

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAMUEL SCHMIDT

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Nicholas Molnar: This begins an interview with Samuel Schmidt in Monroe Township, New Jersey, on September 3, 2004. Interviewing Mr. Schmidt today will be Nicholas Molnar and ...

Shaun Illingworth: Shaun Illingworth.

NM: I would like to thank you very much for having us here today, Mr. Schmidt. Please tell us about your father.

Samuel Schmidt: My father was born in Romania. [He] spent a lot of time in Vienna and, for [a] very short period of time, he lived in Berlin. By trade, he was a furrier and he was a good, decent man who lived to the age of ninety-three. He passed away about twenty-eight years ago.

NM: What exactly does a furrier do?

SS: Makes fur coats and his specialty was the cutting of the furs, which is a very intricate procedure. He used to specialize in mink coats. ... If you know what a real mink looks like, it looks like a large rat and, in order to incorporate the mink into a coat, it requires very delicate cutting and stretching, stretching, and then, after they've been cut, stretched, they have to be sewn together in such a way that makes it look like one long piece. ... This is what his specialty was and this is what he did when he was in the old country. ... This is what he did when he came to ... this country in 1922.

NM: On your pre-interview survey, you said that he also served in the Austrian Army during the First World War.

SS: Yes, he served in the Austrian Army. Funny you should bring that up, just a little side anecdote, I have a postcard that he sent ... my mother in 1918 and it's a picture postcard. He's on one side with one of his buddies, a typical photographer's pose, with [his] hand on his shoulder and standing straight, in the Austrian Army [uniform]. On the flip side, it was in German and I never could read it, because it was too small and it started to yellow with age. ... One day, I just happened to glance at the very top and it indicated that his outfit was the 95th Fusiliers and, by coincidence, I was in the 95th Infantry in the US Army.

SI: Did he ever talk about what he did in the service?

SS: No. My father was a very quiet man. He never discussed it. I knew a little bit, very little, about his past life in Europe, very little, and practically nothing about his being in the Austrian Army.

NM: How did he come to America?

SS: They wanted a better life, like any other immigrant who came to this country. He wanted a better life and he was fortunate in that one of his cousins owned a fur factory in Manhattan and he knew that he had a job available when he got here. So, he and my mother and my brother, older brother, came to this country in 1922 to look for the good life.

NM: Could you tell us a little bit about your mother?

SS: My mother was really the head of the family. She was the one who made all the decisions. She was a very bright lady and she showed ... my brother and I a lot of love. ... She also lived a long time. She passed away at ninety-two and ... she was the leader of the family. She made practically all the decisions, but they were good decisions, so, my father had no argument with her. She came from a rather large family. She had five sisters and brothers and they all immigrated to the New York area, ... except one sister, who, for some reason unknown to me, immigrated to Charleston, South Carolina, where her husband had opened up a bakery business and did rather well. She was a good lady.

SI: Your parents were married in Europe. How did they meet?

SS: ... No, never discussed that, no, nothing about that at all.

SI: Was your mother also from Austria?

SS: Oh, yes.

NM: You lived in the Bronx, New York, in your youth.

SS: I was born in the Bronx and we moved from the Bronx to Brooklyn when I was about two years old. So, I was brought up in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn. ... When I was married the first time, we moved to an area called Flatbush and I lived there until I came to New Jersey, twenty-two years ago.

SI: What was Bensonhurst like when you were growing up?

SS: That was a very nice area. It was not what you would call a rural area, but it was a very nice, quiet area, ... primarily Italian and Jewish. ... We had no problems with neighbors and we made friends. It was a very decent place to live.

SI: Was it a mix of recent immigrants and people who had been there for many years?

SS: It's hard to tell. I know the neighbors who were on the east side of us [were] immigrants who came to this country. ... They were two nice Italian families and they had immigrated to the United States from Italy, didn't know too much about them, except that we were neighbors, never really buddy-buddy, but, "Hello, how are you?" friendly kind of thing.

NM: What was your elementary school education like? Do you have any memories of that?

SS: Yes, I went to PS 48 in Brooklyn, elementary school. I don't know how it is today, but, in those days, you went from kindergarten, and then, from grade one to grade six. ... I was ... an average student. I never had a problem in school and, from there, I went to what was known then as junior high school, which was three years, which meant that when you finally went to high school, instead of going for four years, you went for three years, because one of the years in

junior high school was equivalent to the first year in high school. ... I went to junior high school for three years, and then, I went to New Utrecht High School for three years and I graduated in January of 1941.

