

Interview with Donald Palmer

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Thursday, October 25, 2007. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here today to do an interview with Donald E. Palmer, who is a veteran of World War II and has already been telling me some fascinating stories about his experiences with one of the beach battalions, which is one of those parts about Americans' involvement with World War II that not nearly enough people know about. I'm sure you would agree with that assessment.

Palmer: Well, I would, but not only that, they kind of called us the "Sons of the Beaches."

DePue: Sons of the Beaches.

Palmer: Right.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: I like that one.

DePue: Okay. I always start with these, and ask when and where you were born, Don.

Palmer: Actually, I was born in Springfield, Illinois, on November 30, 1923.

DePue: Okay. And did you grow up in Springfield?

Palmer: Yes.

DePue: So you were a young man during the Depression. You certainly remember the Depression years. What were your parents doing?

Palmer: I remember them well. What were they doing?

DePue: Yes.

Palmer: Well, my mother was planting gardens and we ate an awful lot of green beans in those days. And every Wednesday, I would have to ride over to the grocery store where they had hamburger two pounds for a dollar—two pounds for a quarter. So that was my Wednesday project, was ride up and get the hamburger, because we had it once a week. That was the days when you didn't make vegetable soup. You had wiener stew and things of that nature. Meat was rather scarce.

DePue: Did your father have employment at the time?

Palmer: He was selling automobiles, primarily, most of his life. Actually, they were married in Lowder, Illinois and moved here. I had three brothers that were born in Lowder, and I was a city slicker here in Springfield.

DePue: So you were—you came in later in...

Palmer: I was the fourth son in a family that might have wanted a daughter or two but never got it. (chuckles)

DePue: Okay. Let's move forward a little bit and ask you what you remember about Pearl Harbor.

Palmer: I was the doorman at the Pantheon Theater that Sunday when the people come in to the movie said they just bombed Pearl Harbor. And I said, "Where's Pearl Harbor?" I'd never heard of it. Very few people had, at that time, not even knowing that our fleet was stationed there.

DePue: Now, you were what? Nineteen or twenty at the time?

Palmer: Actually, you better back up. I was eighteen.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: Before I was nineteen, I'd been in three D-days.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: (laughs) They came rather rapidly.

DePue: Had you graduated from high school?

Palmer: Yes. I graduated in January of '42, and then I tried to join the Navy. I wanted to be a second class pattern maker, because I was an apprentice pattern maker at the pattern shop. I was making twenty five cents an hour, and jobs were a little scarce in those days. Actually, I was working two jobs. I was working from 6:00 until 3:30 at the pattern shop, and then I would catch the bus and ride out to the Pantheon Theater. I would open the theater and be there until midnight, and then get back home on the

bus and be back to work the next day. I was doing two jobs, ninety-six hours a week, and I was making something like thirteen dollars.

DePue: Which was okay money at the time, but not great money, I would say.

Palmer: It was money that I wasn't used to.

DePue: Yeah. Well, tell me a little bit more about a pattern maker. What does that mean?

Palmer: A pattern maker, in those days, was a wooden pattern maker and you made a wooden model to scale. And every metal has a different shrinkage, so your rulers... That's the first time I found out might not be twelve inches. It might be twelve and an eighth, might be twelve and a quarter, or twelve and three-eighths depending upon the metal that was going to be used to make the pattern to the finished product.

DePue: Okay. But then the decision came along someplace that either you were going to be drafted or enlist?

Palmer: Well, I was negotiating wanting to join as a pattern maker, but they didn't have third class pattern makers, they only had second and first class. So they offered me carpenter's mate, and I turned it down. Well, when I got my draft notice, I decided maybe I'd rather be a carpenter's mate third class than a buck private in the Army, so I joined the Navy. I hurried over and I told them, "I'll take third class carpenter's mate."

DePue: Were all of the early negotiations with the Navy?

Palmer: All my negotiations were, because I thought I might get additional schooling in pattern making, but I never got that.

DePue: So you knew that they had that in the Navy? That's one of the reasons you didn't look at the Army?

Palmer: I joined the Navy to not... In other words, I thought maybe I would get three good meals a day.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: And I thought I'd rather be aboard a ship than... Let's just say I joined the Navy to keep from doing what I ended up doing in the beach battalion, because I ended up carrying a Springfield 03 rifle and dressed as any other Army, and we were always with a different company, whether it be the rangers or combat engineers.

DePue: Okay. Well, we're getting ahead of the story just a little bit, but that's fine. At the time you went in, that was what time?

Palmer: Actually I joined in September of '42 and they said, "Well, right now we're not ready for a rated company, so you go home and we'll call you when we want you to come. And actually, I went to the train station here in Springfield, which is now Madison Street, and with another group, on December 13th of 1942.

DePue: Boy, you've got a good memory for dates.

Palmer: I do have.

DePue: Do you remember a girlfriend back then?

Palmer: I didn't have any.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: Because I was busy. (both laugh) Either with sports or the jobs I had.

DePue: What did your parents think about you going into the Navy?

Palmer: Actually, I had a brother that was a major in the Army, and I had another brother that had been drafted who was in Puerto Rico, so I figured I would rather be in the Navy. My other brother didn't go in until later, into the Army. So we had four sons in the military and in those days, you had a flag in the window for how many sons you had in the service. I still have the flag with four red stars on it.

DePue: So they were used to worrying about their boys?

Palmer: Actually, let's say they had to get used to it. What else were you going to do different?

DePue: Well, they weren't alone.

Palmer: No.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about your days in basic training, then.

Palmer: Basic training. I went to Great Lakes, and I was in an all-rated company because they separated the rated companies from your other companies. The basic training that I had, I got up about halfway through the boot camp. I had taken the part where you jump off of the platform into the water and inflate your dungarees as life preservers, things of that nature. But they took me down, and our whole company, down to the swimming pool, and they said, "Now, those who can swim full length and back, line up at this end, and those who can't, line up at the other end, and we'll bring you back next Monday and teach you how to swim." I didn't know how to swim, so I lined up at that end, and the next Monday, I was in Norfolk, Virginia in a big tent where I was given two cards to sign saying I was joining a beach battalion. And I thought, "Well, I'm not overly fond of that, so I wouldn't sign the cards." I said, "What happens if I don't sign them?" They said, "You won't leave the tent

until you do." So in those days I found out there's a few things our country does that I wasn't overly fond of, and they still do that to an extent.

DePue: Did you know what a beach battalion was at the time?

Palmer: I'd never heard of it. But they showed us pictures of what we would be doing. We'd be the first in and the last to leave. If it was not a success, then we would stand retreat for the Army back to the ships. And they actually had a waiting list to get into the brig at Norfolk, Virginia, because they had us in an enclosed area with fences all the way around. I had one liberty, and the only thing I remember... I went to a park and the sign said, "All sailors and dogs, keep off the grass."

DePue: Well, that's not a very welcoming sign.

Palmer: We weren't very welcome (laughing) anywhere in Norfolk, because it was a Navy base.

DePue: How long had you been in the Navy when you were confronted with this decision that you had made but didn't know about making to go into a beach battalion?

Palmer: Actually, I had served about a month and a half in boot camp instead of a three month boot camp. I think it was three months I should have served. So many things I did not have in boot camp, but they had the need... I was told later that they had posted signs in camp asking for volunteers, but they couldn't get them, so they changed their way of getting volunteers. We were 100 percent volunteers.

DePue: Yes. I wonder if we can look at a quick picture of you at the beginning of this, and then go into what I believe is the wiring diagram of the organization of the beach battalion. Because I wanted to talk about how these beach battalions originated in the first place.

Palmer: All righty.

DePue: So if you could talk a little bit about that, I would appreciate it.

Palmer: And where do you want me to... okay.

DePue: Well, there's the picture.

Palmer: Actually, the 4th Beach Battalion... I didn't know there were any others other than the fourth until after the war. And so I signed up for the fourth beach battalion, and that consisted of ten companies. There was three Company B, three A companies, A1, A2, and A3, B3, B4, B5 and B6, C7, 8, and 9. Each company then would have the same complement of number of officers, as well as enlisted men, because the duties would have to be duplicated on any beachhead that you established.

DePue: I might have been using some wrong terminology here. But I think what I read about this was that these that had forty-six people were platoons and there was the

alpha. There was A, B, and C Company, and those were the platoons. But that's using Army jargon for what's a Navy organization, so...

Palmer: Right. I was in Company B4 of the Company B4, 5, and 6.

DePue: Okay, okay. And there are forty-six people in B4?

Palmer: Forty-three enlisted people, one doctor, and two officers. So there's a total of forty-eight. Or I think there's forty-nine with one... The doctor, I thought, was included in the two officers.

DePue: Okay. But those are all Navy personnel?

Palmer: Right.

DePue: And what was the whole idea behind establishing these beach battalions in the first place?

Palmer: Well, when they went into North Africa, this one ensign and four Army officers went in without weapons and they thought, "We better have better cooperation between the Army and the Navy. The Army had loaded the ships not realizing that you unload a ship one deck at a time, and their weapons were on the third deck. So the five of them went to the War Department after they really screwed up in North Africa. Being the first one, they had nothing to start from.

