the shore, we'll have a shell there to greet him." We landed. First man off the ship, shell hits the shore. Do I believe her? Right on the money. You could believe her. She didn't know all, but she knew a lot.

TINKER: She knew enough.

COOLIDGE: She knew where we were! All the Italians, all the Africans knew where we were going. The French knew where we were going. We didn't know, but she knew where we were going all the time. They had great intelligence. But you've got to remember they had occupied all this land. And they knew. They still had their people. They had their deserters and everybody that were feeding them information all along. You know information travels fast. And we haven't got the modes—just think how you can sit here on the phone and talk to somebody in Knoxville, right like you're there with them. And it's the same thing. They had their own modes of communication. And yeah, I'm a firm believer in that she [Axis Sally] was well informed, and she just happened to be on the wrong side of the game. She wouldn't have been anything if she'd been an American, just been another no-no. (Chuckles) But we went on up there [to Anzio], and we hit. I don't know whether it was the twenty-second, or earlier, of May. And then we worked our way up slowly until we got—our, uh, colonel somehow had figured out that the Germans over to this right flank of Velletri ... [were weak]. And I'll tell you what, there was a man in Chattanooga that, uh, he's come down here and talked to me several times. But he developed the film that the people would go up and take in the airplanes, and he would develop it. So the colonel walked in one day on him and he said, "Well, what are you seeing with the films you got the last few days?" And this boy said, "Well, it looks to me like over here on the right flank there's not much activity." And he said, "Well how you figure that out?" and he said, "Well, the dew is on the ground this time of year and when these pictures were made, you could see that there's not many soldiers over there. Maybe somebody had walked across this field, or somebody had walked across that, or a vehicle had gone [across]." But he said, "There's no action over there." So this colonel took all this information and decided he'd attack up through this ... [area]. But what the colonel said to this guy, "Well, how much do you believe that? Will you go up there with me to check it out?" And the guy looked at me when he was sittin' right and he said "What would you have told him?" and I said, "Well, I'd told him I'd go if you felt

there wasn't any out there." And he said, "That's what I told him." He said "I believe it enough to think we can go up there and check it out." They went up there and found out they were right, there were very few Germans and so that's where we attacked. When we attacked, of course, we came in and ... we bypassed Velletri and came in on the backside instead of going in on the front. We found a kitchen with frankfurters, sauerkraut, and take this, ice cream! We hadn't seen ice cream since Africa. (Laughter) But that's what we found in the kitchen. We came in behind them [and] they didn't know they were gonna get caught. We captured 'em. We didn't kill 'em.

LEBLANC: You stop for a lunch break?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

LEBLANC: Did you have lunch in their kitchen before you got 'em?

COOLIDGE: No, you know, I never would eat any of their food, uh, that way. I was afraid they might have poisoned it or something. I never did eat any of their food. Now I've taken pistols off of them, and I've taken this, but I never even kept a pistol. I let my men have 'em. I killed a German right out in front, six feet from the gun one night. Up on mount, uh, let's see, it wasn't a mountain, it was, Riquewihr [in Alsace, near Colmar] in France. They threw a [an artillery] barrage on us, the worst I ever took in the war. Now we're getting way ahead of the story on France now, but we took a real barrage. And this Lieutenant Ainley I've been telling you about, he had come to us and he was new and we had gone up on that hill that night. It was a hill here and a little road that went from this town. The French have little dirt roads, and it went into this other town, and the Germans held this town. The Germans on the other side of the hill, and the Germans [had previously] held that, and we had come up on this side at night and we had dug in. Of course the Germans had dug most of the holes. There was a forward observer for the artillery, which was the captain, and there was a forward observer for the rifle company. And we climbed up and got up there at night and my lieutenant and I found this hole. It's what you call a home on the front line. It was a great big thing. Railroad ties going this way, railroad ties going this way; I mean, they [the Germans] had to carry them things up there. And we got in that hole and it's raining, not a hard rain, but raining. And Lieutenant Ainley and I were in that hole and these two captains walked up and said they needed that hole. And of course the lieutenant's gonna give them the response. And he said, "No we got here first. You can't have this hole." I'm telling him what to say. (Laughter) He knew, you know, [that] I'm telling him. And of course the two captains are arguing with him. "We've got to have it. We've got a forward observer for the artillery. We've gotta have that hole." I said, "Well, just tell him, tough luck, they better go find 'em another one." And course I've got four machine guns, and that's rare that I'd have all four machine guns. 'Cause I generally had my platoons split, two would go with one company and two would go with another company. So, on that hill I had all of 'em and I was right in the middle of them where I want to be. So they waited a few minutes and they came back and they told us they just ... they couldn't find a hole like that. They needed another hole like that. That hole was built, I'm telling ye! It was lovely, with a shield on top. If a mortar hit, it wouldn't matter, it'd just explode. Wouldn't come through and hurt you.

TINKER: Wow!

COOLIDGE: So, that was at nine [p.m.] At about a quarter to twelve they're [the two captains] coming back for the hundredth time to tell us they had to have that hole. And I finally told Ainley, "They ain't getting this hole. You can just tell them anything you want to, but they ain't gonna get this hole." And he's absolutely crying. He said, "You got to give it to them, they're captains." He's only a lieutenant, see. (Laughs) "They're captains." I said, "Well, I don't care who they are." I said, "I wouldn't give this hole to Eisenhower if he was coming through." (Laughter!) I said, "I'm just not going to give ..." Well, Ainley started to cry ... I said, "Okay, you want to move, you want to give 'em the hole." I said, "That's a dumb thing to do" but I said, "Okay, go ahead, tell 'em they can have it." But he first said, "I'll go dig the hole."

TINKER: That you could move into.

COOLIDGE: That I could move into, that's what he said, "I'll go dig the hole," 'cause he wanted to get me out so bad that was why he was gonna dig the hole. I said, "Okay, if you want to do that now, you've got to dig it where I want it." And so we got out, climbed out of the hole, it was raining, and I didn't normally even carry a rain coat. But I had a rain coat that night ... 'cause we started out in the rain. So, I moved [to where I was behind], not my first gun, second gun, third gun—but, my fourth gun. I got right in behind my fourth gun and there was this tree hangin' there. And he [Ainley] says, "I'm gonna dig the hole, but you gotta get the roof." Course he'd seen those railroad ties and all, he thought he was going to get him a real roof you know. So it's a little after twelve by now, at night, raining, and I said, "Oh, you dig that hole, you see that tree there?" It was a tree about that big around (gesturing). I said, "I want you to dig right beside that tree and I want the Germans in the front, Germans over there. And shell fire is gonna come this way." [By my reasoning] we're on the back slope of the hill. If a shell comes over, unless it's a mortar, every shell that's shot will never hit this hole. It's going to clear us because we're on the backside of that hill. And so I said, "You just dig it there. Dig it about five feet deep. When you get it dug I'll get you your roof." He dug and dug, [and] at five o'clock in the morning I heard him holler, "Coolidge, Coolidge!" And I said, "Yeah I'm right here." He said, "I 'bout got it done, you got the roof?" and I said, "Oh yeah, I got the roof." And I got up and I reached up in that tree and got me a limb off and broke a few little stobs off of it and I took that shelter half off ... and then I put a little—you now it's couplings on it, three places on each side. I put a coupling here, and coupling there, and a coupling there, and I started draping it over the hole and he said, "Well I thought you were gonna get a roof!" I said, "I have got a roof." I said, "It's raining and that shelter half is gonna keep us dry. But I said, "Now when daylight comes, that shelter half comes in on top of us" I said, "We don't leave that shelter half there to be seen by the Germans over on that hill on the other side."

TINKER: Right.

COOLIDGE: And so, uh, he [Ainley] didn't like it. Oh he was hot. But he said, "Well I think I'll, I can lay down now." And I said, "Yeah, you get in the foxhole first." Foxholes just made for one, so I let him get down on the bottom and he climbed down there on that hard soil and about an hour later he kept, "Oh my back is killing me, my back is killing me." And he said, "You know I didn't see that rock when I was diggin' that hole." And I wouldn't let him up, you know I just kept, "Well, you're going to have to wait awhile 'til it gets daylight." Pretty soon he kept moanin' about it, moanin' [and] I finally said, "Well get out and let's just see what the rock is, dig the rock out." He got out and what do you think the rock was? His canteen! He'd left his

canteen on his web belt. He was sleeping on his canteen. (Laughter) No wonder he felt a rock! But that's war.

TINKER: Now where was this at?

COOLIDGE: This was at, oh, Riquewihr, Riquewihr, France.

TINKER: Oh, yeah.

COOLIDGE: I told you I went to France.

TINKER: And this was a lieutenant. What was your rank at the time?

COOLIDGE: I was probably a ...

TINKER: Had you already been promoted?

COOLIDGE: I had probably gone from—I was probably a ... sergeant. I was probably a tech sergeant by then.

TINKER: Well before we get completely into France I still want you to tell the action that took place that you got the Silver Star for.

COOLIDGE: Okay, Velletri, okay I've told you we came in behind it. And then we were in the battle with the Germans. In other words, we were fighting with them and they had troops where they were trying to get out of Velletri and we were trying to keep them in, or capture 'em or kill 'em. And I guess somebody threw a grenade and instead of panicking I just raised up, and stood up, and told everybody, "Lay down! Get down! Don't be on your knees, get down." And of course the lieutenant saw this. We never lost a man. A grenade went off—somebody throwing it had dropped it. And the men were all, you know, cocked up throwing grenades, and shooting, and I stopped it and I saved everybody, or some of them from getting hit by that grenade. That's the only thing I can figure.

TINKER: So everybody was just throwing grenades and ...

COOLIDGE: Yeah, well, and one of them, when he [leaned] back to throw it, he dropped it.

TINKER: It's amazing that everybody listened to you and got down real quick.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, they listened to me. They listened. They know I don't give any false information.

TINKER: So when you spoke, they knew.

COOLIDGE: They knew. Wasn't any use trying to guess. "He knows what he's talking about." What that lieutenant ... [said] to my wife ... [when he] jumped up from the table ... "No don't you ever say about [Coolidge] that man knew exactly what he was doing all the time." Anyway, that's a compliment.

TINKER: Yeah! That is a compliment.

COOLIDGE: But anyway ... what I had done ... I didn't have that lieutenant then, when this happened.

TINKER: Oh, okay, it was a different—somebody else?

COOLIDGE: I had somebody else. It was different, because that was Italy and I didn't have him [Lt. Ainley] in Italy. See, I told ye I jumped ahead to France.

TINKER: Yeah, in Italy it was just you and the platoon.

COOLIDGE: Right, well most of the time it was me and my platoon with the rifle company. See generally any time we attacked, part of my platoon went with one company and [the rest of the platoon and] I generally went with K, I don't know how that ever happened. But I generally went with K Company and for that reason I always stuck the Coolidges with K Company. That doesn't matter because I would be with L or K, never with I. I Company always went with the first platoon.

TINKER: It did?

COOLIDGE: They had four guns and they generally had four with them. But with me, I had two-and-two which was four guns, but ... [my platoon] was generally split. There was a time or two, like I was telling you, on that hill that night, at Riquewihr, we had four guns which was rare but we went over and dug that hole and to make a long story short on that hill story. He, uh, ... we gave up the hole and we stayed up there five days, went up on the hill with twenty-eight men, came back down, and we had very few casualties. We only came down with eight, but we had few casualties.

TINKER: That's a few.

COOLIDGE: Just a few. But anyway, we stayed on that hill. But what I'm going to tell you—three or four days later the Germans threw a barrage on us, one of the worst, if not the worst that I took in the whole war. When I mean a barrage, they throw everything but the kitchen [sink].

TINKER: What month was this?

COOLIDGE: December '44.

TINKER: So that was after.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, December of '44. And boy they threw everything they had at us. Then they attacked. They attacked in force. Oh, and that's where the gun I was behind, number four, they couldn't get the gun to fire. But I had a good sergeant on there.

TINKER: So you'd been through all this in Italy and then through the whole, through October in France. So December of '44 was the worst ...

