Interview with Thomas Varns

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Interviewer: Jerry Smith

Smith: My name is Jerry Smith: it's November 24, 2009, and I have the honor to interview Tom Varns at his home in Springfield, Illinois. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Veterans Remember* Oral History project. Thank you for taking the time with us today, Tom. Could you tell us when and where you were born?

Varns: I was born in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on July 26, 1925; makes me eighty-four years of age last July. I moved to Springfield, Illinois, so I need to point to that. We moved into Springfield, Illinois when I was about two years old, and lived in Springfield, Illinois for the rest of my life. Anyway, I graduated from high school in June, 1943. October, 1943, I went into the service, and I went in Camp Grant; that's where we first were exposed to army life.

Smith: Tom? Where did you go to high school? In Springfield?

Varns: Springfield High School, yes.

Smith: And what brought your family to Springfield?

Varns: Well, at that time, my father was still in the construction business and I had an aunt living in Springfield. Anyway, she, at that time, wrote my dad and said that the building business was booming in Springfield, which it wasn't where he was at there in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It was at the point like it is nowadays—there wasn't any jobs to be had. So, my aunt invited Dad to come down to Springfield, and by the time he got here, Springfield was in the same conditions as they were in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with employment. So, I think that's the starting of …I had a peculiar situation: I lived with my aunt on Holmes Avenue. I guess maybe the kind of funny, peculiar part about that is that I married the girl that wasn't born yet; her parents lived right across the street! Lillian Mau and Hank Mau.

Anyway, later on, we went to various schools: went to Highland School which, at that time, was a very small school. Went to Butler School, and after we graduated from the eighth grade, we went into Springfield High School. I started out with a b-flat clarinet when I was in grade school, about the seventh grade. Anyway, when I got to Springfield High School, Mr. Patrick, the band leader, was this excellent man. He asked me if I would be interested in changing to the bass clarinet. They had a new bass clarinet that he said he's having trouble finding somebody who wanted to play it. I said, "Well, I've never played it, but I'll try."

And so, Mr. Patrick finally got the point—he took me to his home and gave me these lessons at home. He said that if I would go to the state contest, probably "Flight of the Bumblebees" with the bass clarinet would probably win the state contest. But I was too…I guess bashful, whatever you want to call it, to get up and play in front of people, so I didn't go, and he gave me an F in my grade, so I learned a good lesson there. Pass up opportunity, and sometimes you pay the price.

And so, anyway, in June of 1943, Springfield High School was a large school. I rode a bicycle to school almost every day, regardless of the weather; we picked up cheerful guys along the way that rode the bicycles with us, and we'd get to school just in time to hear the bell ring. We left school immediately, and I found time to take a three-hundred-hour engine lathe course—I learned all seventeen operations on the lathe. I wanted to be a tool and die maker, what I thought I wanted to be. Anyway, after I got my notice to show up in October, we rode a train out of here to Camp Grant, like I said before.

Smith: That was when you got your notice that you were immediately inducted?

Varns: Yes.

Smith: Did you ever work after high school, or did you go straight to the military?

Varns: No, I didn't—I didn't. I worked odd jobs: I worked Scaife's Flower Shop, I worked as a greenhouse servant. Just odd jobs here, wherever I could pick up, because everybody knew I was going to be leaving, so I didn't have much opportunity to establish myself in the employment area.

Smith: Where were you when you heard about Pearl Harbor? You were still in high school?

Varns: Yes, I was. I think it's kind of amazing because I was sixteen years old: it was down in front of Ada's, a little store. At that time, there would be a neighborhood—you just seemed to get along with four, five guys. If you wanted to have something to do, you'd call "Whatnots" or "House," and you'd listen to *Jack Armstrong: All-American Boy*[1], that kind of thing, and we kept out of trouble. If we wanted a ball game, we had a vacant lot there that we played on. But anyway, it was in front of this little store and I was sixteen years old, like I said, and anyway, I told my buddies, I said, "Huh! Don't worry, "six months, we'll have those guys whipped and we'll all be back doing what we're supposed to be doing." I got a rude awakening when I come to find out that they were better equipped, and just how well equipped they were to have attacked us. Anyway, when I got my orders to go to Camp Grant,

[1] *Jack Armstrong: All-American Boy* was a favorite boys' radio program in pre-TV days. The opening announcer would say the name in a very dramatic tone, with a pause-for-effect after *Jack Armstrong:…* Jack Armstrong became an icon of American boyhood masculinity which worked well for advertising copy.

they, at that time, put us on a train down to Camp Barkeley, and that camp was near Abilene, Texas.

Smith: Where was Camp Grant?

Varns: Camp Grant was in northern Illinois, but the camp that I went to in Abilene, Texas was where we had our basic training. I think there's some serials that we had. We had the experience of a show—they said, "Kill or be killed." They showed us a show on this. They showed us a show on—well, it wasn't really a show, it was actual machine gun fire, and you had to crawl about a hundred yards. I noticed before I went to take my turn to crawl that the board that the machine gun pivoted across, and on the ends, it was getting old. Anyway, it wore down so that the machine guns on the outside edges were missing the guys very, very, very closely, in relation to the center, so I elected to take the center. Then, they put us in a hole about four foot deep and let a tank run over us. They'd get us up early in the morning and we'd go with tanks before it got light; the tanks probably wouldn't miss you, probably eighteen, twenty inches, and they couldn't see any better than we did. Anyway, that's some of the things that we did during basic training.

I thought I saw a human reaction to…Most of the fellows in my outfit were older than I was. anyway, I saw Christmas Eve—we had some people come around and start Christmas caroling, and anyway…(shaky breaths, pause) Some of the older guys…(shaky breaths, pause).

Smith: I'll just pause for a second.

Varns: They—damn it—they just showed how much they missed their family. And it…(shaky breaths; voice breaking). I'd never seen grown men cry like this.

Anyway, in a high school band, we did a certain move, an oblique movement I'll never forget as long as I live. They did it just a little bit different than you did it in the marching of the army, and I had the misfortune of doing that wrong too many times; the sergeant stopped the whole group of men and put me out in front, and he let me take a look at what I was supposed to do, and I didn't forget how to make an oblique move while I was in that group again because he had a way of teaching you. He was very thorough.

Smith: So, you had a lot of respect for your instructors?

Varns: Oh, yeah. They were very, very direct. Very exacting. You knew exactly what they wanted and they knew exactly what they wanted of you. If you deserved to be lectured, you got a lecture. The food wasn't too great, and the buildings we were in, we had two little pot-bellied stoves. The buildings were probably seventy, eighty feet long, and maybe twenty foot wide. We had one sergeant slept in one thing, but in order to keep warm at night, we'd take part of the wood of the building and burn it in these little stoves to keep warm. It got cold in Texas at night, and you'd wake up in the morning and have a profile of

your face sunk in some kind of little red dust, showed you… Paul Harvey[2] said that that was Alcatraz[3] of the Army.