So what they did, they... If you were a tank driver, where would you go for gasoline, because they just dumped all the supplies ashore with no markings of the beaches or any way of knowing where to go for any supply. Then they had, as I say, —it was so loused up that one ensign and four Army officers—went to the War Department and they said, "We need better cooperation," and they established twelve beach battalions, six for the Mediterranean and six for replacements. Being an historian, I've learned this from the ensign who went and got the beach battalions formed.

By having twelve beach battalions, we would have, say, like... I've never known until I've... These reunions have really helped me considerably because I learned from others what was going on when I just aware of maybe a three foot space.

DePue: Sure.

Palmer: Quite enlightening to go to a reunion, because the first time I... Well, I'm getting ahead of myself there, but...

The beach battalions were formed in order to have better cooperation. And what they did, they gave us the personnel required for everything, ship to shore. We would actually be in charge of loading the ships, be in charge of unloading the ships. We had a hydrographic section that would go in and wade the beaches, destroy the obstacles so that the small boats could come in, and then we would

always have either one beach battalion coming in in full strength in the first wave or there would be one in reserve. And so when we came in with either combat engineers or, in many cases, the rangers—anyway, Army, mostly, infantry—what we would give them: Our beach master would hand out the plans so that they knew if you went to red one, there would be a certain supply there and red two would be a different supply. Every beach they established would be a different color beach, so that any supplies you needed would be available to the Army, as they needed them. They would get a duplicate set of plans from our beach master showing them where to go for everything they required for the invasion. So it worked out very well.

DePue: You know, I'm painting this mental picture in my head of what happens when you dump all these Army troops on the beach. It's got to be one of the most confusing environments that anybody could ever find themselves in, and the beach battalion was there to sort out the confusion and get people pointed in the right direction?

Palmer: Actually, we were—let's just say in charge of every invasion. The beach master himself was in charge up to the sand dune, at which time he'd turn it over to the infantry commander at the sand dune.

DePue: So he was god on the beach

Palmer: He was in charge of everything. Let's say he had the original plans. He handed them out to the Army, as well as knowing what was required at every color beach that we established.

DePue: Now, how about the obstacles that the enemy might put into the water itself. Were you responsible for clearing those out?

Palmer: Actually, whatever we could get cleared out, the hydrographic section would do that with... Oh. Anyway, we had all kinds of dynamite and ways of removing things in the way.

DePue: But from some of the readings you gave me, I know that you also worked pretty closely with engineer units when you went into some of these places?

Palmer: We were usually with a combat engineer group.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: Of course, when they came in, they had kitchens and food. And when they established the beach battalion, they did it so rapidly, they forgot a few details, like we did not have a paymaster. We did not have a kitchen or any supplies. So when we got to Africa, they dumped us out and we had to find an Army outfit that would more or less adopt us. There was only forty-eight of us in our zoo with that company. And so we got a group of Army people that would feed us and they adopted us. Actually, it turned out to be the 531st engineers who we ended up going into the invasion with, so we had a lot of doings with the engineers.

DePue: So you had a close relationship with engineers. Sounds like you had a close relationship with some ranger units, as well.

Palmer: Actually, what we did... See, when there was no invasion, we would actually be training these divisions, like the rangers, how to hit a beach. We were taught by the commandos when they came back from the up-raid how for us to hit the beach. They told us many things we didn't even want to know. But by knowing how to disperse and everything, we would take—say like the rangers that I mentioned I went into Gela, Sicily with—they were teaching us how to get in good condition. We were doing, let's say, marches and a lot of running with little field packs on our back. And they said that the reason for that was, when we went into Gela, Sicily the British would be eight miles away—or the duplicate of eight miles in kilos or however they measured it—and we would have to join the British because we couldn't swim that Mediterranean Sea.(chuckles) So they were training us, in case we had to make that trip, we could do it rapidly.

DePue: So you had British commandos who were training you how to do your duties in these beach battalions. Was that training that was going on in the United States?

Palmer: That went on at Camp Bradford in Norfolk, Virginia.

DePue: Okay, okay.

Palmer: Yeah. So they taught us bayonet and everything, because they were pretty well... Let's say they had been in it long enough and they were very good at hitting a beach rapidly and getting back away from it.

DePue: I suspect that they had your full attention most of the time, didn't they?

Palmer: Let's say I was not overly fond of learning how to use a bayonet, (both chuckle) and fortunately, I never had to.

DePue: Yeah. I read something where you talk about: they would actually train you about doing things like, the first guy to the barbed wire would throw his body down so everybody can run across it?

Palmer: Well, that I have even seen on television since I talked to you, and it was in the training. When I was in boot camp, I'd won the hundred yard dash in a track meet we had in boot camp. When I got all that training and found out that the lead men had to dive on the barbed wire and they'd use you for a bridge, I got slower and slower, (both laugh) and I just never could quite get to the barbed wire first.

DePue: Felt like your legs were in mud or something, huh?

Palmer: Well, see, the barbed wire, we wore leggings for that. And there's quite a story there, because when we left the beachhead about everyone had lost their leggings and our illustrious leader, ninety day wonder—I think he flunked out after thirty days. But anyway, he got the bright idea that if you ever lost another legging, you

better lose a leg along with it. I never forgot that. Believe me, I never forgot it. And the other officer that was with us was a fine gentleman that everyone liked, and he didn't like the other one, either.

DePue: Well, let's see if we can't get you over to the Mediterranean. I believe that you shipped out from the United States in April first of 1943?

Palmer: Right. And that was April Fools Day. Two out of the three April Fools Days—it's not my favorite day of the month or the year, because one of them was Okinawa and the other was when I left the States. And two out of three is not too good.

DePue: Do you remember the ship that you shipped out on?

Palmer: I went out on what later became a hospital ship. It was the Oh, I have it.

DePue: I think you said in the article the USS Acadia. Is that right?

Palmer: Arcadia, yeah. Arcadia. I had never been aboard a ship before and I was seasick all the way to Africa. I didn't eat much and when I got to Africa, what fascinated me: we tied up next to a French ship and they were all drinking wine. And I thought, "Why would they drink wine for lunch?" When I found out you couldn't drink their water, I figured maybe wine was better than what you would get from their water.

DePue: So where was it that you landed, then? Was it near Oran, Algeria?

Palmer: yes. It was a small dock just short of Oran and then we were trucked over to Oran for meeting our officers and getting our supplies.

DePue: And you were there for a little while, at least?

Palmer: Actually, that's when I met Mr. Birch. And he called all of the carpenter's mates to step forward and he said, "Unload the crates. All of our gear is in those crates." Let's just say I asked the wrong question. I said, "Well, Mr. Birch, how do we open the crates without any hammers or any tools?" "Well, goddamnit, you got to learn how to improvise. Use a rock." I said, "Well, I learned I can pound a nail with a rock, but never did learn how to take one out." My sense of humor got me in trouble with him several times (both chuckle) before it was over.

DePue: Now, Mr. Birch was what position to you?

Palmer: He was an ensign who was—might as well have been an admiral, because the forty-eight of us would be under his command with an Army group, and he would come out and say that the dress uniform for the day will be so and so, by the admiral's command. Well, we had no contact with the admiral. So he was something else.

DePue: So he was the senior officer in B4?

Palmer: Yes, at that time. I painted an awful lot of shovel handles and things for troubles that he thought I was getting into.

DePue: What was it like adjusting to the Arab culture, because that must have been new, as well?

Palmer: Actually, we were still aboard that ship that we went over on. When they brought a man back that... They had already told us, "When you're around an African, don't ever use a knife, because they know how to use them." And they brought a man back aboard ship that had... Let's say he had evidently smiled or something at an Arab girl and they cut him and sewed things up in his mouth. When we saw that, believe me, we learned: don't even carry a pocketknife.

DePue: Well, can you be a little bit more detailed in what it is that they put into his mouth?

Palmer: Well, the thing he uses to make babies with.

DePue: Oh.

Palmer: They cut that off and sewed it up in his—his organ—in his mouth.

DePue: Did he survive that?

Palmer: No. But they brought him back to the ship before he died.

DePue: So that was a rude awakening about the new culture that you were in?

Palmer: Well, we learned that just don't even think about Arab women. You couldn't see them anyway. They were all covered with... Actually, one of the funniest things. You'd be walking down the street and you'd see an Arab with a mattress cover marked, maybe US Navy where some sailor had sold him their mattress cover for a garment. (both laugh) And some of that went on, also.

DePue: What kind of training did you do when you first arrived in Africa?

Palmer: we were shifted from Morocco to Algiers, went all the way to Tunis. And when we were in Algiers, they had never had a Merchant Marine ship go all the way to Tunis. So they asked for volunteers for a gun crew to go aboard this liberty ship. Well, two of us volunteered, and not even knowing what we could do other than the fact they had good food aboard. So we actually went in and we sat at the table and they asked us what we wanted for breakfast, and we ate good from Algiers to Tunis. But I knew where the gun was, but I wouldn't have known how to get the cover off of it.

DePue: Let alone fire the thing, huh?

Palmer: Right. And we were fortunate enough to have no problem.