COOLIDGE: Worst barrage I'd taken. Barrage, yeah. Well ... [by then I had had] a lot of barrages but ... not as long and as sever.

TINKER: Intense, yeah.

COOLIDGE: Right. We got barrages all the time, but we didn't think anything about that. That was just a common occurrence. And if they see you, they'll shoot at ya. You know you hear a lot of times ...

TINKER: Well when you all were finishing up in Italy, uh, you know and into Rome—how long did you stay in Rome?

COOLIDGE: Oh, went right through it, never stopped. All in one day, one day. I stayed in a house one day. When we took Rome they declared it an open city. That means you couldn't fight in Rome. So we just marched straight on through. We might've regrouped, got supplies, but moved right on through going north fast as we could. Went all the way to Roccastrada about ninety kilometers past Rome, then they pulled us off the front line.

TINKER: Wow, you guys were a fast moving division.

COOLIDGE: We loved that going after we got out of them mountains. But them mountains ...

TINKER: I bet it seemed easy after the mountains!

COOLIDGE: Well, France was a picnic. (Laughter) Oh, we enjoyed France. (Laughter) We enjoyed it. We got a lot of good food, and the civilians, and we'd go through a town and all the gals and women would come and hug you and all that. It wasn't so bad. (Laughs) That was part of the good part. But that was just fleeting, you know what I mean? It was just here and gone.

TINKER: Were you aware of—did anybody know anything about D-Day that was happening?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, now we knew when D-Day was. We knew we weren't crossing that Rapido River for nothing. We were trying to get to Rome so that that would take the pressure off the guys that were gonna invade up there. We knew it was coming, but we didn't know where or when. But just like when we were ... [invading] Italy, we didn't know where or when but we're going. We know we're going somewhere. We didn't know we weren't going to France as far as that [goes]. 'Cause you know, the original plans were, they tell me—and I don't know whether I'm right or wrong—but when they made the invasion at Normandy, the original plan was to have us invade where we did on August 15th and hit 'em both at the same time. So that the Germans would be so confused they wouldn't know whether to go this way or come that way.

TINKER: That would have been interesting.

COOLIDGE: Oh, wouldn't it have been interesting! Find out which they were gonna put the most pressure on. And just so happened it worked out good anyway, but when we went into Southern France, wow, it was like we never stopped [advancing] twenty-four hours a day.

TINKER: Really?

COOLIDGE: Well we'd take a town, we didn't stop; we'd just say, "Where's the next town we gotta take?" and we kept moving, either walking, [riding] two-and-a-half ton trucks with the infantry, or [on] tanks. We never stopped, we just kept going ... [We still] lost a lot of people, don't get me wrong, but you kept moving. Once you bypass [or outflank the Germans]—see they're prone to give up then ... and once they know they're cut off there's no use to fighting. I had one [German] that came out of a—I don't know what month it was but we were in France, and we'd gone through [a little town], like I say, we generally went through and we had captured this farmhouse. And there was a hill, and there was a little creek that wound down maybe a hundred, a hundred-fifty yards down in the field. And I just stood up and told my men where to put their guns, you know? And, of course, they [the Germans] were sitting there, they could have shot me anytime they wanted to. But after we got all set up, we got our guns [and] it looked like we were pointin' them right at that creek. This German came out with his hands up, and you know, the first instinct is to shoot him but no, I said, "No, no, no don't shoot him. Let's see what he'll do." And he came up and I just got out and motioned for him to come and he came toward me. You know there was eight of them walked out of that little creek. I said, "Well, see if you'd shot that first one you'd have to fight them other seven." I said, "That's the way you save lives."

TINKER: Yeah.

COOLIDGE: But, you know it's all—the Lord was looking after me and all of us. I mean, you gotta give God credit. He just let me do the right thing at the right time. And every step I took I knew He was with me. And a lot of times I'm by myself at night, when I'm going between four guns there ain't nobody out there with me. I have a runner, but I'm not going to bother him to go out with me at night when I know he might get killed. A shell might've come in and killed two [of us] of us instead of one. And I think a lot of times during the [Battle of the] Bulge that a lot of lives were saved and I don't know whether this is true or false. But when a point detonator, mortar, or something comes in and hits, it explodes. When that point hits, it explodes. How deep it goes before it will explode—but if the snow's a foot and a half deep when that thing hits, it might go down a foot before it ever explodes. Well all that snow's going to keep that shrapnel from getting out there. So, I mean snow might have hurt a lot of people, but it also might save a lot of lives.

TINKER: Well, that's an interesting way of looking at it.

COOLIDGE: Right.

TINKER: I've never heard anybody say that.

COOLIDGE: Well, that's the way I like it.

TINKER: Try to find the ...

COOLIDGE: Well, you find out what's ... [happening an] you can't stop it, so [I] just think positive that it could be helping me out there. You know in the Bulge, you know, that snow was a miserable thing. It was deep—and cold and wet.

TINKER: Compared to Italy you felt like France was ...

COOLIDGE: It was a picnic.

TINKER: Picnic?

COOLIDGE: Why, I mean, we were riding along and ...

TINKER: Let's see, when y'all got to Vosges Mountains ...

COOLIDGE: Vosges Mountains? Oh yeah, we'd been on a picnic for awhile. (Laughter) We took five hundred miles!

TINKER: Yeah I read about that ...

COOLIDGE: You know a five hundred mile ride?

TINKER: That's like some kind of record wasn't it?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, you take five hundred mile ride, you know, and all the time you're fighting the Germans. ... I was fortunate, my platoon had four jeeps.

TINKER: Well.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, but I mean, when we got off, we were carrying fifty-one pound tripods, or a forty pound gun, or two boxes of ammunition, twenty pounds each. So, my men had to carry a lot of stuff so that's the reason ... you couldn't expect a man to carry that kind of stuff all the time.

TINKER: I was going to ask you to talk about that a little bit ... the Vosges Mountains?

COOLIDGE: Well, that morning [October 22, 1944 near Bemont-sur-Buttant] we started out and our objective was to take Hill 623. And we started out, we climbed up the mountain ... well, I call it a hill. It elevates up and you get up to a dirt path up there. And through the mountains a lot of people, I guess, have taken out lumber and stuff, and made these walk ways or pathways. We went up and when we got to the top of Hill 623, the First Battalion had attacked this way, and come this way (Showing attack path). And when we got up to the top of that hill, I see this [telephone] line where they'd laid a line, you know, where they can talk back ... [to the rear echelons].

TINKER: They had gone from the west?

COOLIDGE: Well, yeah, they had gone across at an angle coming from this angle (Showing approach), probably like this, and going down. They had gone across and left their line laying there so they'd have communication. What they had done, they had gone on, gone down the slopes of that valley, gone into the valley below where there was another road that had a road block on it, and gone into the next hill. And the next hill is where [they were and became what] you read about, the "Lost Battalion."

TINKER: So they went further than they were supposed to?

COOLIDGE: Well, I don't know. Their objective may have been that hill but my objective was Hill 623. So ... my platoon took our objective. We had a company commander at that time, K Company, who went with me. In fact, he asked me to read the azimuth. You know, you shoot an azimuth, you get a tree, and you go to that tree, and then you shoot another one, and again. So I had read [the compass] and got us up to the top of the mountain where we were supposed to go, or the top of the Hill 623.

TINKER: So you're waiting for the other battalions.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, and the other battalion had already gone through, which was good, I knew there wasn't any Germans around—I thought there wasn't. And what happened [is] the Germans just let 'em go on through. And they went on over to the next hill.

TINKER: And the Germans could foresee what ...

COOLIDGE: And then they surrounded them. They surrounded ... [the 1st Battalion]. They became the "Lost Battalion." We stayed there five days. The fifth day is when I told them they could have the hill

.

-----END TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE-----

COOLIDGE: The fifth day, I think it was the fifth day, and ... every day [until the fifth day] the Germans would attack us once or twice. Anyway, this was the seventh attack that they had attacked us while we were on this hill. And we had it pretty well-fortified. We didn't have a lot of people, but we had ... only two machine guns. We had the rifle company and whatever they had. And they were picking us off every now and then. They'd climb up in a tree and shoot somebody when we'd least expect it, you know. And ...

TINKER: What was your closest call on that hill—yours personally?

COOLIDGE: Oh, I don't have any idea.

TINKER: You don't? Did you have several?

COOLIDGE: Have what?

TINKER: Several close calls?

COOLIDGE: Oh, you always have close calls when somebody's shooting at you with a machine gun. (Laughter) They just miss you.

TINKER: I mean, you don't remember any moments like, "whoa!"?

COOLIDGE: Well, I'll tell you, when we were coming off the hill I took the last machine gun with me, and the squad had left and Corporal Gillett and I were—I said, "Just give me the tri-

pod, or give me the gun, and I'll carry it." I took the tri-pod because it was the heaviest. I took the tri-pod, and I was carrying it. And Gillett had the gun, and he had it on his shoulder. And he had his rifle on his shoulder, and we were together walking and gettin' off that hill. They shot a bullet that went through the stock of the rifle. Didn't hit him. ... You talk about somebody that was scared on the front line. He was scared. I had a lot of guys on the front that got scared, but he was scared to death anyway. He came from Texas, and he was kinda—he'd been my corporal at one time, and probably been hit a time or two. But anyway, I went up the [promotion] ladder and he didn't.

TINKER: I didn't mean to get you off track.

COOLIDGE: That's alright ...

TINKER: (Laughs) Okay, so, you finish telling about the hill, 'cause I know we're leading up to the act, you know ...

COOLIDGE: Well this is the action.

TINKER: The action that ... you got the Medal [of Honor] for.

COOLIDGE: Well, this is the action. This is the whole hill. We saved the hill for five days.

TINKER: Okay. When you all were over there did you know ... the battalion got cut off? The First Battalion?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah! Oh yeah, I knew they were picking on our platoon because I was the closest element to the Lost Battalion. And who they had to stop was me. ... I didn't have but twenty-seven men, and I wasn't going to do much of an attack down the slope and up on the other hill ... [to reach] them. If I did, who was gonna be behind me? You know what I mean? You gotta look at who's behind you. If I'd go ahead and attack, well the Germans would just come in behind me, and then I'd be cut off too.

TINKER: Then there'd be two lost battalions.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, there would two lost ... [groups]. But anyway, we stayed up there for five days. And we was always fighting, off and on, you know—little skirmishes until we'd stop 'em. Every time they'd try we'd stop 'em. And on the—first time we got up there where we got confronted, where my sergeant, Ferguson, was the machine gunner. And we were up reconning [conducting reconnaissance] trying to find out where to put the machine gun ... So, as we were discussing this we looked and here come the Germans. They were in attack formation, and I said, "George, call to them and ask 'em if they want to give up." Well he [George] spoke German, you know, he started talking to them. And so, he talked and he talked and he talked, you know, and I'm thinking, well maybe they're going to make some kind of a deal here. We'll find out what's going on. So, I watched one of the Germans, and he was behind a tree, and he'd taken his rifle and he was shooting it right at George. He wasn't shootin'. He was just holding his rifle right on him.

TINKER: How far away? What was the distance?

COOLIDGE: Oh, twenty-five, thirty feet—forty feet. Oh yeah, he was right at us. And George was talking to them in German, you know? I wasn't sure what was going on. He spoke pretty good German and [they] kept talking to him. So when I saw this guy shooting for George I took my carbine and I shot that guy. And, of course, when I did that all them other Germans opened up and they hit George. They got him—I think [in] the left arm ... Right or left one, they got him in the arm. And I went over and ... dragged him on back down where he wasn't on the crest of the hill, and got him back to the aid station. And [after the war] he delivered mail in New York for years and years and years. I still correspond with him.

TINKER: Oh, he's still living?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, he's still alive.

TINKER: That's nice.

COOLIDGE: Two of the men in my platoon are still alive.

TINKER: That's nice

COOLIDGE: One of them in Jacksonville, Florida, and one up there. I've been up to see George up in New York.