Smith: Hah!

Varns: That wasn't the best place to take your orders, but we went out one night and we were supposed to wear our gas masks. I don't know—I think I showed Jerry a piece of fabric, but a plane was helping to train us in our gas masks; it showered us with something that literally ate holes in our clothes. We learned a good lesson there when they said, "Wear your gas masks," and things, we did what they said. So, that's some of the experiences I had at Camp Barkeley.

Smith: Is there anyone that you knew at Camp Barkeley that was from home?

Varns: Yes. I guess I should say no, there wasn't anybody at Camp Barkeley, but we did move to Camp Bowie, where I was attached to the 415th Medicals. Before that, I went to El Paso, Texas, where I became what they called a…my number was 860. I was actually a technical litter-bearer man and also a litter-bearer and a company aid man. We got all kinds of experience there in a hospital where we actually worked with patients while I was in the hospital. So that's where I got my training. And then that's when they sent us to Camp Bowie—

Smith: How were you chosen to become part of the medical…?

Varns: I really don't know. It's just like when we went overseas—maybe I'm getting ahead of myself—but when we went overseas, we landed in… (pause) I should have rehearsed a little bit. Anyway, we landed on one side of England and they put us on a blacked-out train, and…

Smith: I think you told me during the pre-interview that you landed at Liverpool.

Varns: Liverpool, that's exactly where it was at. Then, we stopped in London and the Red Cross gave us some coffee and donuts; that's the only time we stopped, crossing England. It was absolutely dark all the time we were there because I guess they expected to be bombed any time. Then, we went on to the other side of England—Jerry probably remembers what I told him. That's where we got a ship and we crossed the Channel. It took us four days to cross the Channel. There was forty-four ships in that convoy, and I happened to go on a ship where you could see some of the things that were on there. It was a dead) ship manned by Indians, and anyway, you could see them preparing our food and stuff; I chose not to eat on that ship. Was on it four days, and I chose not to eat the food they prepared because I didn't think much of the health part of

[2] Paul Harvey was a famous radio commentator who had a very long career, one that lasted into the 21st Century.

[3] A storied maximum-security prison on an island in San Francisco Bay of the same name, later de-commissioned and made into an historical landmark. It served as the subject of many movies.

it; they really had looked like they were eating potatoes from the First World War, up to England; they drove food up to the front of that. (Smith laughs) Anyway, though, we could see that, and—

Smith: What kind of a ship was it that you took from England to Europe?

Varns: I have no idea what they call it, Jerry. All I know is it was a passenger—it was a dead ship where they could have done a lot of different things with it. They could have probably carried freight, most of it, but we had no incidents going across the Channel. When we got there, we landed in Omaha Beach,[4] and we got off the ship there.

Smith: And that was after D-Day?

Varns: Yeah, much more, about three months after D-Day, but there was still so much evidence of the battle that went on there, that you'll never forget. They had these great big cross-iron things,[5] so boats, these landing craft, there was no way you could get in there without hitting one of them. So we got on this landing craft and then we went down a rope [ladder], and they told us to keep our hands on the vertical ropes. And I guess I got a little excited and I put it on a horizontal rope, and some guy stepped on my hand; that recalled my orders to step on the correct side of the rope, anyways, to get into these little smaller crafts. We got on that, and there, we picked up a convoy of people, the Red Ball Express, they called it. They were experts at driving at night as they took us out of there. We went probably, oh, maybe five or six miles inland, and we set up tents and we stayed there for about two weeks. But we were a small outfit that absolutely had no attachment to anything except the Third Army; that's the only thing we knew anything about.

Smith: And that was the 415th Medical Collections Company?

Varns: The 415th Medical Collections, yes. Their primary purpose was supposed to be about a thousand yards behind combat, where seriously injured guys are supposed to come. I did get to see a couple of operations that I just can't hardly believe. I got to see a brain operation—very brutal—and I also got to see a young man that had his intestines all shot up; got to see that back at the collection station. But anyway, they saw fit to use our outfit wherever they needed us, and so we got to see a great part of Europe: Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg—we were all through that section. The Battle of the Bulge was in Luxembourg City, and we were getting ready to go in to back up those people in Bastogne. The General told them, "Nuts!" when they wanted

[4] Omaha Beach was the military's name for one of two beaches where the Americans landed in Normandy, France on D-Day, June 6th, 1944. It marked the beginning of the Allies' assault on German forces on D-Day, one of the largest operations in military history.

[5] The Germans, anticipating assault from the sea, put enormous iron barriers all along the French beaches to impede tanks and other vehicles.

him to surrender. Ah, yes. I just admired the man's form, because they were really taking a shellacking—they really took a beating.

Anyway, I guess I'm getting ahead of myself. When we crossed the Atlantic, we crossed on a ship. By itself, it was a luxury liner for the United States; it held seventy-five hundred men. We were thirty feet below the water line, and we had a little dog that was our escort. I woke up the second morning out, and he was dead. You almost suffocated down there, so I chose to stay up on deck. I did get sick—very, very sick. They had the marines that manned our guns on that ship. It was kind of peculiar—I had a nickname of "Jackie" when I went there because I was going with a girl by that name, and she chose to make embarrassing things to me, like lipstick on the outside of my mail, and at mail call, she had this lipstick all over it and I got quite a ribbing over that.

I guess it took us seven days to cross the Atlantic, zigging and zagging. I can say, if you want to enjoy the Atlantic, don't go during October or November because the Atlantic is pretty rough. I got sick because the ship would roll and toss, and it was a monstrous ship. Anyway, we…had quite an experience going over.

Smith: Was the food better crossing the Atlantic than crossing the Channel?

Varns: Yes, it was very good, but we'd go down and you had to stand up, and then your food would roll past. Anyway, it was good food, but you just couldn't eat it. At least, I couldn't. There was some guys it didn't bother: I guess they should have been in the Navy and I should have been in the Navy. But anyway, they saw fit to send us from this area where we set up our tents and everything. Really,it was kind of boring because we had not much to do. But then they finally started to send us places, and then we got up where the combat was getting close. About every hundred yards or maybe bigger than that, there was—it looked liked hedge trees. These fields didn't have fences like we do; they had these hedge rows, and they were stopping our tanks and stuff from going through there. So some sergeant—I don't know where they got him—he came up with the idea of putting blades on these tanks, and they plowed their way right through those hedge rows.

Smith: Huh!

Varns: That's how they break through. Patton, he didn't let them stop; he went ahead. When he said he was going, he was going! So, anyway, I think I'll move on to where I…

Smith: Did you ever have the opportunity to see General Patton?

Varns: Yes, just very, very shortly and very, very fast. He was in a jeep and he had his machine gun mounted on the top of the ship, and he's standing up like you've seen so many pictures of him. That man was—you had to admire him.

I don't care what they say about it; he's the best general that we ever could have had there because he went there to win that war.

