

## Interview with Edward “Pat” Stapleton

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Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

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DePue: Good morning. Today is Friday the 29th of February, 2008. My name is Mark DePue. I’m the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I’m here with Edward Stapleton, otherwise known, always known as Pat, I would think. Pat is going to tell us a little bit about his experiences during World War II with the 36th Infantry Divisions, which is one of the most storied divisions of the Second World War. So I’ve been looking forward to this one for a long time, Pat, and I want to welcome you to this. Let’s start with the beginning of your life, so if you could tell us where and when you were born.

Stapleton: I was born in New Berlin, Illinois, 8/16/21. Does that sound right?

DePue: Yeah, 1921.

Stapleton: Yeah, 1921. And what else?

DePue: How did you pronounce the name of the town? How do people from there pronounce it?

Stapleton: New BERlin, they pronounce it. We call it New BERlin.

DePue: Okay. That’s one of those peculiarities of living in Central Illinois, isn't it? Where is New Berlin located.?

Stapleton: From Springfield, it’s about fifteen miles.

DePue: Okay. Tell us a little bit about growing up in New Berlin, then.

Stapleton: Well, I was born in New Berlin and probably real close to the Catholic church when one morning we woke up and my youngest sister couldn’t get her breath and the house was on fire, and we barely got out. I was eight years old. We

crawled out the windows to get out of the house. My dad bought the farm out in the country—his mother and dad had both died—and we moved out to the country. That's how we happened to go to the country.

DePue: So he was farming.

Stapleton: He was farming after that.

DePue: If my math is right, this would mean that the fire was in 1929.

Stapleton: That's right.

DePue: And then I would think maybe right after the fire and right after moving out to the farm the stock market crashed and the beginning of the Great Depression.

Stapleton: Terrible. It was awful.

DePue: What was it like growing up in a small farm in Central Illinois during the Great Depression then?

Stapleton: My dad went into everything. He had a service station. He built a big outfit in the back of the tavern, and he had dancing. He had all kinds of different things that would take the place of something having, to have something to do. He had a bar, and he did everything that he could possibly do, like they started the rodeo. He had it for twelve years.

DePue: (laughter) The rodeo! Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Stapleton: Well, he had full-bred horses and steers, and they were just... They were wild! There weren't off of the farm. He had those every Sunday, and he got a little self-serve where riders came from where I was in the war. They stayed there and lived there over the summer to ride the broncos and the steers and all.

DePue: So he had people coming from Texas and the South?

Stapleton: Yes, Texas, right. Every summer, and there were two ladies in New Berlin; they quartered them. They were so nice and clean and all, and they loved each other, they really did. And they made it so nice.

DePue: Well, I would think as a young kid growing up in Central Illinois and getting to watch the rodeo and some of this stuff going on, that was a lot of fun for you!

Stapleton: Definitely. I had a pony that I had things to do with him. He'd lay down; he'd play like he was dying and he's going to die, and he'd lay down, you know. Just really had him trained perfect. Well, the cowboys helped train him with me, but then he went ahead with me. But that was great; I thought that was something else. But we had a lot of different things to do. I tended bar when I came back

from my service. Didn't have anything to do; I didn't know what to do, you know!

DePue: Well, that's getting a little bit ahead of the story. Did you have a lot of chores growing up then?

Stapleton: Yeah, we had cows and steers and hogs, mostly, had several hogs. My dad farmed some ground about ten miles away. We used to haul them, I mean drive them from our house to there in the winter, to winter them. We were busy; we didn't have too much time. He bought the farm that the family owned, and we held onto that all the time, and he always had animals.

DePue: So those were tough times, but—

Stapleton: They were tough, yes they were.

DePue: But you always had enough to eat?

Stapleton: We had enough to eat and we never had any problems like that. He worked in the bank for about ten, twelve, fifteen years I guess, and then his brother took it over 'cause he had too much other stuff to do. He did all the rest of it on his own, you know, that I'm telling about: the tavern, the dancing, the rodeos, you know. It was his, it wasn't anybody else's.

DePue: Where was the dancing going on?

Stapleton: Back of the tavern, back of the bar. It was a large—we built onto it. And then we had a calliope that we drove the country with advertising the rodeo, and oh, we thought that was great! I was ten or twelve years old. My uncle drove it, and we'd go get out and wave at everybody and had music and, you know, beautiful music. And we had a lot of, you know, made fun of our own.

DePue: I didn't ask you your parents' names. We probably ought to get that on record here.

Stapleton: Well, my dad's Edward. He was Edward P. Stapleton and I was E. Patrick Stapleton, and my mother was Stella Hanrahan. And I guess I was the only one who had the Edward and the Patrick.

DePue: Okay. Do you remember Pearl Harbor, then? We're jumping ahead a little bit, but...

Stapleton: Oh, yes, I do.

DePue: 1941.

Stapleton: Right.

DePue: What do you remember about Pearl Harbor?

Stapleton: Well, it just seemed like it was helpless and hopeless and everything else. It just didn't seem like it was going right. We had people—they weren't for it, you know, they really weren't, not as much as they were in ours.

DePue: What were you doing that day when you first heard the news?

Stapleton: Well, I can't tell you. I'm sorry.

DePue: I thought you were at a Bears game. [Chicago Bears football]

Stapleton: Oh, that's right, I'm sorry! We were at a Bears game. We certainly were. I'm glad you brought that up. That's right, we did. Couldn't hardly believe that.

DePue: And did you decide then you wanted to join up or did you want to wait some time?

Stapleton: Yeah, I did. I thought I would like to go but they turned me down. I wasn't very big.

DePue: How tall are you? How tall were you then?

Stapleton: Not much over five feet.

DePue: Yeah, I saw someplace five feet four; is that about right?

Stapleton: Yeah, that's about right: five-four. I was a little huskier, but in the war I was terrible! You know, you just lose all your weight. I think my coat that I had then, I can't even get it to here!

DePue: Did you get rejected because you were too small or because...?

Stapleton: No. Well, the first time I did. They wouldn't take me. My buddy went, and I waited and I went and finally got the job done. I only got serious about it because they were running out of people and they had to have 'em, and they just about took on anybody.

DePue: Why did you want to join up in 1941 right after Pearl Harbor?

Stapleton: Well, I don't know. I just felt like a thing to do. I just thought that was my honor or whatever you want to call it.

DePue: Were you disappointed that you weren't?

Stapleton: No, I'm not. I'm not to this day. I'm really not.

DePue: Okay, so what were you doing between 1941 and 1943 when you did join up?

Stapleton: Well, of course my wife and I got married before I went overseas. We kept close touch with each other, and I was positive that she was honest with me and I know I was honest with her. I couldn't wait to get back, and everything was right. We'd been alone real...

DePue: What was your job from 1941 to 1943?

Stapleton: When I came back?

DePue: No, no, before the war.

Stapleton: Before the war, oh, 1941. A little bit of everything. I helped my dad. I tended bar. I was just a kid almost, and we had pigs, hogs all over the place.

DePue: So you were still living in New Berlin.

Stapleton: Yes, uh huh. We were living in the country, living in a farm house, and we didn't have any water or heat or nothing, you know.

DePue: And during that time you're dating, as well.

Stapleton: Yes.

DePue: Okay, and what was your girlfriend's name? Your wife's name?

Stapleton: Well, no, it wasn't her! (laughter) I never dated her until not too long before the war.

DePue: Before you enlisted?

Stapleton: Uh huh, before I enlisted.

DePue: Well, tell us a little bit about how you met Arlene. I think that's her name...