TINKER: Have ya?

COOLIDGE: Yeah. I tried—he was going to Florida one time—he and his wife and another couple—and I tried to get him to come by here. He told me he would, but he got out here on Rossville Boulevard, somewhere in that area, and called me and said, "I'm out here on Rossville Boulevard." I said, "George all you gotta do is get up on the freeway and come on," told him "you can't get lost." But he went home. You know how people travel, and they get antsy and they want to do it right now. So anyway, but we stayed up on that Hill [623], and like I said, every counter attack we stopped except the last one. The first time, I ask them if they want to give up. I rarely ever shoot one of 'em without asking if he wanted to give up. 'Cause I figure if I can get eight, ten, twenty people, why not take 'em prisoner rather than have to fight them. So, this time that they came, the last time, the seventh counterattack. They came down—I'd already told my men there was a possibility they could bring a tank and come right down through there. We were on the high part [of the hill], but there was a bank about twelve or fifteen feet and then there was this draw just big enough for a tank to come by. And so on that seventh [counter] attack that [fifth] morning, I heard this rumbling coming, and I saw these Germans coming up through the draw. And so I watched the tank as he came, and when he got right beside [one of] my machine guns. Not my gun—I mean it was my gun, but I mean it was right beside it where the barrel of the tank lacked about ten feet of being over the gun. He opened up the turret of the tank and in perfect English stood up in that tank and said, "Do you guys want to give up?" And I stood up, now I'm fifty feet from him now, and I stood up and I looked him right square in the face and I said, "I'm sorry Mac you've got to come and get me." [He] throws the turret of that tank. He took that eighty-five millimeter gun and turned it right toward me, and it was in heavy trees or I'd have been up a tree. But he turned that thing right at me and he fired five times, point blank right at me. And every time he'd fire I'd watch the barrel of that tank and if it went this way, I was going that way for another tree. And I ...

TINKER: So you're just darting back and forth ...

COOLIDGE: Right, I'm going from one tree to another, the heavy part of the tree, the trunk part where I could get in behind that thing. One time I got—when you're lying flat like this your feet stick out kinda like this, and the shrapnel cut the leather on the top of my boot. But never broke the skin, just cut the leather.

TINKER: That's unbelievable!

COOLIDGE: He fired five times. Well then ... the guys were getting a little anxious, [about] the Germans, but I had a whole lot of grenades. I say a case of grenades. I might have had more or less but I always carried grenades with me everywhere. 'Cause you know when you throw a grenade it's not gonna do it, but possibly, it could break into sixty different fragmentations. And when I threw that grenade, I figured the man's gonna have a hard time walking past sixty pieces of metal. Or if he even had to walk past four, he's going to have a hard time. So I started throwing grenades at the infantry. Oh I was throwing them over the tank, letting them explode because they were coming up through the draw of the valley. We held them off for a while, and my men were running out of ammunition and getting kinda antsy, and they weren't the only ones.

TINKER: Yeah, I guess not. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: And anyway, we stayed there for a long time and finally I told 'em, "Let's go on back where we started from." 'Cause that was where we always—we were always the one that was stuck out like a sore thumb. We were up there where the action was. The rest of ... [the battalion] stayed in the rear. They felt pretty comfortable. I never have figured why they didn't [come forward]—well they did one night. Two nights before that they had dug in in the valley down there where the Germans were.

TINKER: The rest of your battalion had?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, part of 'em.

TINKER: When did you find out what had happened with the First Battalion and the 442nd coming in?

COOLIDGE: Well, I had begged them and begged them, "Please send a unit up here that can attack and we'll go get those people." My lieutenant was a real nice guy. He got killed. I may have ... had two or three [more] medals if he'd lived. (Laughs) But he liked me. He knew that I'd do anything. I'd put him on the spot, and in fact after we lost that hill he came up there and wanted to know what the problem was and I said, "No problem, you want to walk up there with me?" And he said, "No, no, no, I don't want to."

TINKER: What was his name?

COOLIDGE: Hofmeister, Lieutenant Hofmeister. But he was a great lieutenant. He really was a captain, I mean doing the captain's job. He was Company Commander.

TINKER: So how long before they sent the 442nd?

COOLIDGE: Oh, if they'd come an hour earlier they could have taken our hill and not had to fight for it. They lost ...

TINKER: They lost way more men than ...

COOLIDGE: They lost as many men as they rescued.

TINKER: More, didn't they?

COOLIDGE: More. Well, I say they lost as many men as they rescued. They rescued 200 men, I think roughly, or maybe that's what they started with. See a lot of times you think about a unit being somewhere, and most people, and history books, will think, "Boy that was a pretty good outfit." Yeah, a pretty good outfit three months ago when we started fighting, but now were down to nothing but a crew left. I mean we haven't got 240 men. [We're not at full strength anymore.]

TINKER: So if they'd sent 'em just a little bit sooner they wouldn't have suffered such ...

COOLIDGE: Two hours earlier or an hour earlier would have made it. They would've got to us before they had to fight. We were there, we ...

TINKER: Because the Germans were bringing in the tanks and all that?

COOLIDGE: Right. Oh yeah, they could've got 'em ... well, really I feel bad. I tried to knock the tank out but I couldn't make my bazooka work and, uh, if I'd been able to knock that tank out, that'd backed him off. What I mean, even if it didn't knock him out it would have stopped him in his tracks. But he came around behind us and turned the tank around. We could see by his trac; we came back up there within a couple of hours. But I liked the action, you know; I got to where I enjoyed it really. I mean, you know how it is. If you enjoy something you have to ...

TINKER: Well, it's that adrenaline, right, too?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, it's the three aspirin and two codeine. (Laughter)

TINKER: Throw a little adrenaline in there and you're good to go. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: No, I don't know whether I had any aspirin or codeine ...

LEBLANC: I bet you got a headache though.

COOLIDGE: No, no, strangely enough, sometimes—you know since I got married I never had many headaches. I have them, but not bad.

TINKER: Well, that's a good sign for your wife.

COOLIDGE: Oh, good sign, but she's dead.

LEBLANC: Oh, yeah.

COOLIDGE: That's what's wrong, she's dead. She just died last May 16th. We'd been married sixty-four years. Sixty-four years, seven months.

TINKER: I bet you were sad to lose her.

COOLIDGE: Well, yes, [but] I hated to see her suffer.

TINKER: Oh, was she suffering?

COOLIDGE: Well, yes and no. She was alright until she took some ... [a nutrient supplement] that was marked wrong. They [the manufacturer] mixed it wrong and they gave her selenium that was 10,000 times stronger than it should have been. Then she had trouble and we took her to the hospital they wanted to find out what was wrong, and they inserted a needle in her arm. I guess they were going to draw blood but never drew it and that was about ten or eleven in the morning. Then at 4:00 p.m. they told us we could take her home, and she got a blood clot between her elbow and her shoulder and, of course that broke up and eventually killed her ... later.

TINKER: That's terrible.

COOLIDGE: Well, everybody's gonna die.

TINKER: That's what my dad's doctor says there is ...

COOLIDGE: Don't worry about it.

TINKER: I mean, yeah, it's gonna happen.

COOLIDGE: Everybody's gonna die, unless Jesus comes here before that time, then those living will probably have a chance, but everybody else is going to die.

TINKER: So after Belmont, you all just kept on going?

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah. We kept on.

TINKER: You never stopped again?

COOLIDGE: Well, no we never stopped. We're always on the move. Always on the move—let's move, we've got to get there. The quicker the better I say. I'm ready to go home. (Laughs)

TINKER: Get it over with.

COOLIDGE: Well, you know that's the way I felt about it. I just said, "Well we got to do it, let's do it now." Tomorrow never comes, today's the only day you got to live. Tomorrow will still be tomorrow.

TINKER: What was the next big engagement?

COOLIDGE: Oh, I don't know.

TINKER: In the Colmar pocket?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, I don't know.

TINKER: That was in November? ... Okay, so that was the end of October at Belmont. Then y'all are still moving through ...

COOLIDGE: Belmont was October, November.

TINKER: And then December's when you said that the most intense barrage ...

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, that was ...

TINKER: Where was that at?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, Riquewihr. Riquewihr, France ... Yeah, we took a real barrage—a real fight.

TINKER: How long did that last?

COOLIDGE: About five days. Five days taps most of 'em out. If you can't do something then you better get some help and do something. (Laughter) I was a great one to say, "Let's do it now!" But anyway, in December of '44 we went—that's when the Bulge broke. Patton said he wanted 36th Division to fill the gap. In other words he was going to take the Third Army with his tanks. They were going to go behind the German line, but he was going to leave a gap in the line and so he wanted us. So we moved on Christmas Day. We'd just been on the [front] line a hundred and something days straight and they pulled us off. We went back to get a Christmas dinner and while we were eating, before we ever ate, they said "We gotta go. We gotta move up." We moved up a hundred miles that night in snow knee-deep. And I can remember the French, I don't think we were in Germany right then, uh, it would've been Limbourg [Belgium] where we had to go. It was pretty close to the border. So I can remember moving up that night, and I had four jeeps [as] I told you. Now the riflemen, they put them in two-and-a-half ton trucks and they either sat down or rode in the big trucks, whereas I had little jeeps. And of course all the civilians, they were so happy we were there, you know. And here we are. They've been there before, and here we are coming through. They know we're not coming up there at nine o'clock at night [for nothing]. They know we're coming for one purpose—to fight. They're coming out giving us schnapps and all this, and I had never had a drink of schnapps. This guy came out with his schnapps, and I looked at my jeep driver and I said, "You know, I never have had any of this schnapps but it's so cold," and it was bitter cold. All during the Bulge it was bitter cold, and I said, "You know I think I'll take a little swallow, [see] if I can't get warm a little bit." And I took that thing and I drank it down, but you know it was just like water. I never even felt it. I never even felt it.

TINKER: Oh, well that's too bad. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, but I drank that stuff down and I swallowed it all down ...

TINKER: And it didn't warm you at all. (Laughs)

COOLIDGE: It might have warmed the throat a little bit but other than that ... It was just so cold. It was bitter cold! I mean it was—Oh! It was cold. And I tell you what. You know survival is the first law of life, but then the Lord's speaking to me again, telling me. You know every time you get a chance you go back and take a shower, you don't throw that undershirt away. You know generally you just rip it off, they'd ... issue you a new one, a clean one. So every time I'd get my shower I'd keep that dirty one instead of letting them have it. I'd lay it down and put that clean one on me and take that dirty one, or the next dirty one, or then the next dirty one—you know in the winter time, I had four, five, six undershirts on and that's what kept me alive. I had [seen] men freeze to death. I mean, literally, you'd go to wake them up and they were frozen.

TINKER: In their foxholes? (Coolidge nods) Awww ...

COOLIDGE: But I was fortunate, I learned early that there was a right way, the Army way, and my way. And the real way was, when my men went in the hole—see my men were always with riflemen, a rifle company. We were always attached to a company. When my men would dig in, the rifle company would require their men, try to, to dig one to a hole. You only dig one man, of course [if] a shell hits only one man get killed. But if a shell hits my men, I get two men killed. So, I always told my men, we'll dig two to a hole. But I knew what the old Bible was saying about two men lay together for warmth. The warmth will warm each other. Two bodies, male, female, whomever, if you lay together you gonna have body heat and body heat'll keep you alive. Otherwise you lay there alone, in the first place you start, "Well I'm gonna dig my own grave tonight." Mentally they get blasted out, and then physically the cold weather hits 'em, and they give up. So you never give 'em that opportunity. So I can remember some of the captains or lieutenants coming by and telling the men, "You're gonna dig. Everybody digs their own hole." "Yeah, but Coolidge lets his men dig two to a hole!" They'd say, "Well, he can do whatever he wants to but you're gonna dig one to a hole." As soon as that lieutenant would leave I'd go over, I'd say "You get two in the hole," [and to the] riflemen, "You get two in a hole."

TINKER: So you stay warm.

