

[Begin Sound Sparks interview](#)

KENT: Today is July twenty... [looks questioningly at Sparks]

SPARKS: The 23rd

KENT: [July] 23, 2003. This is Judith Kent speaking from the Flagler County Public Library. Joining me today is Richard D. Sparks who was born on June 6, 1923. Mr. Sparks now resides in Deltona, Florida. Thank you, Mr. Sparks, for agreeing to participate in the Library of Congress Veteran's History Project. Would you state just for the record the branch of military in which you served?

SPARKS: Yes, I was in the U.S. Army.

KENT: And that was in World War II?

SPARKS: World War II, yes.

KENT: You have written extensively about your military experience. What was your motivation?

SPARKS: Well, I think probably... If I may start off a little bit... In training we were with what we called the I & R Platoon (Intelligence and Reconnaissance) a group of 24 fellows. We were all unmarried, most of us with some college background, and we formed a bit of a bond, and we were noted for being a little reckless sometimes. But our mission was, of course, was to get back of the enemy lines and scout out and come back with the information. But anyway, we all went our separate ways after discharge. And then in 1989, one of the fellows was trying to track down the rest of us and I got a postcard saying, you know, "If you are still around, call me at such and such a number." Well, that was the first one I hooked up to, and after that we got together two or three of us in the Orlando area and ultimately located and accounted for every one of the 24. That piqued my interest, of course, and I started putting out newsletters and things to the group, expanded that to the headquarters company we were in. Finally, one of the fellows said when we were at a reunion in Chicago... He said, "I think, Dick, that you ought to write up our stories some way or another." We were sitting in a bar that night. And I said, "If you make me a tape recording of what you remember and [with] the notes I've taken we'll contact this other fellow and see if he'll do the same thing." Anyhow, that turned into the first attempt. It's something that I've tried to show was not a big combat thing but more an account of how a bunch of guys lived together, worked together, some of the things we went through. And I followed that a little bit later on by soliciting autobiographies from each one of them (about what their civilian life had been after we got done). So I've got [their stories] kind of from the beginning right up to about four years ago. [*La Guerre Fini: Looking to the Future*, 1998]

KENT: Great. Even before they asked you to do that [be the platoon historian] you had done a bit on your own. In 1946 you had written "As We Lived."

SPARKS: When I first came home, I had taken a few notes as I mentioned. Basically after the war in Europe was over, and we were waiting around to come home I started fleshing it out a little bit.

KENT: Way back.

SPARKS: We got home (discharged in December 31, '45) and had a few weeks before I went back to college again. My dad, bless his soul, typed all those [notes] up for me (which was, "As We Lived"). It was a partial look at the thing [military experience]. It was the beginning of everything. And that [manuscript] sat in the closet in the bottom of boxes until 1989. [It later became "A Walk Through the Woods".]

KENT: The next one that you've already described was "A Walk Through the Woods." That was [written in] 1991, and that took place from the past?

SPARKS: Yes, that [the first of three books] didn't really come next as far as the history. The "Walk Through the Woods" takes us from training through the end of the Battle of the Bulge when our platoon group was split up. And then I wrote a second one, not in the order, "Over and Out" it was called which took the group from there into the newly reconstituted regiments that we had lost at the Bulge. It talked about, really, post-war Europe and armies of occupation. [It was] really a bunch of anecdotes that the guys told me, some of them kind of laughable and other ones not too much but it brought back memories. ["*La Guerre Fini*" followed] And then the one that you mentioned "Footprints From the Past." It's just a little account; two of my sons and I went back to Belgium in '99 and each one of us wrote up a little series of it.

KENT: From your own perspective.

SPARKS: Yes, uh huh. The interesting part about it was that through [my work on] "A Walk Through the Woods"... I had become acquainted with a Belgian gentleman, a member of an organization called CRIBA (Center for Research, Battle of the Ardennes). They're dedicated to meeting veterans that come back and taking them where they want to go. I had sent him my "Walk in the Woods." And by e-mail just the week before I came over he said, "I'll meet you at such and such a place and I'll take you to every place in your book." And we just about did, and that's why [we wrote] the "Footprints in the Past." The boys and I walked in a lot of those same footprints.

KENT: I like the title of the other one, "Over and out, the demise of a bunch of smart, properly disrespectful, hang-together-guys also known as the I & R Platoon, 423rd Regiment, 106th Infantry Division."

SPARKS: That's right. Actually I should have given credit; that's a quote from one of the fellows in the platoon who, I think wrote it to me in response to his copy of the first book that I sent him. And I always thought that was kind of a nice way of describing us.

KENT: You talked about consulting several sources to be sure that your report was accurate. Why was it so important to you that it be right?

SPARKS: I think too many times there many stories from veterans around that kind of gloss over the surface. This is not criticism, but you don't remember (after say 50 years when I started) a lot of the little details. I wanted to research the background (particularly to make sure the names and places were somewhat

accurate). Even though I had my notes I wasn't sure of some places where we were. By reading those background accounts, "The Time for Trumpets" for instance (the most definitive book I've ever read about the Battle of the Bulge) it just verified for me or let me clear up, particularly some of the sequence of things I remembered.