DePue: Well, I read someplace else that it was in North Africa that you experienced your first air raid.

Palmer: The first air raid was in Arzou. At that time, we moved from the pup tents into... They were actually cottages on the Mediterranean that were used for, let's say, American visitors—tourists. So we were in those. The first air raid we had, I took off without any shoes on and I went across two stubble fields, across a road, up into the hills, and it took me about an hour and a half to get back, but it didn't take me long to get there, because I had never been in an air raid before. (laughing)

DePue: Was it more painful coming back than going up?

Palmer: Oh, yes. It took me a little while to where I wanted to put my shoes on. But I figured that was the safest of two evils.

DePue: How long were you there? Well, I know that the invasion of Sicily –and this was at Gela where you landed –was on July 9th. So were you in North Africa first?

Palmer: No, no, no. It was July 15th in Gela, Sicily. July 9th was Salerno.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: Yes.

DePue: Whatever.

Palmer: It was July 15th at Gela, and then two months later, we were in Salerno...

DePue: It was September in Salerno.

Palmer: September 9th.

DePue: Okay. So let's... How long were you in Northern Africa, then, training, before you went into Gela?

Palmer: Actually, there was no training involved. We were just being part of the Army's duties with the 531st Engineers all the way through up to Tunis. All the training we ever had was what we got in Norfolk, Virginia.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: So then... Go ahead.

DePue: Go ahead and tell me a little bit about that initial landing at Gela, then.

Palmer: Well, the initial landing: I was on an [Landing Ship – Tank] going in and I was seasick again. They put us into a –actually I call them Limey –equivalent of a small boat, LCVP [Landing Ship - Vehicle – Personnel, British craft] and I was heaving over the side and the Limey, said, "Please, heave over the side, mate." But what

happened in the invasion of Gela, Sicily. the biggest problem, was sandbars. And when we pulled in first and they dropped the ramp and this ranger captain put his forty-five up in the air and he said, "Give 'em hell, men." He stepped off the ramp and the last thing I saw was the forty-five going under the water, because of the sandbar we had hit. So we actually then brought the ramp up and came in for a second landing, because the sandbars... Due to the three day storm in the Mediterranean, it was the... We had people drowning all over the place because the greatest problem was the sandbars. They'd let them out and then they'd get into deep water. And when you get in deep water with seventy some-odd pounds on your back, you couldn't swim if you had to.

So, basically, they wanted to get us far enough ashore to where we could wade in the whole distance. But I learned in that invasion never to buckle my strap again on my pack, so that if I needed to—got in deep water—all I had to do was that and the pack was gone.

DePue: Just shrug your shoulders, then.

Palmer: Right. So you learn on every invasion what's best to do on the next one.

DePue: You have to excuse my ignorance on this. But my vision of this: you're in the beach battalion. You have to kind of mark and organize the beach. So you're going in before everybody else. Or oftentimes, in this occasion, did you go in while it was still dark?

Palmer: Actually, we would go in at the same time as the combat engineers, and it was usually dark. Just before sunrise.

DePue: Before the main waves of infantry came in?

Palmer: Yes. Actually, going in in Salerno...

DePue: Well...

Palmer: When I—oh, go ahead.

DePue: In Gela, now.

Palmer: Okay, in Gela. There I learned that Darby's rangers—Colonel Darby had a solution that he figured: when you get to a machine gun nest, you don't surround it. You'll lose more men than if you charge and dive in head first. So when I got to Gela, I noticed that there were two rangers right at the machine gun nest. He figured you would lose less... And there again, you don't want to be very fast to get there first. See, the Italians were wanting to surrender, then, and they weren't wanting to fight, but they were afraid to surrender because the Germans would wipe them out if they tried to surrender and leave it all for them. So when we got to Gela, the biggest problem was, we could not get a camp large enough to hold all of those that were surrendering. I went over to see what they were doing there in Gela, and they had a

small area with prisoners in it. Then every day they were having to enlarge it because of more and more coming in.

That's where I learned that the Navy battleships and the shrapnel from a Navy gun is much more severe than an airplane. And the cruiser Boise, in my opinion, saved the whole invasion, because shortly after the invasion, General Patton—we had to go out and get him in a duck so he wouldn't get his boots wet—but he said, "Where's the..."

DePue: The duck being one of those amphibious landing craft that can crawl right onto the beach?

Palmer: No. Now, see... Actually, they had a few ducks then, but that was the first invasion where they ever had ducks, as well as the first time they ever had, oh, the gun to fire at tanks.

DePue: The bazooka?

Palmer: The bazooka. That was the first time they had that. Shortly after we got there, there was a counterattack with tiger tanks coming. [German Panzer tanks] That's when—I know now that Patton came in and he called the admiral and he told the admiral, "First of all," he said, "where's your tanks" When we said over here and we took him over and he said, "Call the admiral." So he called the admiral and he did his George C. Scott [an actor who later won an award for the Patton portrayal in the movie, *Patton*] imitation right there on the beach for us. And his language was a little bit different, but actually what would happen was, those sandbars made it impossible to get the LSTs [landing ship – tank] in far enough to get his tanks to shore. So he was telling the admiral, "I don't care if you have to beach those blankety-blank LSTs of yours. I need my tanks and I want them now." Well, he jumped in the first tank and went up the hill and I thought, "That man's nuts."

Well, at a reunion, I asked one guy, I said, "Did you see Patton?" He says, "Yes, I was at the top of the hill." "Don," he said, "all he did was jump in the first tank so he could command the tank battle that was coming up from there. He said, I asked him "how are we doing?" And he said, "Well, pretty good, son, but," he said, "we just lost the spotter plane from the Boise." And that's how I learned that the Boise pulled in shortly after. We were already told that there was a counterattack coming and have your dynamite on anything that the Germans can use. Be ready to blow it up to leave the beach. So we were ready for that when that Boise pulled in and started lobbing shells over our head. And when I saw that big *Red One* movie, I was describing to my wife what would happen next, because the Boise had already been... They got the Presidential Award for their gun crew in the Pacific before they came over to Gela, Sicily. That eyewitness was in Fundy Hospital at the top of the hill, told me... He said, "I saw those tanks coming and there were six direct hits from that Boise." He said, "Then the others turned around and went back." And one of them did get ashore and the engineers were on top of the building to throw rockets down because they didn't have the bazooka guns to fire the rockets with.

DePue: So were they able to take out some of the tiger tanks with that ship?

Palmer: Actually, there was only one that came in on that invasion. But they said there was thirteen of them in that counterattack. That Boise, in my opinion, saved the whole invasion.

DePue: Was it Italians that were right on the beach and then the Germans were right there behind them?

Palmer: Right. In other words, the Germans' tactics, regardless of what war or what beach—what invasion you were on, the ones they had just captured be between you and the German, because they had to fight, one way or the other. And there's so many things I've learned, as I say, having met the man who got the beach battalions formed.

DePue: Yeah. Can you tell me your personal experience of when you first hit the water to a couple, three hours into the beach –what you were doing on the beach itself?

Palmer: Your rating had nothing to do with what you ended up doing. It's utter confusion and you do what is necessary, which, in my opinion, is one big reason we beat the Germans, because they would only do what they were told. They weren't allowed to think for themselves. So if we ran into a situation that needed to be changed, we would change it. We would do whatever is necessary. So being a boat repairman, I never repaired one boat in any invasion I was on.

DePue: That was your rating, a boat repairman?

Palmer: I was a carpenter's mate to repair the boats at the beach so they get back to the ships.

DePue: So what did you do on the beaches of Gela?

Palmer: I unloaded five hundred pound bombs and I unloaded... Whatever was necessary is what you did, because when you hit the beach, you don't have any idea of what the conditions will be. So you react to whatever situation comes up. And believe me, you learn very rapidly what to do in the next invasion, because... As I say, our biggest problem was finding something to eat. You don't go ashore in a country that's an enemy and ask them to feed you. So we would go ashore with two K rations strapped in our pack. But when the K rations were gone, what do you eat, then? We actually had a man pass out from malnutrition. When we got back from Gela, Sicily he was standing in line and he passed out, so they unanimously voted to let the 4th Beach Battalion eat ahead of their own people, because... They had eating equipment and, let's say, a kitchen to fix things with and we didn't. They more or less adopted us. And quite a relationship in the service. You learn to respect all others for what they're doing.

DePue: And I'm sure they respected the folks in the beach battalion who are doing all that necessary preparatory work for them to be successful.

Palmer: Well, the beach battalion was in charge to make sure that everything was going as scheduled.

DePue: What kind of preparations had the enemy laid down at this particular beach where you hit?

Palmer: At Gela?

DePue: Yeah.

Palmer: What they had done, they had laid a lot of mines right at the tide. In other words, as the tide would come in. They had buried them so far below the ground because they were afraid the tide would expose them. So what trouble we did have, bulldozers and ducks and things, would go over a land mine, but it would just blow the wheel up. And the funniest thing I saw was one individual... Well, see, what happened first was what they call friendly fire. The night after our invasion, we were under a heavy bombing attack for about 45 minutes. And then what happened was the paratroopers came in at that same level, right behind the bombers. So the Navy cut loose and shot down an awful lot of those... They called this friendly fire. But anyway, they were so mad that they came back to the beach the next day and we had to convince them we couldn't shoot you down with a rifle. It was done out there. Because they were mad. They lost an awful lot of people, and their planes, as well as their _I don't know how you can ever be aboard one that you're pulling. What do you call that?