COOLIDGE: I said, "Let that lieutenant come up here and stay in one of them if he wants to but tell him we're putting two in a hole." And they would. You know most of 'em, they'd respect what I'd say. And that's what you have to admire when they respect you more than their own lieutenant. They [the lieutenants] didn't know much anyway, most of 'em. (Laughs)

TINKER: You weren't really older than any of the other men, were you?

COOLIDGE: Oh, no. I was battle-wise. You didn't live long the front line, that's what I keep trying telling you. You only live twelve days on the front line in the infantry. If you're in combat and fightin' them you're only gonna have twelve days. I don't say live—you're going to be either killed, wounded, captured in twelve days.

TINKER: Right. Have you ever figured up exactly how many days you were on the line?

COOLIDGE: No, twenty months. That's basically all of 'em but, I mean I know there were days when I was off, and I was on the ship, but basically I was out there where I could be killed

twenty months straight—September 9th of '43, until they took me off of the line on April 1st of '45. And the only reason I got a break then was I was on—we were getting ready to make an attack at the Siegfried Line and Captain MacArthur of K Company and I, the night before had been on the attack at the Siegfried Line, and that's where all the pill boxes are. You have a pill box and five hundred yards another pill box, then you'd drop back five hundred yards and between those two you'd have another pill box. That goes for miles. And we were going through that line this night, and Captain MacArthur with K Company and me with my machine guns were going through the Siegfried Line, and we heard all this noise, you know, the troops moving. So I've got to know what's going on. I ease out over there and I see that it's Americans and I get over closer to where they're moving and I come across this guy at the end of the line, and I said to him, "What azimuth are you all shootin'? Where you all heading?" and he said—I didn't know we were breakin' the Siegfried Line—and he said, "Oh why, we're breakin' the Siegfried Line tonight, don't mess with me." Or something like that and I turned to Captain MacArthur and I said, "Did you hear what he said?" I said, "Wish him well. Let him go, let him go. Let's take our troops to a spot where we can get ... [a] hill on the each side of us." You know ... [the line was built so] they would cut the roads where they would take supplies instead of going over a hill; they'd [the Germans] bulldozed it all out. That thing had been there for years and years and they had just bulldozed it out. And you had banks where they had cut through a bank and that's pretty good protection. So we went back and found one of those and put—we got our troops in there, and the next day were pinned down so to speak. You know, we couldn't raise up. And your men, they get restless, particularly when they're thirty men or forty men and they can't get off and they can't go anywhere. If they raise their head up they're going to get hit. And by afternoon they're saying, "Oh I don't believe any Germans are out there. I don't believe it."

TINKER: Where exactly was this?

COOLIDGE: This was the Siegfried Line

TINKER: Oh, that you were getting pinned down?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, yeah, well we were pinned ourselves down. We could have gone back further, see, and it would have been alright. But we didn't. I thought we ought to stay near the troops, so if we had to fight to get 'em out we'd at least have that much of a shot before we got shot at. But ... that afternoon some of these guys were saying to me, "I don't think there're any Germans out there." I said, "Well, you don't think there's any Germans out there. [I'll] tell ya what you do. You do you take that rifle, and you put your helmet on it, and you just get up there and act like you're trying to peak out and see what will happen." That guy took that rifle and did it, he thought ...

TINKER: He did it?

COOLIDGE: Oh, he did it! He raised that rifle up. He had barely gotten [it] up about that far there on the helmet, bullet went right through it. I said, "That could have been your head. You better keep your head down and not worry about whether they're out there."

TINKER: See, no wonder they listened to you!

COOLIDGE: I said, "We'll get you out of here if you just do it our way." That's what I'd tell 'em. I said, "If you'll do it our way, we'll get you out of here."

TINKER: So that was the last—after that you got taken off the line?

COOLIDGE: On April 1st of '45 I got taken off the line. And [a meeting was held about] what we were doing, how we did it, [and whether] we made that attack that night, or the next afternoon, or whenever. Well, they had a planning strategy where the officers meet to what we were gonna do on the next attack and where we're going to attack. They went back for the meeting, and Colonel Owens, the regimental commander, was in charge of the meeting, and he said, "Now tonight we're going to do so-and-so," what they were going to do and where. When he said that, this Captain MacArthur said, "Well I'm going to take Sergeant Coolidge with me." And Colonel Owens said, "What did you say?" And he said, "Well I'm going to take Sergeant Coolidge with me." And he said, "You're not taking Sergeant Coolidge with you tonight." [Then MacArthur said], "Well he was with me last night!" "You're not taking him with [you] because when I leave this room Sergeant Coolidge is going with me. He's not supposed to be up here," [Colonel Owens said]. So they relieved me off the front line on April 1st of '45.

TINKER: So you went with Colonel Owens?

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah I went back with Colonel Owens. They gave me a jeep and a jeep driver 'cause they knew I wasn't going to stay still long. (Laughter) I liked it. (Laughs)

TINKER: What happened when you went back?

COOLIDGE: Oh, I stayed in the rear and then they couldn't stand it that I was enjoying myself so they said, "We're going to take about thirty non-coms [non-commissioned officers] and take 'em back here in a little town in Germany and we going to practice what we'll do when we start fighting up in the Alps." So I was a mountain fighter, you know, from Italy, so I got to go back and train them on how to fight in the Alps. So for thirty days I did that. Then on May 1st they relieved the little camp we had, and we go back to the front. And I'm riding in the jeep going back and my driver's with me of course, and we see all these German soldiers, all in their long overcoats, mile after mile after mile of dejection, no weapons, [having] already thrown 'em all away. Their big long overcoats [were] the only thing they had to survive on. And where they were getting their food I don't know. But that, I mean, it was just heart sick to see it but it was a blessing to see it because we knew they had quit. We knew they had quit even though the war wasn't over we knew they'd quit.

TINKER: You knew ...

COOLIDGE: They were finished. 'Course you know, I've heard people—oh, I hear lots of things, but I've heard people say, "Oh, they shouldn't have bombed this city on April 1st, or they shouldn't have done this because that's where all the historical things were kept." And I said, "If you'd been there you'd thought a little different."

TINKER: Well, that's true.

COOLIDGE: You think a little different when you're there.

TINKER: That's true.

COOLIDGE: I said, "If you don't think it's tough, you climb down the ropes of a big ship and try to hit a little boat down there, and then you try to get that boat to go into the shore and you jump out on that sand, and you try to climb over barbed wire fences and mined beaches. You'll find that your mindset will change real fast." But I'm fortunate that the Lord gave me—I really, I felt no fear. I really did. I never felt like I was gonna get killed. People say—You know, when you look around your platoon and you got thirty-four men and there's four of you left, who's gonna be next? I mean you've got replacements, but who of the four that are still left are going to still be able to say at the end of the war, "I made it." But we were getting down to four, five, or six men. When you get down that low, "Hey, who's gonna be next? It's got to be one of us." I always kept saying, "Well, it ain't going to be me. I haven't felt anybody calling me yet."
(Laughs)

TINKER: Mm hmm. That's something. When I was reading about the 36th I came across this—did you know of this? A 36th Division rest camp?

COOLIDGE: Yeah.

TINKER: They called it Shangri-La?

COOLIDGE: I don't know what they called it but ...

TINKER: That's what it said in this old magazine.

COOLIDGE: I know they had a rest camp, we had to have. People stay on that front line long time, [and] you gotta go back and get clean clothes and a shower.

TINKER: Apparently it was pretty nice. Did you get to go there?

COOLIDGE: I never went there.

TINKER: Well, that's too bad. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: I never got to go the nice places. (Laughter) They knew that I didn't mind fightin'

LEBLANC: Not since Detroit. You didn't get a good hotel did you?

COOLIDGE: No, I never got that break.

TINKER: Well, when did you first find out that you were gonna receive the Medal of Honor?

COOLIDGE: Oh, I don't know.

TINKER: Or did they just spring it on you?

COOLIDGE: Oh, no. No, I knew that, uh, at the Hill 623, where I got the medal awarded for action on that hill. I knew when I went back in November that they had ...

TINKER: Submitted you?

COOLIDGE: They had submitted a thing and then the battalion rejected it. I don't know whether it was the battalion first [rejected it], I guess maybe it was. Anyway, they sent it back and they—"We'll give him a DSC," a Distinguished Service Cross, and then they [the company] resubmitted it and it went back and they sent it back again and said, "No, we'll just give him the DSC."

TINKER: Had you already received your Silver Star or was that later?

COOLIDGE: I received that in Épinal, in France, when we went back to get clean clothing.

TINKER: Do you think that maybe that's why they kept returning the ...

COOLIDGE: Oh, no, no.

TINKER: Okay.

COOLIDGE: Well, like I told ye, if Hofmeister hadn't gotten killed.

TINKER: He would have submitted you for more?

COOLIDGE: Oh, Lord all the time. Well, I'd just do anything they ... [ordered]. They would say, "Take that hill," I'd take it. I'd be on my way. It didn't bother me. Well, if that's what we're gonna do, we're gonna do it.

TINKER: That's great, that's great.

COOLIDGE: You gotta have the attitude that you're going to do what they want done, when they want it done.

TINKER: When did they finally approve the medal?

COOLIDGE: They [the battalion] finally, after a third time ... sent it on. I don't think it had too many obstacles. Well, I think, uh, in my case they were going to try to reject it, and Patton told 'em, "Give him the medal." I didn't find that out until a year or so ago.

TINKER: Really?

COOLIDGE: They had said that they were going to reject it and Patton ...

TINKER: How did you find that out?

COOLIDGE: I don't know, somebody had been at the archives and found out that they had said that they weren't going to give it, and Patton went over ...

TINKER: And Patton intervened?

COOLIDGE: Patton intervened and he said, "He gets the medal."

TINKER: Well—I knew I like him.

COOLIDGE: Well, I didn't know why. ... Like I said my experiences were ... (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah, was different. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: Well he [Patton] didn't bother me, but like I say, it was just different. But I liked him because he's like me. He wanted to go get it done. He didn't want to fool around.

TINKER: That's right. You all did have the same attitude.

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah!

TINKER: Just get it over with.

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah, let's do it. We're not gonna fool around. I'm going to be here. They'd say to me, "How come you so anxious?" I'd say, "I'm not anxious." I said, "We got a war to win. We ain't gonna get to go home until we win it." We were starting to send a few [soldiers] home by then ... in February of 1945 ... We'd been on—see, I told you [that] in December [1944] we'd been on the [front] line 128 straight days. From August 15th 'til then we'd been on the line every day. And sometimes the Germans were retreating, but we were having to go through and see them face to face, or shoot at 'em, or whatever. And we were moving so fast, you see. Then when this happened in February we went back, and the company commander sent for me. And I went back and I asked the boy that they sent for me, I said, "What does he want?" He said, "I don't know. He just said to come get you." I went back to the CP command post], wherever they set up ... M Company Headquarters. You go in—and it's just a room—and I walked in and I asked the man what they wanted and he said, "Well, we've got a pass, uh, going to the United States." And I said, "Gee whiz, I've got get it." I mean there's no other way. I'm the only one up there fighting every day. The mortars are behind the lines, half a mile. The cooks, they stay in the rear all the time. [They] ain't got a chance. And so he said, "It's between you four." And I said, "What do you mean it's between us four?" I said, "Gosh, he's a half a mile behind the line with mortars." He was a half a mile behind the line! And I think one of 'em was a company clerk. Of course he knew the officers real well 'cause he worked with them every day. ... Anyway, to make a long story short, they had the four of us draw. And of course I was hot. (Laughs)

TINKER: I bet you were hot.