Stapleton: Yeah. Let's see, how in the world did I come about that? I met her brother, and he thought I was a pretty nice kid, you know, so he introduced us. We became very fond of each other and just kept it up. She was going with somebody else and I took it away! (laughter) I tell her that! She says, "You don't know if you did or not!" I say, "Well, maybe not!"

DePue: What's her maiden name?

Stapleton: What the hell is it? Gee, isn't that terrible?

DePue: Well, we can get that in there later. You don't have to worry about that. You enlisted then in September of 1943; your military record said September ninth.

Stapleton: That sounds right.

DePue: Why September ninth? Why then did you decide to go back and try to enlist?

Stapleton: I don't know. Nothing particular about it. It just happened to occur at that particular time.

DePue: Okay, so you would've been twenty-one, twenty-two at the time?

Stapleton: Yeah, twenty-one.

DePue: Okay, and a little bit older than some of the other people going in at that time, I would think.

Stapleton: Yeah, I was. Well, I tried to go earlier, you know, and they wouldn't take me.

DePue: Had you filled out a little bit in those two years?

Stapleton: Done what?

DePue: Gotten a little bit more weight put on you by that time?

Stapleton: Yeah, yeah I did. Yeah, I did, 'cause I had that pneumonia so bad that I just didn't have any weight, you know.

DePue: So you had a pneumonia around 1940 or '41?

Stapleton: Yeah, it was around that time.

DePue: That was then a contributing factor of getting enlisted in the first place?

Stapleton: That's right, it was.

DePue: Okay. Tell me a little bit, then, about basic training? Was that pretty easy for you, being a farm kid?

Stapleton: No, it wasn't too easy, but it wasn't something that I didn't expect. It wasn't something I could say I couldn't do. I'd never tried not to do or anything, and I just got along and never thought too much about it. I kind of figured about what it would be like, and it was!

DePue: Where was your basic training? I know you ended up at Camp McClellan. Was that where you had basic?

Stapleton: Yeah, that's where it was.

DePue: Why infantry? Why the Army?

Stapleton: That's just where they put us at that time. We didn't say "I want to go in the Army," and maybe I would've anyhow, but I didn't want to just sit around

counting cookies or something, (laughter) you know, for the rest of my... If I was going to go, I wanted to go into war.

DePue: And you certainly knew at that time, infantry and the Army, that was going to be a pretty tough job.

Stapleton: Yes, I did, I did, but I never ever dreamed of not coming back, never ever. I never was in a hospital. I never was turned down. We had—well, it's on that one piece of paper I gave you—we had how many? Hundreds of days without any relief in the winter. We did without food sometimes. We did without water. I drank water out of lakes that had dead people floating in it. They gave us some—what do they call it? There's something they gave you to kill the... We had to have some! This was in the summer, what I'm talking about now.

DePue: Iodine tablets or some purification tablets.

Stapleton: Yeah, I'm going back and forth, but I don't know, you just take those things automatically. What do you do? You're there, you asked for it, and I wasn't any better than anybody else, but we did have some that didn't, that did. They'd just cry. See, I couldn't do it. Well, hell, I cried, too, but nobody knew it but me. I did, I got, you know... There's a guy sitting over here playing cards with somebody while the Germans were going through, and we were over here, my buddy and I. A piece of shrapnel came in and killed the little kid with him, went through his heart; they were playing cards, and he was still playing cards with him until... I found out about two years ago he's still playing cards with him.

DePue: In his mind?

Stapleton: Yeah, he just went out of it. That's terrible, live that long like that, you know. Boy, you have to be thankful for that.

DePue: Do you remember anything—do you remember any of your drill sergeants or anything about your training while you were in basic?

Stapleton: Not really too much, no. I never took 'em too hard. I didn't.

DePue: Now, I know that you were at Fort McClellan. Did you know while you were going through that training that you were headed over to Europe or that you were going to the Thirty-Sixth Division?

Stapleton: Definitely, we did. Yes, I did. I had all the thought and mind that that's what was going to happen.

DePue: Okay, and I believe you headed over around March.

Stapleton: That sounds about right.

DePue: And you got married right before you shipped out, right?

Stapleton: Yeah, you got that there somewhere.

DePue: Why did you decide to get married right before you shipped out?

Stapleton: I don't know. I think we both felt like that's what we should do. I loved her and she loved me and we just decided to get married.

DePue: Can you tell us a little bit about the wedding or the marriage?

Stapleton: Well, there wasn't much of a wedding to it. How in the hell did that come up?

DePue: She came down to Camp McClellan?

Stapleton: Yes, and of course there was a Catholic priest that married us. But that wasn't there; we had to go to town to get married. I can't remember the name of it. We got the time to go to have our marriage taken and I can't for the life of me remember just where that was. I think it's on that piece of paper.

DePue: How long were you married, then, before you shipped out?

Stapleton: Oh my, not very long.

DePue: Just two or three days?

Stapleton: Yeah, just a few days. She waved at me as I got on the ship, you know.

DePue: She went on down to the port to see you off.

Stapleton: Yeah. Now, the worst thing about that—how'd that come about? They wouldn't tell her where I was and I didn't know where she was. She was around looking. We were getting on a truck, and we got on a truck to meet the ship to go overseas, and she'd been there two days trying to find me. She came back up to where I was. She'd gone back home thinking I was going to leave sooner, and she came back just to tell me, you know, goodbye and thought we could get together. She was there two nights, and my buddy and I—they were friends [all] our lives—my buddy and I were on this truck going to the place to get on the ship to go to fight, you know. My buddy said, "Look, they're out there.! They'd been looking for us!" And we waved at each other while we went. That was dirty cruel. I really got upset about that. He wanted to get off the truck, but he didn't. "To hell with them." He said, "They'll just put 'em on garbage detail or something and we won't have to fight the war." I said, "Yeah, but you won't see your wife!" (laughter) He did, he was serious! He thought that was really dirty, and that was! They called and found out where we were, tried to find out, and they wouldn't even tell her that we were there.

DePue: So even though you'd been married for two or three days, it wasn't like you'd spent any time together after you got married.



Stapleton: No, I didn't. No sir, we didn't, but we just thought that was it, and I guess it was.

DePue: What can you tell me about being shipped overseas, then? Uneventful trip?

Stapleton: Yes, in a sense it was. We had some big outfits going over, and I was up on the top. We'd take turns, different ones of us. I had a gun up there on top, and they never did come down at us. I don't know how come they didn't, but they were shooting down ships all over the place, all the way over after we got so far, not where we started from.

DePue: So you mean that you were under the threat of submarine attack?

Stapleton: Yes, we were. We were, could've been.

DePue: What kind of a ship did you go over on?

Stapleton: You know, I can't tell you what it was.

DePue: Was it the standard liberty ship?

Stapleton: It was a pretty good sized ship.

DePue: It was a little bit bigger then.

Stapleton: They had a bunch of colored men on there, and they had an awful time. They were having fights and shooting each other. They really did. I don't know if they were upset to go or what, but there was no sense to... I mean, they didn't do you any good, you know. They did, though. They locked them up in different places to keep from killing each other and stuff. I don't know what the hell ever happened to that.

DePue: This would've been, I believe, February, March of 1944. Where did you first land, then, once you got to Europe? Was it in Sicily?

Stapleton: No, we landed at another country and got on boxcars and went from there to, I guess, went from there to Italy. I guess that was it.