Anyway, we got attached to the Seventy-Ninth Division—there was, I think, fourteen or fifteen of us, went as litter-bearers and the company aid men. Then, my friend—they called my twin—who was in the outfit in the 415th, he actually drove an ambulance. He almost got captured in the Battle of the Bulge because he was attached to an outfit. They come over the hill and the Germans were coming, and he didn't know whether the Germans were Americans or Germans because they had American uniforms on.

Anyway, most of us were back to Luxembourg City, but they were getting ready to ask us if we minded being riflemen. Well, you didn't have a choice—you were going to be a rifleman. They needed you real bad up there, so that's what you were going to do.

Anyway, after that, then we had a lot of experience moving around. We went to Stuttgart. I'll never forget that as long as I live: the roads were like the width of a blade on a bulldozer, where they just—they bombed that pattern. The English bombed that pattern bomb, and when they said they bombed a pattern bomb, they didn't leave much there. It was basically everything was enough for us to get through on a road.

I guess our next situation was they sent us up to Hurley(?) in Holland for some rest there. In some ways, they called us away and we went on the Ruhr River, and we was there. That's where I first learned—I watched veterans that had been up on the front before; I watched what they did and I did what they did. Shrapnel was in this room, and the shrapnel hit four or five walls, bouncing around. They hit the deck—I hit the deck, and just like that… We had a short period there. I did get to see something that I don't know whether American people realize or not, but Germany was very close to developing jet airplanes. I got to see two of the first jet airplanes. They had P-47s covering the bridge, and there are probably ten or twelve of them—I don't know how many there was—but these two German jets come over there, and they just made these American P-47s look like they were standing still. They did drop their five hundred bombs. I know there were five hundred bombs because they were just that bad.

There's always humor in all this. There was somebody in a six-by-six truck that had a machine gun mounted on the top of it. I don't think it had ever been fired, but this guy got up on top of that. He had tracers,[6] and you could actually see those tracers just barely behind the planes.

They did surprise me one time where another situation was close to that; German pilots jumped out alongside their own paratroopers in their own

[6] Machineguns typically use tracer ammunition, with every fourth or fifth round being a tracer round which is visible to the gunner. This allows the gunner to observe the trajectory and adjust his fire.

parachutes, and I hate to say it, but the Americans shot them all the way down. They died of their own flares. Maybe I shouldn't tell that—I don't know what—but war makes you a different person.

I sent some china home from—I forget exactly where we got it. Beautiful stuff; it was tissue thin. It was so thin that I had it packed so that I got a big part of it home, and I'm not sure I didn't give Jerry's wife a saucer or a cup. Anyway, I got that part home without any damage. I had a set of lesser stuff that was actually in a factory, and they did let us send that stuff home. I unpacked it, and that's where we got in trouble, seeing it broke. So, that's the two main battles I was in. We were in where there was battles and you could… Artillery is the biggest thing that we… I guess I sympathize with the guys with their weapons they have now because there's so many things like artillery. I finally learned what incoming shells sound like, and these guys don't have a chance, with the way they have it now.

Anyway, that basically is the combat part that I was in. I don't know how long this is supposed to last, but after the war was over we absolutely were forbidden to fraternize with the German people, but we did, regardless. We had two Polish guys that were actually in line to be put in the furnaces.[7] When somebody tells you about the Jewish people, that is not exaggeration—that happened. We got these two Polish guys and we took them aside and we fed them at our mess table. Anyway, they got—it looked like a fist—this German guy was coming down the street, and he did every day, about the same time. He come down the street, and anyway, my best friends were Polish: Olschwitz, Talahaney, Nozle. That's some of them I know, Polish friends.

Anyway, Nozle, he was kind of a humorous guy. He says, "I'm going to get one of those bottles." He said it was some kind of schnapps, and anyway, we got this German down the road, probably two or three blocks, and we filled one of these bottles up with water and had Nozle give him ten dollars for it, and we had quite a time! That's the kind of thing we did after the war. I missed doing what I should have done. You had the opportunities, if you really wanted to, you could see parts of Europe. After the war was over, you could see things that you'd never get a chance to see. School, you could go to. But I didn't take advantage of that, and I have my regrets, sir.

Smith: I assume you had furlough some time?

Varns: Yes.

Smith: A number of times during—

Varns: Not a number of times. We got to go to Paris after the war was over.

[7] Hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish Poles were subjected to the same atrocities at the death camps as were the millions of Jews.

Smith: Ah, that was after the war.

Varns: Yes, and I think Jerry(??) and his wife Kay got to—I asked them to bring me back a picture because there was part of the cornice work that was blown off by some kind of means—I don't know what weapon hit it. But anyway, I asked him to make sure that that had been repaired, and when they come back, they had photos of it. It had been repaired.

Smith: At the Arc de Triomphe?

Varns: Pardon?

Smith: The Arc de Triomphe, yes?

Varns: Yes, that's exactly where we're at. We got to see really, so many parts of Paris. It's a beautiful city, but like any big city, it's a big city. Then, another time, we got to ride in the back of a six-by-six—that's a big truck, moved about two hundred miles—and we got to ride about two hundred miles to see the Glenn Miller's band; he was already missing by that time—Benny…

Smith: Benny Goodman?

Varns: Benny Goodman? No. Anyway, the guy that took his place is the guy that was the singer in the band. We got there and everybody was carrying their weapon and there was just bound to be an accident, and there was an accident while I was there. One man got shot, and they finally got him out of there. I'm sure he wasn't hurt that bad, but you get that many guys with weapons, you're going to have an accident of some kind.

Smith: Did you see any other entertainers?

Varns: Yeah, I don't really remember who they were, Jerry, but I only saw two or three. Our outfit was so small and transferred to so many different places. That was the amazing thing to me. We did get a nice letter from the commander of the medical department. When the 79th crossed the Rhine River, we got a very, very nice commendation letter from him. Then we got another couple officers wrote us nice letters from places we'd been, but nobody told us really where we were at.

I couldn't tell you a minute for a minute—all I remember is it was a very, very nice day that day, and we sat and watched B-25s go over. The sky was almost silver with them; it was so many of them went over, bombing before they went over across the Rhine River. That night, that's when they kicked off on the artillery with going over the Rhine River. It was daylight from artillery fire, you hardly couldn't hear yourself talk because the artillery was that heavy. It's just unbelievable, to somebody that's never been in war. I just wish that people knew more of what war is. Maybe we wouldn't get into some of these conflicts—I understand—don't misunderstand me—I

understand that our war was a different kind of war than what the wars that these young men are going into now.

I just feel for them because our war was against a maniac, and I don't know how he persuaded the German people to follow him the way he did. But he had S.S. troopers and then he had these young people that were Brownshirts, and those people… When the war was over we were sent to a hospital that was all TB. We had a hundred Wehrmacht troopers, and I think there was something like ten, or something like that, S.S. troopers and ten war criminals at this hospital. I got pretty rough with an S.S. trooper one day because he'd go through his rifle moves right in front of you just to irritate you. I found out while I was there at this little Englberg, I should have got that—here, did I give you the pictures of that?