DePue: A glider?

Palmer: A glider.

DePue: Yes.

Palmer: That to me is...

DePue: That never made sense to me either.

Palmer: I wanted no part of that and I actually had a golfing friend here in Springfield that was in the paratroopers. His picture's in the *World Book*, because he was standing right next to Eisenhower when he talked to the paratroopers before they went into Normandy.

DePue: I know that picture very well.

Palmer: And he's the one standing right there and he was my golfing partner.

DePue: Wow.

Palmer: He has passed away now, but I have a calendar with his picture right on the calendar because of that.

DePue: Was the Luftwaffe active at all in Gela?

Palmer: Yes. They were very active in, actually, both through Gela and Salerno. Let's just say that we had not dominated the airspace yet. And the best looking plane I ever saw was the P-38. And the first one I saw was at Salerno. But then the P-51s were primarily the plane that was in both Gela, Sicily, as well as Salerno.

DePue: Now, I recall reading someplace that you were kind of strafed on the beach. I think that was at Gela.

Palmer: We were always strafed on the beach, all hours of the day. But they always came out of the sunshine. And, I, at that time, was keeping the book of what time the attacks came and everything for the officers. As always, they would come right out of the sunshine where you couldn't see 'em as well to shoot at 'em. But the worst one I had was in Gela, Sicily, and I was walking down the beach and I saw this *zzt!* in the sand right alongside of me, and I turned around and the only thing I could see was the pilot's eyes. I could see his eyes and I could see the wing tips firing.

DePue: Bearing down right towards you.

Palmer: Right. I always had a slip trench rather than a fox hole, because I could cover it with the waterproofing for a tank and have metal over me for fallout from ack ack or whatever on the beach. So I dove into that and they couldn't get me out of there for about thirty minutes. (both chuckle) And I saw those eyes for a long time. But what did happen was, he came over the hill and he was strafing. And when he came up to go back, the Navy shot him down. So they did shoot that one down at the beach.

DePue: You know what kind of aircraft that was?

Palmer: I have no idea, but the Focke Wulf 190 [single seat, single radial-engine fighter plane] was most of what they used. They had several versions of that plane.

DePue: Was there any bombing by the enemy?

Palmer: Oh, yes. And one of the big problems on a beachhead is, they would drop a bomb on the sand and that would just cover you and the foxhole with it. So you'd have a problem there. We lost people, had no idea where to look for them even. We knew in this one instance there in Gela that the foxhole, where it had been, and the man in it, they never did locate him. He was just buried by the overflow of the bomb sand movement.

DePue: Obviously, because of your mission, your unit is staying right there on the beach and helping other follow-on...

Palmer: We actually never left the beachhead, and then the Army combat engineers would go on and leave us with no supplies or food or anything.

DePue: That's why you got so darn hungry, huh?

Palmer: Well, I learned, believe me, how to take care of myself. I'll talk about that when we get to Southern France, how I handled it.

DePue: Okay, okay. Anything else that you wanted to mention about your experiences on Gela, itself?

Palmer: Gela, itself. We went up the beach aways to see how another fellow, friend of his, had turned out at the next beachhead. But all the way there and back was just lined with dead soldiers that had washed ashore. Because you don't have any facilities to bury them or anything until they get a burial detail, maybe three or four days later. So when they came in, then they took care of the burying of the dead.

DePue: Well, I'm going to take you back a little bit. By the time you went into Gela, you at least had that one experience of being strafed in North Africa, and that was a rude awakening, I'm sure. But what was your frame of mind while you're waiting to hit the beach at Gela? What are you thinking?

Palmer: Well, I can explain it the best because I had a general who was flying B-17s and B-29s. He said, "You will never be,"—this was at the Vet Center—" and he said, "You'll never know how frightened you can get when that ack-ack [anti-aircraft fire] is going on around you." I said, "Well, did you ever get into a small boat and then have to go ashore not knowing where the machine gun nest will be when they drop that ramp?" He said, "I never thought of that." And so we have learned a lot about what others did at the same time. So, yes, there's much respect at the Vet Center, believe me, for all branches of service.

DePue: So did you find yourself doing things out of training?

Palmer: Actually, as I say, the American ingenuity is what really won the war, because you can react to whatever is necessary and not be court martialed because of it.

DePue: Okay. What I'd like to do next is for you to take us from when the beach battalion left from Gela and those next couple of months as you're preparing to go into Salerno.

Palmer: We had nothing to do between invasions other than we might be out three nights a week on what we called a dry run. We'd go aboard ship like with the Thirty-Six Division or the First Division or the Rangers and teach them how to hit the beach. So we'd be out all night long and then we'd wade in of a morning, freeze our butt, and wait until the sun came up. So we were doing a lot of training in between of different divisions and getting to know them. But we had no duties other than we would form baseball teams and things to occupy our own time between training and invasions.

DePue: What were some of the lessons you learned? Now, you mentioned one lesson, to make sure that you're ready to get rid of your backpack when you hit the water. Do you remember any other lessons you learned from that first experience?

Palmer: The best lesson I ever learned was how to feed myself and the entire outfit in an invasion, and that was in Southern France.

DePue: Okay. Well, we'll get there pretty soon.

Palmer: Yes, right.

DePue: So let's get to Salerno, then, because I know from reading, and what you've told me, as well, that that was easily the most challenging, toughest assignment that the 4th Beach Battalion had.

Palmer: Well, see, one thing I don't like to do is compare with anyone else or compare wars. Because what takes place here may not take place ten feet away. But when we went into Salerno, our biggest problem was, in my opinion, General Clark, because he said, We will not bombard the beach with either Navy fire or airplane; we're going to surprise them. We surprised them all right. They were already set up in the hills, because we were told later that someone had sold them the plans to the invasion of Salerno, and the inhabitants that lived around there said, "Well, they definitely knew your plans, because they moved back just ahead of what the bombardment was supposed to take place, and then they moved back to the beach just before you came in." So they had the higher elevation, the foothills of the mountains and hills.

DePue: So not a good decision as far as you or the rest of the troops were concerned?

Palmer: Well, the admiral said, We will bombard the beach. and Clark said, No and he was in charge, so we did not bombard the beach. But it cost an awful lot of American lives because they didn't. One of our biggest duties was we had a doctor and we had corpsmen, and they would actually do all repair they could on the beach itself, and then they would try to establish a hospital a very short distance in for more severe before they could even get them back to the ship. So a lot of our was taking care of the wounded and getting them back aboard ship any way we could see fit.

DePue: Now, there was another surprise right before the invasion at Salerno, as well, and that was the Italian surrender. Or, excuse me, the armistice.

Palmer: Actually, what happened there was, General Eisenhower came on the loudspeaker on the ship we were on going into the invasion, September 9th in Salerno, that the Italians have surrendered as of September 1st, but they didn't want to announce it until we were ready for the invasion because of what the Germans would do to their troops and civilians. The Thirty-Six Division had never been in battle yet and they were just coming over from the States. So they got the opinion that we're going to go in and shake hands with the Italians, when we knew that would be different. And having been in Gela, Sicily, they would be between the Germans and us. And we were trying to convince them, "Don't expect one thing, because when you get there, it's going to be something different." And sure enough, when they went ashore, so many of them suffered from shell shock. Because shell shock, in my opinion, is caused by expecting one thing and then getting something 360 degrees different than that. So our medics were actually trying to get them out of their foxholes and

everything –of a division that later, believe me, was a very fine division -but in my opinion, that broadcast cost an awful lot of problems.

DePue: Well, I know that the 36th Division, which is a National Guard division from Texas, at that time at least, never had a very warm and cordial relationship with Mark Clark for the rest of the war.

Palmer: Well, good, because I didn't, either. Well, I went to a reunion in San Antonio at the invitation at the Division. They had voted unanimously to invite the Fourth Beach Battalion, who had trained them, to come to their reunion. So that was quite a story in itself. (chuckles)

DePue: I wonder if we can get the picture of the map of Salerno here, and you can talk about exactly where on the Salerno beachhead that your particular organization was.

Palmer: We were on the left flank on Red Beach. There is a World War II book that these pictures are taken from. And it said there that Robert Birch landed with twenty-five men on Red Beach. What happened was...

DePue: This would be the arrows that are coming out from the 36th Division there on the right flank of the beach?

Palmer: Right.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: What probably saved my life was, the patrol boat met us before dark and they stopped us and they said, "It's too hot and heavy. We're not going to invade right now, so go back to your ship." Our coxswain took us to shore and dumped us out. Well, that probably saved my life, because the Germans didn't know we were there. And we were there when the first and second waves came in and the eighty-eights were just cutting them up.

DePue: What time would you have landed on the beach?

Palmer: Probably around six o'clock a.m.

DePue: Was it light by that time?

Palmer: No, no. It was dark.

DePue: It was still dark.