SI: Where did you see yourself going after high school? What were your aspirations? Did you think you were going to college or did you want to get a job?

SS: That's a good question. I really didn't have too much aspiration. I thought, at one time, that I wanted to be an accountant, which ultimately led me to St. John's University, but, after studying [to be an] accountant for about three years or so, I realized it wasn't ... the kind of thing that I really liked, but, then, somebody else made up my mind for me, Uncle Sam. Uncle Sam blew his bugle and I was drafted. So, I had no thoughts about what I wanted to do until I could get out of the Army, which didn't happen until 1945. ... Then, when I did get out of the Army in 1945, oh, let me backtrack a bit. Even while I was going to St. John's University, I was working in a department store, a now defunct department store, called Abraham and Strauss in Brooklyn. I loved retailing. I just like the whole idea of working in a large store and, when I was discharged in 1945, I went back to Abraham and Strauss. ... In addition to going to New York University School of Retailing, I also was in the Abraham and Strauss executive training program, which is very interesting. They would expose you to all facets of retail store operations, and then, after testing all of that, you have the option of choosing the one that you wanted to pursue a bit further. I pursued the idea of being in management, which is what I did.

SI: Did your father want you to get an education or follow him in his trade?

SS: No, not follow in his trade. They thought, and I thought, in the beginning, that accounting would be my profession, but, after a while, I didn't care for it. ... They made no objections when I told them that I wanted to pursue a career in retailing.

SI: You grew up mostly during the Great Depression.

SS: No, the Great Depression was a little bit earlier, I believe. I was finally exposed to the workforce in full time reality ... right after 1945 and I think the Great Depression, I believe, was over by then.

SI: You were a child, though, during the Depression.

SS: Obviously, I was a child and I couldn't comprehend the full meaning of what the Depression was. I know, being that my father worked, we always had food on our table. We never enjoyed any supreme luxuries. We never had an automobile or had any extended vacations, but we were relatively comfortable in our own house.

SI: As a child, what were your interests? Did you participate in any extracurricular activities or athletics?

SS: Oh, yes. My big passion then was and, as late as this morning, is tennis. I've always played tennis, for fifty-five, sixty years. It's my one big passion, for two reasons. Number one, I love

the game and, number two, it affords me the exercise that I need to keep the body going the way it should be going. [It] helps lower cholesterol and hypertension and things like that. In addition to that, I just love the game and I've been playing it around sixty years and I'm pretty good at it. I'm no Pete Sampras, but who is? but that's my big passion, is tennis. [laughter]

SI: How easy was it to pick up tennis in Bensonhurst?

SS: We had park department courts in Bensonhurst and, for twenty-five cents a year, you got a pass to play. It started at twenty-five; it ended up costing twenty-seven dollars-and-fifty cents when I left Brooklyn. ... It was easy, always, to pick up a game and, as I say, it was my big passion. ... Then, when I was in the Army, I was on the Fort Bragg post tennis team, which was very nice, because it afforded me the game that I love and getting out of all kinds of duties, because you're on the tennis team and you had to go practice. As a matter-of-fact, we even left the post and we went down to Duke University in North Carolina and North Carolina State University to play exhibitions with the college teams. ... They treated us royally and we felt like visiting celebrities.

SI: Was anybody on that tennis team a professional tennis player?

SS: No. Nobody was really a professional. More or less, most of us played a similar scale game but, on any given day, somebody can play a little better than the other guy; as was evidenced this morning.

NM: Did you commute to St. John's University?

SS: Yes, subway.

NM: Did they have any extracurricular activities?

SS: No, not at all. When I went to St. John's, it's no longer located where it is now, out in Long Island, in a lush, rural area. When I went to St. John's, it was in downtown Brooklyn. It was strictly an office building amongst other office buildings, so, there was no athletic field or anything that they probably maintained. ... They did have a basketball team, a very good one, at one time, but it was well off my campus. So, I had no idea where it was, because I didn't participate.

SI: Did you go during the day or at night?

SS: Night. I was working at Abraham and Strauss during the day and going at St. John's at night.

SI: You worked at Abraham and Strauss after Pearl Harbor.

SS: Much after. Pearl Harbor was '41 and I started working at Abraham & Strauss in '42 and I worked there until I was drafted in '43.