COOLIDGE: So, anyway, we cut the cards. Sergeant Wyatt was a real good friend of mine. He's another poker player, and they had picked him to be the one to go home. So now they reduced it to four but we were going to get a trip to go to England. Wyatt hadn't left yet, he's still standing in the room with us. And so when we got in the line, first man, second, and I was third, then the fourth man. And Company Commander said, "I got a deck of cards here." He said, "You all can cut 'em, anything you want to, and then I'll pick one off." And so we started and he—Oh, everybody had to pick a card off and the high man got to go to England. So Wyatt got in behind me and the first man flipped his, and he flipped his card over. I don't remember what it was, and the second one he did the same thing. I still don't remember. I know one of them had, uh, had a ten. And the third one was me and I picked it off and I never even looked at

it. I just put it behind me and when I did I flipped it. You know how you can make it pop? I made that thing pop, and Wyatt leaned up in my ear and said, “You got a tough one to beat. You got a tough one to beat.” And then the fourth man he picked his. Then after I did that I pulled the card out and I threw it down and I had the Jack of Spades.

TINKER: You are kidding! (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: Trip to England! Trip to England! I knew when I said that, “Boy, I’m going to make the war now.” (Laughter) This was February. I said, “Oh, I’ve got the war made!” I said, ‘Cause I knew, they said, “You’re going to get a ten day pass to England.” Well, I know how the Army works. You’re going to spend a week getting there, a week getting back. You’re gonna spend ten days over there. I said March is gone.” So anyway, we got the trip, we got on the thing and went on to England. Spent a week, well, ten days, and then we came back. [On my way back] I was standing on a two and a half ton truck, it was going to haul us back to the front line. And I’m standing right in Paris on that truck, cold weather, [and] I still had all my heavy underwear on. The French would buy anything you had. And the MPs were swarming around us. I know I ripped, took that jacket off, and told that Frenchman, “What’ll you give me for this?” And he said, “I’ll give you a hundred dollars.” I said, “A hundred American dollars.” A hundred dollars. I handed him the jacket and that MP on this side said, “Don’t you sell him that jacket.” I said, “I’m not going to sell him anything.” I said to him, “You hand me that hundred dollars.” [The] guy handed me the hundred dollars. I said, “I thank you,” and I stuck that hundred dollars in my pocket. At the time, I ... [gave him] the jacket and I said, “I hope you enjoy it.” MPs, they couldn’t say a thing. ‘Cause I didn’t buy it. I just gave him the jacket. He gave me the hundred dollars; I gave him the jacket. So I went back and they [the MPs] said, “You’ll freeze to death in the back of this truck.” I said, “Huh uh, I got five underwear on. I ain’t going to freeze.” (Laughs) So I didn’t play by the rules all the time.

TINKER: I can tell.

COOLIDGE: My rules. But nobody interfered with me. You know why? “Because we want Coolidge on the front line; we don’t care about anything else. We know he’ll fight. Why would we gamble losing him when he’ll go up there and fight for us and never complain?”

TINKER: People that know what they’re doing often get a pass.

COOLIDGE: Right!

TINKER: Yeah.

COOLIDGE: And I knew that my mother and daddy were there praying. I wasn’t tempting the Lord, I was just—knew that I had to be there and that I had to do the job, and I wanted Him to protect me. And that’s no assurance that I wouldn’t be killed. That’s not an assurance.

TINKER: If it’s your time; it’s your time.

COOLIDGE: It’s you time. And I figured that, well the way my parents ...

TINKER: You might as well just go on.

COOLIDGE: My parents were praying and I knew they were praying and I said, "If He wants me to live, He'll going to answer prayer." So I really never gave it a thought.

TINKER: Um—So you did go back to the front line, then?

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah.

TINKER: Okay, you did go back.

COOLIDGE: Until April 1st, oh yeah. Whenever we got back I went back and stayed until—on April 1st we were making the attack across the Siegfried Line and we went back to that thing and that's when the Colonel said, or the captain said, "Coolidge is going to go with me tonight." That was April 1st, and Colonel Owens said, "No, he's not going back with you. He's going with me." And that's when they took me off. I should've been taken off in October.

TINKER: Well ...

COOLIDGE: Well, I'd say November [after I was submitted for the Medal of Honor].

TINKER: November, yeah.

COOLIDGE: I should have been taken off the line.

TINKER: Well, after you received the Medal of Honor what did they do with you? I know you didn't ...

COOLIDGE: Let me ride around and have a good time.

TINKER: I was gonna say... (Laughs)

COOLIDGE: Let me ride around in my jeep and have a good time. (Laughter) That's what you asked ...

TINKER: (Laughing) I know.

COOLIDGE: I mean, you know, I had a swimming pool.

TINKER: You did?

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah. I had anything I wanted.

TINKER: You had it made.

COOLIDGE: I had it ...

TINKER: 'Cause they had to keep you protected then. I mean, they couldn't put you in harm's way after you'd won the medal.

COOLIDGE: Oh, the war was over then.

TINKER: Well, yeah.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, when I got the medal, see it was June 20th.

TINKER: Oh that's right! You didn't receive it 'til ...

COOLIDGE: That's the medal up there. (Pointing to wall)

TINKER: ... third week in June.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, 20th of June. That's the medal I got over there. (Pointing) That's the one that I let get away.

TINKER: You let it get away? You lost it?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, gave it away.

TINKER: You gave it away?

COOLIDGE: Yeah.

TINKER: Well, I haven't heard this story!

COOLIDGE: Oh, you haven't heard a lot of stories! (Laughs)

TINKER: Hang on. Let me change the tape 'cause this is running out.

-----END TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO-----

CYNTHIA L. TINKER: This begins tape three of our interview with Charles Coolidge on April, 20th. Okay, we were kind of talking about Buck Karnes and Calvin Ward and the ...

CHARLES H. COOLIDGE: Well I only knew that ... they asked me to come to his funeral in Knoxville, and I couldn't go because of the fact that I had already agreed to give a Pledge of Allegiance or something up at the dedication at Signal Point. The governor, I guess, was coming there or something. But anyway, regardless, when we went up there they said, "We'll take care of that." I don't remember whether the governor was the speaker up there or what, but anyway, they said, "You'll go down to Lovell Field, and he'll fly you back to Knoxville"—probably going to the same funeral. But anyway, afterwards, they were going to fly me back [to Chattanooga] in the governor's plane. But a storm came up, and in the storm the little plane that had flown me got tipped over, blown over in the storm. But the ... the 101st Airborne, had sent a delegation to the Buck Karnes funeral.

TINKER: Oh yeah, the 101st.

COOLIDGE: So they had all their food for their supper on the plane, and being that the governor's plane had turned over, I couldn't come back on it. They said, "Well, they will fly you to Chattanooga." So I loaded in with them, and, of course, they had sandwiches for them, and me, or whoever. And they did fly me to Chattanooga. First I told them, to just be nice about it, and take the troops home to Fort Campbell first, and then I said, "When you get there just swing over to Chattanooga." That's what they did. They did, if I remember correctly. That's been a long time ago. But I remember them flying the troops home and me home. I appreciated it 'cause I didn't want to ride the bus back to Chattanooga. I'm not much on buses, I mean I'm fine, but...

TINKER: Well, when you can fly.

COOLIDGE: Well, when I can pull a few strings and make 'em work. (Laughter)

TINKER: Well, when you came back home was there anything that happened between the time that you were having fun after the medal? Is there anything you need to tell—oh yeah, you were going tell us the story of how you gave it away, the original medal.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, that had happened to me years ago, maybe ten or fifteen, twenty years ago. I went to a convention—Medal of Honor Convention! Always during the convention you have a time when you can go in and let 'em look at your medal and put a new ribbon on it, a blue ribbon's what makes it. That's what goes around your neck and then holds it. And [my secretary] Colleen could probably get you one in there to look at; I think it's in here. I really don't know where it is. But anyway, I ... what was I saying?

TINKER: How you gave it away.

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah. And so we [my wife and I] went to the Medal of Honor Convention. We went to the little room. They were going to put a new medal on it—a new ribbon on it. So I took the medal off, and I handed to him, and I said, "Okay just ..." and he handed—The next day I went back—see, my name was never on mine because it was given to me in Germany. I didn't have anything on it. I just had the medal. Normally your [name], "Charles H. Coolidge," and your outfit, and all that, "the 141st Infantry, 36th Division," was all printed on it. Nothing was on mine. So [after the war] I made a speech one time at the Rotary Club in Chattanooga, which I did a lot of public speaking right at the end of the war. And after the meeting one of these guys walked up to me and said, "Well, if you'll come by my jewelry store I'll put your name on it for you." So I brought it by, 'course it wasn't put like it was supposed to be. Mine was in "Charles H. Coolidge" in an arc, like McDonald's. Well, that's alright. (Laughter) That's perfect! That's fine. So that's the way that one is marked there if you read it. That's the original medal. So anyway, when I turned it in up there I didn't get my medal back. I got a different medal but I never looked at it. I just took it back from the guy I gave it to. He must have been part of the Medal of Honor Society. I don't say he was the society, he was with a group of Army, or Navy, or Marines, or somebody that was helping us. So he gave me my medal back and I never thought anything about lookin' at it. My office used to be back over where John's is now. But the guy called me on the phone and he said, "Charles," he said, "have you lost your medal?" "Well, no I haven't lost my medal. No, I don't think so." I said, "I'll call my wife and ask her." And I called her and I said, "Look in the glove compartment." See when I go speaking people want to see it...

TINKER: You carry it around.

COOLIDGE: ... And I don't like any publicity. If I get my picture in the paper, everybody and their brother will want to call me and have me come speak somewhere. I don't want to do that. So I said, "No, I haven't lost my medal but I'll call my wife." And I called her and she said—she pulled open the glove compartment, "No, it's down here in the glove compartment." I said—so I came back to the phone, and I said, "No, I ain't lost my medal." "Well," he said, "we've got one," he said, "It says 'Charles H. Coolidge' on it." I said, "Oh! How is it written? Is it in an arc?" and he said, "Yeah!" he said, "Yeah! That's what it is." (Laughter) He said, "It's not like all the rest of 'em." I said, "No!" I said, "Mine wasn't marked over in Germany. It was plain." And I said, "They just shipped it over when Roosevelt died." I said, "They just shipped it over there. They just presented it on there without my name on it." And so he said, "Well, we found it in a pawn shop. The guy was asking five thousand dollars."

TINKER: (Gasp) Oh!

COOLIDGE: I said, "Well," I said, "Well, he's got it overpriced!" (Laughing) So they took it. They confiscated it. They didn't pay anything for it! About a week later, I'm sleeping one Sunday afternoon, resting, and I answer the phone—my wife answers the phone—and she says, "Somebody wants to talk to you." So I answered and told him, and he said, "Are you the Charles Coolidge who's got the Medal of Honor?" I said, "Yeah, why do you ask?" He said, "Well," he said, "I had it at a gun show and I was displaying it"—this was before the other—he said, "I was displaying it" and he said, "these guys came in and looked at it and wanted to know where I had gotten it and started asking me questions," He said, "I had six or eight of 'em," and said they took it away. So I said, "Well, where'd you get it?" He told me where he'd gotten it and all. And I said, "Well, what'd they say they're gonna do?" he said, "Well, they said they were gonna take it. They wasn't gonna give it back to me." And he was moaning, because he paid for it—to buy it, you know. I said, "Okay." So, in the meantime—I can't remember whether Elliot, the president of the society called me or something, but anyway, to make the story come out. They got the medal back, and I got the medal back now, and we didn't pay anybody anything for it. But it's not unusual for somebody to say they have a Medal of Honor. ... [One time] I went to the National Cemetery [in Chattanooga] and a guy ... [was wearing] the rosette. The rosette's are the little lapel button, and he was out there on the Fourth of July.

TINKER: You are kidding.

COOLIDGE: And I was in the car, and at that time I didn't walk, but I'd been out there. I folded ... [over a] thousand flags off of caskets there. I don't know how many but way over a thousand. And I used to go out there often. They could always grab me because I was ... [a salesman], and, you know, it was easy for me to ... make appointments that I could juggle between a one o'clock funeral, and a two-thirty funeral, and four o'clock funeral, and so I was available. And [Harold "Joe"] Wilhoite used to help me a lot of the time—he's deceased now—but we folded a lot of flags. It was really no inconvenience to me. In fact the National Funeral Home got so embarrassed about calling me they quit calling. But it was never an embarrassment to me, I mean ...