Smith: I don't think so.

Varns: Anyway, Furstenstein was a little town that had a castle—

Smith: Ah, yes you did.

Varns: —and I think Englberg was another little town that had a castle. These castles, they said, were connected by some kind of tunnels. I never did see the tunnels, but the old priest that was there… How dedicated these people were that were running this hospital; I just can't get over how dedicated they were. They took care of these people just as well as anybody could possibly expect.

Smith: So the castles were used as hospitals?

Varns: Yes, and the Catholic priest took me down into where the torture chambers were; they were still in the condition to show you how the torture chambers were. They had these gates that they'd drop down—they were still in condition. They left them down all the time we were there, and they also had this moat, this water thing that they had around the castle, and he showed us where you could get around that. He's also quite a gardener, and he could raise beautiful flowers. He made you actually forget where he's at with his comments and his involvement in the war. He was just a wonderful person.

Two little girls were there—I'll never forget them as long as I live because Christmas is a hard time to be away from home, and these little girls, on their hands and knees all day long, go down—all these castles had a court—and in the court was terrazzo—not terrazzo—what's these little tile tracks?

Smith: Marbles?

Varns: Ceramic tile. These courts were made of ceramic tile, and these two little girls were down on their hands and knees polishing that every day and cleaning it. Anyway, this castle had four stories in it, and they were one story above

where Boling and my accommodations were. They sang Christmas Eve, and… (pause in audio; shaky breaths) Anyway, that's some of my rifle right here. Got to know…(voice breaking) the German people, and had no reason. In fact, I wrote a letter home, and this letter was to a man who lived in New York and his sister was one of the people who worked in the hospital at one of the castles we were in. Anyway, I brought that letter to his sister, and what she wanted—she could talk perfect English—she wanted a pair of **nylon hose**.[8] She got that—I sent that to her brother—because her brother sent me a letter when I got home. I corresponded with him a little bit but not very long.

We had some experiences that you find out these people are basically… The average person is very similar to you: they have loved ones, at home that they care about so much. They worry about those people in war. They don't like it because their leaders have took them in a war. They just—I'm not defending the Germans, don't misunderstand me—but I'm just saying, we wouldn't probably have the situation we do. In this case, we would because Hitler **had** to be **stopped**. Anyway, when he went into Poland and things like that—in fact, another place was at Poland. When he went into those places, he just treated those people terrible; it's hard to believe how he could treat a human being. He had his Panzer Division: those tanks were armored probably two inches of steel more than we had on our Sherman tanks, but they were huge, and he had 88s on them—that's a weapon. They turned that on us when we was on the ground.

Smith: That fired an 88 millimeter shell?

Varns: Yeah. That was a weapon that we all hated to face. They used it on the air force, they used it on the ground troops, they used it on every possible thing they could use it on. I don't know for sure whether I should mention this or not, but I was still on the American side—our side, the United States' side—of the Rhine River when there was a German officer out on the beach. He was shell-shocked or something. Anyway, I went out to get him and get him out of there, and that's the closest I come with an 88—it knocked me down, and I couldn't hear for two or three days, but I got him out of there. A lot of people say, "Well, why didn't you just let him be?" Well, that's not what medic's for. (pause in recording; shaky breath; voice breaking) But anyway, that's—I did a lot of talking.

Smith: What did you think of the officers in your unit? Were they good men?

Varns: In our service?

Smith: In your unit, yeah.

[8] Earlier, hose were made of silk. Nylon was a new product, superior for women's hose, but very scarce all through the war.

Varns: The company commander of ours, he was a good guy, but we had a couple of incidents that I don't think he showed leadership. He was actually—maybe I shouldn't say this because it'll be on paper, but I guess it's true: he treated people who had venereal diseases that he wasn't supposed to treat. I think he should have sent them back to the hospitals.
He shouldn't have kept them there and treated them there. The other couple of things… these officers never went with you when somebody told you. Like, our fourteen litter-bearers, twelve litter-bearers, whatever was, we never saw them after they took us up there. But we did have some very nice officers. As far as training, we were properly trained.

I'm not tearing the officers down at all because some of those infantry guys—anything you were required to do as a combat infantryman—they were right there with you. They never missed a boat or never missed a step. Our leadership in our military is what helped us win that war. My neighbor was in Italy; around Sicily, I think it was, he stepped on a landmine. He was a lieutenant, and his leadership role is the reason—he was out ahead of the people. That's the kind of people that were in leadership. Then, my friend Tuck Belton, he was a pilot for B-17s. They'd leave Italy and they'd come from there, and bombed over in Germany. Anyway, they got shot down over Holland. He lived with the Holland people after he got shot down. He lived with them over a year, and he played the part of a deaf mute, and that's how he escaped. He finally got back to the English lines, and all that. He got—I shouldn't be talking about somebody else, but these guys, that's the kind of leaders we had, and you'd follow them anywhere.

Smith: Tom, do you recall hearing about Patton's slapping incident?

Varns: Yes…

Smith: What did you and your fellow soldiers think about that?

Varns: Well, there wasn't much comment about it, Jerry. They knew that what they'd seen in war, they knew that he was there for one purpose, and sometimes, you weren't a human being when you were in war. They take eighteen years of your mother and dad telling you, "Don't do this and don't do that…" (voice breaking; shaky breaths, pause) That's what we were there for, and that's what Patton was there for, when he slapped that soldier. I don't know if he had another chance, I don't know if he'd do the same thing over or not, I don't know. I just know that the man was there to see that we won whatever he was after. That's what he was there for, and I've said, he was bound and determined (voice breaking) to win.

Smith: Where were you when the war ended in Europe?

Varns: That's one of my areas of disgust. They sent us up on the Elbe River, and we sat there. We went in there real late at night, and we didn't have any idea

where we was at, but we knew we were close to somewhere on the Elbe River. Anyway, we had cots. We got in there late, and somebody in the morning kicked my cot and said, "Soldier, police up around your cot." I proceeded to tell him I thought that I was tired, I didn't feel like getting that. Anyway, the soldier says, "You know who I am?" I said, "Nope!" And I was pretty cocky. Anyway, he told me who he was, and I come up out of that bed with attention. He said, "You ever been to the front?" And I says, "Yes, sir!" He said, "Did you like it?" I said, "No, sir!" He said, "Did you want to go again?" I said, "No, sir!" He said, "Well, you mouth off again, you're going!" So, I was embarrassed by guys around me, and they used to kid me a ton, yeah. And I said no, I was afraid he would! (laughs)

Anyway, we sat there on the Elbe River while the Russians went into Berlin. It disgusted all the guys that we were there. I think General Eisenhower just didn't want to see any more American troops injured than had to. He's the best man for that job. Eisenhower was—he was fantastic. The responsibility he took for what that war meant, it's just unbelievable that a man had that resting on his shoulders, to take that responsibility and call the shots when these people were going to be probably killed on D-Day. I know he talked to the guys personally. I know he talked to them because we saw pictures of that. I'm just thankful I didn't have to go in on D-Day because on Omaha Beach it's pretty flat, so you get back in there and they had weapons that implanted—they would fire those things and they'd go all the way out to the ships twenty-some miles out, and jeopardize the ships. Those big weapons were…The Germans had the know-how to fight. I just don't understand how Hitler talked the society into being what he was, but that's neither here nor there. That's over with, and now, I just pray every night…(voice breaking; shaky breaths, long pause) I just…I'm pretty emotional guy.