SI: How did rationing affect what you were selling and doing at A&S?

SS: No effect at all, that I could see. I was finally assigned to a specific department. I was in men's wear and there was really no shortage of shirts, ties or what have you. ... So, there was no impact on us.

SI: You did not have to put limits on customer purchases.

SS: No, no, nothing like that at all.

NM: Was there a drop in business in the men's department or anything noticeable when men starting leaving for the war?

SS: I never discerned any kind of difference at all. ... I'm not saying there wasn't any, but I couldn't see it.

SI: Did you know about what was happening in Europe before Pearl Harbor?

SS: We know a lot, especially about Hitlerism, because it so happened that my father's two brothers had remained in Germany and both were in concentration camps. One of my father's brothers was in Dachau. ... The other one, I don't know how it happened, but, somehow, he wound up in a *gulag* in Russia. Luckily, they both survived and they ended their days living in Paris. We never heard any details about their incarceration, as to what they went through, whether they were really hurt or not or just survived from day-to-day. So, I really can't tell you what they went through. All I know, is they were in concentration camps.

NM: Did your family correspond with them?

SS: Well, the correspondence was, of course, after they were released. When they were living in Paris, they began to correspond with my father and mother.

SI: Was there any awareness of this in your neighborhood?

SS: About what was going on in Europe? Oh, yes. I mean, the rise of Nazism ... was all through the community. Everybody spoke about it, whether you were Jewish, Italian or what have you. Everybody was aware of the impending disaster, because you could see that no good was going to become of this at all. It was just the Holocaust, you know, and a lot of people were aware of it.

NM: Did any of the Italians express pro-Mussolini feelings?

SS: No, not at all. There was no political discussion at all. Amongst ourselves, we spoke about what Hitlerism was doing in Germany and the rest of Europe, but we really didn't have any specifics to really get into. We had a general idea of what was going on.

SI: Before Pearl Harbor, did you think that America would get into the war? What did you think?

SS: To be honest with you, I really didn't know whether we would or we wouldn't. I had no idea whether or not America would finally get in. Of course, we knew that Britain got into the war in September of 1939 and we knew they were having a tough time. I never stopped to rationalize, "How is this going to impact on us? Are we going to follow suit?" I didn't give it too much thought until the day of Pearl Harbor. I had no idea what Pearl Harbor meant. When we heard there was an attack on Pearl Harbor, and never having heard of Pearl Harbor before, we couldn't understand what it meant. We didn't know that this was a Navy base out in the Hawaiian Islands; we had no idea. We knew it was somewhere out in the Pacific and, also, at the very beginning, until Roosevelt declared war the following day of Pearl Harbor, we had no idea what that meant. I mean, the enormity of what was going on, [I] had no idea.

SI: How did you hear the news?

SS: On the radio. There was no television in those days. As a matter-of-fact, when we heard the fact that there was an attack on Pearl Harbor and that there might be an imminent attack on the mainland, I went to the window and began looking up in the sky, because you don't think properly. ... We're talking about something that happened thousands of miles away, but you don't think rationally at a time like that.

NM: Working in the men's department at A&S, did you see anyone get drafted before you? Were any of your contemporaries or friends drafted? Did you expect to be drafted yourself?

SS: Well, once the draft was in effect and we understood that people were being drafted, I saw that draft board headquarters go up in my neighborhood, I knew, eventually, I'll be called. ... I was in good health and I was a prime candidate for the draft and, sure enough, it came to pass. ... As far as people before me, some of my friends, who were maybe a year or two older than I or even my age, just by the luck of the number of the draw, were drafted earlier than I was. I would say, in my group of contemporaries or my friends, I must have seen six or seven of my friends drafted.

SI: Did you go directly to St. John's after you graduated high school?

SS: Yes, directly.

SI: After Pearl Harbor, did you consider going right in the military?

SS: No. ... I wasn't too anxious to volunteer. If I was to be drafted, so be it, but I didn't volunteer, no.

SI: Do you remember if rationing, blackouts or Civil Defense drills affected your neighborhood?

SS: I remember people walking around with Civil Defense armbands and wearing a phony helmet, nothing really happened. I really don't remember rationing at all, no.

SI: Do you remember any paranoia on the East Coast about Germans landing from submarines?

SS: No. ... I heard about it, later on, that some German submarines had gotten very close to the Jersey Shore, but I don't think that anybody ever left the submarines to go ashore for any terroristic activity, no.