TINKER: It's an honor for people.

COOLDIGE: Oh, yeah, they wanted me. So anyway, we got a lot of 'em put away, and I hope ... [the families appreciated] it. But I like to help people when I can. I can't always help people, but sometimes I can.

TINKER: When you came back to the states did you come straight back here? Straight back home?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, quick as I could get here.

TINKER: Quick as you could get here?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, I landed in Delaware and they put me on the train and the colonel that brought me home—see at that time you had to have an officer take you home, and the officers in my company got to arguing about who was going to bring me home. I said, “Nobody going bring me home. I’m coming home on my own. I got over here on my own and I’m going to get back.” So I left them, and I got to Paris. We got to Paris, and they assigned this colonel to bring me home, his wife was dying of cancer. I can remember he was very nice. We got to flying back to the states, and we had weather interference, and had to land on some little island out in the ocean. They were all waiting for the all clear. They couldn’t fly out, and they couldn’t fly out. I hadn’t been home in about three years. I said, “What do you mean you can’t fly out?” “Well,” the pilot said, “Well, I can’t fly this plane out unless every man on here will agree to fly because they haven’t given the all-clear signal.” I said, “Well, if we get a vote on it, how about that?” He said, “If they all vote to go, I’ll go.” He said, “I’m not the hindrance.” I called the whole plane load there. I said, “Y’all guys willing to take a chance and fly? Or do y’all want to wait ‘til the all-clear signal?” They said, “We’ll go! You want to go, let’s go!” I told that captain, “Let’s load up!” We got up in the air and we’d gone—I don’t know how far we’d gone—but ... well, were gettin’ fairly close to the United States when we hit an air pocket. That plane dropped a hundred ... or two hundred feet. We’re flying along and just dropped. You ever had that happen to you?

TINKER: No.

COOLIDGE: Oh, boy!

TINKER: I hope never ...

COOLIDGE: You talk about putting your heart in your mouth. That thing ...

TINKER: Were you about to rethink your decision? (Laughs)

COOLIDGE: No, no, that didn’t faze me at all (Laughter) That thing dropped me ...

LEBLANC: If you knew it, it was fine, right? If it had crashed ...

COOLIDGE: That's right, it's all over. It's all over, see it had dropped. But we went another few miles and we hit a little bump but it wasn't like that.

TINKER: Wasn't that bad.

COOLIDGE: Next thing, we landed. Man I'm glad ... But I think a lot of 'em wanted to rethink their decision when that thing dropped down. It dropped down—I don't know how far, but it dropped a good hundred feet. Just flying around and boom!

TINKER: Wow, wow.

COOLIDGE: Boy, good thing you've got the seatbelt on. (Chuckles)

TINKER: A hundred feet, yeah, yeah. Well, what was the first thing you did when you got back home?

COOLIDGE: First thing I did was—oh, when I went home?

TINKER: Yeah.

COOLIDGE: Oh, well.

TINKER: Well, or to the States. Did you do anything before you actually got down here?

COOLIDGE: Well, I had to get from there, uh, from the airplane ride there the colonel put me on the train. He wouldn't ... [go see] his wife. I'm begging him, "Please go on and meet your wife. I'll be at home, don't worry about me!" I'd tell him. "No, no we want you to—I've got to take care of you. You're my responsibility." I said, "'You've fulfilled your responsibility. Go on home.'" But he wouldn't. He got me on the train before he left. And then I had a train ride from way over there on the East Coast to Camp Atterbury. Where's Atterbury? In Indiana?

TINKER: Atterbury? Is that in Maryland?

COOLIDGE: No, it's, well, Atterbury's ... [in Indiana].

TINKER: Oh, I've heard of it ...

COOLIDGE: [The] Separation Center ...

TINKER: You separated there in Indiana?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: You separated there in Indiana?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, well I didn't separate right then. That was the plan.

TINKER: Oh.

COOLIDGE: Plan didn't fit my plan.

TINKER: Oh, because you had the medal?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, that was the plan—to get rid of me. But the plans that I had weren't that way. So when I landed I told 'em, at the place where you separate. Separation Center, that's all it is. I didn't know what a Separation Center was, or anything else. I just knew they said they were going send me over there to get finished. So I got there and told one of the sergeants that I wanted to go home for a thirty-day or forty-five day leave, and he told me he said, "Well, you'll have to talk to the general about that." I said, "Well, I want to talk to him." So I go into the general—I told the sergeant there, "I wanted to see General So-and-So," so he rung a bell, you know, and the general had a bell sitting there. And the sergeant told him, "I have a Sergeant Coolidge to talk you." So he said, "Come on in." I went in, and I said, "I'm Sergeant Coolidge and I would like to get, uh, recuperation leave." (Whispering) The colonel told me that, the colonel that brought me home told me. I never knew what a recuperation leave meant.

TINKER: He told you to ask for that?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, he said, "When you get there ..."

TINKER: That's smart.

COOLIDGE: He said, "They'll give you a little static." But he said, "You just demand that you get a recuperation leave." So I told him [the general], I said, "I want to get a recuperation leave." Boy, he barked at me and said, "Why this is Separation Center. We don't give anybody leave here." I said, "I will repeat that. I want a recuperation leave." He barked it back and I said to him, "Well," I said, "I see we have a difference of opinion." I said, "The only thing I know to do now is for me to borrow your phone and call the Adjutant General in Washington, and we'll find out whether I can get a recupe. We'll find out whether I'm entitled to a little recupe." Boy, he shoved that phone at me. Well, being in combat, instantly I grabbed that phone. He said, "Now, wait a minute." I said, "Well we're just gonna call Adjutant General's office. You can think all you want to." And he looked, and he called that sergeant back in. And that sergeant, that had never seen me, there was nothing on me to indicate that I was a Medal of Honor winner—nothing. I had just come—well, there's the picture. (Pointing to picture on wall) That's the picture they made that day. And, no, not that one—there's one here.

TINKER: It's that one there. (Indicating picture on wall)

COOLIDGE: Yeah. And so there was nothing to indicate that I was a Medal of Honor winner. He [the general] called—he buzzed that sergeant ... in there. He said to the sergeant, "Can he do that?" and this sergeant says, "What do you mean, 'Can he do that?'" He said, "Well he wants a recuperation leave," and he said, "I told him this is the Separation Center; we didn't give anybody vacation; we didn't give anybody leave." And this sergeant never hesitated. Now I

figure he must have been the smartest man in the Army, because nobody ever knew that a Medal of Honor winner—you never see one! ... So when he asked him, “Can he do it?” the sergeant never hesitated. He said, “He can do it on one condition. If he has the Medal of Honor he can get a recuperation leave.” This general said, “Do you have the Medal of Honor?” I said, “Yes, sir.” [Then the general said] “Okay, we’ll give you the leave.”

TINKER: Wow.

COOLIDGE: (Laughs) Isn’t that something?

TINKER: Yeah!

COOLIDGE: Anyway, they flew me—let me see, how’d I get home that night? Uh, they flew me home that night.

TINKER: Wow.

COOLIDGE: Well, I’ll tell you how that happened! I left that meeting, they put me up in a hot room—if you can tell by looking at that, (Motions to picture on wall)—sweat dropping off of me. It’s July 20th. Sweat—I’m upstairs in a barracks with no air conditioning, no nothing. Just one of them huts out in the middle of a field.

TINKER: Right.

COOLIDGE: They put me in that building, and I’m sweating all over, and they’re taking pictures and pictures and pictures. I’m worn out takin’ pictures. And finally he said, “Well, you can take my jeep.” The general [said], “You take my jeep, and take him over to the railroad station.” I figured he’s going put me on a train. And I got over to the railroad train, and it was right on the base, and the guy says—he’s the only one in that whole building. It’s after five o’clock, maybe six o’clock, and he’s the only one. And he looked at me and I’m sweating all over and he said, “What’ve you been doing?” and I said, “Well, they’ve been taking my picture.” I said, “They can’t be worth anything. I’m sweating all over.” I told him, “Squeeze my arm and the sweat will come out.” And he says, “Where you going? Where do you gotta go?” And I said, “Well, I’m going to Chattanooga, Tennessee.” And he said, “He’s gonna send you on the train and he knows the last train left this place at four thirty in the afternoon?” He said, “Well, that general’s all the time talking about how important he is and what he can do.” He said, “I’m of a good mind to put him to the test.” And I didn’t know what he was talking about. He said, “Give me a few minutes. Let me see what I can work out.” Well he goes over there and gets on the phone and calls the general. He said, “You know, you got a Medal of Honor recipient here.” And he said, “The only opportunity you ... [have to] ever see him or get to meet one, and you’re gonna send him home on a train [that left] at four thirty in the afternoon [and] the train’s been gone an hour and a half.” And he said, “I don’t see why you just don’t fly him home.” And the general said, “Well, let me see what I can do.” And pretty soon he [the guy at the train station] told me to ride over to the airport on the base, and they’d have a plane come get me. So, that’s how I got home! They flew me home!

TINKER: Well, it worked out for the best.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, you got to have a little resistance, you know, make it worthwhile. So anyway, we waited ... out there [at the airport] for a long time, and then this colonel came in. He'd been on the dance floor, so I'm told, with his girlfriend or wife or whatever. And he came over with a crew. See you had to have a crew, it being a C-54—big plane.

TINKER: Wow!

COOLIDGE: Yeah, so he gets over there, and by that time it's ten o'clock at night—nine thirty, anyway. And he gets there and he walks in, says, "I'm looking for the general. Have you all seen the general here tonight?" And I'm standing around, sitting around with the boys all on duty. That was at ... the tower. "No, we haven't seen the general." "Well, his jeep's out there." I didn't say a word. He went on and he started looking. "I'm going to look and see what the airport is in Chattanooga, if they got an airport." I started to tell him there was one there at Lovell Field, but I didn't open my mouth. I just held my calm, you know? About ten minutes went by and he said, "You all sure you haven't seen the general?" "No, we haven't seen any general here tonight!" And I figured, well I better let the man out of his misery. I've already put him in misery. And so I said to him, I said "Colonel, I don't think you're going to be flying the general to Chattanooga tonight. You're going to be flying me." (Laughter)

TINKER: I bet he was thrilled.

COOLIDGE: Oh, man! You could've had a blow torch! You could've hit him with a blow torch! (Laughter)

TINKER: I was gonna say.

COOLIDGE: Oh, man! He was mad as fire, and then finally he said to me—walked out there and said, "Alright sergeant, let's load up." So he told all the rest of 'em, "Take him, get him on the plane." So I got on. I hadn't been on a plane like that. You know, you had to buckle up the seat, you had to do this, and all this kind of stuff. We started to take off. We got airborne, and one of the sergeants came up to me. See, he had four sergeants to help him I guess, I don't know what they're for, but they're all there. And he got one of 'em and he said, "I want, uh, call him and tell him to come up here. I want to talk to him." Well, I'd been up about two days. I'm tired. I'm about settled in. He came back there and said, "The colonel wants to talk to you." I said, "Well you tell the colonel I'm tired, and I don't want to talk tonight." (Laughs) And he went back and told that colonel what I said. Oh, man I didn't know how mad he was 'til I got home. (Laughs) We flew on in into Chattanooga, you know, and ... when they landed it was midnight or one o'clock in the morning. Lovell Field is a pretty good size, but all it had around it was little old fence wire, chicken wire all around it, you know. And they landed way out in the middle of the field. And he just—he left ...

TINKER: (Laughs) Did you walk?