Palmer: In fact, the Navy got word that the first and second wave had been wiped out and the beach battalion, so the destroyers pulled in and started shelling the beach. There were German tanks and then the minefield and then the beach here. Well, the Germans couldn't get through the minefield because of their own mines, and they're

shelling back and forth with the destroyers, and we're on the beach and they don't know it. So what happened was, this one Army man, he yelled, "Don't you have a signal man?" And the signal man said, "Yes, but my signal gun is broken and I don't have any flags." And he said, "Well, I've got a handkerchief. Would that help?" So Fred Binglan(?) took two handkerchiefs and wig-wagged running down the beach. He was put in and received a silver star, and that's the only medal that was ever given to the beach battalion, because the Army gave it to us and the Navy couldn't stop it.

DePue: What, the Navy chain of command normally frowned on getting medals?

Palmer: Well, they said we were just doing our job. Of course, that man also might have wanted to become an admiral later.

DePue: So even the ships out in the—the American ships, obviously—they didn't know there were any troops on the beach?

Palmer: No. And proof of that is: I was in charge of a lot of our reunions, contacting other people and I got a phone call from California one day—this was after we'd had several reunions—and he said, "How can you have a reunion when you were wiped out in Salerno?" I said, "I've heard that once before. Now, you tell me your side of it." He said, "I was in the Fourth Beach Battalion. I was a truck driver and we'd been loading the ships for about ten days, and they said, 'You're so tired. You'll be no good on an invasion. We'll leave you here in Iran and then when we come back, you can join us again.'" They got word that the Fourth Beach Battalion had been wiped out, so they went to the Navy Department. They said, "Yes, they have, and they were reassigned to ships." (both laughing) So even the Navy didn't know what was going on. So yes. I run into that twice about being wiped out. The other one was after I got in the Pacific.

DePue: So during the time that you're on the beach, and nobody knows that you're on the beach except you guys who are on the beach, and there's only, I assume, a few score of people. Was it your particular B-4 and some rangers that were with you or engineers that were with you?

Palmer: It was combat engineers. There were just the two groups until later, after dawn, when they started coming in, and then they just got cut up awfully bad.

DePue: During that time, were you just hunkered down or were you actually doing some preparatory work?

Palmer: We were hunkered down, because if you raised up, their machine guns would... They found out we were there after a while after daylight. So yes. You couldn't do anything but hug the beach because the sand dune covered us and their machine guns.

DePue: And you didn't actually have any kind of heavy weapons to defend yourself, either, did you?

Palmer: I had a Springfield 03 rifle.

DePue: Was that pretty much what everybody had?

Palmer: Actually when we went through boot camp –or rather, we joined the boot camp in Norfolk –and they went over to Springfield, Massachusetts, and got the Springfield rifles from World War I. And they were in cosmoline [wax-like rust preventive] (both chuckle) and we had to clean the cosmoline. And some of us got rifles, some of us got tommy guns, [sub-machine guns] which were good for shooting ducks. But the best weapon for the beach battalion was a Springfield rifle because there was so much problems with snipers. So you can fire very accurately with a Springfield rifle, and I had an experience with that on a bell tower in Southern France.

DePue: So what was your thinking when you're on the beach? You guys obviously dug whatever kind of foxholes that you could dig, I would guess. And then you're watching waves of Americans come in and just get hit with the worst that the Germans could throw at them.

Palmer: There was so many beaches involved and you were only aware of one beach at a time. So what we saw in that book that was written by the beach master about Salerno, he said, "What ever happened to the first and second waves?" He said, "I was to be in the third wave, and when we got through the smoke, the first and second wave were gone. What happened to them?" Well, that's where the eighty-eights were cutting them up and sinking them, right out there in the Mediterranean Sea, because they could see them then and an eighty-eight just tear them up. See, that was originally an anti-aircraft gun, developed for that, and then changed into... It was the most far- reaching... That one screamed at you.

DePue: Were you watching while these first and second wave were being cut up, then? Were you personally watching that?

Palmer: I could only see one beach. I know what happened to them because I saw it happen. But one thing that I think is worthy of your time and story... On the beachhead, while we were there before the Germans knew we were there, I was following this one officer, and another man was digging his foxhole. So I figured wherever he's safe, I'm going to be safe, and I was following him and I was digging my own. So I had so many foxholes. But he called his sergeant over and he said, "Go put up a barrage balloon." And I thought, "Don't ever put up a barrage balloon because..." Well, I was right in my thinking, because the sergeant went over, and as soon as the barrage balloon cleared the sand dunes, the eighty-eights, one over, one under, and then one right in the middle, and the sergeant came back and he said, "Sir, I lost all my men." And he said, "What do you mean, you lost all your men? You're here to report it to me." He said, "Sir, I think someone a little higher up than you had something to do with that." Now, try to top that for an answer.

DePue: Now, the barrage balloons... The initial order went up to prevent aircraft from strafing?

Palmer: Right. But they can shoot them down so rapidly. If they don't know you're there, don't give them a clue, like, "Here's a barrage balloon. Now, where did this come from?"

DePue: Yes.

Palmer: And that was when they learned we were there already.

DePue: So during the actual landing, were there German aircraft strafing and bombing, as well?

Palmer: We were very much under strafing all day long. You never knew. And bombing. I was very fortunate on the beach. I had something hit me in the waist and I felt it and I reached down and picked it up and it was hotter than the devil. It was shrapnel, and I was far enough away to where it just hit me and dropped down on the ground.

DePue: Any idea of what it was to begin with?

Palmer: Yeah. They were dropping shrapnel bombs right on the beachheads, and they would explode before they hit the ground.

DePue: I know also that you were involved with putting together a road, so to speak.

Palmer: That was only necessary because the combat engineers were putting a road... The trucks and tanks and so forth couldn't really maneuver in sand. The German tanks had keepers on so that the tracks wouldn't come off. But the American tanks, the tracks would come off and then you're dead. So the combat engineers were trying to get a mesh highway, a road, across the sand dune and they started at the sand dune working towards the beach. All of a sudden they already had their wire mesh unrolled and they had stakes and all the equipment and they were laying a road, and then all of a sudden they left, and I thought, "Well, the eighty-eights scared them away." So I had already more or less timed the sequence between the eighty-eights starting all over again on their... They would fire and then come back and do the same thing again.

DePue: What, they were sweeping the beach front?

Palmer: They were sweeping the beach, just from one end to the other, beachhead. So what I would do is I would get out of my foxhole and I would take one stake and unroll the mesh just about a foot and put a stake in the ground and then be back in my foxhole. So I found out later that the reason the combat engineers had left was there were tiger tanks coming up the beach and they were called to stop them, because that was a little more important, they thought, than the other. So they had not been scared away, they were just given different duties. So your beach master is in charge of making sure that the right thing's done at the right time.

DePue: But there is another example of your just taking the initiative on yourself, that if that mesh is going to get down, you're going to have to be the one that does it.

Palmer: Well, it says in that book that the Navy laid the road. So it's to everyone's advantage, if you can get that road down, to get your tanks and stuff in. It's your own advantage to see that they get a road to do it with. So you're not thinking of trying to get a medal or anything. You're thinking that I want that road finished, and if I got to do it, I'll do it myself.

DePue: Yes. And you were put in for a medal for that?

Palmer: I was put in for it. There was a Lieutenant Ruprich(?). He was a full lieutenant. He was the one in the story about Salerno that had observed this road being done. So I was walking across the drill field. Usually, we're not all together. Only about two times did we ever be all companies at the same base at the same time, and that time, he was there and I had never met the man or seen him before. I was walking across the drill field and he said, "Sander, what's your name, rank, and serial number?" I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, I think you're the young man that I saw that was laying the road in Salerno." I said, "Well, I laid the road but I didn't know whether you saw me or not." He said, "Well, I want you to know I'm putting you in for the silver star, because I think that was a little above and beyond." So anyway, I found out later he put himself in for the Congressional Medal of Honor, so it might have been a little bit to do with why I didn't get a medal, either.

DePue: But your chain of command said no, huh?

Palmer: Actually, I was told that the commanding officer would not approve any medals that were put in for by other officers, either.

DePue: Did you have some incidents involving friendly fire at Salerno?

Palmer: Actually, the only incident that I remember with planes and so forth was, they told us that the P-51s were—is this what you have in mind?—the P-51s were going to come in, and not to shoot them down because they were going to try to land at an airport just shortly from the beachhead. So they came over the beach and there were thirteen of them, and all of a sudden, one of them pulled out of rank and shot another one down. So we on the beach thought, Hey, whose side is he on? What had happened—I learned later—was, we went back and sure enough, it was a German pilot, had a plane with the wing markings for Gela, Sicily, and that's when I learned that the wing markings are different for every invasion. The pilot had noticed that it was a captured plane, so he shot down the one ahead of him, and it was a German in a plane that was just scouting and was reporting back..

DePue: Well, that's a gutsy move, to shoot down one of your own aircraft.

Palmer: Well, it's a little unusual, so we took off for the airport to find out just what did happen, because that I had never seen before.

DePue: The doctors that you took with you: I assume that they got busy not just taking care of your personnel, but all kinds of injured that were on the beach?