DePue: Okay. I know your first combat then, would've been shortly after the Anzio landing, which is southwest of Rome. That was the landing that was supposed to break out of that static line, because the Americans had gotten bogged down in the mountains south of Rome, and so they hoped that the Anzio landing would break out of that. I know that you landed, oh, a month or so after the fact. In fact, we're looking at the map here right now. You can see that the Anzio landing beach is on the left side of that map, and the rest of the Americans were bogged down with the Germans on the right side there. I think you got in there well after the initial landings. Does that sound right?

Stapleton: That seems like it was, it does.

DePue: Do you have any memories of first landing on enemy territory?

Stapleton: Not too much, really. I pretty well knew. They explained it all to us, and I pretty well knew what was going to take place. I just was hoping nothing would happen to me, and thank God it didn't.

DePue: Well, you were assigned to the Thirty-Fifth—excuse me, I keep—

Stapleton: Thirty-Sixth.

DePue: —Thirty-Sixth Division. You certainly knew the reputation of the Thirty-Sixth Division, though.

Stapleton: Oh definitely, yeah.

DePue: What was your first impression of the other veteran soldiers of the Thirty-Sixth when you started working with them?

Stapleton: They were all very easy to get along with and whatever they had to do... We fit together, no problems.

DePue: There wasn't any looking down their noses at the new volunteers?

Stapleton: Not as far as I was concerned. There wasn't a thing; not one thing.

DePue: How many of these guys, the veterans, were still Texans? Because, of course, it was a Texan division to begin with.

Stapleton: Not too many. Not as many as you'd think, and they weren't very nice to us, either, and they weren't very intelligent, I'll tell you. A lot of them just didn't have the education, and that didn't help any. I mean, that's confidential but it's the truth. They really weren't. They had some good ones, but they did have more of the others than we did. We all had at least a high school education, you know, but some of them didn't. They were shooting each other on the ships, on the ship.

DePue: But the folks in the Thirty-Sixth Division, by the time you get there it's indicative, I think, that there are not that many Texans left in the Division, which means they'd already seen some pretty tough battles before—

Stapleton: Yeah, they went through quite a bit. They really did. I didn't know just how many or whatever, but...

DePue: Did they talk much about those experiences to you?

Stapleton: No, not too much. They had quite a few yet that wasn't too swift. I mean, they weren't too... They didn't have the education, some of 'em, you know. They really didn't. They couldn't help it but, I mean, they really shouldn't have been there.

DePue: Yeah. I know the Division got chewed up very badly at the Rapido River.

Stapleton: Yes, they did, and I missed that. That was a bad one.

DePue: Do you remember your first experiences in combat, then?

Stapleton: I'm just trying to think. It was right after we left where I landed, because we went through the... Let's see, where was that? I forget what the heck they called it before we went into...

DePue: Well, I know the campaign, at least officially, is referred to as the Rome Arno campaign.

Stapleton: Yeah, Rome Arno, that's right. So we were in the outfit that went into Rome, and then this particular piece of land I was telling you about, we almost got hit coming down the hill, you know.

DePue: Well, why don't you tell us about that ammunition incident that you were talking about earlier?

Stapleton: Well, we ran out of ammunition, and we went back to get some and the Germans were off like this with their big outfits. When we went down and got our ammunition, we were running out just before we got to Italy, I mean to—

DePue: Rome.

Stapleton: —Rome, and they shot right at us, where we would've been if we hadn't have jumped. And that's all it amounted to, really. We had all those shells on us. We ran out that night. This was in the morning.

DePue: So something like that happens, you have to feel like somebody's looking out for you if the rounds hit right after you left that area.

Stapleton: Yes, they did, right in there. In fact, we'd have been gone. They hit 'em close enough with those tanks, those big tanks they had that they'd have put us all out of commission.

DePue: Is that what was firing on you, tanks?

Stapleton: Yeah, they were big ones, too. You know, they had us out-whipped to everything they had. They had the machinery and everything that we didn't have. They really and truly did. They had those machines that—what'd they call 'em? They'd wind 'em up and they'd shoot here and they'd shoot there and shoot over here, and you didn't know where in the hell they were coming in. They didn't want you to know because you wouldn't know where to hide, you know. It was so bad you had three kids come up to belong to the outfit; the Company Commander told me to see who they were and come in and let 'em know. When I went back out they were

laying there dead. They got killed; three of 'em never even got to... I cried. I thought "Oh my God."

DePue: Never even got a chance to fire a weapon.

Stapleton: They were sitting there waiting with their guns, you know, to tell 'em "You go over here and you go over there." They never—just shot 'em all to hell.

DePue: What was going on in your mind that first time you saw combat? You know, I guess the question I always have is, how does somebody find the courage to do that in the first place?

Stapleton: Well, come to think of it, I knew pretty well, I'd read about it, and just halfway knew about what I was getting into. I really thought the Lord would take care of me. I really do. Between him and the Blessed Mother. That's the God's truth. I mean, I can't... I have to admit and I have to tell you that that's a fact. I just didn't think they'd let me get killed. I might be silly, I might be foolish, or whatever, but I think it's what saved me. I really do. I got off to the side and cried with nobody knowing it. My friend got killed, Company Commander right over where that is. Oh honey, he was a dandy! All at once a shell came in and got him right in his heart; just fell over dead, you know. My friend and I watched him; later that morning when the Germans got pushed away, they grabbed him and picked him up and put him in the back of a truck, you know, just (makes "psh" sound), and I cried my eyes out. He was such a nice... I went to see him—maybe I told you—I went to see his wife and daughter. He had a daughter two months old, and I went to go see them, my wife and I did.

DePue: So this is well after the war.

Stapleton: Yeah, well after.

DePue: Well, can you talk about that a little bit?

Stapleton: Well, she was such a nice lady, and I almost cry to think about it because he was such a nice guy. It just didn't seem right that he had to do that, and here's this one little girl he had. She never remarried. She brought him home, and we went out and saw the monument where they put him in when he come. I bet he wasn't in it because the way they handled him, I doubt he was in it unless he they had to show him. I don't know. But he was satisfied that he was going to be buried with her. That's the way she wanted it.

DePue: Where was he from?

Stapleton: Where the hell was this? Oh gosh, I don't remember that.

DePue: Well, we don't have to worry about that.

Stapleton: It's one of the towns... Oh brother, I don't know.

DePue: Can you tell me a little bit about going into Rome?

Stapleton: Yes, but we had an awful time going into Rome because a part of that was them shooting at us coming down the hill, you know, with artillery and stuff. They were shooting everything at us, things that were not allowed under the what-do-they-call-it, you know?

DePue: Yeah, the Rules of Warfare.

Stapleton: The Rules of Warfare. They just used everything and stuffed it, had fire in it and all, and we were out of machinery. What'd you say?

DePue: About driving into Rome. At least my impression is basically you're liberating Rome.

Stapleton: Yeah, we did, and the Pope came out and waved at us, you know.

DePue: So the Germans had evacuated the city?

Stapleton: Yeah, they had when we got into Rome, and I had this machine on me. It's a picture of—that's right, you've probably got one—on my back, and—

DePue: Of radio?

Stapleton: And a girl about—

DePue: Yeah, there it is! Right there, I think.

Stapleton: That's it! A girl came up to me and picked me up and kissed me, you know! I about dropped it, fainted! I got so tickled, you know! And we got to go in and see the Pope, and I reached up and touched his robe. I never touched that—what do you call it? You'd think they would've, wouldn't you? You'd think they'd try to blow it down. They never touched it.

DePue: The Vatican?

Stapleton: Vatican, yeah.

DePue: Well, from everything you've said up to this point, Pat, I'm certainly getting the impression that you were raised in a very strong Catholic home.

Stapleton: Oh, yes.

DePue: And that was obviously very important to you.