NM: What were your feelings when you were drafted?

SS: I wasn't crazy about the idea, because I was in school and I thought I would like to finish my college, but I realized that I had to go with the flow and my number was up and I was called. I really did not have any ideas about it. My only thought is, "Where am I going to wind up? Am I going in the infantry? Am I going to be artillery?" That's what I thought about. About being drafted, I just accepted it as a thing that had to be.

SI: Can you tell us about the process of reporting for duty?

SS: Oh, okay, ... that's interesting. We had to go down, first of all, for what they call a pre-induction physical, which meant getting your arms stabbed about five or six times with needles. ... Then, we reported for induction at a place called Camp Upton, Long Island. ... The Army decided, in their infinite wisdom, to give us some kind of an intelligence test, to see where we might be best suited. So, we spent a good four-and-a-half, five hours filling out a paper, yes or no, multiple choice, etc., expecting them to rationalize, "What should we do with these people? Everybody comes from a different background, has different things they like to do or are capable of doing." The following day, the commander walked in and said, "Everybody here is going down to Camp Breckenridge. You're all going to be military police." Why have an examination? So, we reported to Camp Breckenridge. We were the 505th Military Police Battalion and we were what they called combat MPs. In other words, we weren't supposed to be the kind that you see patrolling the streets or riding the trains. We were supposed to be the military police that would come in advance of the infantry, plotting out roads and being police officers, guarding convoys and things, that kind of thing and taking care of prisoners of war and that's the way it started out. We were military police. We were shipped to Camp Breckenridge. We were there maybe less than a year, and then, we were sent to the State of Tennessee. ... Three-fourths of the State of Tennessee became a maneuver area, where several divisions and accompanying troops would play at war and it was done ... very effectively. Starting with Monday morning, at eight o'clock, you have to assume actual battle situations and you couldn't use any public facility. You couldn't avail yourself of anything nice. You were in battle zones and we, as MPs, were doing what we were trained to do. That went on for about a year or so ... and, after the maneuver was finished, we went back to Camp Breckenridge ... and, all of a sudden, one day, somebody came and he said, "They're breaking up the outfit. Don't need any more MPs; we now need infantry." So, we were shipped off to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where we joined the 100th Infantry Division. ... We were with them for quite a while, and then, prior to going overseas, we were shipped again to the 95th Infantry Division and went overseas with the 95th. ... We landed at Omaha Beach, well after D-Day. D-Day was June 6th and we got there, I think, in late August and we were bivouacked in Normandy for about three weeks. They didn't know what to do with us, because the main objective at that time was getting