KENT: Okay, we can't possibly do justice to all your experience in the little time that we have today, so we should tell the listeners that your written materials will be made available as part of this interview. So, we can just kind of relax and talk.

You mentioned your early years that you were in college before the war started. Tell us a little bit about your family. Where you were born and raised?

SPARKS: Well, I was born in Westfield, New York. It's on the shores of Lake Erie. My dad was Production Manager of Welch Grape Juice Company. And I'm sure people have seen those products all over for many years. And I attended Potsdam State Teachers College in upstate New York as a music student. I had started in September of '41 and then Pearl Harbor, of course, occurred in December, and I finished up that year. At the time the Army came out with a program for college students that literally said, "If you will enlist in the Enlisted Reserve, we will let you complete another year of college before we call you up." So I traipsed down to Buffalo in the spring and summer of '42 and signed on the dotted line. And they did let me get through until next April and then they needed bodies more than they did college people, so I went on active duty at that time.

KENT: What was your basic training like?

SPARKS: Interesting. We were inducted at Fort Niagara and then sent down to Camp Wheeler in Macon, Georgia, at the beginning of a good, hot summer. And if anybody knows that territory, the red clay and the chiggers that would latch on to your leg (you know it took a cigarette to get them out)... But interestingly enough most of us in our training battalion were college fellows that had a year or two of college. We all seemed to be gathered at one time. Our platoon sergeant, training platoon sergeant (I guess it's called a drill sergeant nowadays) was an old regular Army guy, a Sergeant Humphreys, who I think maybe got past 6th grade, but I'm never sure. And he didn't think much of college fellows, to say the least. I remember distinctly if anybody even tried to use a word of too many syllables, you were liable to end up on KP or something because he didn't know what you were talking about. We had in our training platoon, let's see, quite a cross section of guys. There was a Larry Armour from the Armour Meat Packing outfit in Chicago and (the thing that I'm proudest of) Charles Guggenheim was in our training battalion. He just passed away, you know, the one who won so many Academy Awards for documentaries and things like that. And we've had correspondence over the years. But he [the drill sergeant] would pick on Charlie like nobody's business. Charlie was a slightly-built guy. 'Didn't have an awful of energy and on some of the marches he would want to lag behind a little bit and Sergeant Humphrey was always on him, you know. And in fact there were some times when one of us would get on each side of Charlie and we'd half carry him to get back to the barracks. [Chuckles] But as I said, anybody who acted like they were a little different (as he thought college people were) he'd end up on the lousiest details he could

find. But bless his soul after we finished basic training, he walked in the barracks and said "I thought I would get some of you guys to quit or do something, but none of you did." So it made you feel pretty good.

KENT: Beyond that, did you have some kind of specialized training?

SPARKS: After basic we did. After basic training they had sorted out some of us (I think based on Army scores or something, on tests we took) and sent us to the Army Specialized Training Program; ASTP it was called. I went to the University of Alabama along with a bunch of other fellows. They were supposedly sending us there so that we would study engineering and be ready for the postwar reconstruction of Germany. Well, again, that lasted for six months until they needed infantrymen. And then we went to the 106th Infantry Division in Camp Atterbury in Indiana. That's where we got our specialized training as the I & R. I guess [it is similar to] what we hear about these patrols that go out in Iraq that are probing for information.

KENT: Like Special Forces?

SPARKS: Special Forces. They didn't call us that then but at a regimental level we were supposed to do the same thing. We were to gain information and intelligence, bring it back to the unit so they knew where the strong points [of the enemy] were. And we were to avoid any firefights as much as we could unless it was absolutely necessary. So we had a lot of training in "sneaking around" (things like that) map reading, identification of German uniforms, a little bit of German language training and hand to hand combat (because the stuff we'd be in would be very close). It wouldn't be shooting a rifle from a distance. We were trained in that type of patrolling also and motorized patrolling. We had three groups in each squad. We were taught how to go down a road, stop and look ahead and then the next group would come up and "leapfrog" [the first vehicle]. You know, find out quickly what we could until we ran into the enemy, then hightail it back and tell them [regimental officers] the story. So it was a little bit more [training] than the average rifleman would have.

KENT: You'd have to radio equipment, too, right?

SPARKS: Yes, I was the radio operator for our squad.

KENT: Did you learn that skill in the service?

SPARKS: Yes, as soon as I got to Camp Atterbury they sent me to radio school along with some of the others. I graduated from that after about six weeks (I guess it was). A certain [Morse] code speed. [The ability to send and receive Morse Code at a specified speed was required for graduation.] Actually I ended up in a radio section for a week or so until they needed radio operators in the I & R so they transferred me from the radio section over to the I & R.

The I & R was kind of like a separate little unit. We were in a headquarters company but it was only for administrative purposes. Our lieutenant reported directly to the regimental intelligence officer. So we kind of didn't fit into any real structural sort of thing. I think we were resented sometimes, because I think we probably took advantage of it sometimes. [Laughter]

KENT: Everybody had nicknames?