Stapleton: And it doesn't mean that I hold anything against anybody that isn't a Catholic. My wife wasn't Catholic, and I never asked her to be a Catholic. She became one, but I never once mentioned her. She was clean and she was not anything but good, you know, and I knew she'd be just as good that way as the other. I never

so much as... She said, "What would you think if I became a Catholic?" And I said, "Well, it'd be nice. We'd both have the same with our children, you know," and this was before we had any children, and she said, "Well, I think I ought to, I think I'd like to," and she's a good one! She really is!

DePue: Well, sixty-four years later, I guess so!

Stapleton: No, she is, you know. She'll say, "We got to go to church tomorrow! We got to do..." And I kind of, you know, okay... You know darn well we got to go to church tomorrow! (laughter) But I kind of enjoy it, you know. But I forget what... She didn't really have a certain what-do-you-call-it of church, you know?

DePue: She didn't have a strong church background herself?

Stapleton: No, no, not really strong, but she sure has been good to me.

DePue: So it must have been very meaningful for you, now getting to Rome. It sounds like the Italians were ecstatic, thrilled to have the Americans there, and then here you are, a good Catholic boy in the heart of the Catholic Church and in the Vatican and see the Pope.

Stapleton: Right. I had a girlfriend that was a—what are you? What is your nationality?

DePue: Well, I'm a mixture: German, English, Irish...

Stapleton: This girl that I was going with, their mother and father wouldn't let me go over there, but I took out the preacher's wife and then we traded... (laughter) And they were next door to us before our house burnt, and they didn't know our house—this was after we had moved—she was in my class and this other girl was two years younger, real nice girl, real cute girl, and she went to the party with me and then we traded places, (laughter), and I took the little other girl. And finally I decided it wasn't going to work because of the family. She was a real nice girl. She was real cute, was real nice. I thought the world of her, but... And that preacher, the minister, he was a honey and his wife. She was adopted, the girl, not the one that went with me and then traded, you know. She was adopted by the...

DePue: But all of that was long before Arlene, wasn't it?

Stapleton: Yes, it was.

DePue: What happened after the unit got through Rome?

Stapleton: After we got through Rome... Where'd we go next?

DePue: Did you continue to fight north or did you get pulled out and sent to Southern France then?

Stapleton: You know, I can't for the life of me think of just what that was.

DePue: Well, I know it wasn't too much longer until the unit landed in Southern France.

Stapleton: No, it wasn't.

DePue: Do you remember any particular—

Stapleton: Well, we pulled through Rome and we had just a couple days relief. Then we went just as far as you'd think we could go, and I will forget—there's a building that's got a—it's something that's out of this world, that's supposed to be, it leans like this—Leaning Tower of Pisa? We got almost to that, and they pulled us back and took us to the other place, but on that particular thing on our way in there before we got there—we didn't get there because they pulled us back—there was a bunch of Germans that got into some buildings there, and the one guy's sitting there asleep. (laughter) We pulled up there and there were just four or five of us—I think it was four and the driver—and he started to get up, and of course we killed him, you know. And here the rest of them come out. They were in there with the women, the rest of 'em, I guess maybe. Took them over, and they came out with their clothes off and this and that, and we had to kill all of them 'cause they had their guns with them. There's about six or seven of them and this other kid. You hate to do that. What do you do? Wait and let 'em get you? It's hell! War is hell, and if you want to live you can't let them live in certain circumstances. You don't want to do it. I'm sure I didn't. I crossed myself every time I thought I got one or didn't hit one or whatever. I just... I never got punished for it, I guess, nothing happened. But you do—what do you do? Kill or be killed; that's what they told us.

DePue: That's what you were trained to do, wasn't it?

Stapleton: That's what they said. Every day, kill or be killed. Kill or be killed. Look around you; one of you would be dead, one of you would be crippled, and the other one would be this way, you know. They just tell us that every day, so many minutes, hours.

DePue: And through all of that you always had faith that it wasn't going to be you.

Stapleton: Yes, I did. I did, absolutely. I wouldn't have known the difference if it had happened, but that's the way I felt. I couldn't have stood it if I didn't.

DePue: You had told me earlier about an occasion where your unit was almost overrun by some mounted German troops.

Stapleton: Yeah, there were.

DePue: Now, that just... I had never heard that there were Germans who were Cavalry, at least.

Stapleton: Yeah, there was a few, not too many.

DePue: Was that when you were in Italy?

Stapleton: Yes, uh huh.

DePue: Can you tell any of the details about that?

Stapleton: I don't think I can, I really don't. It just didn't impress me that much that I could go back and talk about just exactly what happened to that. But they gave us a pretty hard time.

DePue: Maybe if we could go to the map here of Southern France, as well, and we'll move on to that, what I wanted to ask you about, Pat, was whether the nature of the combat changed. Did the German resistance change once you got into Southern France?

Stapleton: They didn't seem to me to. I never noticed it or caught it. I really didn't, as of right now. Maybe I've forgotten or something, but I don't remember that.

DePue: As far as you're concerned, this was a very determined enemy.

Stapleton: Yes, they were. They were good fighters, too. They weren't...

DePue: Okay. The next campaign, at least in the official records, is the Vosges Mountains. Am I pronouncing that correctly?

Stapleton: That's close to it.

DePue: We're talking about is the southern part of that border that stretches between the English Channel all the way down to Switzerland, and you're at the Southern end of that.

Stapleton: Yeah, right.

DePue: Was that pretty mountainous terrain that you were fighting in?

Stapleton: Quite a bit, yes it was. It got a little rough.

DePue: And that was pretty cold. We're talking the winter of '44, right?

Stapleton: Yeah, it was cold. It really was.

DePue: How do you deal with not just being in combat every single day, but now you've got to deal with the climatic conditions and being in the mountains as well?

Stapleton: Well, you can't do anything else. You just do the best you can, and if nothing happens, well, you're all right. But I don't remember anybody just running off to do something better or whatever. You just automatically—by that time, you know you just can't do it without just doing the best you can do. That's the only way I



can think about it. And I wasn't not scared, I mean, don't get me wrong. I cried a few times. I didn't let anybody know it, or tried to not.

DePue: Which did you find the worst: the fear or the cold?

Stapleton: The fear was the worst. I could stand the cold. In fact, I did, you know, and I was in pretty bad shape when I went in the service. I'd had pneumonia and I almost died. I had three nuns on me a day for over one or two weeks; they thought I was going to die. I got out of that and went through all this. It was not understandable, was it?

DePue: Was that part of the reason why you thought that God had something else in mind for you?

Stapleton: (laughter) I wondered. You know, I did. I tell you, I'm not a religious—what do they call it—I couldn't change my religion because of what had happened to me, and I don't think my wife would either because she feels like she's done the right thing. We don't talk about religion or anything. I have more friends probably that aren't religious. Some are religious people I'm not too fond of! (laughter)

DePue: But obviously you had thought all the way through this, and something that sustained you is that God had something else in mind for you.

Stapleton: I did, I really did. I had so many things happen, like I think I told you about the foxhole, digging it only so far, you know, and "How come you're through digging yours?", and I said, "Well, I'm not very tall! I'm through—I can see out without digging that far." It must be, you know, but that wasn't it at all. I just was lucky, that's all.

DePue: So a little bit more on that story—the two different people digging a foxhole at different depths or what?

Stapleton: Yeah, 'cause so many of them were taller than I was, and they'd still be digging. It wouldn't be that much, but I mean, they'd still be digging, I'd be through. And I said, "Hell, I'm going to get through! I don't want to get killed!"

DePue: So did being short save your life one time because of that?