Palmer: Souvenir hunters became quite a problem. Because, see, your Merchant Marine... We had a bunch of them come ashore, and they did not know about booby traps or mines or anything. All they were interested in was souvenirs. So they would come ashore and they'd be warned, "Now, don't do this and don't do that," but all they cared was, I've only got a couple of hours ashore and I'm going to get some souvenirs. Well, one group, they came in—that was in Southern France and right on the beach they took off and we saw... I've got a picture of this landmine going off. They had tripped a Navy shell by hitting a wire and... Let's say... They weren't Merchant Marines anymore. We had learned, don't look for souvenirs, because they're not worth it. And in the other place, how would you carry them?

DePue: Yes.

Palmer: Everything you owned is on your back, so you don't want to load yourself down with a little additional weight.

DePue: Did your doctors get involved with helping people out who got themselves injured that way?

Palmer: Actually, they were treating both enemy people, as well as civilians, or whatever the need be.

DePue: Now, you mentioned at Gela there was a lot of Italians that were surrendering. Did you have any Italians surrendering at Salerno?

Palmer: Salerno? At Salerno, we did not have any prisoners. Yes, we did. We still were taking prisoners in Salerno. But the biggest problem with prisoners is it takes too many people. If you take prisoners and you have to have a place to keep them, you have to have a lot of men guarding that place, and it takes away from the personnel's regular job. So before the war was over, there were actually orders put out, "There will be no prisoners taken for the first forty-eight hours," because when they went into Normandy, by that time, they knew that they could not take them prisoner and be successful.

DePue: How about casualties? Did your immediate organization suffer some casualties in Salerno?

Palmer: Well, every invasion you have casualties, but then you get replacements for the next invasion.

DePue: Of those forty-some people in B-4, how many ended up being casualties at Salerno? Do you recall any of that?

Palmer: Well, an awful lot of our company was aboard an LST that got torpedoed in the Mediterranean, and a lot of them were blown over the ship and some of them even

pulled through the screw. So there were an awful lot of casualties there, as well as you would lose some on every invasion. But I could not give you any figure of what...

DePue: Did you see some yourself?

Palmer: Oh, yes. Some of them were actually accidents. And the first one we lost was before we went in an invasion and the ramp had stuck on an LCVP and they were out practicing blowing up obstacles and things, and the officer told him, he said, "Well, just jump up there and pull the ramp down." Well, when he did, he made the mistake of going through the opening in the ramp, and the ramp fell and crushed him. So that kind of mistake is... That was our first casualty.

DePue: I wonder if you'd be willing to share your worst moment on Salerno.

Palmer: On Salerno? Actually, you get to a place where you're just more or less numb. You don't have the same feelings... Let's say after about seventeen months of either being in an invasion or practicing for one, you get to a point where this is not going to ever end, so you just get mad to a degree that... I think that's part of the training, is they want you to find the man across the street... In other words... I can explain it best this way. One of our men was forty-two years old and he wanted to become a chief petty officer. He made the mistake of making –not a mistake –but he made the statement that sometimes these officers don't come back from invasions. On the next invasion in Salerno, he came in driving a truck three days after the invasion and with no weapon. So there's more of that that goes on than what is publicized. At the Vet Center, they'll ask us, "What did you do if your officer did something that you thought might cost you your life?" And the first answer given was, "I would knock him on his ass," which is a little bit different than a German would do. So we would only do what we felt was to our best and when I get to Southern France, I can show you how I took care of myself and the whole company.

DePue: Well, you've mentioned that a couple of times. So are there any other things that you'd like to tell us about your experiences at Salerno, then?

Palmer: The main thing about Salerno was, now that I know what the plans originally were; they were supposed to land at Salerno and be in Naples by ten o'clock the next morning. That would be the infantry and combat engineers. Well, on the seventeenth is when they finally brought in the—seventeenth of September, we had gone in on the ninth –they brought in the 45th Division instead of leaving the beachhead as Clark wanted done. And so the fighting –according to that article that's in the magazine –was still two miles from the beachhead on the seventeenth when we went in, and they were supposed to be in Naples forty miles away by ten o'clock the next morning. So it tells the difference between what the plans originally were and how it turned out to be. So I think our General Clark had quite a bit to do with that.

DePue: Now, I know that you weren't involved with Anzio, which is the next major landing up the spine of Italy. What happened to your organization, then, after Salerno?

Palmer: After Salerno, we were told that the admiral was asked to send us to England for the invasion of Normandy. And he said, "No." He said, "I'm going to send the Second Beach Battalion up there, and the sixth, because the Fourth Beach Battalion gave me ten beachheads in Salerno and they couldn't give me one. So I'm keeping them here for Southern France with me when I go into Southern France." So I was not unhappy to hear why we did not go to England.

DePue: I believe that your organization ended up in Naples, kind of to recuperate and get replacements?

Palmer: No, not really Naples. Actually, the main objective in an invasion is to find a harbor where you can unload supplies. In other words, when you land on a beach, you're unloading all of this by hand. So once they got to Naples, that was the objective, to use the harbor, but they found out that the Germans had even driven trains into the harbor to prevent us from being able to use it as an unloading place against them. So the 4th Beach Battalion was sent there, along with the combat engineers, to help clean out the harbor to get it ready for unloading.

DePue: So these pictures of this bivouac area –you're in tent city, looks like –are those in the Naples area when you're doing the cleaning out?

Palmer: Actually...

DePue: I wonder if we can see a couple of those photos? One of them is of you and your tent mate.

Palmer: Now, that... Yes, that's the fellow that came into my tent and asked if we had a person by my name there, and I said, "You know damn good and well we do, because you're talking to me." And he was a good friend of my brother's, but I had changed slightly.

DePue: What was that gentleman's name?

Palmer: Len Metz(??). And he's still alive here in Springfield.

DePue: And that's the one in the center there?

Palmer: Yes.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: And he was the best friend of my brother. He was looking for me because he had heard that I was... In fact, we were at the same place at the same time several times in the Atlantic.

DePue: So you were in the Naples area to clean out that harbor and to try to get that operational again?

Palmer: Well, the beach battalion was. I was not one of them because I was in a military hospital. My eyes had swollen up and my glands had been stopped. My tear glands weren't operating. So I was put in a field hospital for a period of time to get the sand... They said I was spending too much time in the sand. I did, too. But it took a week or so to get the tear glands opened up. They were doing that while I was in there.

DePue: Okay. And then the next operation is Southern France.

Palmer: Right.

DePue: So I think there's another couple of pictures of you on shipboard and the one especially where you're right in the center of the photo, if we can find that one. There you are.

Palmer: Now, that's in the World War II magazine that I have here.

DePue: The article that was written about—

Palmer: Salerno.

DePue: —the Salerno landing.

Palmer: Right.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: And that was aboard a ship. Now, I had that picture taken, and it was in the magazine just to show the people that I was in the Navy, but you couldn't tell it by the way I was dressed. So you can see my rifle and everything there, and I do have the ship's log in my hand there for taking down the time of every air raid and so forth.

DePue: And that item that's on your left foot, next to your left foot? It's a radio?

Palmer: That's a radio. It was just equipment that was sitting there. I had nothing to do with it.

DePue: That's a pretty large radio to be toting around on the beach, I would think.

Palmer: I was not part of that.

DePue: Okay.

Palmer: We had radiomen, we had signal men, we had carpenters, everything required ship-to-shore.

DePue: And this is a photo that was taken immediately prior to the Southern France landing?

Palmer: Right. I had them take the picture just to send home how I was dressed, rather than my dress blues.

DePue: Okay. And I think the next photo, this one right here, is also a shot that was probably taken from the same timeframe?

Palmer: Yes. That's an LST that I was on when they took that picture.

DePue: Okay. So let's go to the next one, which is a map of Anvil, which is the code name for the Southern France landings. Where exactly did your unit land on the beach?

Palmer: Where we landed was probably three or four miles from the city of Saint Tropez. And it was an area that was just more or less like... It had been a forest, and they had cut all the trees down for the sake of having machine gun available for firing at anyone that might want to land there.

DePue: So was that anything like the Salerno landing, in terms of enemy resistance?

Palmer: Very little resistance in Southern France, because by then Normandy had already landed. And I know now what I did not know then. They had to keep unloading in Normandy until we could open up a harbor in Southern France to unload and take the load off of them so they could go back to their base.

DePue: Yes. Of course, they had built those gigantic Mulberry harbors that got beat up in a couple of storms in the North Atlantic, as well. So I can see the need for Southern France to provide another way of getting supplies in.

Palmer: Yes. Well, that's when they brought Patton in and they started up and cutting off Germany. They had them then. They were coming in to meet and then they had all of these Germans surrounded.

DePue: Yes. The Ruhr pocket I think is what you're talking about there.

Palmer: Whatever.

DePue: Yes. Okay. The initial landing was, as your experience goes, relatively uneventful?