SPARKS: Oh, that's right. We had this one fellow, Eddie Shannon. He just passed away about a year and a half ago. He lived in St. Petersburg. He was just a funny Irishman, and he gave most everybody a nickname. Of course, mine was "Sparky" which was kind of natural for a radio operator. [Laughter] A lot of the Navy operators are called "Sparky". There was a little short fellow who kind of was always looking around with nervous eyes so he nicknamed him "The Gnome", another fellow, Eddie "the Terror" Dentz and John "Rat" Califf (different things like that). He'd make up something for almost everybody.

KENT: That was probably part of the early bonding that was going on.

SPARKS: Oh, yes.

KENT: Teasing and practical jokes?

SPARKS: Oh, I guess so, yes. We would have, oh I don't want to say cliques, but different guys with different interests did things together. Three or four guys would go together into town for a pass or something like that, and maybe hit a few bars or whatever. Then there were some of us who, just like before we shipped out from Camp Miles Standish in Boston, there were four of us got an evening pass to go into Boston. Our place was to go listen to the Boston Symphony while other guys were doing other things. You know. But we all worked together well. Nobody looked down their nose at anybody else. But we took advantage of it all. In England (in our month in Cheltenham) three of us went and caught the Royal Philharmonic in Royal Albert Hall. [We] Took advantage of those cultural things.

KENT: We skipped over your shipping out, and that was quite *luxurious*, [sarcastic] accommodations on the *QE*.

SPARKS: Yes, I guess it was luxurious in that we went on the *Queen Elizabeth I*, but it was outfitted, of course, as a troop ship. The nice part was the 69th Division had been loaded on, and they had room left and they wanted an advance party of the 106th to go over to England to get things set up and our overall big unit was assigned to do that. So by the time we got loaded on board the *Queen Elizabeth* we had main deck cabins even though our bunks were five tiered high. We were still on the main deck and could sit outside and watch everything. All the details had been assigned to the 69th Division so we just sat and had a magnificent time. [It was a] Pleasant crossing of five days without a storm or anything else.

[Sound Sparks 2 way](#)

KENT: Was that your first time leaving the country?

SPARKS: Yes, it was if you don't count Canada.

KENT: Right. How did it feel arriving on the "other side of the pond"? Do you remember arriving?

SPARKS: Well, I don't know. I think we were all young enough it was a sense of excitement to us. You know something new. Let's see what this is all about. We had fun for that month in England getting acquainted with the British people, things like that. Meet them on the street, get into a conversation, rent a bicycle from the Red Cross and pedal out to the little villages. We were just kind of killing time. We didn't do much training for that month waiting to go over across to the continent.

KENT: When you crossed, it was on an LST [Landing Ship Tank], right?

SPARKS: Yes.

KENT: You got to meet their radio operator.

SPARKS: Oh, yes.

KENT: And what's that story?

SPARKS: We in the platoon, we radio operators, thought we were pretty "hot shots". We could do 20 words a minute [of Morse Code] by key and copy it and sometimes copy a little faster. So we roamed up to the radio room on the ship and Navy operators, of course, are noted as being experts, but they said, "Come on in". All the time with his ear phone on, he's taking down a message. We saw him glance out the window and he handed one of us a pad with a pencil and he said, "Copy these letters down". So he's taking one message over his ear phone and watching the blinking light from on shore that was sending individual letters, you know, in a message. Automatically while he was copying this [message] down, reading those [blinking signals] so we could copy down the second message. I never could figure out how the dickens anybody could be able to do that!

KENT: Things were still not all that arduous or difficult. They were really not all that

tough yet.

SPARKS: No, not at that point.

KENT: You had plenty of warm clothes?

SPARKS: Yep, yep, uh huh.

KENT: Equipment? Good food, okay food?

SPARKS: Well, yes, as long as the company kitchen was in force that's fine. That lasted right up until about the end [when the platoon got into combat]. After that it was a little different. [Laughter]

KENT: It went down hill? What was your first place that you reached on the continent?

SPARKS: Our ship pulled into Rouen, [France] just up the river from Le

Havre, war-torn buildings, terrible shape. We offloaded there about three days and spent about three days in a muddy field just outside there grouping, and then by motor convoy going down into Belgium into St. Vith (which was our ultimate destination through the division). The 2nd Infantry Division had been headquartered in St. Vith with their troops out in the front lines. We were just barely across the German lines at that time.

KENT: You could hear the artillery?