Stapleton: Yeah, I think so. I do.

DePue: That you didn't have to dig as deep a foxhole and you survived the barrage?

Stapleton: Yeah. I had close ones, and then like that one I told you about, the kid in the foxhole, you know. We had a guy that his leg was shot off, and he went running down the hill. Here's part of his leg hanging, pulling from, and hell, the Germans shot him before he got to the bottom. Why the heck he did that... Of course, he couldn't have lived anyhow. Nobody could've got to him, because his leg was dragging, and he said he got it made. We watched him; before he got down at the

bottom, the Germans just really got him. That's where they got all those ones that were in beds down there. They had a little, it was like a little place to keep people that were sick and hurt, you know, the hurt mostly, and they killed all of them. They did some awful things, they really did. We didn't do some of those. Why they did it, I don't know.

DePue: When you say this soldier was running down the hill saying, yelling "Got it made"—

Stapleton: Got it made, got it made.

DePue: He had his million dollar wound and he was going back home?

Stapleton: Right, and he couldn't live through the bottom. If he'd lived through the bottom, there was nobody to take him! But the Germans coming through the gully there. But people just did some of the darnedest things, you know, when it comes to what those things happened. It's terrible. Nobody can realize what it amounts to just without going through it, and I wouldn't advise that! (laughter)

DePue: Obviously not!

Stapleton: And don't get me wrong, I'm not... I'm just one of thousands. I'm not telling you that I did this or I did that and nobody else did it and all. I was lucky, that's all.

DePue: Do you remember an occasion—I think it was December thirteenth, which would've been toward the end of the Vosges campaign, I believe—when parts of the Thirty-Sixth Division, maybe the entire Thirty-Sixth Division was basically surrounded? Or at least a battalion, I think it was.

Stapleton: Yeah, it wasn't quite as bad as it looked like or it seemed to be, but it was pretty scary. It really was.

DePue: Were you in that unit?

Stapleton: Part of it. Not fully, like some of them were. We were lucked out on a little bit of that. We didn't get hit as hard as we could have, but we had a lot of 'em that were rough.

DePue: Now after that, the war started to accelerate. Of course, the thirteenth of December is just a couple weeks before the Battle of the Bulge. By the time you get to January, late January especially, the Germans, at least my impression, are on their last gasp. They blew their wad at the Battle of the Bulge and some of these other battles. Did the nature of the combat start to change once you got into January and February?

Stapleton: Yes, I think it did. I do, I think it did. I want to break in. I don't know—you know, we fought in Germany and we had some bad fights in Germany. The worst thing I saw happen in Germany was these boxcars loaded up with girls that they

were using for rape and screwing. I shouldn't have said that with this going, but... And they didn't have any clothes on, and these guys had used them for that, and before we got there—I've got pictures of 'em; I thought I gave you one, I thought.

DePue: If we can show the picture that we've got from Dachau maybe. Was this at Dachau?

Stapleton: Yeah.

DePue: There it is.

Stapleton: Yeah, there, that's it right there. That was terrible. See underneath that thing? There's all dead people all the way along, and they had a burner set up here. When they were through with those girls they'd burn 'em.

DePue: Yeah, the furnaces that they put 'em in.

Stapleton: The furnaces. You can imagine the guys themselves came into the office and were eating everything; I mean medicine and everything. They were starved! You couldn't believe that those things could happen, and we just went crazy. We really did. We couldn't be... We tried to do everything. These women had hardly any clothes on, just a little cape on. Some of them are pretty little girls, too, you know. They didn't deserve that, and then imagine, raping them and, I have to say, screwing them and then burning them when they're through with them, you know. They didn't want them for children.

DePue: Did you capture any of the guards?

Stapleton: No, they killed them all.

DePue: So there were some there when you got there?

Stapleton: Oh, definitely, yeah. Oh, some of them threw up their hands. That was just letting us have a good shot, you know! But what do you do? Could you put up with that?

DePue: When you discovered this, was it totally unexpected? You suddenly ran across this...?

Stapleton: We were told. We were told pretty well. We got a pretty good idea, but I didn't think it would be anything like that. I really didn't. Some of these girls were so cute and pretty and all, you know, and they were so... All they had was a little gown on, and it was wintertime! We just couldn't believe that anybody could do something like that. I never will get over it. I think I gave you that picture. I've got several of them. I just can't over... It's just unbelievable that anybody could do that. One of my grandmothers is German, and there couldn't have been a better person than her. I loved her to pieces. Germans aren't all like that, but that just really puts in a real bad taste, doesn't it?

DePue: Well, I was going to ask you, by this time you'd also encountered German civilians. What were your impressions then, before you got to the camp?

Stapleton: Yeah, most of them were like us. You know, there wasn't that much difference in us; there really wasn't. They weren't all like these people. Hitler did all that. He did it; he caused all that. Don't you think?

DePue: Well, apparently he had plenty of people in the SS and other units that were brainwashed.

Stapleton: Yeah, you know, he just "Go at it boys, I mean, do whatever you can do to get what has to be done, and no matter who they were." No, I don't blame the... Like I said, I got a grandmother that was a German, you know, and she was a honey. I mean, I wouldn't trade her for nothing.

DePue: After the fact, do you have any sense of regret that the Americans, once they got to this camp or others, that they saw these SS Guards and they just gunned them down?

Stapleton: No, that's what should have been done. I definitely say that. What would you do with them? You wouldn't trust them to get on the car, you know, or move them away. After you saw what you saw and smelled all that, and underneath it they just threw them off on there and shot 'em. We found some that wasn't all dead, women, and half-dressed, you know, in those—

DePue: In the piles?

Stapleton: —ditches, in the ditches, yeah. It's just unbelievable. I tell you, I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it. I about went crazy. I thought, Oh my God, why would the Lord let this happen, you know?

DePue: Well, I know that's very much why Eisenhower and the senior military staff said "We're going to film this." They also said "We're going to bring the German population out to see this and let them clean up and see what had happened under the name of the Nazis." And now you know, of course, that there are people who denied it ever happened.

Stapleton: I was Army of Occupation in Germany after the war for a while. The ones that were there earlier than I was, you know, say somewhat how many weeks or whatever, they got to go home first and that's the way it should be. So we took over. It's a strange thing, we got three little towns. What is it? Springfield, then I said New Berlin, and then Jacksonville, and I had Springfield, I had the middle one for occupation. They were all nice people, you know; they were all German, and we never had any trouble with them. I'm sure they couldn't accommodate any of that either if they knew what was going on, but it's just a shame that it had to come out like that.

DePue: What were the conditions? When you were there for occupation, what were the conditions in the area where you were?

Stapleton: They were pretty good, they really were.

DePue: They hadn't suffered too much from bombing?

Stapleton: These were smaller towns and they just didn't have the German's militias there. They had their food up in the attics and stuff where they didn't find them, I guess. Some of them, they didn't have any use for them, either. I mean, they'd tell you.

DePue: They didn't have any use for the Nazis?

Stapleton: Yeah, they'd say, "Would you believe that that happened?" You know, "No, I wouldn't, I couldn't."

DePue: Did you get a feel that they had a real sense of guilt about all of it?

Stapleton: Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure they did. There's a lot of nice—the majority was nice. They wouldn't give us a nickel's worth of trouble. We just had them.

DePue: Were there a lot of refugees in the area you were occupying?

Stapleton: Not a lot, not a lot. There was some.

DePue: And roughly, is this in Bavaria where you were?

Stapleton: Yeah, yeah. There was a few.

DePue: Any other things that you remember, any incidents you remember during the time you were in occupation?