Palmer: The only things that we had: they did have some snipers in the trees, but they had no resistance other than that. When we got to Saint Tropez I went into this building and it was a Navy barracks for the Germans, and their breakfast was still on the table. So I thought, "They have not had time to booby-trap anything, so I got all of my souvenirs, a *Mein Kampf*, as well as different small items of buttons and things, flags, and things that I could use for souvenirs. But they didn't have time to mine anything or booby-trap.

DePue: Well, this must be where the story of self-reliance and taking care of yourself comes in.

Palmer: Well, what I had learned: my biggest problem was food, or lack of it. In Salerno, in fact, I got so hungry that I found a carton of Carnation milk. I drank three cans with no water in it; try to do that today. So I figured food is a problem. So when we got into Saint Tropez, I got a hotel room right on the beachhead, and I made myself a clipboard, and I went down to the dock and took charge. So every small boat that came in, whether it be an LCVP [Landing Craft – Vehicle, Personnel] or whatever, I would ask them what they had and they would tell me. And I also had one of our trucks. So I was loading good food on our truck, and I ended up with... Let's just say we had natives walking away with cans of coffee in canteen cups. I had bacon, I had everything. In fact, I confiscated –I forget how many –actually, there were barrels of cognac and they came in for the French officers. So what I did, I had them put all of those aside and we were using cognac for cigarette lighter fluid, or anything that they needed fire. And I had fruit juice, so we had fruit juice with cognac in it.

In fact, we built our own mess hall in that hotel. I cut a dutch door out of the one side, and then we made a kitchen in there, and then we made a mess hall out here, and there were no officers invited. So we had our own kitchen and own equipment. And I had enough to where we could get... By going to a bakery and giving them supplies... I would give them an equal amount, and then they would bake fresh bread for us and give it to us in return for supplies that they could make loaves of bread and be in business.

DePue: Was this a military bakery or a local bakery?

Palmer: Local bakery. We would go and give them the supplies. They were very happy to do that, because they hadn't... We went on a liberty, over the hill, of course, when we were off duty after the invasion of Southern France into Cannes and everywhere. So we went into a restaurant to see what we could get to eat and the restaurant owner said, "Well, I've got one tomato. I'll be happy to share it with you." That's all the food he had. And they were so hard up at that time in the war that if you had a dog, you better keep it in the camp, because there were no dogs in Italy. They ate 'em.

DePue: And France the same thing?

Palmer: Right. So your pets you had to keep under control or they were gone.

DePue: Did you have much association with Italian civilians?

Palmer: I had none. I couldn't speak Italian.

DePue: But you had some experiences with French civilians?

Palmer: I didn't have any experience, other than this one pup tent buddy of mine. He had met a girl, so we went to her house and drank some wine. I learned a little French, because one of our guys was going to marry a girl in Africa, a French girl. So he was wanting to learn French, and he had me take the book. I still have all these copies... Every invasion, they give us a book of the customs of that country so that we will be able to speak the language just to get basics that we need. First, I made the mistake in Saint Tropez. The guy came in and said, (odd syllables) and I thought he wanted a cigarette. He wanted a truck to unload his... We had bombed his hotel and he wanted to clean (the) lobby out. And so a Frenchman told me, "He's asking for a truck. He don't want a Camel." So these books were very limited and I found that out when I got home.

There's a fellow that married a French girl, so he invited us over to meet her when he came back. And so I pulled my French on her. I said, "Allez-vous le cabernet." And she started laughing. I said, "What are you laughing at?" She said, "That's a dirty word for bathroom." I don't know. I just got it out of a book. I didn't know the difference. (both laughing_

DePue: And probably the person who put together the book didn't either, huh?

Palmer: Right. That's what I say. But it was just... If you were thirsty, how do ask for a drink of water, or a bathroom, or what you would need to get by talking. They did not want us insulting the inhabitants of that country. We were representing the country.

DePue: How did you manage to keep in touch with your parents and folks back home while you're doing all of this?

Palmer: Actually, they knew where I was because my father's middle name was Oren. Oren. or Horan??

DePue: Oh, wow.

Palmer: So I merely wrote home and said, "You should have no trouble finding where I landed, because it's very similar to my father's middle name." So they got a map and found out Oran in North Africa.

DePue: Oh, because otherwise these kinds of things might be censored out in a letter?

Palmer: They were censored, right. You could not write. They did not want anybody to know where any outfit was, because it would help the Germans in there know what they needed in different areas.

DePue: Is there anything else you wanted to mention about going in to Southern France, Saint Tropez? I know we've got a couple of pictures there.

Palmer: Yes. This trawler came in four days after the invasion. And they were French commandoes.

DePue: I believe you got a picture of that.

Palmer: Yes. There's the ship they came in on, four days late. So all of the French people broke out their champagne, dug it up and everything, and treating them like they're heroes, and there's the commandoes that were aboard that ship. You can see, I marked it, "French D, plus four, commandoes." D-day plus four. Then the French navy came in. I found out that they had been in New York Harbor dating and marrying American girls and the Red Cross were paying them the differential between the French Navy and the American Navy, and they're over there while we're fighting in France. It got so bad in Saint Tropez that the admiral put out orders, "There will be no liberty in Saint Tropez for the 4th Beach Battalion because..." Let's say that we did not care for what we were doing versus what they should be doing.

DePue: So you didn't have a real high regard for the French commandoes or just the way it was played out?

Palmer: Actually, the French people themselves were so indifferent. We would ask, "Now, are you happy that the Americans have come over and taken it away from the Germans?" They said, "It don't make any difference." [in French – "C'est le guerre." Literally, "That's war."] Be a war on anyway, and somebody's going to rule us, so what difference does it make to us whether they're Germans or Frenchmen. And a good story about that... At the Vet Center, we have a man that was in the Battle of the Bulge. He had a friend that was engaged to a German girl and he was engaged to a French girl. Can you imagine going home and having a Thanksgiving dinner with a German, and having... The marriages, of course, were going on. And the Germans would be in charge of this town today, and then the Americans the next day. So they were getting engaged in the same town, the same people. Wow, what a relationship for future families.

DePue: Well, that's amazing. But you don't hear the stories about Americans marrying Arab girls?

Palmer: I never saw any of that. Well, first of all, you had no idea about what an Arab woman looked like, because they were completely covered and they had to keep their faces hidden.

DePue: Yes. Did you have, at any time during this practically a year or more that you were in the Mediterranean region, did you have any kind of R&R or leave?

Palmer: No. We were there for seventeen and a half months, and then we were given a thirty day leave at home and then sent to the Pacific, because they broke up the beach battalions after the last invasion in Europe.

DePue: Yes. I was going to say, after Southern France, there's not much of a need for beach battalions in Europe anymore.

Palmer: It was all over, so...

DePue: So at that point in time, they sent you to the States for a thirty days leave?

Palmer: At which time, I was to report to Oceanside, California, which is just practically across the road from Camp Pendleton. We were then broken up and assigned to whatever the need was, and I ended up on an APA [Attack Personnel Transport ship]. And that was the first time I had heard that I had been wiped out in Salerno.

DePue: Oh.

Palmer: There were four of us from the beach battalion that went aboard the same ship, and I was the senior and I had the records. So when we went aboard ship, I handed them to the officer of the deck, and he looked at them, and he said there was a mistake here. I said, "What do you mean, a mistake? That's what they gave me." He said, "I was an officer on the USS Lyon during the invasion of Salerno. It says you were in the beach battalion. They were wiped out in Salerno." I said, "Well, there's four of us here are very happy to say you're wrong." And so that was the first time I had heard that we... He said, "Well, I was an officer aboard that before I was transferred over here."

DePue: Anything that sticks in your memory now about the thirty days leave you had?

Palmer: Actually, I didn't wear a uniform, I merely wore my skivvies, my regular clothes.

DePue: Came back to Springfield?

Palmer: Yes. And just to show you the difference between walking down the street in Berlin, or in Springfield, one of my souvenirs was a Navy German uniform. So I went downtown with a German uniform, walked all through Springfield, got a haircut with the swastika on my—and never was asked one question. I wouldn't try that if you were an American in Berlin.

DePue: No.

Palmer: They knew the difference.

DePue: Did you find it kind of a strange environment, to be back in civilian life after being in combat for so long?

Palmer: Well, not really, because... See, World War II was different than what they do nowadays, because it was a family affair, just like the war picture that they just had. Because you had rationing. The people here were doing without in order to have what you needed over there. So when I came back, I actually used gas stamps and so forth to drive my dad's car while I was on leave. Nowadays, you don't have the whole country involved in a world war. You have different groups of people that all feel different about everything that's going on.

DePue: So you personally didn't have any difficulties in adjusting from being in combat to not being in combat, being back in Springfield?

Palmer: No. See, after, say, three and a half years of wasting your life, you wanted to go back to work and get a job and get away from it. So when we first got back, well, much like my son or daughter would ask me, "What did you do during World War II?" I said, "It wasn't in my history book." But now I realize that the history books are so screwed up that maybe we can change something before... Because the people who wrote the history books weren't there.

DePue: Which is one of the reasons we need to do this kind of thing.

Palmer: Right. Exactly. We do have a group at the Vet Center of combat engineers that go in at the invitation of high schools. I asked this morning—I was at Vet Center meeting—would they... See, they're not allowed to advertise. Here is a group that can help people with flashbacks, but they're not allowed to let the people know that. They can't advertise. I can do the advertising and the federal government can't cut their paycheck off.