supplies and ammunition and food to the frontline troops that were way ahead of us. So, they turned part of our outfit into a trucking outfit. They got some very good, experienced drivers to come in. ... They provided us with trucks. Those of us that did not ride the trucks, we just sat in the apple orchards of Normandy for a couple of weeks and, being that I spoke a little French, they decided to make [me] a French teacher. So, I stood up in front of 187 men and gave a couple of French lessons, ... the typical, "How are you? What have you got to drink?" etc. "Do you have a pretty sister?" [laughter] When that phase was over, we were loaded into what they called forty-and-eights, which was a boxcar with forty men or eight horses, and we traveled clear across France, to almost the German border, where we detrained and stayed in an area ... for a day or two. ... Then, finally, we were taken up to the frontlines, ... where we saw some action, but it was minimal. It wasn't that comprehensive. So, we were stationed there, and then, our first main objective was a town called Saarlautern in Germany, it's right over the French border. I don't know the strategic value of why it was necessary, but it was a complete battalion push and we went into Saarlautern and we lost a third of our men, on December 3, 1944, which was very, very tough. ... Then, we stabilized the area and, from there, we had other minor skirmishes and I'm kind of vague about where we went, from there-to-there. ... I remember, one time, we were sent up to Holland to join ... part of the British Army on some kind of action, I don't remember exactly. It wasn't Arnhem, but it was somewhere around the Arnhem area. We ended up in the Ruhr Valley, and then came the Battle of the Bulge, which we were not in it. Our division was in reserve, in case they needed more troops. So, we were in reserve. So, we really didn't get into the thick of the Battle of the Bulge, but we were about two or three miles behind the lines. ... Then, we were in the Ruhr Valley. I had a very good buddy of mine, his name was Wesley Hare, and, one night, we were sitting in this farmhouse, the whole squad, and we got the order to jump off and take a little town. ... I had been transferred from a line company to battalion headquarters, because I spoke a little German, and I was being used as an interpreter. I used to interrogate prisoners of war. Anyway, this one particular night, April 12, 1945, the day President Roosevelt died, we were in a road leading into a town called (Schverta?) and the entire battalion was strung out in a column of twos. A battalion is a couple of hundred men. Behind the last two men was an armored vehicle, which was kind of wide and almost encompassed the complete road, and I was in the back of that vehicle, in a jeep, with Wesley and my lieutenant and another driver and in back of us was two more jeeps. It was in the middle of the night and you couldn't put lights on, because, if the lights went on, they'll start throwing shells and we were slowly navigating, very slowly, and, all of a sudden, I heard a motor rev up. ... I turned around. I could just barely [see] another vehicle coming down on the side of the road and almost was adjacent to us, like this, but he couldn't pass, because this armored vehicle was in the front and it was too wide. So, they're more or less cruising alongside of us, I mean, just this much apart and I heard they were talking in German. So, I gave the alarm. I carried a German Walther pistol. I grabbed my gun and the other guys grabbed their guns and we told them to surrender, we were American troops, and their response was, "*Jah, jah*, don't shoot, don't shoot." Then, they changed their minds and they went for their guns and they opened up and the first [shot] hit me right here, [Editor's Note: Mr. Schmidt is pointing to his forearm] and then, I ducked and the second one, just on a tangent, went off my shoulder, just caused a big burn and the third one killed Wesley, sitting next to me. I had returned fire and I killed one of them. These were four German officers in full, not battle dress, but party dress, like they had been coming from some kind of a party. They were in class A uniform. So, I killed one of them, I know that, and then, the others decided, now, they had enough. Lieutenant Heekin was infuriated first, they

surrendered, and then, they went for their guns and the fact that they killed Wesley. He didn't buy that. ... He took the three of them, lined them up against the wall and took out a Browning automatic rifle and just cut them in half, killed them right on the spot. When I was lying on the floor, the funny thing is, you think, being shot you would feel pain, but you don't feel pain. Did you ever bump your elbow on something? You get like a little electric shock. That's what it felt like, but then, I put my hand down on my field jacket and felt two holes, so, I realized then. So, they had me stretched out on the floor and they called for the ambulance and piled me into an ambulance and took me to, ... what was in those days, a MASH [Mobile Army Surgical Hospital] unit. ... I had a broken ulna. The bullet had broken my arm and they set it and put my arm in a cast and I stayed there a day or two. Then, they flew me back to England. I recuperated at an Army hospital in Cambridge, England. I stayed there I don't know how many months, and then, I was sent stateside. Oh, I don't know whether you want to hear about that; ... I'll tell you anyway. One day, my doctor walks in, the one who was in charge of my case, and he looks at my chart and grabs my arm and says, "Hey, Sammy, you're doing pretty good. We got a good job for you." I'm looking to get out of the Army, he's talking about a good job. I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Being that you have a little experience over there, what we'll do is, we'll send you back to the States and you'll be a training cadre for new recruits, teaching them." I'm looking to get out and he's talking about some additional Army time. So, there was an old joke in the Army, "If you have a problem go see the chaplain." So, I happen to know the chaplain, because I used to go to his services. So, I told him what was going on. He said, "Let's see what we can work out." The next day, a chicken colonel walks into the ward where my bed was and he yells out, "Who is Schmidt around here?" I jumped out of bed, ramrod, "Here sir." He said, "I understand you're having a problem with Captain Moore." I say, "Far be it from me to challenge his expertise, I said, "But he seems to think I'm ready to go back to duty and I don't think so." He says, "What do you think we ought to do with you?" "Well, I'll need some more physiotherapy or I'm not going to get my arm straight." He says, "Do you have any idea where you'd like to go?" I said, "I live in New York City; I understand that Halloran Hospital," which is in Staten Island, which is right next to New York City, "has a rehab hospital. If I could go there, at least I can have my rehab work and be able to go home on weekends." He says, "That's what you like?" I said, "Well, sir, you asked me." Later, a runner comes in and says, "Pack up, you're going to Halloran Hospital," and that's what happened. ... I was there for a little while and I was discharged on November 15, 1945. Of course, being wounded, I got the Purple Heart; naturally, you get that. I also got the Silver Star. ... That was my Army career.