Stapleton: Well, one was there at that, it was at one we got to before where we tore down the building, you know. What was that nationality? That took our place 'cause we were just beat up?

DePue: Oh, you're talking Monte Cassino.

Stapleton: Yeah.

DePue: But that's in the Italian campaign and the Poles.

Stapleton: Yeah, that's right. I'm sorry, I'm going backwards.

DePue: Well, do you want to have any comments or reflections on that?

Stapleton: Well, how nice can you be to do what they did, you know? And have all their people be buried there, and we could've been. We would've been, if it hadn't been for them.

DePue: You're talking about the Poles taking over the mission at Monte Cassino.

Stapleton: Yes, they did. When I took my wife back to Italy—I took her to France, both. But in Italy, we went back there and they had that all built up. We went up there and had dinner. They took us back up there. There it was flat, you know.

DePue: Was that a little bit surreal for you to be there during the war and then...?

Stapleton: Yeah, but not too much, really. It was different, you know. But some of the strangest things happen, don't they? You wouldn't think they'd ever want to rebuild that. We had dinner up there.

DePue: You came back in December of 1945. You had enough points at that time? Is that the reason you rotated back?

Stapleton: Yes, uh huh.

DePue: Okay. I think we've got a picture here of a couple of the officers who were with your unit. There's some of the troops; you're right there in the center.

Stapleton: Yeah, that one guy there next to me on this side—

DePue: On the right of you in the picture?

Stapleton: Yeah, he's the only other, he's the only—he's just a small... DePue: Is he still alive?

Stapleton: No, he's dead. I think they're all dead. I don't know of any—

DePue: He survived the war?

Stapleton: Yeah, he survived the war.

DePue: Okay. And can we get the picture of the two officers there? There we go. Now, I wanted to show this one because I think it's indicative of what the nature of the combat in the Thirty-Sixth Division was like. These are two of your company commanders, right?

Stapleton: Yes. Now, this one here, the one on the outside—

DePue: Harold... I can't read it... Hancock!

Stapleton: Hancock! He was one of ours. In fact, he came to my reunion five, six years ago from where his little town is, and he was a real nice guy. He got hit, though. He got hurt. We lost him for a while.

DePue: He survived the war, but I think it says a lot about the nature of the combat that your unit—for the time they were in Italy, Southern France, and into the Rhine, for about a year and a half—went through eleven company commanders.

Stapleton: Yeah, we did! I'll give you the pictures, I mean the names of 'em.

DePue: And that's not saying they were all killed. Several of them were injured and a couple rotated, but...

Stapleton: Right, but there was some killed. There was.

DePue: I think your particular regiment, from what I read, suffered 9,000 casualties.

Stapleton: Yeah, we did.

DePue: And how many people in the regiment?

Stapleton: Oh, God, I don't remember!

DePue: About 2,000?

Stapleton: I'd say 2,000, close to it, one way or the other.

DePue: Yeah, in that neighborhood. That speaks volumes for the intensity of the combat that you personally experienced.

Stapleton: Yes, it does. I was just luckier than could be.

DePue: How'd you manage to keep in touch with Arlene during the war?

Stapleton: Letters, wrote to her. You couldn't talk to her, you know, until the war was over. I called her then.

DePue: Did she write you pretty regularly?

Stapleton: Yes, uh huh.

DePue: So how important was it to have mail call?

Stapleton: Oh, of course, the guys grabbed it, "No, let me read it!" (laughter) Well, I'd let 'em read it! I didn't care! They weren't anything but clean, you know. She wouldn't write anything that even suggested we do or wish we could do this or that or something. I wouldn't either. I mean, that isn't what we were living for. But she's a honey. She really was.

DePue: Did you keep those letters?

Stapleton: I think she's got 'em, but she doesn't want to turn loose on 'em.

DePue: She's got the letters you wrote her?

Stapleton: Yeah. I haven't got hers. They wouldn't let us—they wouldn't mail it back, anyhow.

DePue: Yeah, and there was no way you were going to keep those letters intact.

Stapleton: No, I got rid of them. I hated to, but I had to.

DePue: Well, I imagine you went weeks or months without things like showers, even.

Stapleton: Yes, at times, we sure did. Well, that one there that tells you about how many weeks there was no chance of taking a shower.

DePue: I think you showed me something where—I'm going to get the number wrong but it will be close—it was something like 178 days of continuous combat.

Stapleton: Yeah, that was terrible, and I was in it the whole time. You didn't get any relief. You didn't go back. And we had a hard time getting enough food, really did, and it was cold. My God, it was cold. They had to keep the tanks running on the outfits to keep 'em freezing, you know, and then not being able to get, even with... It was horrible, it really was. And we got run off what was there. We were there, and we got relief, and about halfway before we were where we were going these guys come running through. Whose outfit was that originally back in the other war? Good outfit, but these weren't terrible. They even were right to the river, and we kept the Germans there, and when they came along they took off their coats and all and played this and played that, and they just came across the river and killed half of 'em.

DePue: The Germans did?

Stapleton: Yeah, and we had to come back and do that all over again, and that's without any service at all, without any help, you know.

DePue: So that was one of the reasons you had to be in continuous combat as long as you were.

Stapleton: Definitely. We just turned around and came back, and we had one hell of a time. We had an awful time putting them back across that river. They were fighters!

DePue: The Germans were.

Stapleton: Yeah, they weren't kids or... Well, they'd been through it, and they saw what they'd saw. Oh, we got to bathe, and they did, they had it made. And we got pushed back about three times before we got them back in there.

DePue: Was this even when you were in France and into Germany?

Stapleton: Yeah.

DePue: So they were still fighting tooth and nail with you.

Stapleton: Yes, they were. They certainly were.



DePue: Did you have respect for the German soldiers, then?

Stapleton: Yeah, we had a lot of respect for... You know, some of the things they did we had to do and they did, too. What do you do when you're surviving for yourself? They're put in a position that either lets you shoot 'em or gets shot or whatever, you know.

DePue: Now what are your thoughts about your own officers and COs, the sergeants?

Stapleton: I have nothing to talk about as far as... They were all good ones. We didn't have a bad one. We had a couple that were weaker than the others that just didn't... But that happened. We had people, our own people that were the same way, you know?

DePue: Pat, what I'm holding here is Award of the Oak Leaf Cluster for the Bronze Star. You haven't mentioned this incident yet so I'm going to read this and see if you recall the incident at all and if you want to make any comments on that. The citation for the bronze star reads

**“Edward P. Stapleton, Sergeant, then Private First-Class,  
Company “I”, 143rd Infantry Regiment  
For heroic achievement in combat on 6 December, 1944,  
in the vicinity of Austein, France.”**

(And I assume that means it would be in the Vosges campaign)

**“When the assault platoon was halted by intense small arms fire, and artillery fire during the attack on Austein, Private First-Class Stapleton courageously remained in an exposed position and directed effective artillery fire on the enemy, enabling his comrades to reorganize and seize their objective. Later, on a contact patrol, he surprised and captured three Germans.**

(Then the final comment here is:)

**Entered the Service from Chicago, Illinois.**

Do you remember that incident?

Stapleton: Yes, I do.

DePue: Can you elaborate on that at all?

Stapleton: Well, those three that, on the end there—

DePue: That you captured?