COOLIDGE: He left it parked right out in the middle of the field, and we all got out. And the colonel—out of respect you always let them out first—he got out and got to walking ahead. Us four, the three sergeants and myself, or the four sergeants and myself, we're walking behind. We're gettin' closer to the [terminal] ... Well the railroad man had called my mother and dad and said, "Hey, your son's coming home tonight" And I guess he told them. He estimated times that we'd be there by so-and-so. So we're starting to walk over to the gate. This was just a little swinging gate there before you go into the building and the tower. So when we got about half way, I told the sergeants, "I better go up there and thank the colonel for flying us home—flying *me* home." They didn't object, they said, "Well, that might be a good idea." If I'd known how mad he was I never would have told him. But anyway, ... I double timed, got up beside him, and I said, "Colonel, I want to thank you for flying me home tonight." And I said, "Now, my family's got a pretty good size house in Chattanooga." And I said, "We've got enough room to give you a private room and take care of the sergeants." And he said—boy he turned around and barked at me and said, "I had instructions to fly you to Chattanooga and return, and that's what I intend to do!" Well, by this time we were out ... [at the gate and] the newspaper and all had gotten wind of it by now. I don't know who all this railroad man had notified but they had a pretty good little congregation by now. Right as we got there, he barked that at me, and I said, "Well I hope you have nice flight." I said, "I thank you and I hope you have a nice flight." And I turned and the first newspaper man walked up to me, before I even got to meet my mother and my daddy, and he said, "What seems to be the problem, Charlie?" I said, "We haven't got a problem. Oh, his problem is to get that plane back where he started from." (Laughs) They went on in [the terminal] and took a break, you know, but we went on home. I got in the back seat and came home. But, my girlfriend was there, and—I thought it was my girlfriend, but anyway.

LEBLANC: Was she still waiting for you?

COOLIDGE: No.

LEBLANC: She gave your car back?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, she gave my car back. Well, she married me. I didn't know that she was waiting for me.

LEBLANC: Aww.

COOLIDGE: But she stayed with me for sixty-four years.

LEBLANC: Wow.

TINKER: Well, yeah, she might as well have kept the car then.

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: She might as well have kept the car if she was going to wait on you.

COOLIDGE: That's right. She wasn't going to wait while I—why not have the car, too?

TINKER: Yeah, that's right.

COOLIDGE: But I left it with my brother, and he took good care of it. When I got back I said, "Deal was, I was going to war, and if I come back I get the keys back, and if I don't [come back], you'd have the car." And so he handed me they keys.

TINKER: You had it made, you had your girlfriend, you had your car.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, and they're all back together now.

LEBLANC: Wow.

TINKER: Yeah, that's good. Did you—what was longest that you went without sleep?

COOLIDGE: Oh, when you're moving around ... I'd come two thousand miles, or a thousand miles. I just didn't sleep much. I had a berth on the train from over to Atterbury, I guess it must be the name of it. That's in Indiana.

TINKER: But I mean when you were in Italy or France. When you were on the line, what was the longest you went without sleep then?

COOLIDGE: Oh, I don't know. When you make an invasion you might go two or three days without sleep.

TINKER: Then you'd just sleep a few hours?

COOLIDGE: Oh you'd just cat nap. You never sleep.

TINKER: You cat napped for about two years?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, oh yeah. Well you just, on the line, you just don't sleep. Well, you get lazy times when you'd just lay around if there's not really fighting going on. But on that front line where the fighting's going on, you're not going to get no peaceful rest up there.

TINKER: My dad and I have had conversations about what war does to a person's body, being under that kind of stress. Because you mentioned your MS and the stress that the battle puts on your body.

COOLIDGE: Right.

TINKER: And it affects you later even though you may not feel it when you're younger.

COOLIDGE: Well, and the stress of running a business.

TINKER: Well, that, too.

COOLIDGE: You know, I had—Dad started this business [Chattanooga Printing & Engraving Company] in 1910. We're a hundred years old.

TINKER: That's right! This is your centennial year.

COOLIDGE: They're celebrating ...

TINKER: Well, congratulations!

COOLIDGE: I've got a calendar out there that we publish. We put one out every year but it mentions ...

TINKER: Well, congratulations.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, we've been in business a hundred years.

TINKER: A hundred years.

COOLIDGE: And so, my dad ran it ...

TINKER: Did you know you wanted to just come and work here when you got out [of the military]?

COOLIDGE: Well when I got out I didn't come to work here.

TINKER: What did you do?

COOLIDGE: I went to work for the Veterans Administration [VA]. I worked there three years and three months ...

TINKER: Three years and three months?

COOLIDGE: That's the way I was in the Army. That's the way it was in the Veterans Administration, and then here; I've been here all my life. But I was a bookbinder by trade, and so that's what I learned when I got out of high school.

TINKER: What were you doing for the VA?

COOLIDGE: I was a contact representative. I talked to everybody and got 'em in schools like [University of] Tennessee, Alabama, and all those other schools. Anybody wanted to go to school I ...

TINKER: You're just helping them.

COOLIDGE: I'd help 'em fill out the application—get 'em started. [Sometimes] they'd wait 'til two o'clock in the morning [of the day] they were supposed to report to school. No paperwork done [and] they'd call me. Two o'clock in the morning. That's what made me quit the job. Reason I'm telling you, [I] had a guy call me about two o'clock one Monday morning, and he was supposed to be up at Tennessee that day at eleven or whenever. And I said, "You know what time it is?" he said, "Yeah, it's two o'clock in the morning." I said, "Yeah, you were out drinking. You're going to Tennessee tomorrow, and you're goin' wake me up with a baby that's been sick." And I said, "You expect me to meet you tomorrow morning at eight o'clock and fill your paperwork out before you go to Knoxville." I said, "Yeah, I'll meet you." After he left the office I walked into the manager I said, "I'm giving you two weeks notice. I'm quitting." He said, "Oh, no, no, no. No, we'll upgrade your ... [position]." I said, "Uh-uh. You're not going to grade me anywhere. I'm out of here." And I quit.

TINKER: I bet that was—was that a pretty nice transition job, you know?

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah.

TINKER: 'Cause you're coming out of the military but you're kinda still ...

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah. I loved it, I really loved it. My wife was always ready. She wished I had never quit.

TINKER: It's a good transition though.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, but I mean, I know that they needed me here [at the printing company] over a period of time. But I really liked working for them [the VA] because I was gettin' people on-the-job training, into universities ...

TINKER: Helping other veterans.

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah, helping veterans. And I was not only doing it here, I was doing it in Cleveland, and, uh, Copper Hill, and South Pittsburg, and Monteagle, and another little town past that. But they were all on my agenda. I'd call them once a week, and I'd have certain hours that I'd be there. I really enjoyed it. But, I don't know. My Mother and Daddy kept begging me to come back and so I went, I came back. My wife never was happy about it but she's dead, so I don't have to worry about that either. (Laughs)

TINKER: Well, like you said, you felt like your family needed you here.

COOLIDGE: They did, I think they did.

TINKER: Was your brother working here?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, he was really good. He was a great businessman. He was a good businessman.

TINKER: So you just came on over and joined the family.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, so it's not the most money in the world but it's a living.

LEBLANC: It's honest living.

COOLIDGE: Huh?

LEBLANC: It's honest.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, it's an honest living.

TINKER: Yeah.

COOLIDGE: You have to work in the printing business. There's nothing easy about the printing business. [It is a stressful business with strict deadlines.] I guess newspapers and all have it a little easier but it's—and it [commercial printing] pays a little better than newspaper ...

TINKER: Both your younger sons work here, is that right?

COOLIDGE: That's right.

TINKER: So they've stayed in business. Now what did, well, Charles Jr.—do you think your service sort of—what made him decide to go Air Force, I guess is what I'm asking.

COOLIDGE: What made him go Air Force? I gave him a choice.

TINKER: What was his choice?

COOLIDGE: Well, he wanted to go to the Academy, he had always dreamed of going to the Academy.

TINKER: Oh!

COOLIDGE: And so, uh, I had—after he got into the tenth grade or eleventh, that's when you decide what you're gonna do. So ... he made application to the Army, and he got accepted into West Point. ... [At that time] I was on airplane going to Pennsylvania for something, and while I was on the plane I met this officer; and he, and my wife and I got to talking and he said, "Well, what you need to do is get the boy in the Air Force Academy." And we said, "What?" He said, "Well, there's an Air Force Academy. It's new it's out in Denver, but I understand they're moving down to Colorado Springs." And he said, "That's the Holiday Inn of the military." And I said, "That's interesting." So we got off the plane, we thanked the guy, and we came back home and we said, "Charlie, you ever think about going to the Air Force Academy?" He said, "Well, I've already got the appointment to go to West Point." I said, "Yeah, but they tell me that the Holiday Inn of the military is the Air Force." (Laughter) I said, "I'll call some friends of mine," and "I'll find out about it and about the chances of getting in." Well, it was right in the middle of

swimming season, and he was the manager of the Baylor swimming team. And he could swim. He wasn't the fastest in the world, but he was a pretty good swimmer. So I called J.P. Brown, and I knew him [since] we used to do a lot of printing for his daddy. And I said, "I got a son that's interested in the Air Force Academy. Can you tell me anything about it?" He said, "Oh yeah, of course." He was one of their liaison people, you know. And he told me about Bob Summit, who was circuit judge here. He [J.P.] said, "He's the other liaison officer." Well I knew Bob real well. So, anyway, we [my wife and I] contacted him, and ... [Charlie] made an application for the Air Force. He had to go down to ... [Smyrna, TN] to be examined for the Air Force. And he had to go the next day. Well he went to Smyrna that day, and then the next day he had to be up at ... Nashville or Knoxville, to be examined for the Navy. And so he goes down to Smyrna and he weighs in, and it's right in the middle of swimming season. He's down to 118 pounds.

TINKER: Wow.

COOLIDGE: You gotta be so many pounds. (Laughter) So anyway, he goes to the Navy, and the Navy doctor looked at him, and he said, "Son," he said, "what've you been doing?" He said, "Your eyes are so bloodshot." He said, "How much sleep have you had the last two days?" "Well," he [Charlie] said, "Not much 'cause I had to be in Smyrna to qualify for the Air Force and have to be here today to qualify for the Navy." The guy was pretty nice about it, they passed him anyway. But anyway ... [after several weeks we] hadn't heard from the Air Force Academy, even though we had applied, [so] I used two of my friends to help me ... [find out]. So I called J.P. back and I said, "J.P. you gotta find out something." I said, "I'm not going to send him to West Point." I said, "You know how I am about the infantry. I ain't gonna send nobody there." And I said, "That's all the Army is, infantry, tanks, or something like that. I'm not going to do that." He said, "Well, I'll call 'em out there and find out." And so he called them out there. And they looked at his app and said, "Why he only weighs 118 pounds." He said, "If he'll guarantee me that he'll weigh 130 when he comes out there we'll take him." And J.P. called back and said, "Well, he's gotta gain twelve pounds before he goes out there. Do you suppose he can do that?" I said, "Well, that won't be a problem at all." And so I had a doctor friend, Dr. Norris, and I said—I called him up and I said, "Charlie's gotta gain twelve pounds." And he said, "Just send him out here. I'll give him something make him gain twelve pounds." So we sent him out there. We had Charlie up to about 150 before we went out there. [He had finished swimming and I knew we could get him up to 130.] (Chuckles) 'Course he lost it all right back [in training at the Academy], but that's alright. So that's the way he got into the Air Force Academy. We had to pull a few strings. But they had to accept him. If he mentally and physically passed the exam, they had to accept him. Don't make any difference how many they had, somebody will be dropped off 'cause he's gonna get ... the nomination. President of the United States says that. (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah. How many times have you been to the White House?

COOLIDGE: Oh, many times. Many times.

TINKER: They like to have the Medal of Honor recipients up there, don't they?

COOLIDGE: Oh, they love us. They love us, yeah.

TINKER: Who was your favorite that you got to meet?

COOLIDGE: Oh, I don't know. Kennedy was sharpest.

TINKER: Was he?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, he was sharp, I tell ya. John, oh sharp as a tack. Very, very good mind.

TINKER: Yeah.

COOLIDGE: Eisenhower, I liked him. He was more laid back. Oh, in the line when they had about 200 people, we went by one time when we were [in Washington DC]—they had a lot of us right after the war. And Eisenhower was President so, you know how many years ago that was. But we were in the line and we, uh, you know you have two people that get your name before they introduce you to the President.

TINKER: Right, right.