SPARKS: No, at the time it was very quiet. The 2nd had gone through in about September and captured that territory, established very substantial foxholes, little forts and things like that. Nothing much happened after that. And so they figured this was the place for a new green division to go up and relieve them [the 2nd Infantry Division] so they could go back and get organized again. They had some pretty tough fighting. As I say man for man and gun for gun, we took over their positions (except that they took their guns with them). By that time most of our artillery pieces had not reached us yet. We had no overshoes or vital things like that. I think each rifleman on the front line had something like only two clips of ammunition (that was about 20 rounds). You're supposed to have a whole belt full. Hand grenades and things were almost nonexistent. The company kitchens didn't have all their equipment to cook meals so we were living off the little K Rations, about the size of a Cracker Jack box, you know, but they had cheese and I don't know what. But it kept you going. That was the situation really at about the time the Battle of the Bulge started on the 16th of December. It had started snowing. We didn't have our equipment. We just had the wool gloves that were issued, no leather over-gloves that normally you had. Really the whole division was not in very good shape for any sort of combat, but again the higher ups said, "This is a place they can get used to things. They can send some patrols out. They can exchange a little rifle fire here and there and get used to what the front lines would be."

Well, of course, the Germans surprised us. They came in all at once on the morning of the 16th and all Hell broke loose is the only way to say it, a 20-minute bombardment of everything you could think of. Of course, the Germans had previously occupied that territory where we were, too. They know where every little village was and where we had set up in headquarters. The villages were little groups of houses, logging trails between them. There wasn't any place other than those to set up headquarters so they were shelling all of those normal places of command and disrupted communications within the first 10 minutes. All our telephone lines between units were out, and we radio operators were successful for a while keeping in touch with adjoining units but after a while they were jamming all our signals so there was no communication whatsoever.

KENT: And then it got colder?

SPARKS: Oh, yes, the snow kept coming down and coming down. It was pretty, that fluffy snow in the middle of all those pine trees. When a wind would come up it would blow right through you, you know. We started to move out. I'm ahead of myself, I think... We did have overcoats. They were pretty cumbersome to wear if you were going to move around much. You found if you did much moving around well then you'd begin to sweat and that layer of wool

clothing you had would get all soaked underneath and you were colder than if you left them [the overcoats] off. So we operated just with our field jackets most of the time. We had no overshoes. The "waterproofing" (in quotes) that we put on our boots didn't [keep out the water] and you constantly had cold feet. And some of the fellows had a little of trench foot even that early on.

Well anyhow the Bulge hit. Of the three [American] regiments in the division, two of them [the 422nd and the 423rd] got immediately surrounded (3,000 men per regiment). We were lucky enough with our 423rd Regiment to have been assigned to hold a road block back on the main roads that the Germans were coming up on. Because we did, we escaped a lot of what was happening. Ultimately the regiment had to surrender. They got caught in the valley, couldn't use their vehicles, ran out of ammunition and food and medical supplies.

KENT: So you actually saw their surrender?

SPARKS: We saw it. We overlooked that valley.

KENT: What did you think you should do? What did the group think they should do; surrender or...

SPARKS: No, our lieutenant had gone down to regimental headquarters to see what was up and at that time (that was on the morning of the 18th I guess). The colonel said, "We're going to have to surrender the regiment. If any of you want to try to get out on your own, go ahead. I'm giving you permission." Lieutenant Long came back and he said, "Do you guys want to surrender?" We said, "No way! We're used to sneaking around things." From that point on we took off and traveled about 18 miles on a roundabout route through Germans and across streams and into snow banks and everything else. We finally got back to St. Vith on the night of the 20th.

KENT: How cold was it then?

SPARKS: I don't know. It felt awfully cold. The streams were still flowing so it wasn't way down, but zero or a little bit below probably.

KENT: You were wet?

SPARKS: Yep.

KENT: And did you have any food?

SPARKS: No, just about the time we took off to leave the regiment the Germans had spotted where we were and starting shooting 88's (very high velocity shells) at our position, so we had to abandon our vehicles. We threw hand grenades into the [jeep] motors and things like that to disable them and left with whatever we could carry. We did have, some of us, a few of these little 4 inch long, hard chocolate bars stuffed with vitamins. You could hardly bite them, but at least they were very nutritious. We had some of those in our pockets. They came out of the K Rations we had been eating. And that's about the only thing we had. One fellow had stashed a little can he had picked up

some place with beef stew or something. And so we lasted on that from the... Well our last meal, I guess, would probably have been about the morning of [December] the seventeenth. Through the evening of the 20th when we got into St. Vith we hadn't had anything to eat other than that.

KENT: How close were you to the German troops?

SPARKS: I could have touched a couple of them. [Chuckles] We had moved in... Actually the Germans had swept completely around everything, and we had to go right through the middle of their forces if you will. Of course, thank goodness, it was wooded. We had been trained on how to get around in things like that. And they were sticking with the roads pretty well. They were just like a blitzkrieg going through quickly. We had pulled in one evening under a little bunch of low evergreens. A lot of the forests in Belgium are planted forests, if you will, nice rows you know where it's been forested before. These were a fairly young patch of trees, and we crawled in under these branches. It was ending daylight but we could hear in the distance artillery fire which made us think we were getting close to American lines some way. They [the Americans] don't know we're out there and, you know, [we reasoned that] maybe we'd better wait to see what's going to happen. So we crawled in under these trees and about as soon as we got settled on our stomachs down there, a group of panzers with their big tanks pulled in right around that square and established an overnight bivouac. As I said, I could have touched one. A couple of us were laying up near the edge of the woods, and a few of the German enlisted fellows went down and dug a latrine hole for the officers. And so as the evening went on, the officers would walk down and I think I could have reached out that way and I could have tripped any one of them. But thank goodness they never glanced down, you know, there's about (at that time) 18 of us. Anyhow, it got dark, and they went to bed, and we sneaked out. We came into the [American] lines that night.