NM: You went from the 505th Military Police Battalion to the 100th, and then, the 95th. Did you have to go through any retraining?

SS: Oh, no. They assumed that a soldier can serve anywhere, as long as he's got basic training. ... In addition to the military police basic, you went to basic training, how to shoot a rifle, creeping and crawling and all [the] other things that a regular infantry soldier would have to do.

SI: How would you characterize your basic training?

SS: Tough, especially in the hot sun. Did I say it was Tennessee? I made a mistake, Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky, not Tennessee. Tennessee is where we went for maneuvers. No, it was tough, because I got there in the later part of June and Kentucky in June is hot and, when you

have to do some creeping and crawling, and with a thirty-pound pack on your back, a rifle and gas mask and helmet, it's kind of rough, but I managed to do it.

SI: When you see movies about basic training, there is always that tough drill instructor who tries to rip people down. Did you have that kind of experience?

SS: Well, what I did have was, I had a sergeant who didn't particularly care for me, for whatever reason, I don't know, but I remember there was one instance, while we were doing training, we went on a thirty-mile walk, full field pack. It was hot and it was very difficult and the ambulance was following us, because they anticipated some guys not being able to make it, heat exhaustion or whatever. When we got to our destination, I sat down and the chow wagon came along with the food and I got my mess kit and I got myself some food and I sat down under a tree. Now, the old Army helmet has a strap that goes under your chin and, while it's under your chin, you can't chew. So, all I did was undo the strap, so [that] it comes down on one side and I started to eat and my sergeant came along and he said, "How come you're not having your chin strap undone?" I said, "Because I want to eat and I can't chew." He said, "See me when you get back to the barracks, a week in KP," all because I had my chinstrap on one side. Other than that, I didn't run into ... any other problem with any of my so-called teammates.

SI: Where were most of the men from?

SS: Most of them, from the Midwest. As a matter-of-fact, when we were at Camp Breckenridge it was a brand-new Army camp and one of the men in our outfit came from that town, a strange coincidence, and he had been on the construction gang that built the stockade, the military police stockade, and he was the first one in it, because he went AWOL. So, we always used to kid him, I say, "You built such a beautiful home, you decided you wanted to live there for a little while," and he was the first one in. Other than that, I never had any other problem with any of the other soldiers in my outfit. There was no anti-Semitism or anything at all, maybe behind my back, but [not to my knowledge]. ...

SI: How did you adjust from civilian life to military life?

SS: ... I think I have a happy facility of being able to adjust from one situation to another without too much of a problem. Just to give you an idea, the last place that I worked was Bloomingdale's Department Store. The day that I retired from Bloomingdale's, which was July 1, 1985, the very last day, I said goodbye to my co-workers, I went down the escalator, the subway is directly under the building, I got on the subway to take it to [the] Port Authority and I completely forgot that I ever worked in Bloomingdale's. It's just [like] an invisible curtain came down in front of me or behind me and said, "Okay, that was something that happened years ago, forget about it. It's no longer in your life." The same thing, the day I went into the Army, I forgot about civilian life, and then, vice versa and I don't know whether that's good or that's bad. I don't know, it all depends on your attitude, but I know I can forget about something very easily, as long as I pass it and I don't have to return to it again.

SI: Did anybody else have problems with homesickness or not fitting in?

SS: No. I wasn't aware of it. Of course, there had been lots of stories about GIs coming home after the war and they don't want to talk about what they went through. They want to completely forget about it. If people would stop and ask me questions about some of the aspects of my Army service, I would talk about it. I mean, you know, I wouldn't make that a primary conversation, just to start off, but, if somebody would ask me questions, I wasn't hesitant about answering it. That wasn't a problem.

SI: Can you tell us about what your military police training entailed?

SS: Good question. First of all, they taught us about [the] laws of the Army, the things we had to look for. They taught us the use of a club. They taught us how to use handcuffs properly and they taught us how to; you know, really, it's been so long, I can't really remember. I know one thing they didn't do right. When we went on patrol, we packed a .45 automatic. Now, [the] .45 is one of the biggest sidearms you can carry. We didn't have any training in the use of it. The mere fact that we carried it, probably not loaded, was just for effect. I remember very little about the military police training itself, to be honest with you. There was a lot of talk about hygiene. You know, sometimes, you're off in the woods some place, you're not near any facility, how to dispose of things, etc., but, other than that, I really don't remember too much about military police training.