COOLIDGE: And then there's one on the left side, I don't know what he's for, but anyway the two was all I was interested in. The first one got to my name, "This is Charles Coolidge. Mr. Charles Coolidge, Mr. President this is Charles Coolidge." And he looked at me and I don't know what made him ask, and he said, uh, "What outfit were you in the war?" I said, "I was in the 36th Texas outfit." "Were you there in Africa when I reviewed the troops and came by in the convertible?" I said, "Yes, sir. I was there." And I said, "I was there when the war was over." (Laughs) And he started talking to me, and he talked, and he talked, and he talked.

TINKER: Really?

COOLIDGE: Well, we had something in common. And he kept talking and talking and finally the guy on my right said, "Mr. President, you have 300 people waiting to talk to you." He said, "But I'm interested in this one."

TINKER: He was still reminiscing.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, he said, "I'm interested in this one." That's exactly what the President told him. He said, "I'm interested in this one."

TINKER: So you've met 'em all?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: Have you met them all? From Eisenhower on up?

COOLIDGE: There were a few of them I skipped.

TINKER: There was three you skipped?

COOLIDGE: I don't know how many, but I have skipped some. I didn't go to the last one because of the weather and a lot of other reasons. And, you know, it's inconvenient now. When my wife—I've been in this twenty-seven years. (Points to his wheelchair)

TINKER: Have you?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, twenty-eight in July.

LEBLANC: You're pretty comfortable in it, aren't ya?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, [but] my butt gets a little sore.

TINKER: But your health is good apart from that.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, for my age I'm doing pretty good. When you're sixty-eight, you're supposed to look pretty good. (Laughter)

TINKER: Well, over all, do you—I mean the medal, receiving the medal it's been a positive thing.

COOLIDGE: Oh, it's a great thing.

TINKER: It's a positive.

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah.

TINKER: I know you said when people see you in the paper then you start getting calls to come speak and all that.

COOLIDGE: Oh, always. Oh, yeah, just wears you out! [But it is an honor and I like to help people.]

TINKER: That sometimes feels overwhelming a little bit?

COOLIDGE: No, it don't overwhelm me. I've [learned I've] just got to say no.

TINKER: You just say no.

COOLIDGE: When I finally made up my mind I couldn't do it. I finally made up my mind I couldn't do it. Took me awhile to learn to say no because I know people wanted to hear me, particularly in 1945 and '46. When I first came home, [it was] constant, two times a day, noon and night, noon and night, noon and night.

TINKER: It's a wonder you got any work done.

COOLIDGE: Well, I had to work. I'll tell you how come I had to work. One night I went up to about Rockwood, [TN] up that way somewhere, past Dayton somewhere up there, to a meeting. And you know after a meeting everybody wants to sit around and talk, do a lot of drinking and all that, and I don't care about that. Because all I know is that gets you in trouble, so I've never been much of a drinker. But anyway, I went up there one night and I started back and I guess it was midnight. I got up here by the lakes and the water—Charleston and all through that area. ... I hit a [thick] fog. I could not, literally could not see the hood of my car, the end of it. I could see the first part of it but I could not see the end of my car and what I finally did, about four o'clock in the morning, I find that I'm either going to have to stop or follow that line. And the line I meant was not where the lights were shining 'cause I couldn't even see it. The fog was that thick. And I opened the door of my car and I got over the line, the center line—that was when it was a two-lane road. I got over the center line and I was holding on to that steering wheel and I was ...

-----END TAPE THREE, SIDE ONE-----

COOLIDGE: I was creeping along, and I held the door open, and I was lookin' down at that line, just staring. If I saw the line was starting to turn I'd turn the steering wheel just a little to follow that line.

TINKER: That is some fog.

COOLIDGE: I never looked out to see if anybody was coming. I just kept following the line and fortunately there wasn't anybody coming the other way. If we had, we wouldn't have hit hard. I was just barely moving. But I got home, and I remember that night when I crawled in bed. You know, very rarely was I ever home early at night, and I remember crawling into bed that night and my wife, she said, "Do you know what time it is?" And I said, "Yeah, it's five o'clock." And she said, "Well you do know you go to work in the morning." I said, "I'll go to work in the morning." Six o'clock, I got up, and went to work. I remember that night, ... [and] I always say, "Well, I know I missed a few nights sleep." After that I started telling people "No." That's what broke me, I know ...

TINKER: Think the Lord was trying to tell you something?

COOLIDGE: Oh, He did!

TINKER: He gave you a message loud and clear. (Laughing)

COOLIDGE: He beat me real hard and said, "You learn. You learn!" (Laughing) Yeah, well it's been an interesting life. I've really enjoyed it. And I hope that I can always, you know, when people come in to interview me [or when I've given talks] ... I can give them a little conversation, some little enjoyment so they can back ...

TINKER: Well we really appreciate it.

COOLIDGE: ... so they can go back home and tell folks that they met Charles Coolidge and, “He was a nice guy, really, when he don’t keep us too long.” (Chuckles)

TINKER: You definitely have had an interesting life.

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah, very.

TINKER: The Lord’s definitely had His hand on you.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, yeah. And I’ve taught Sunday School ...

TINKER: To go through what you’ve been through and ...

COOLIDGE: And I trust Him. Like I say, I don’t worry about what I’m goin’ do. I just worry about what He’s goin’ do. ‘Cause He’s going to lead me, and I pray every morning, “Guide me through the day.” I thank Him for another day, and that I’ll do His will during the day. I mean, I know people don’t believe in God and all this but I tell you, when you’ve been where I’ve been, you better believe in something other than yourself.

TINKER: You’ve maintained a great attitude. I really appreciate your time. We won’t take up anymore of it.

COOLIDGE: Oh, well I’ve enjoyed it.

TINKER: Well get this—When we go back we’ll do a transcript, and then we’ll be able to put the interview online, and that way people can access it and read your story.

COOLIDGE: Well, I don’t know how much of the story I really told. I have so many experiences.

TINKER: Oh, I’m sure.

COOLIDGE: I can tell you the worst I ever felt was when I got a guy killed.

TINKER: You did?

COOLIDGE: Yeah. And he begged me not to make him do it, and I made him do it.

TINKER: Where was that at?

COOLIDGE: That was in Limbourg [Belgium], right near the German border. The Germans were behind us, I mean they were beside us at a railroad, and we had the end house. We’d come through the whole town, but the Germans had all the houses, the next four or five houses up. They were sleeping up there at night and running down to the railroad, and staying in their holes during the day. And some stayed there at night, you know, and then they’d come up to the

houses. We only had one house. Our supplies, and ammunition, and everything was in that end house. And so the mortars, the 81mm mortars, have a forward observer, and they'd stay up twenty-four hours a day. Then they'd send a new one up. Well, they sent this boy up, and he is not used to being on the front line. [As] I say, they are [usually] half a mile or more behind, but the forward observer's got to be up there where the action is.

TINKER: That's right

COOLIDGE: So we had four guns up there. That was at Limbourg when ... Patton said he wanted the 36th to fill in the gap, and so we, uh—he came up there and it was about ten or eleven in the morning. Snow all over the ground, cold, and you don't start fires or anything. You know if you get a cup of coffee, you get it and put it in a hole and burn a K-ration cover. It's paraffin. That means it'll burn without makin' smoke and, uh, but we didn't even do that. Most of the time, ... in a situation like that, we'd go to that end house [to have coffee]. And so, about ten or eleven I started telling this boy, "Let's go back and get a cup of coffee." He was a forward observer. My men would watch for him. If we see some action up there, we'll let 'em know. And so anyway, uh, it got about ten or eleven in the morning. I started telling him, "Let's go back, get a cup of coffee." You know winter time. It's cold. It's January, or December. And ... he wouldn't do it, he wouldn't do it. About two o'clock in the afternoon, I know he's not gonna get relieved 'til four. I said, "Man, you oughta go back," and he said, "Oh, I'd love to have a cup of coffee." I said, "I'll take you back and we'll get a cup. We'll go back to the house and we'll make a cup of coffee." So finally, finally he decided he'd go at my insistence ... I didn't want to go back alone, you know. And so we go back to the end house. And we never went in the front door or out the front door. We always went around to the German side. Why, they were in the next house, and we'd go in that side door there [that faced their direction].

TINKER: Right.

COOLIDGE: The feeding trough and all was in the back. Where the animals come up and feed and get their water and all that. And the Germans were right down fifty feet from the houses, this railroad comes in there and there's a bank that ... [drops] off ten feet. And so, we go in and fix the coffee. And he's [the young forward observer] still got ants in his pants. He's just got to hurry, got to hurry. And I never let anybody go first. I always went first because I felt safer that way. They might not be quite as observing as I am, or something, you know. Anyway I never had anybody go first. So anyway, as we go out the front door there's a step, and then you step down off it, so really two steps, but only one step, but really two steps. So he opens the door, goes out and steps on the first step and a mortar shell hits right, it had come over from the Germans and it had hit right in front of him. Just blew him back in my hands, my arms, and I dragged him back to the middle of the room and laid him down. He was dead. That's the only man I ever felt like I had ... And the company commander, I used to tell him—oh I was so, "I hated it, I killed a guy." He said, "That's war, you didn't kill him." He said, "That's war."

LEBLANC: It was his time ...

COOLIDGE: When your number's up, your number's up. You don't have to worry about it, when your number's punched, it's punched.

TINKER: It's understandable you'd feel awful bad.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, I felt bad about it. I still sometimes wake up at night thinking about it. But there's no use, I just turn over and go back to sleep. Remember what the company commander said, "It's not your fault. That's just an act of war."

LEBLANC: Well, the faith that you have, too. I mean, you know that you're not in charge.

COOLIDGE: No, I'm not in charge. No, I'm not in charge. I got nothing to do with it. I'm just doing my job up there. And I liked that job, even though I knew right away when I got in combat that I'd gotten the rough end of the deal. I knew that the whole war was on my shoulders, and there were other people who were fightin' it but there weren't that many—not for the first year. I'm telling you over in North Africa and Italy, I told you—1st Division, 3rd Division, 9th Division, 34th Division, 36th Division. What's the next one—45th, and then the next one. That was the six that fought the war from October of '42 on 'til June 6th. There were maybe a few others that came in after we left but I would say up until June 6th, those were the six divisions fought the war. The 88th [Division] came after the sixth. They came and relieved us on February 28th of '44. But otherwise—in other words, you're talking about 20,000 men in a division. You're talking about—we got seven times twenty—140,000 fighting men.

TINKER: One of our longest interviews is with a guy, Ben Franklin, who was with the Big Red One.

COOLIDGE: Big Red One?

TINKER: From North Africa ...

COOLIDGE: All the way.

TINKER: All the way [to the end of the war].

COOLIDGE: If he lived all the way.

TINKER: And landed at Omaha Beach, lived through Omaha ...

COOLIDGE: But let me tell you. Let me tell you, Big Red One, not one of the top! (Laughter) But I mean they're the top outfit, they referred to as top outfit. But Big Red One, see, the 1st, the 3rd—3rd's one of them—the 3rd Division, the 34th Division, 45th Division, [and] the 36th. 36th is third in line. We got the most time on the front line. That's the reason when I made that opening statement, that I may have, and I say "may," have the longest time on the front line because basically, nobody stayed on the front line all the time. They got wounded, or they were off the front for a while and sent back. But not many of 'em stayed up there the whole time. See my problem was I couldn't get hit. I didn't want to get hit, but by the same token I wasn't lucky enough to get the million dollar wound like I told you [about] Aaron, [who] had six brothers or maybe five brothers and him, but anyway there's six of 'em. But he was the only one in the

American Army and all the others were in the German Army—"How'd you like to walk over his dead body?" "I'd a whole lot rather walk over his than have him walk over mine." (Chuckles)

TINKER: Well, we want to thank you.

COOLIDGE: Alright, you're quite welcome.

TINKER: I appreciate it.

COOLIDGE: Alright.

TINKER: Okay.

COOLIDGE: I hope it was what you were looking for.

TINKER: It was.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----