KENT: What happened when you got to the American lines?

SPARKS: Well, as I said, we could tell [where they were] because of the artillery fire. We could hear some coming one way and some going the other. [gestures with his hands] We knew we were kind of in "no man's land." We got to the edge of a little patch of woods, and we could look across quite a vast plain in the direction of what we thought was St. Vith. We could see artillery flashes from the American side, and we could look over our shoulder and see it from the German side. And so we went along the edge of the woods and all of a sudden came to a little depression or draw as we used to call it. Probably you weren't hidden anymore than up to your belt buckle, maybe but a little bit of depression... We started walking along that and one of my friends (a radio operator with the other squad) he said, "Wait a minute!" He was about the fifth man in line and reached down and there was a trip wire. He had his radio pliers with him and we had been taught how to disarm some of those [land mines]. He felt that was a kind [of mine] that he could clip that wire... [He safely disarmed the mine.] Okay so we went on. Finally as we went a little distance out of the depression up in front we heard this voice shouting "Halt!" He ["Ike" Long, their platoon leader] stood up and said, "Ya, ya!" He told us, he said, "Either would be Germans or Americans." Whatever it was... He had a heck of a time explaining to the American troops (and this was a "dug in" tank from the 7th

Armored Division with a few infantry surrounding it) who we were and why we'd been out there [behind German lines] and why we were just coming in there [through the mine field].

KENT: Why you weren't Germans?

SPARKS: That's right. We didn't know at the time but, of course, they had been dropping German parachutists in American uniforms back of the American lines. So there was that suspicion always. Anyhow we finally were accepted and got through. [Chuckles] and taken to the big schoolhouse in St. Vith.

KENT: What kind of shape were you in physically?

SPARKS: I think pretty well done in. You know, feet were the worst things. I think most of us had a little touch of frozen feet; some worse than others. I remember one guy... After we got back to the schoolhouse and they had a few extra pairs of dry socks around. Incidentally, our headquarters most of them had pulled out and gone back further, but the remaining group there had some supplies. He [Bob Hirst] took his boots off and as he peeled his socks off the skin came with it. The medics said they only thing they had was sulfa powder. You got new socks, shake the sulfa powder on, put the socks back on along with the wet boots and all that. I think that was the worst part of it, you know. And physically, of course, without much to eat... We probably lost a bunch of pounds, but we were just about done in. I think it was the weather more than the Germans that ever did it. But I think probably we got back safely because of our training. We knew how to get around. We spotted Germans all the way through our little trip and things and were able to circumvent things.

KENT: And your teamwork?

SPARKS: That's right, yes. The scout went ahead and would scout it [the situation] out and say, "Okay let's do this." I know once we had to cross a road, and there was a German (this was after dark, a German convoy was coming down) so we stood at the edge of the trees, and one tank would go by and one guy would run across; the next tank would go by and the other guy would run across. We all got across all right.

KENT: So you all made it back?

SPARKS: We all made it back. And frankly we never fired a shot, which maybe says something for our training, too. We were not supposed to; a couple of times we debated whether we should [fire]. One of the scouts had spotted a small group [of Germans] around an 88; it looked like half a dozen Germans. We debated whether we should try to take them out. We said, "No, let's keep a good thing going." We don't know how many others are out or anywhere near there.

KENT: Did you get some rest?

SPARKS: We got in our [American] lines that morning about 2 o'clock, and they took us down to the big St. Joseph Kloster it was called, the big school house, part of a rural institution there. And we got debriefed and they sent us up

to the third floor where there were some old mattresses and blankets and said, "Get some rest." Three times we were chased out of there by shells hitting the building because the Germans were very close to St. Vith at the time with only a skeleton force holding them back. So our rest lasted until about probably 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and they called us down. Two houses down there (or wherever it was in a basement) I think the Medical Corps had set up a kitchen so we were sent down there. The shells were coming in and we were kind of running between, and we got down there and had our first hot meal which was beans and franks and garnished with fruit cocktail. That's about all they had to work with, [Laughter] but at least it was warm.

KENT: Tasted pretty good?

SPARKS: Yes, and we'd had a chance to wash up a little. You feel a little more human after you get the grime off you, you know. And then after that back into the streets again where we fought alongside tanks and the final battle and rode the last tank out of St. Vith before it fell [to the Germans] that night.

KENT: Why don't we pause here and take a break.

SPARKS: Okay.

End of side one

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KENT: Okay, when we finished side one, we had just gotten you out of St. Vith, which wasn't easy. That's where you spent Christmas and New Year that year, in that area.