So we are actually at the invitation of high school history teachers, going in to high schools, and to me, that's the most valuable thing we can do, and I enjoy it very much, because we will take one individual from every branch of the service. I have learned now what World War II was, instead of what took place in one area. I know what the Air Corps was doing when I was doing this. The first five minutes, each individual will merely explain what his duties were for five minutes, and then we turn it over to the students to ask questions. Now they know who to ask questions that's been in their minds all their life. "What did they do this for and what did they do that for?" We also are learning just how accurate the history teachers are, because the first question that we were asked at one of the local high schools, girl got up and she said, "Did any of you ever get a Dear John letter?" And I think the only thing they knew about history was what they see in the movies.

Believe me, the Vet Center has made an effort to learn the difference between a movie and what was real life. Because they use us to learn how to treat Vietnam veterans. In fact, they rented the *Private Ryan* [movie] and she showed just the beach scene. Then they ask every individual there, "Is that a movie or is that real?" So they were learning from that how... He said, "I am learning now, from you, how to treat those..." He said, "You people have a sense of humor. They don't. And they compare wars and you don't." Well, to me, you cannot ever compare even one invasion with another because you don't know what happened ten feet away.

DePue: Well, maybe I shouldn't ask this question, but did you find that beach landing scene in *Saving Private Ryan* fairly accurate from your perspective?

Palmer: First of all, they showed a group of German prisoners, so I answered that first of all. I said, "No, that's a movie, because all of that noise and everything, people yelling at each other, don't take place." Because if you're on the beach and you hear a noise and you don't know where it's coming from, you'll shoot at it. So, in fact, the story that a man told me here who's still in a wheelchair that was in a beach battalion on Normandy, and he told me... He said, "I'm going to tell you a funny

story. We landed, and it only took five minutes until the war was over for me. I was a signalman. And when we got ashore there was another tank coming up the beach and I tried to get the signalman's word, 'Stop the tank.' I kept signaling and he couldn't get the signal. A little later, I learned that I was close enough to him to talk to him. You just don't dare, because if you hear a noise that you don't know what it is or where it came from, shoot at it, because..."

DePue: Well, that sounds like this would have been in darkness, during darkness.

Palmer: Well, see, most invasions took place in the dark.

DePue: Well, for the beach battalions –who were the first ones on the beach and prepping things –that's obviously the case, where it's in the darkness. And that gets awfully confusing, I would think, too.

Palmer: Well, I can take either side, because they can't see you and you can't see them. But by the same token, you can't very well see a red flag, if it's marking red beach one or red beach two. So certain things have to take place after the dawn in order for it to work.

DePue: Okay. Now, I know when we initially talked about this, you wanted to spend the bulk of our discussion here on your experiences in the beach battalion. Going back to the United States after... This would have been early forty-four now, was mid-forty-four, wasn't the end of the war for you. You went out to the Pacific and were at Mindoro and were also participating in landings in Okinawa, but apparently not in a beach battalion?

Palmer: Actually, we had a beach battalion: one small boat, one group. But they operated different in the Pacific. They had broken up all of the beach battalions that were in Europe. Some of them were training for beach battalions if we went into Japan. They were still in Hawaii training for the invasion of Japan when the war ended. But no. Actually, on APA... I did not go in on the landings.

DePue: APA being?

Palmer: Amphibious personnel attack. So what we did... We would take troops in and we would have many LCVPs, LCMs, [Landing Craft – Mechanized] and whatever equipment necessary to take the troops and their equipment into the beach. There would be a rendezvous area and all of these would be making one trip after another taking troops in that were there for different waves and different times. So I was very happy to say that I watched them leave and watched them come back, because it's not much fun going in not knowing what you're going to see when that ramp goes down.

DePue: Yes. So how was the food on the APA, Don?

Palmer: I went back to eating again. (DePue chuckles) Your body will tell you what to eat. Because when I went overseas, I wouldn't eat greens, I wouldn't eat lettuce. I got

overseas and I started craving everything that I didn't like before I went in the service. So if you listen to it, it will tell you. This is what you need. And believe me, I believe very strongly that you are what you eat and I have learned accordingly.

DePue: You obviously recall that day when you heard the news that there was the end of the war in Europe. What was your reaction to that?

Palmer: See, we got word that the atom bomb had been dropped. I came home for a three day leave. Actually, it was a liberty, but I had, let's say, a man that had been a Navy court reporter before he joined the Navy, and he knew Navy law and how to make out liberties. In other words, I had three brothers that were going to be home at the same time and I wanted to come home when they were. All three were in the service. So they were having a picnic out at Lake Springfield. So I went to this yeoman and I said, "You know, I would like to get a three day pass." He said, "Well, you can't go that far on three days, but," he said, "I can help you." I said, "How can you do that?" He said, "Well, you go ask for a liberty to go in and get a loan in order to fly home." And I said, "Well, I've got the money." He said, "I said do this." So he started my special liberty at a certain time, and I was in Saint Louis when my leave started at eight o'clock that morning, I was in Saint Louis at seven o'clock that morning on special liberty. I had two and a half days at home because of this yeoman's experience. Believe me, he was so good they had to transfer him off the ship, because he was fighting for everything that went wrong aboard ship that the officers did not even know Navy law. So he would take their case and he won every one of them. So finally they had to transfer him because...

One of the funniest ones was he was down in the ship's office one night and the officer of the deck called down, said, "Bring me my record. I'm the officer of the deck. I'd like to see it." He said, "I'm sorry, Sir, I won't do that." He said, "I'm the officer of the deck and if you don't bring it to me, I'll put you on report." He said, "Well, then, put me on report." So they put him in court martial, and the captain—a full captain, mind you, because he was on drugs and so forth, and on an APA instead of an aircraft carrier—he asked this yeoman "Is it true that you refused to show him his records?" He said, "Yes, Sir, I did." He said, "And why would you do that?" He said, "Well, as you well know, Captain, no officer is allowed to see his records without your special permission. You know that." And the captain turned to the man and he said, "Don't you know that?" He said, "You ought to know that." And so he was getting in their hair, believe me.

DePue: So I take it a captain is not normally the commander of an APA?

Palmer: No, not exactly. He actually turned our ship broadside instead of hitting head on in a storm in the Aleutians, and tore the stanchions loose at the deck.

DePue: Ooh.

Palmer: And they actually took him and locked him in his stateroom and put back hitting the waves head-on because he was something else.

DePue: Even a landlubber like me knows not to do that.

Palmer: Well... Yes.

DePue: Well, we need to probably close this up. You say you remember the dropping of the atomic bomb?

Palmer: It was on my father's birthday, the first one. To us, we wouldn't be here if it had not been for the atom bomb. And I've even had some of the Japanese now even will admit that, because if we had gone into Japan, just think how many hundreds of thousands of Japanese would have lost their lives in the invasion, as well as –they figured as many as one million on the invasion –of American lives. So the A-bomb, in my opinion, saved lives rather than taking lives.

DePue: How do you think this whole experience, especially being in the beach battalion—and obviously, it wasn't your idea necessarily to be in a beach battalion –but did that experience change your outlook? Did it change you?

Palmer: Actually, all I did was grow up. And when I went in, I was very backward and so forth, and all of a sudden I realized, nobody is going to take care of you but you. So I swung about 360 degrees and I became... If anybody is going to get hurt, it's not me, it's going to be you. And I adopted that. And believe me, I could be one way or the other, and I found that the second way was the most successful for me. My aunt had a grandson that was going to be drafted and she was so worried about how he would turn out. And I told her, I said, "Don't worry about him. He's already been raised. All he's got to do now is put it to work," because you learn at a much younger age. The military's not going to change him, it's merely going to make him be that much sooner than he would have been otherwise.

DePue: Now, your generation especially, fighting in World War II, you sacrificed a lot. And you personally sacrificed a lot. Do you think that sacrifice was worth it?

Palmer: At that time, definitely. There was no choice. If I was here, I would probably speak in German or Japanese had it not been for World War II. Because I know what was going on and I know what the Japanese philosophy was. We were going to be garbage and so forth. So what the Germans did, I think, had to be stopped and it went much further than it should have before America entered. I think it would have been much better if we started sooner. Let's say that Germany got too many things given to them that we would not have allowed them to have. Let's say the minister of Britain was giving them everything else to keep them from coming across the English Channel.

DePue: The prime minister, yes. Chamberlain, yes.

Palmer: Right.

DePue: Here's your last question, then, Don. What advice would you give to your children, your grandchildren, or future generations?

Palmer: About what?

DePue: Any advice in general. How to conduct their lives now that you've got...

Palmer: Actually, you merely raise them up to a point and you have to accept and don't try to control their life. Turn them loose and you'll be surprised how they turn out.

DePue: Okay. Any final comments, then, Don?

Palmer: No. I don't have any.

DePue: Well, I think we've had a wonderful conversation. I thank you very much for the opportunity.

Palmer: All right.

DePue: And we'll close with that. Thank you again, Don.

Palmer: All righty.

(end of interview)