Smith: (clears throat) Tom, after V-E Day, how much longer were you in Europe?

Varns: How much longer?

Smith: Yeah, after Victory in Europe Day.

Varns: I was the most fortunate guy in the world. We had seven guys in our original outfit left, and they put my name in with the six guys', and believe it or not, they drawed my name for a thirty-day rest coming home. I was supposed to go to Munich. Anyway, the weather was just—well, I should mention that when we landed there, it rained ten consecutive weeks when we first got there. But getting ready to come home, there was three days just—nobody left the airport; it was just terrible. So, they got a break in the weather, and they put us on an old C-47. It had probably thirty, maybe more than that, parachute jumps that the guys had made. Anyway, these planes still had the seats along the side; everybody had a seat that you buckled down, except I grabbed a seat with no buckle. I had two guys that were trying to hold me down, and I

actually left that seat a good six, eight inches. Oh I got sicker—oh, I got sick again. (Smith laughs)

So, anyway, they landed us in Paris, and they told us that we'd have to find another way to get to the heart of France because we had a ship by the name of *Kokomo(?) Indiana*. It was a victory ship we were supposed to catch to come home. We got to Paris and all we had was our orders that we were supposed to go to Le Havre. Anyway, I don't know why these MPs, but they kind of took pity on me like the marines on that ship. I was supposed to be down below on the ship coming over, and I said, "If you want me to go down on a ship that's what I went overseas on, you're going to have to carry me." And the marines, they just laughed and went on.

Well, these marines in Paris, they did practically the same thing. They put me on a train, and they had little cupolas on her, probably an eight-by-eight, maybe smaller than that. But anyway, I got to Le Havre, France. I don't know how I did it, but I got to Le Havre, France and from that point on, they put us right on a ship. We came home on that liberty ship, and on the way home, we hit rough water; the rough water we hit take the screws [propellers] completely out of the water, and that ship would just shudder. These guys start rumors how the ship's made—the ships cross there and it's probably going to fall apart after that. It was kind of scary to… You believed those guys!

Smith: I bet.

Varns: Anyway, after we got to Boston, coming home again, they put us right on a train and it went to Camp Sherman—I think that's where they put us. We got declared surplus, believe it or not, and I felt like I was a traitor to the guys across the sea because some of the guys had two-hundred-and-some points and I only had fifty-some points. It was on a points system. Some of those guys, especially the air corps, had 250 points, and they were still over there just messing around. Anyway, that's how I got to come home with these seven names got drawed out of there, and they got drawed out on a basis of how they were picked out of the helmet. Coming home I don't know why it picked us seven guys to go up and have our names in the helmet, but that's what happened.

Smith: Tom, you said there were only six or seven guys that were left in your unit that survived?

Varns: No, I say out of the similar guys—we got transferred to various places. I don't know where all of them went, but we had probably very few casualties in our outfit. They were like me, they weren't there long enough. Three or four days combat, then they sent us someplace else, and maybe it wasn't as bad, the next place you went. Anyway, maybe I shouldn't talk about this gentleman on this here trip that the Honor Flight took us on. I sat next to a guy that spent 195 days in combat, and I don't know how he did it.

Smith: That was a trip you recently took to Washington, D.C. from Springfield, through St. Louis, and it was for World War II veterans.

Varns: Yeah. Yes.

Smith: And the purpose was to see the Memorial.

Varns: Right. This man had been in combat that much. I had so much respect that I obviously… I saw a lot of guys that had been in combat, and it's amazing what the human nature will do. But like I say, the war was there because of an idiot, a man that was ill—sick—but what I don't understand is how—and maybe I'm wrong, but the way I look at it, our country, if we aren't careful, we could end up in the same situation because these people were… You talked to them and they were ordinary people, the German people I'm talking about, and anyway… They just didn't… I guess it was their life at stake. Maybe that's what happened; I don't know. They had a leader that needed to be ruined and needed to be kicked out of there.

Smith: (clears throat) You mentioned earlier on our pre-interview discussion that you had a funny story about an army cook that thought you were special.

Varns: Yeah. When we were back in the States, I got to know the cook fairly well.—Balzanne was his name; he's from Wyoming.

Smith: Was this at boot camp?

Varns: No, it was when I got connected with the 415th. You got to know all your guys,I In fact, the night that I got sent into the 415th, a couple of guys said, "Who are you?" And we told him we was new guys coming in, and they said, "Say something! We want to tell you where you're from." And believe it or not, this one guy said, "You're from Springfield, Illinois!" There was another guy from Springfield, and they told him about supposedly my twin, Ed Killian. He was there from Springfield, and he drove an ambulance. He almost got captured one time during the Battle of the Bulge. Anyway…I forget what I was going to…

Smith: The cook, and your mother's pancakes.

Varns: Oh! Oh, Balzanne. He could take mutton and make it taste good, believe it or not. I got up to 220 pounds. I got another funny story to tell about our head chef. We'd go on these night trips, and like I say, these tanks come just a few inches from you and it's dark. Anyway, it lightened up, and this head chef… We had our gas mask supposed to be on, and he had a cigarette alongside of his, and he breathed it alongside. Well, somebody caught him, and he got pretty well treated for that. Balzanne was a guy that—he just was just a gentleman. He was good to everybody.

But anyway, to go back to your story, Jerry, and the real humor. After we got inland probably six or seven miles we set up our camp, and they were tents. Believe it or not, ten weeks of rain get up, and sometimes rain didn't show up on mornings. We would have these three pots and they had burners in them; they'd heat the water and you'd take a little metal can… Anyway, to make this a long story short, I told Balzanne one time when we was back in the States, I said, "You know, Balzanne, you don't know how to make a pancake. My mom knows how to make a pancake." And so, when we got over there he decided to treat me like my mom did; he stopped a hundred guys and says, "Jackie wants a pancake like his mom made!" He told these guys, and he made a pancake as big as mom made—it wasn't quite as good, but I didn't pop off anymore. I still got Balzanne's address out in Wyoming. I wish that I could have took time to stop and see if he… He was just a little bit older than we were, but he was a fantastic guy.

Smith: So, a hundred guys had to wait for you to get your pancake?