SPARKS: Yes, that's right. We left St. Vith and finally we were able to catch up with our division headquarters. They had pulled back to the little town of Ferrieres (about thirty miles away). We caught a series of rides with various trucks and got back there and caught up with them on the 23rd of December. That was probably the most traumatic thing for all of us, what happened [long pause]. There was a little school in Ferrieres that was run by a couple of sisters. We were put there [at the school] for our barracks, if you will. They and the townspeople brought in bales of straw and things like where we had something to lay on. Of course, the supply groups of headquarters had blankets and things like that they could bring to us. But we were really (except for that one hot meal) in bad shape by that time by the time we got back. We got into the room and we kind of said, "Look, we've been chased out of every place that we stopped by the Germans that we stopped. Maybe we'd better clean our weapons the first thing we do, and then we can relax." Well, nobody really felt like it but it made sense and in the process one of the guys was so tired, I think, he didn't realize there was a shell in the breach of the gun and the rifle went off. [The bullet] ricocheted off the floor into one of the fellows' arms (this typical school house had a little raised platform, and I was sitting alongside my Squad Leader, Bill Morris) and it caught him right in the middle of the forehead. [He was] The only person we lost. [pause] That kind of shook us all up. We were mentally not in very good shape anyhow at that point. [nervous laughter]

KENT: And you had held him in high regard?

SPARKS: Very much so. He was one of the guys that when we college fellows came in [he] had been there, so he was our squad leader. He was my squad leader. When you only have about ten guys in a squad, you're pretty close. It didn't matter that he was a sergeant and I was whatever, you know. He was just a wonderful guy.

KENT: What kind of leader was he?

SPARKS: Excellent, excellent. He led by example. 'Never would ask anybody to do anything he wouldn't do whether it be in training or anything else. It was a real loss. I was able when I went back to Belgium with my boys to visit his grave over in [Henri] Chapelle [Military Cemetery] and take a picture of it and leave a flag.

KENT: Those were hard times. Okay. On April 15, 1945, you had a very solemn ceremony.

SPARKS: Yes, you see, the two regiments that had surrendered probably the 6th with only one regiment [the 424th] left and we had been attached to that after our platoon was broken up and we did a lot of actual fighting at that time. So just before then they decided to bring that regiment back and with replacements coming in from overseas, to reconstitute the entire division. We had gone way back into the Brittany peninsula where the ports of St. Nazaire and Lorient. The Germans had two big submarine pens in which their (what do they call them, I can't think) wolf packs, submarines that go out into the ocean there. They (the submarine bases) had been captured early on in the war and there had always been troops there keeping them secure. The Germans were in there, but we wouldn't let them out either. So we were sent back there to take on that duty and at the same time about 6,000 new replacements came in. It was a little interesting considering the training we'd had, we "veterans" at the time. [Laughs] Most of them [replacements] had received about six weeks of basic training in the States and shipped right overseas without any formal unit training or working with a group they knew about or anything else. And so on this given day at the airfield in Rennes, [France] the big airstrip the 6,000 of them were in regimental formation on one side and the survivors of the 422nd and 423rd were on the other side. In the 423rd, out of the 3,000 men we had 60 that were not captured. So there was the 60 of us. Our little unit [the I and R] of almost 20 guys was about the biggest group of survivors if you will. And, yes, it was impressive. The band was playing and all that. We [the survivors] marched across with our flags and emblems and went over across, turned around and the rest of them [the replacements] followed us back. So all of us [survivors and replacements] up there were two new regiments.

KENT: That was a proud moment.

SPARKS: Yes, it was.

KENT: At the risk of being immodest, tell us what medals and citations you won.

SPARKS: I guess the usual ones [that] all of us did. We, all of us, of course,

earned the Combat Infantry Badge. Anybody that was in combat would qualify for that. It was in the summer of '45, I think, that General George Marshall issued a proclamation (or something) that those at the time who held the Combat Infantry Badge also qualified for the Bronze Star. There were two classes of Bronze Star: one, that way, and the other one for extraordinary heroism. We got the first one. It's nothing to say that we were heroes or anything of the sort. [Laughs] We also were able to wear on an individual basis (and I'll explain that in a minute) the Presidential Unit Citation which is given to units that did outstanding things. That all came from our short time in St. Vith when we were attached to the 7th Armored Division, but since we were not an integral part of them for a given period of time (really only 24-26 hours) we were not included in the order. Because we were there [at St. Vith] we were allowed to wear that ribbon on an individual basis that says, "Yes you were there with the unit and knew what to do." And that was about it. Some of the fellows that got wounded later got Purple Hearts, of course, and we had a couple [from the I & R] in POW camps that had their POW medals. Just the usual things. We were proud of the fact that we did have in the European ribbon, four battle stars for campaigns. Most outfits don't have that many, except the long term guys who came in in Normandy and things like that. But we accumulated those.

KENT: Do you remember where you were when you found out you were heading home?

SPARKS: Oh, let's see, I think it was; we had gone up and done occupation duty after the war ended with a new group. And we waited around, of course, at the time you went home according to the number of points you had accumulated. You got so many points for length of service, so many points for certain months overseas. It [the points] built up but, of course, all the high point men who had been in for a long time went [home] first. And the rest of us waited around for a while. But I think I was in... Oh, we started the trek back in Karlsruhe and then we went with whatever group of people; you didn't know who you were going to be with. I ended up in a little place called Dole, France right near Dijon, and from there into a port of embarkation and shipped out of the port of Antwerp.