SI: Were you also taught about the laws of the Geneva Convention, what to do with prisoners of war?

SS: No, not at all, because we were supposed to be combat MPs, whatever they meant by that, and we never had anything like that.

SI: What were your duties during maneuvers? What did you do specifically?

SS: They used us [as regular MPs]; we'd go out in the trains, to make sure that any GIs aboard the trains were behaving properly. We did town patrol, ... always a pair, two at a time. We just cruised the city streets where GIs might be and, ... when we were in a place called Lebanon, Tennessee, which was [the] maneuver director's headquarters, we acted as guides to the visiting dignitaries from Washington. As a matter-of-fact, I even saw Eisenhower there, General Eisenhower there, one time, he came to visit. That's about the size of it.

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

SI: What was it like to be in the South in the 1940s? You grew up in an urban area and Tennessee is very rural.

SS: I really didn't notice too much of a difference. I thought the people in the South were very gentle; they were very nice. I never had a problem with any of them, one way or the other, and I found them to be just nice people. I never ran into anybody that rubbed me the wrong way.

SI: Did you ever get to go on leave while you were in the States?

SS: When I was at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, I had an aunt living in Charleston, South Carolina, just a short ride by train. ... She had a house on the beach, in addition to living in the city. She had a very successful bakery and she had this house on the beach and I used to go down on weekends and we would spend time on the beach with her and the children and her husband. ... It was very delightful. Other than that, in 1943, my brother, who was also in the service, was home on furlough, getting married, and I just came home on furlough to be at the wedding. That in itself is a story. [laughter] I had approached my commanding officer, asking for a furlough to go home and attend my brother's wedding. He says to me, "Your brother will have to get married without you, sorry. You're in the Army now. You can't go home." I asked him a couple of more times and got the same response. So, I gave it up as a lost cause. So, I wrote home and I said, "Mom, I won't be home for Leo's wedding." About four days later, the Captain calls me in the office and says, "Here's your furlough papers. You're going home for your brother's wedding." I'm saying to myself, "Well, he had a change of heart. Isn't that nice?" So, when I went home, I attended the wedding and, prior to leaving, my mother said to me, "You know why you're here, don't you?" I said, "No." She said, "I wrote your commanding officer a letter," and, obviously, he responded to my mother's request and that's why I got out for my brother's wedding. That's about the only time I left. Oh, there was one other time. I decided to go home for the weekend. Fort Bragg was adjacent to a place called Pope Field, which was a glider training base, and I understood the Army had a program, not a program, but a situation where if they had a plane flying where, you want to go, you were free to hitch a ride. So, one Friday morning, bright and early, I got up and one of my friends gave me a ride over to Pope Field and I walked into the operation building and I said to the young man at the desk, I said, "Do you have any plane going toward New York or New Jersey?" He said, "No," but, he says, "Hang around. You never know what happens." In twenty minutes, a young pilot comes in, didn't even shave yet, a second lieutenant, he said, "Anybody want to go to New York and New Jersey?" I said, "Yes, yes, I want to." So, I hopped on a jeep and we drove across the tarmac to a C-47, which is an Army cargo plane, and there was another passenger and myself, pilot, co-pilot and the crew chief. There were five of us and we took off and it was very noisy and I said, "Are all airplanes so noisy?" He said, "Not usually, but we're testing a motor and this particular motor doesn't have a muffler on it yet." I thought that was kind of weird, but that's what he told me. As we were flying, I noticed there were four parachutes lying on the floor near the cockpit. So, I went up to the cockpit and I said to the pilot, I said, ... "Excuse me, but there are five of us aboard and there are only four chutes. What happens if we have a problem?" He says, "If it comes [time] to parachute, you and I will jump together," kidding me, of course, and the funny thing is, we never got to New Jersey or New York, because, as we were approaching Washington, DC, they had terrible storm warnings over New York. So, he decided to land at National Airport and, from there, I hopped a train to Penn Station, got on a subway, walked into my house and said, "Hello, mom, hello, pop, and good bye." I have to go back ... to make it to a train going back to North Carolina. That was my trip home.

SI: Was that your first time in a plane?

SS: Yes, first time in an airplane, the very first time.

NM: Were you scared that there were only four parachutes? [laughter]

SS: No, ... I'm not a fatalist. I have a lot of confidence in things and people. Flying didn't upset me at all, no.