Varns: A hundred guys had to wait, and I wasn't too popular for that.

Smith: (laughs) I can imagine. Were you mustered out at Fort Sherman, you said, in Boston?

Varns: Yeah.

Smith: And then you came straight back to Springfield?

Varns: Yeah.

Smith: What did you do after you came back from the war?

Varns: Well, Jerry, I'm not proud of what I did; it was what they call a fifty-two-twenty. Like I told you back, I had a 300-hour engine lathe course that I took. I could do all seventeen operations on the lathe, I could cut internal gears, and I could do every operation there was to do on the lathe. Anyway, I thought that I would be able to go out to Allis Chalmers[9] and get a job somewhere in a machine shop. Well, I went to Allis Chalmers, I went to Sangamo, Hummer.[10] I went to all these places, and they said, "Well, you start out at this." I could make twenty-eight dollars a week working, and I could make twenty dollars a week doing nothing. My mom and dad—I'm sure I made them ashamed of me—but for half of that fifty-two weeks that I got twenty dollars, I laid around and just went and got in trouble. That's how I'd guess you'd say around, I'd stay up half the night and did things I shouldn't do.

[9] Allis Chalmers was a large manufacturer of heavy equipment. It later merged with Fiat as Fiat-Allis and eventually moved away from Springfield.
[10] Sangamo Electric manufactured electrical parts and equipment. Hummer Manufacturing made machine parts.

Anyway, after I finally decided to go to work, I went to Allis Chalmers. In the first hour I was there at Allis Chalmers they put me on a little hobbing machine, tooth-rounding machine on gears, and this machine would put a profile on the gears, and that was part of a transmission. Well, I lasted about fifteen minutes until I broke it down. It advanced itself if you hooked it up right. Well, I didn't hook it up right. I was on that about a week, and they put me off of that and put me down on a hobbing machine; that was a new area of machinery, the gear department was—and they made new parts for gears. Anyway, hobbing machines.

Believe it or not, the guys, when they come back from the war, they're different people. A lot of the guys in the Navy, they'd take their lights and flash signals back to each other. One guy—his father was one of the head guys out there at Allis Chalmers—he's the guy that soaked the sandwich in his compound and **splash!** right in the back of my head. Well, I had an opportunity to get even with him because they took me down to the internal grinders. Those took the internal and the exterior, but it had a wheel seven inches wide and probably thirty inches in diameter. I turned it off right behind me and turned it on right behind me, but they had nobody that took over the shift. There's only one shift running.

Well, I come to work that morning, and oh, somebody had an oscillating lever on his machine, and that made the machine go back and forth. Anyway, this machine started back with that tail end, and that great big old grinder started breaking up right in front of this kid. He's back there going, "Shut it, I can't see, I can't see!" (laughs) And I says, "Well, that's too bad!" (laughs) I had let it run for a while. Finally, I turned around and shut the machine off. After that, Jerry, they opened up the back doors in the spring, and I knew I couldn't tolerate being inside. I just knew I couldn't tolerate that; it'd be so boring. Then I went back with my other brother-in-law later on, and they took you through the shop after it was doing the run. They had three shifts, and they had people that would come and set your machine up. You had nothing to do; all you had to do was run the machine.

I'm glad I got away from there. I got into the carpenter business; that's what I thought I wanted to be. I wanted to be outside, and that's how I got into the business. I was very fortunate to work for several different contractors. I had several different experiences. I was way ahead. In fact, I had one guy—he was eighty-one years old—and he says, "I found a guy that I want to give my books to," and he gave me a book on bricklaying and carpenter work. He gave me one on the steel square. Anyway, I got to work with him for a while, and then I finally got laid-off, and I went to work for J. Fred Adams; he's a guy that took kids out of Feitshans High School, and he actually let them be part of these partnerships to do with the house; they'd sell it, and they'd share the profit.

Anyway, Fred was building a building himself; I'll never forget as long as I live, the floor joists were made out of oak. Actually, they weren't planed-down like a piece of oak that you'd buy from a lumber yard; actually they were two, two-and-a-half inches wide, and they varied from eight to seven-and-a-half inches in height. Anyway, we had a pretty good job, me and my dad, getting that floor straightened up. When Fred hired us, he said, "I think about a week's all I can handle you." About six months later, he said, "How'd you guys like to have a partnership?" We told Fred Adams, "We don't have any money to buy into a partnership." He said, "I didn't ask you that." Anyway, he put us in a partnership: he was a senior partner, my dad was a partner, I was a partner. He gave me half the profit, and Dad got a fourth and Fred got a fourth.

That's how I become very proficient and I got in business. I became in business for myself. Fred got to the point where he would say, "Tom, I'm going to California," he said, "somebody's got to take care of the books while I'm gone." "I don't know anything about bookwork," I tell him. He said, "Well, I'm going to tell you how, and if you get in trouble, you look at how I did it." And he said, "If you get in trouble, my wife will tell you somebody to see." Well, I got by very fast, and finally I had the privilege of being the bookkeeper.

Fred took me on all of the people we contacted, and introduced me to them. I had the skill—for some reason or another, I could take things proportionally—and On Sunday morning he'd take me over to Champaign or wherever he saw a house. He'd like to go down to Florida and come back with a house that he liked. He saw something that he liked in Champaign; he'd take me over there, and he'd say, "Sketch that, will you, Tom?" I actually did the drawing on most of our projects, plus doing the actual work. Fred Adams is the one that encouraged me to go into business for myself, and I am ever so thankful for that.

Smith: That's great.

Varns: That man…

Smith: That is wonderful. You just had the privilege of taking a trip to Washington, D.C. to see the new World War II memorial. Would you like to tell us about that?

Varns: Yes. I don't know all the details how the Lincoln Honor Flights Incorporated got started. I don't know, but all I know is that whoever is the original thinker or the original guy that put this all together, he had to be a genius because his imagination took veterans; absolutely no way that a veteran could pay one penny to go on this trip. Somebody had to pay their way. They had what they called guardian people, and these people, I think most of them paid their own way. That's what I think; I'm not sure. They were women. Since I've been

back, I wear my hat that they gave us. We dressed up in blue shirts and blue hats, with who we were for, and our guardians had green; that's how they kept us separated from other companies that come there. We had one from Indiana had yellow. I'll never forget the different colors, and it's a good thing we did have different colors because we sure would have got mixed up at the Memorial.