'Crossed [the Atlantic] in one of the old victory ships in December, up and down and up and down in a big storm. [gestures with hands to show the motion of the ship] I know I was in the forward hold, I guess in a bottom bunk. I think I was out of it for about four days. I remember waking up one morning, and a guy said, "Are you all right? We've been worried about you. You've almost been comatose".

KENT: From motion sickness?

SPARKS: Yes, I got so sick to my stomach. And I wasn't the only one, there were a number of others but the storm got done and we got in the calmer seas and that again was close to Christmastime. On the 24th the chaplain had a Christmas service. Since I'd had some music, I played this little pedal organ for that Christmas service on the *S.S. Victory Frederick*. We headed back to New York and were interrupted a little bit because one man had come down with acute appendicitis, and we had to stop at St. John, Newfoundland and drop him

off at a hospital before the ship went down to New York into the harbor

KENT: You pulled in by the Statue of Liberty?

SPARKS: Oh, yes, that was quite a sight! It sounds trite but it is.

KENT: And you made your way back to your hometown?

SPARKS: Yes, after discharge. We went into Fort Dix as a separation center. I was discharged on the 31st of December in '45. I said, "Well, maybe I can make it home for part of New Year's Eve." I remember they gave you some transportation money along with \$300 of mustering out pay which was kind of burning a hole in my pocket. But I remember catching a bus from Fort Dix in to Grand Central Station at the time and in New York there was the Empire State Express which crossed the state and all the way to Chicago. It always stopped at little Westfield because there was Chautauqua Institution and some things nearby where visitors would come. Well, I found out that was just about going to leave at that time, and here I am running down with my big duffle bag over my shoulder, and it [the train] was just starting to pull out and the conductor on the end said, "Come one soldier!" I tossed it to him and he grabbed my hand and pulled me on to the train. So I got home at 2 o'clock that morning. So I didn't make the celebrations, but it was enough celebration.

KENT: Just to be there!

SPARKS: That's right, yes, the family was waiting for me down at the track. We'd had a short stop in, I think, Syracuse, and I was able to send a telegram or something—you didn't make phone calls much those days. I let them know that I would be in.

KENT: Had you been able to keep in touch with them at all while you were overseas?

SPARKS: By letter, that's all, of course. I know a number of the letters I wrote my mother saved. The ones I wrote seemed to get home. The ones she wrote very seldom came in after we once got in combat. Although it was, I think, a good six weeks after the beginning of the Bulge that she didn't know where I was or whether I was alive or whatever. A group of mothers (it happened all over the country) kind of had what they called the "agony grapevine". I know the first my mother knew that I was alive is my friend Bob Jones had written to his mother and his letter got through. And she called my mother, and the word spread, you know, "These guys are okay!" But that was almost up into February by the time she knew. So, yes, we were in touch. Of course, all our mothers particularly sent boxes of goodies to arrive a Christmastime and not a one got there, of course. [Laughs] Yes, we were able to keep in touch that way. I kick myself because when my mother passed away I ran into all the letters I had written. This was 41 years ago. I said, my gosh, I don't want to remember all this stuff. And if I had them now I'd be thankful. They probably would have documented things I've forgotten. Although we couldn't tell much. All your letters were censored. They went through, I guess a battalion level regimental censor. A lot of times you'd write one, and they'd take a razor blade and cut out a given word or two words. Maybe when your letter got home it was a patchwork because anything that would tell where you were was verboten. So

we'd try to arrange codes or some way to let them know about where we were anyhow.

KENT: So you are still a young guy what are you going to do with the rest of your life.

SPARKS: Me? Now?

KENT: No, then. When you got out.

SPARKS: Oh, when I got out, I went back to school, back to college. It might be a little interesting sidelight, but this was a rather small college. I think there were ten of us that came back at the same time for the second semester starting in '46. We had two more years to go. I remember one day we were all happened to be assigned to the same history class; it was a basic subject you had to take. And, of course, I think too when we got back we were three years older than everybody else that was there in class and probably a little "porky", too. But we were sitting six to a table or desk and the "prof" was lecturing and right outside the window on the main street in town a car went by and backfired out there. As soon as that car backfired, you quickly looked around and there were ten of us under the tables, that automatic response you know to something. If you hear an artillery shell, you get under cover, so we did. I'm not sure whether we were more embarrassed or the other students who didn't know what the heck these guys were doing. [Laughter] We had such good times.



The nice part of it was that none of us lived the war over again [at that time.] I have a very close friend of mine who was in the 82nd Airborne. I knew where he was [during the war], and he knew where I was; we knew we were somewhere near together, but we never compared notes until we went to a class reunion back in '97 when we roomed together and then started comparing notes about the war. Thank goodness, [in 1946] we could go back to school, we could start a new life immediately. We didn't have the dreams and nightmares and all that. We didn't have time to think of all that sort of stuff.