Stapleton: –captured . I called on two of the guys and I said, “Take them back and do what you have to do to, you know, get them out of the way.” They took them about 20 feet and shot ‘em. That made me mad, I mean, ‘cause they were nice enough to surrender, and they were just going to go take them back to where, you know, they’d be safe. “Oh, they tried to get away!” I know damn well they never tried to get away; they just didn’t want to fool with them! I about shot one of them, I really did, they got so smart about it, “German bastard,” you know, and all that. I said, “That’s not the way we do it.” But you do find a few people that, you know, they just think of it that way. You don’t do things like that just for the fun of it. It’s hell, it really is.

DePue: You obviously saw an awful lot. Can you tell us about coming back to the United States, then? ‘Cause you got back, I believe, right before Christmas of 1945.

Stapleton: Yeah, we sure did. I went to the door and my wife didn’t expect me, you know. “Oh my gosh!” She just about fainted. And then we went out to dinner at my mother and father’s house, took her mother, and it was a wonderful time. It really was. I felt great, you know.

I didn’t felt too good up to then, but I can’t complain. I really can’t. One thing that I could tell you that I thought was terrible where they did this, they did that, you know, our own outfit. I saw some of the others that I did think, like I told you about those Germans—that was horrible. You know, I think anybody would agree with that, shooting those poor girls and raping them, using them for—what do you call it?

DePue: Well, prostitutes, basically.

Stapleton: Yeah, that’s terrible. And some of them were real pretty young girls that were still living.

DePue: You saw an awful lot, and you come back to the United States. You try to resume a normal civilian life. Did you find it tough to adjust back?

Stapleton: Not too bad, although I woke up a few nights crying, thinking about something, and my wife would say, “You got to calm down, you know. You got to...” “Yeah, I know.” I just come across something—I was asleep when it happened. I had that happen to me a few times, and my worse trouble was I got to drinking overseas. I wanted to go home so bad and knew I couldn’t, you know, and we all had... I set up a bar, and we drank too much. In fact, one night we went out to...

DePue: Was this on occupation duty?

Stapleton: Yes. I went out to—I was the one that had to give an award. What do you call it?

DePue: A salute?

Stapleton: A salute. And I fell, and I was not drunk but it helped me fall, and this officer said, "Stapleton, you do that again, you're going to be sorry," and I said, "It won't ever happen again." Well, that did stop that. But you know what you're trying to do is forget some of the things that you saw and did maybe.

DePue: So you kept drinking when you came back home?

Stapleton: No, definitely. I did not drink, and I haven't to this day. We might have a highball, but it isn't because I have to have it.

DePue: Did you tell Arlene a lot of these stories when you first came back?

Stapleton: Yes, she knows 'em all.

DePue: But when you first came back?

Stapleton: Oh, I think so, and she realized, like telling me "You got to forget some of that, you know; you can't just live your life with it," and I said, "No, I know, but..."

DePue: Did you find it somewhat cathartic that you were able to tell somebody about the stories to kind of get rid of them, maybe?

Stapleton: No, I didn't talk that much to anybody, really. I just... I don't know anybody like I'm telling you now. But my brother-in-law, he wanted to know how things went and this and that, and he asked me questions like you are. I told him the truth, and you know, it did happen and this and that, but I wouldn't go to someplace and just give 'em a out and out what I thought about the... The Germans are good people! I mean, hell, there's a lot of good German people everywhere, everybody and everything. We never had any trouble with the ones that... Only the bastards and some of that. There really were. They were bad!

DePue: What did you do then for a job once you came back, for a career?

Stapleton: All right, when I came back my Dad still had the tavern; I tended bar. I got to selling insurance. And what was the next thing I did? I did about five things before I got settled down, you know. I was taking a bus back and forth from New Berlin to Springfield, and that got old, you know. Just one thing led to another and finally I got into the insurance business. My dad had an automobile business and I helped him with that, and I was getting a little bit of insurance business. I liked it better than I did the auto business, and I told Dad, I said, "I'd rather not..." I didn't like the tavern. I really didn't. I had guys come in and criticize me, you know, for being in the war. Yeah! Making remarks to each other about what an asshole I was or how, you know... Boy, if I'd had a gun I'd have probably shot 'em! You know, you don't like to hear that, do you? I wasn't that type and I wasn't that kind, and they should have done what I did, too!

DePue: And this was a war where the net was cast pretty wide, and they got almost everybody who was eligible.

Stapleton: Yes sir, but some of them weren't and they paid, too. They paid money, I mean, not to do it, 'cause the guys that did that, you know, the big shots... Well, when I signed up they signed me up, but they paid money to these guys. I know they did, I just know a couple of them...

DePue: So your lifelong career then after going through a few of these jobs initially is in life insurance, or in insurance?

Stapleton: Yes, I'm still helping my son. I turned it over to him a few years ago.

DePue: But I think that's pretty significant. You're how old now?

Stapleton: I'm eighty-six.

DePue: And you're still working in the insurance business?

Stapleton: You know what? I'm afraid to quit, because I just don't think I could hardly handle myself, you know. I think a lot of it's got still to do with the war, I really do. I don't like to say that because I don't want people to think that I'm just using it as an expose or something, but I really do. I think I'm better off keeping myself... You know, every once in a while you think about some—and you get something else to do, and it makes a difference. And I think my wife realizes. She's never said anything. She likes to have me here and there, and I try to be right to her. I couldn't find anybody to be any nicer to me than she has.

DePue: Well, I think you've got some children that are pretty special to you, and they feel pretty strongly about you, too.

Stapleton: Yeah, they do. We had four grandchildren over the weekend, this last weekend: a boy and three girls, and we don't have a great-grandchild with twelve kids!

DePue: Twelve grandchildren?

Stapleton: Yeah.

DePue: How many children did you have?

Stapleton: We had six, three boys and three girls. That one I told you, she died. But we have twelve grandchildren!

DePue: Well, Pat, it strikes me you've had a full life.

Stapleton: Yes, I have!

DePue: And would you say a good life?

Stapleton: A good life, yessir, and I'm well pleased with it. I love my wife and my children, grandchildren.

DePue: I want to back up real quick and talk about what happened to you in November of 2007. Let's have you put your cap on now; that might be a good time to do that, because I want the camera to see all these medals and ribbons that you've got: bronze star, campaign ribbons, and things like that. In November of 2007 what happened? That's just a few months ago. The French government?

Stapleton: Oh, yeah. I should've brought one of them!

DePue: I think the medal that they [the French government] awarded to you was the Legion of Honor.

Stapleton: Yes, that's right.

DePue: So, did the French government come here and get a bunch of members of the Thirty-Sixth Division together?

Stapleton: I don't know where they got... Now the information, can you show me?

DePue: Well, all I've got is just that information down here.

Stapleton: No, I mean that one that you had before, the one thing that you showed me that...

DePue: Well, I don't know that we're going to be able to—

Stapleton: This is what caused it, these two things. That's the reason that we got that one that they gave us. Now, there's more than the five or six of us that got it than there was us, but they're gone, and that's where we got... They just now went to this, but without them because they're not here. That's kind of bad, you know. I turned 'em down once because I didn't think it was fair for me to get that and them not to get it.

DePue: The ones who didn't survive?

Stapleton: Yeah, and I had survived. Then finally they sent me another letter and that was going to be it, and I got that thing, "Well, shoot, I might as well take advantage of it." I mean, it's nothing that I wasn't entitled to under their circumstances!

DePue: Where was the ceremony?

Stapleton: In Chicago.

DePue: There were how many of you who received it that day?

Stapleton: It was either five or six, is all. I should've brought one of those papers with me. Did I give you one of those?

DePue: Yeah, I probably have that in the collection of papers.

Stapleton: I think you have.

DePue: How meaningful was it for you to get that after all these many, many years?