But anyway, since I've been home, I wore my hat. Describing this, and I think the main thing I do, I run… I was in Hardee's over there on Jefferson Street. Some young man was sitting there with his wife, and he come over and he said, "You've been with the veterans out in Washington, D.C.?" And I said, "Yes. It's just almost impossible to tell you how wonderful this trip is. I would have never had the opportunity to go see the monuments that it would make for the World War II veterans." I said, "I'm may be prejudiced, but it's the most beautiful one there. The Air Force has got a nice one, but World War II…"

My grandson was my guardian. He was twenty years old, and he left school for two days—which I was really afraid that he might get in trouble for that, but he was an excellent guardian. He took all the pictures for me and I probably got a box full of pictures that he took for me. My brother-in-law, Jim Davis, who got his hand shot off in Okinawa, he was the other person with us. So, before we left, why, I ran on to four guys from Springfield that I went to school with: one of them, my barber, one of them was an undertaker that was on that trip, and I knew Scotty real well. They treated us just fantastic. Before you left, they'd ask if you needed a wheelchair. If you couldn't walk very long at a time, then they put you in a wheelchair; every place you went, you went in a wheelchair, and that's what your guardians did.

Our food… I got to give Southwest a plug. We had ridden the bus from Springfield, Illinois to St. Louis, then the airplane picked us up there. It was Southwest, and there, we went to Baltimore, where our friend Jerry)—and I think I should mention that Jerry was going to be my guardian, and he had some arrangements made. We didn't know when our trip was going to take place; we just had to take a chance that our trip was going to be and make plans, and when your time come up, you had to go. Well, Jerry could not go, and so he had to back out. Anyway, he could have went, only in the meantime, I had asked my grandson to be my guardian, and obviously, I didn't feel like not letting my grandson be my guardian after that. I got to mention this because Jerry's not only a friend, he's an acquaintance, he's just a young man and his wife—they're our best friends. When my son and he were in college together, Jerry stayed at our home for a couple—I don't know how long, maybe a couple of years. My wife was kind of a minority group; she had three boys, and Jerry was a boy, and then we had a boy dog. (laughs) So, she had quite a time with one female with five males there.

But anyway, after we got on this trip, we go in the airport, and the airport, apparently they announced we was there, and the people just—they just went crazy, clapping and stuff for us, and it made you feel like, Well, are we really entitled to all of this? You know, but we had our food given to us. We went on the airplane and every place we went to, they clapped, and at the Monument, at the World War II monument…

Well, first, I think I should say, in Baltimore a national guard band come there and played for us, and some young kids out of school was there. That's one thing I should mention, is that after we got on on our way home, that's the first time the guardians didn't sit with the ones that they were in charge of—we sit with the guardians. They sit by themselves, and anyway, we wondered why, and when we got to the airport, they said, "You sit with the other guys," and we got going.

They told us why we were sitting by ourselves, and somebody out—I wish I knew who this lady was—but she and another lady made little cloth envelopes that they put letters from kids that were in various schools, teachers, friends. By the way, Jerry, I don't think I've ever tried to tell you how much I think of a letter that you and Kaye sent. I just can't say how much these letters and things mean to a veteran. Anyway, we left Springfield at 3:30 in the morning, and we were on a schedule that obviously, when they said, "Be there at 3:30," the bus had to leave at 3:30 or we wouldn't make it to St. Louis on time for the air flight. There was people who had paid the ticket owners, they had to take care of them as well as the veterans. But when we got on the airplanes and clapping all for us, you know, and all that stuff. We got off; the pilots clapped for us and people, you know, waiting for us.

Anyway, when we got on home, I've had people… Some woman stopped me just yesterday, and she said, "Do you remember me?" I said, "No, I don't, I'm afraid," I said. She said, "You went on that trip as a guardian, didn't you?" I said, "No, I went on a trip as a veteran, but I don't remember." She says, "Well, when we come home out there at the motel, I was one of the people that was holding flags." When we got back, we had a column on both sides, of people—11:30 at night—holding flags and soldiers dressed up, waiting. They were actually from some of the wars that we're in now. I just couldn't believe people would wait that late at night, but anyway, she said, "That flag got heavy!"

I think I started to tell you about this young man in Hardee's. Anyway, I was talking to him and I said, "Do you mind giving me your name so I can thank you? I'd like to thank you for recognizing what we are." "Just a minute," he said, "I have a card." His name is Scott Niermann, I guess it is, it's N-i-e-r-m-a-double n, Volunteer Programs manager for the State of Illinois, Human Service Division of Community Health and Preservation. He said, "I want you to have somebody that's got some influence for the men that got this here guardian. I want to have a conversation with him."

And I hope what it is, is that they can get together—like I said before, the veterans could not pay, and somebody had to come up with the money to pay for the guardians and all the vets—and I'm hoping that this leads into maybe something that might lead to somebody might come up and pay because it says, the way I looked, "the Division of Community Health and Prevention, and the Department of Human Services." So, I'm hoping that he's got some connections.

Smith: That would be great.

Varns: I'm going to call him and ask him later on because I got his phone number and that. Anyway, since I've been home, I've been stopped six or seven times, stopped, "Oh, you're one of those guys who went on this…" My friend was here just a while ago; his wife left Springfield, went teaching in Riverton. He got to know a lady, and this lady turned out to be the wife of the guy that took care of all of the guardians of people on our trip. Anyway, I got to talk to him, and this guy knows quite a bit about the guy that did all of the program for us, for the—I don't know if I'm getting mixed up here or not—but anyway, he's the one who's in charge. I do want to mention that my brother-in-law got mixed up on not getting a guardian, and would you believe that…Ray Wyman.

Smith: I think so, yeah.

Varns: Anyway, the one that's the head guardian, he was the guardian for my brother-in-law. I couldn't believe that, that he took the responsibility, Jim not having a guardian, of doing that for Jim. I was a little disappointed in that I wanted Jim and me to stay close together because my grandson couldn't take pictures of him if Jim was on the other side of the monument when I was on the other side. Anyway, that's one of the things that being a guardian, I got separated from Jim and I didn't get pictures of him. I got some of him. Anyway, we probably got 150 pictures, something like that, maybe there's a picture of him. I got one thing that they saved, the head guardians—I don't know if Jerry must have seen that picture or not, but they sent it to us: my guardian, my grandson. That's how come some people knew who I was, was because I had my grandson as my guardian. I'll tell you, the World War II veterans treated him like he was their son.

Smith: What did your grandson think about the trip?

Varns: He just was beside himself—he couldn't believe all the veterans… The trip, like I say, was so fast that we got to stop in all of the veterans memorials, but we went by where the guys in 9/11 bombed the…

Smith: The Pentagon.

Varns: The Pentagon. The only reason you can tell where they had this is where they joined—you could tell the difference in materials just a little bit. And then, I

didn't realize, but Washington's monument, they had to stop making that because they run out of more, and it was out of two different materials, but you couldn't tell.

Anyway, the Air Force monument was just a beautiful thing. It made you be in awe of the imagination of some of these people that come up with… Like our World War II veteran memorial, the people that did that, I don't know how their mind could permit that. Every letter that was carved in was stone, hand-carved by a couple of people that knew how to do that.

Smith: Did Senator Dole greet you?

Varns: Oh, yeah. If I'd have forgot that, I'd have shot myself. Anyway, Senator Dole came and I've got pictures of him. I got to shake his hand, and I got to thank him, because he's very instrumental in our monument. What's the young man, twenty-seven years old that hails from Illinois that's in the Congress for us?