KENT: So you had time for a family somewhere in there?

SPARKS: Oh, yes. I graduated in '47 and my wife Nancy was in school at the same time. We got married right after I graduated. Within the next ten years or so we accumulated five kids. I started out teaching music, did that for eleven years and then got into school administration. We moved all over New York State; had a good time doing it. Nancy was always one who said, "This is exciting. Let's go! We'll make some new friends." So we got the packing boxes—we always stored the same ones in the attic because we knew we wouldn't be there long. I worked up to the place where I was the equivalent of a county superintendent in New York State for the last eleven years before I retired. Then came down to Florida and did a little real estate and looked around and then got interested in writing.

KENT: Well, you have a lot to write about. You talked about your return trip

with your boys. How was that special?

SPARKS: I think first of all to have them along was one thing. There had been trips back [to the area where he fought] organized by our division association, but I really didn't want to [go] because the itinerary was so planned and you went to certain places and no time on your own. I said, "If I ever want to go back I'll find one of the other guys in the platoon and we'll just go together." Well, that didn't work out that way, but I got talking to the two boys about it. 'Came up at Thanksgiving, I guess, '98. We were up at our son David's house in Shelburne, Vermont. I think his wife Sherry said "Dad, do you ever want to go back over there?" I said, "Yes, under the right circumstances I think it would be nice. Dave spoke up and said, "If you want to go, I'll go with you." I said, "Well, okay, that's good." He called me two days later and said, "I've been in touch with Tom." who lived in Hilton Head. He said he'd like to go along. "Let's start planning." I said, "Yes, okay that sounds exciting. What do you want to ... He said, "I'll take care of getting the reservations on the plane." I said, "What do you want me to do?" He said you plan where you want to go on the trip." I said yes, then I began to have serious doubts and frankly [get] quite emotional. I wasn't sure that I wanted to go back to some of those places again. But I finally said, "What the heck. It's years later; things will look different." As I said we ran into my friend Henry Rogister, the Belgian that took us under his wing along with two other great people and took us all over. It wasn't hard to do. The toughest part was the visit to the cemetery where Bill [Morris] was. There were other places that David said, "I can just see you standing there and listening to those tanks again." "Yes", I said, "I think you're right." The fact that two of my boys were able to see some of the places that I had written about, I really never talked about it much to the family. I think it gave them an idea of what our generation was, maybe.

KENT: I especially liked the list that one of your sons wrote about the things he had learned on the trip.

SPARKS: He's kind of a deep thinker on stuff like that. I don't know how to comment otherwise, but I think the things like he said, "I don't need 2,000 calories a day to live or I thought I knew what being cold was." [Chuckles]

KENT: Looking back from this vantage point, how would you say overall your military experience affected your life?

SPARKS: Well, it affected it in one way. It chopped three years out a time when you were in college and probably a hell raiser and had a lot of good times. I missed that. But that's all right. In three years I think most of us matured probably ten years. We came back we were serious about things. I think we knew how to look at different things and form judgments not based on emotions but on being able to analyze. We learned I think how all people are a lot different, whether they're buddies or what. You found out how

you could get along with people; what they needed, how to work cohesively and things of that nature. I think for that reason I was a lot better for it and I think most of the fellows felt that way.

We've kept together, you know, since then. There are twelve of the twenty-four of us still alive. Up until this last year we've had a reunion in Dallas for a

weekend each year. Maybe there will be one more left, I don't know, we're all in our 80s now so. It had a positive effect. I wouldn't want to do it again, but I think I was better off because I did.

KENT: You talked about the importance of the friendships and the reunions. That's been a bond that you've continued with these people.

SPARKS: When you're in combat alongside a guy, you know you can trust him and he can trust you. A whole bunch of us left the Army with that knowledge. I'm surprised the first time after we tried to set up [a reunion]... We had fourteen at the first get together we tried to arrange. I used to get that many, it was in about '92 at one of the reunions. But you see them and felt that same thing, you know. We were all older. It was a little hard to recognize some of them, but as soon as one word was said you knew who it was. We're big e-mail guys. The thing I find is that (and I preface it by saying I seem to kind of be the message center)... If some word needs to be sent to everybody, somebody tells me. If somebody's got something on their mind it's not unusual for instance that I pick up the phone and call my friend in California and talk it over with him. You have a confidence; you need somebody outside the realm you know. We find that we're doing that with each other quite a bit. Sending an e-mail once in a while [saying] "Do you remember this?" These are my thoughts now, that type of thing, just a great feeling.

KENT: Very special. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that we should mention before we close?

SPARKS: I think I've talked too much. You've got me going! No, I don't think so. I think we've covered pretty much all the bases. Life's been good to me afterwards. I have a nice family, a successful career and a nice retirement so far.

KENT: Sounds good. I would encourage the people that listen to this tape to read the things that you have written because they are so well done

SPARKS: Thank you.

KENT: Thank you so much for telling us your story.

SPARKS: I'm glad I could participate, Judy, and thank you.

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