Stapleton: Not too bad, really. It didn't affect me too much. It's been too long, you know, to let it still get you that much, and they were doing it. I mean, I didn't ask for it. I would've never asked for something like that, not even expecting it or expect it or think I should. I wouldn't do that. I can't do that. If they think I'm entitled to something, why not take it. just like you are right now. I had second thoughts about that, and I don't want you to think I'm just doing it to be a big-shot or something 'cause I'm not. I'm just telling you what I feel that... I have no regrets what I went through, I really don't.

DePue: Well, that's kind of the next question I had. You saw an awful lot.

Stapleton: Quite a bit.

DePue: You saw some very tough combat.

Stapleton: Yes, we did.

DePue: Do you think your sacrifices that you and your other fellow soldiers made were worth it?

Stapleton: Yes, I do. I really do. I don't think it would've ever stopped.. I believe that it was the thing to do at the time. I don't think it... And maybe I'm wrong. I don't really know; I can't tell you that I know that's what should have been done, but I really think that—I don't think you'd ever stop the Germans. I really don't.

DePue: Do you feel strongly about that maybe because you saw what they had done at Dachau and other concentration camps?

Stapleton: Well, some of it, yes, but not all of it. I just think that—look what happened to some of those outfits! I mean, they just cleaned them out! They really did, and they possibly could've got the whole world! Possibly, now don't get me wrong! They had them pretty well...

DePue: So they had to be stopped.

Stapleton: I think so. I really do, and I hate to say it but, I mean, I really believe that was... I wouldn't have done what I—I could've stayed out and I could've done it, but I just felt like we deserve to do what we could do. And don't get me wrong, I'm not a... I'm scared to death of some things and this and that. I'm not different, I mean, I don't think, in a way... I'm glad I did what I did, and I'm sorry that it had to happen. I feel bad for anybody where their loved ones went and got killed and this and that.

DePue: And didn't get to come back.

Stapleton: Get to come back... I feel very sorry for them, and I feel very lucky for myself.

DePue: How do you think the war changed you?

Stapleton: I don't think too much. I didn't live on it when I got out. I mean, I just hardly talked about it. In fact, some of the other people that I saw later and all, they were people that could've been in it and weren't in it, and I never thought anything about it. If they could do that, that's fine. You know, somebody had to stay home and do something, didn't they? They couldn't all go to war!

DePue: Did Arlene ever comment to you that you were changed because of the war?

Stapleton: She never has, no. She wouldn't know if she thought so! (laughter) She's a honey, she really is.

DePue: Did she change a little bit, with you being gone? Young wife?

Stapleton: No, I don't think so. I really don't.

DePue: What things do you think we, as Americans today, need to remember about World War II, and especially about your experiences, your understanding of it?

Stapleton: Well, just how do you mean that?

DePue: What would you like Americans to know about what your generation did in World War II, for them to remember?

Stapleton: Well, I think they should be very thankful for what we did, and I don't think they should just take it exactly against it or maybe for it in their sense, but just stop and think what might have happened if we didn't do what we did. I don't think we did the wrong thing, as bad as I hated to do it and got to do it. Shoot, I'd have an awful time shooting somebody just for the heck of it, you know, and some of that happened, too. We had some Germans one time that we went to a house and we were trying to get them on the way back to us. They had a bunch of old people in it; we put them in the basement, and we were on the main floor. Here come the Germans, and there was a few of 'em, and they were throwing stuff at us and trying to burn the house we were in and shooting at us, and all at once we ran 'em off. There was quite a few of us, and quite a few of them. One of these guys that were in it was an American that came over from the fun of it, to fight with the Germans. Anyhow, when we went to leave one of 'em jumped up and shot one of our guys. We had to shoot 'em all because we didn't know who was going to do that. They just laid down and waited until we got out of there and were going to kill all of us. This one guy told us, the one that got up and threw up his hand, he said, "Well, they told us to do it." They were going to kill all of us as we came out if they could. You know, that's pretty bad, isn't it? That doesn't leave too... I mean, that's not everybody, either. I mean, they're not all like that. But we had people not too far from there, and the Germans came in and told a Catholic priest to cut everything, and he wouldn't do it. They killed him, killed his kids on the altar, and then we got them, not because of that—they just happened to fall in our

hand. They went in there and they took the—they wanted the bodies buried in the... What do you call it?

DePue: The cemetery?

Stapleton: Yeah, and they wouldn't let 'em, but they did, and they took 'em out of there and threw 'em in the ditches. That was their own people, you know. But there's few and far between. There has to be. We have to think that, and I do think it.

DePue: So you've seen enough of war to hate warfare. What's your opinion about what's going on in the world right now, then?

Stapleton: The war is a mess. Don't you think? The world is a mess, and I don't know what the answer is. I really don't. There's just so many countries that are into it, and it's just misunderstood almost to see what the heck is going to happen, don't you think?

DePue: Well, do you see any parallels with the things that are leading up to, that are going on in the world today and the things that led into World War II?

Stapleton: Well, you can a little bit; you really can. I mean, I don't know what to think, like that one—what is it over there?

DePue: Iraq?

Stapleton: Iraq. How are they going to stop that thing? But what would've happened if we didn't do what we did? Look what they did to New York! They hardly did a lot of work there, you know, knocked down those buildings, but that was a terrible situation.

DePue: Out of pure hatred for America.

Stapleton: Pure hatred. So what are you going to do? Just let 'em do more of that? We have kept them out of our—excuse me—out of our way.

DePue: What I'd like to ask you here for the last question, or give you an opportunity, perhaps, for anybody who has a chance to watch this –I certainly hope they do because this has been an excellent interview, and I want to thank you for that –but maybe give us a few words of wisdom from Pat Stapleton to leave to future generations. Do you have any closing comments?

Stapleton: Well, the only thing I can say is they don't want to take in their mind that war is... You have to have war, that just to try to do the best that you can and do the things that you think should be done, and not just take everything as being "Well, you got to do this, you got to do that," because nobody, everybody are bad, you know. We've got good people and they've got good people. Some of those people that are fighting today, some of them are probably forced into it. We never did just really do that; in a sense; we did somewhat but not altogether. You know, we



got “Well, you’re going because you’re of age” and whatever. I don’t think the world couldn’t be settled, to be all right. I really don’t. I just think we have to all get together in a sense and let’s quit this stuff. You know, what do you gain? You don’t gain anything. I just think it’s terrible it has to happen. I feel sorry for the world. Don’t you? I really do.

DePue: I just feel a lot of fear for what the future might bode for us.

Stapleton: Right, I know it. It scares you, it really does. I just hope that somewhere along the line it settles a little bit.

DePue: Well, you’ve sacrificed a lot for your country, and then you’ve had sixty-some years after that of what you’ve expressed has been a very good life—

Stapleton: Yes, it has.

DePue: —and obviously have earned that.

Stapleton: Well, I’m sure!

DePue: And maybe you feel like, well, maybe God was looking out for you back in World War II.

Stapleton: Well, you never know. Anyhow, I’m here!

DePue: Any final comments for us then, Pat?

Stapleton: No. It’s been a pleasure talking to you, and I’m not fond of just spilling all my guts about what I did and I don’t want anybody to think that I cleaned the world out, you know. I mean, I just did what I was told to do and did the best I could do, and that’s all I could do. And I didn’t enjoy doing all of it, but it had to be done, the way I looked at it. And I’m sorry that some of it had to happen.

DePue: Well, if you don’t mind, I think you’re a pretty special guy and I really enjoyed having the opportunity to interview you here today.

Stapleton: Well, thank you.

DePue: Okay. And that concludes our session. Thank you!

(end of interview)