Smith: Aaron Schock?

Varns: Aaron Schock, he was there. He talked to us quite a bit, and…the other guy from Illinois, that's… I should know these guys' names. Anyway, the other senator from Illinois, he was there, and he came and talk to us probably—

Smith: Senator Durbin?

Varns: No.

Smith: No?

Varns: No, he's a Republican.

Smith: Must be a state senator, then.

Varns: Yeah, a state senator. Anyway, I just can't say enough. If anybody has the opportunity to give for some veteran to go on that trip or have an opportunity to be a guardian on that trip, I just guarantee you'll have no regrets. It's just wonderful. I haven't got all my stuff together. I've got so many pictures of when I come back from World War II, had things to get in order, and I got so many pictures that I'm going to probably give some to Jerry. When we went overseas, we had a lot of pictures; I got those. Jerry, I guess he's new at this and I'm new at it, and we didn't know exactly what to get together. I appreciate so much being able to share my experiences with going to the veterans memorial, and we went to Vietnam [Memorial], and all those things.

They gave us a little pamphlet that has every one of our guys who went on the trip; they gave us what outfit they were in, they gave us the information, where they lived and what service they was in. I appreciate that so much, of them presenting that to us because then, they gave us things that

we got a room for some of the pictures that we took, my grandson took; I think there's room for twenty pictures, and I'll put this in this little folder, and I'll have that where I can get at it very easily. I got another folder that I got where I have the other very interesting things that we saw while I was there. I think I should mention that I, myself, had been to Washington, D.C. I had been to Baltimore, and Jerry, my friend, is the one that took me there because he and his wife, they lived in a place I wouldn't give them five cents for, as far as traffic! (laughs)

We were on the bus coming back, and I imagine it was 4:30, something like 4:30, five o'clock, something like that. We got mixed up in that traffic, going back to Baltimore on the bus, and that's where I decided I wouldn't live in Baltimore or Washington, D.C. But Jerry and his wife took my wife, and they had showed us a big part of that, but obviously, the veterans memorial wasn't there yet. I know I'd never have been able to go back and see that if it hadn't have been for the guardians, I think. The patience they had with me calling and asking questions because I definitely wanted to be—I wanted to find out my number, I wanted to make sure I was going, I wanted to make sure I had the names of everybody I should. Anyway, that was all taken care of and we got all that on going there on our trip. I think I've rattled on long enough here that I don't know what else Jerry wants me to comment on.

Smith: Well, just to sum up, Tom, the experiences that you had in World War II, what do you think that Americans today need to know about that? What did that mean to you, and what should it mean to us?

Varns: Well, to me, every American should see the gravesites over in Europe—go back to Europe and see the cemeteries. I've never been there myself, but the fellows that have gone say it's beautiful. But as far as what it should mean to the average person, I…I hear people talk about, "Oh, I did this, I did that," and they talk about things that are… The thing that, as a medic, I saw sights that they should see. Everybody that's ever gone to war should see these things. They never saw blood and dirt mixed together, (voice breaks; pause in audio).

I think I'm ready to go.

Smith: Ready to go again?

Varns: I think I'm ready to go on. Every American should, when they vote, they should know what they're voting for. They should make a study of who the candidates are, what they stand up for. They should know about our Constitution. Other things that we should know about our government. They should know for sure, without asking any questions, who that man that they're voting for stands for, and what he does, and what does he know about things, from a Bill of Rights: what's he know about that? Things I've heard some of the politicians—I'd like to go face-to-face with them and debate what some of the founding fathers—they should know that our founding fathers, almost

everyone that signed that Constitution, they basically lost their family, they lost their ground that they lived on. Almost every one of them lost everything they stood for, and they are the people that made it possible for us to lay back here in this country and not understand what freedom means. Then, you go to other places and they talk about freedom; you just don't know what the word freedom means until you've been to war.

Quite frankly, World War II was worth losing your life over. Some of it—I don't understand how some of the people could treat Korean veterans that had gone there and laid down their life for us. I don't understand that. There's so many other things that I don't understand about these wars we've been. That, as a veteran, World War II—you were willing to give up when you found out what war really is. You were willing to lay down your life for what your country stood for. And the people that were there, they just got to understand that England—what England went through, what the Air Force guys went through, what the infantry people went through, what various parts, the Navy. I think God had a hand in certain things. In Midway, if those clouds hadn't cleared when they did, they wouldn't have had a chance to blow half of the Japanese Navy out of the sky. And if the Air Force and my boy Patton, if he hadn't shown up at the Battle of the Bulge, maybe that would have come out different. But without those people coming at certain times, I **know,** without question, that God had a hand in it. (voice breaks)

As far as what it means to me, to every American, I think that the teachings… I guess that's one thing. On the trip, it surprised me how the kids, they were from five, six, and fifth grade up to high school, that on both sides of the walk the way there, clapping for us when we went to the Memorial, and I think these kids know what this war thing is. Some of the letters that I got, the kids know what World War II was about; their teachers had made every effort to communicate to them what it was about, and what some of these other wars were about. So, there's places, but then there's other people who had no responsibility, understanding what these wars are about now…

I'm not a professional politician. I don't know. But I do know that war should be… If our military people say they need this to do the battle, I think our military people should get what they need to do a war. I think that military man should show that he has as much knowledge of the history of the United States, how it developed, and who did what to make this country what it is. I think if the military people don't understand that, they got no business being in the military for us. There's people that just give up so much to make it so that we will be part of that free nation that we fought for. I hope I haven't rattled on too long here.

Smith: Thank you very much, Mr. Varns.

Varns: Yeah. I really appreciate it, and I appreciate it—I don't know who gets this.

Smith: It's still on.

Varns: I don't know who's behind this equipment and things that Jerry's got here, but I thank whoever it is. I thank for the opportunity to share and I want you to know that somebody like myself that's been in combat seventy, eighty hours, seen so many different things happen—I feel like that I am not able to describe in detail what some of the guys went through, guys that were in the combat so much, and dying for this country and how they died. I saw some of these guys, their injuries were just—indescribable, and they're just such heroes.

I think I'd like to say one thing: On the memorial—one thing you would have got a kick out of—on the memorial, they got a little thing there that says, "Kilroy was here."

Smith: (laughs)

Varns: And we got pictures of that—Kilroy was a guy that was there, he was there, everything he did, before anybody else was there, Kilroy had been there. And on the monument, he was there.

Smith: That's great.

Varns: Yeah, they carved in a wall. (laughs) So, I just want to thank the people that made this possible, and if I hadn't made enough comments, well, I'm sorry for anything I lacked. I just want to make sure that these people have made their effort to really make this a tremendous burden—not burden, probably—possibility for me to get some things off my chest. Appreciate it.

Smith: Thank you, Tom.

(end of interview)