SI: As you went through your three units, what did you think of your officers and NCOs in each unit?

SS: Okay. The captain that we had in the military police was a real bad one. I'll give you an example [of] what kind of a guy he was. When we were in the field, some of the outfits would get what they called laundry service. The Army had a huge, huge mechanized piece of equipment that was actually a laundry. ... While we were either bathing or taking a shower, and, of course, all of our uniforms had our names on it, so [that] we know what belongs to whom, we would throw our clothes in there and this laundry unit would cleanse them. It wouldn't press them, of course, who cares about pressing? But you wanted clean clothes. That would take care of that and, when you got out of wherever you were bathing or taking a shower, you had clean uniforms, but we never had that kind of service. So, one day, we had a company meeting and one of the fellows got up and said, "Captain, A Company and C Company has laundry service, why can't we get laundry service when we're out in the field?" His response was, "Well, my wife is in town, she can take care of my laundry. [You] guys find yourself a little creek and do your washing." Well, to tell you the truth, we got rid of him. There's a thing in the Army called the IG, the inspector general. If people complain about something and it reaches the IG, they'll listen. So, there was so much dissension with this captain, ... the IG came and set up a desk and practically the whole company lined up to tell the IG about our captain. He was transferred out. He was the only bad one that I really had, when I was in the 95th, ... one morning, I woke up with a pain in my throat. I didn't know what it was, but it was rather painful. So, I went, you know the expression "sick call." You go on sick call. You sign out in a book and you go on sick call. Well, the Sergeant who was the assistant to the first sergeant and he didn't care for me; why, I don't know. Anyway, I signed out and the doctor who examined me said to me, "Well, you're excused for duty for the day. Go back to your barracks and just stretch out and take it easy. Let's see what happens," and I did that. Lunchtime came around and I was hungry, but I realized I still couldn't chew, so, I decided to go back on sick call. Again, I walked into the office and the Sergeant was sitting there. He said, "What are you doing here again?" I say, "Well, the Captain told me, in case I don't feel any better, I could sign out." He said to me, "You were here once. Once is enough." He says, "You can go on sick call tomorrow morning." I said, "Sergeant, I really can't wait, I'm in pain." He says, "You heard what I said, get out of the office." I walked out of the office and there was Sergeant Wood, who was the first sergeant, and he says to me, "What's the matter Sam? You look white as a sheet." I say, "I don't feel well. I've got to tell the doctor to look in my throat." He said, "Go on sick call." I say, "I wanted to, but Sergeant won't let me." He said, "You go inside and you tell Sergeant that you got the right to go on sick call any time you damn please." I didn't use those words, but I said, "Sergeant Wood suggested that maybe it's a good idea if I go on sick call again," and he said to me, "All right, go ahead," as if to say, "I'll deal with you later for going over my head," and he did. He made life kind of [difficult]. He was the guy with the chinstrap, ... because it was hanging down. He remembered the fact that I went over his head, because I wasn't feeling well, but, other than that, I got along with my officers pretty good. When I was in the 95th and I transferred to battalion intelligence, because of the little bit of German that I spoke, the officer in charge was one of the greatest guys I ever met. His name was Wilbur Heekin, who was a

lawyer, and, if I remember correctly, he was the legal head of the AAA, Automobile Association of America, and he and I got along famously. He was a brilliant guy and we really got along. To give you an idea of how smart he was, I had a cousin, unfortunately, she is no longer with us, a young lady who was good enough to sing at the Metropolitan Opera chorus. This was her career. One day, sent me pictures of herself in costume and I'm looking at it and he says to me, "What have you got there?" I said, "My cousin sings at the Met. She sent me pictures that she took on stage." He says, "Let me look." So, I showed him the pictures. He says, "Yes, that's Mimi from *La Boheme*," just the picture. I figured he's doing a little guess. So, I wrote my cousin. I said, "Sarah," I says, "The picture," I described the costume, "What opera is that from?" She said, "*La Boheme*, Mimi." I mean, there wasn't a thing this guy didn't know. He was an incredible guy and he had a hatred for the Germans that he would just as soon kill them as look at them. Oh, I've got to tell you this, of what he pulled one day. We captured this old man. He must have been eighty years old if he was a day. They were taking everybody who could stand up straight, I guess. The only reason we knew he was in the Army, he had a band around his arm saying *Volkstrum*, People's Army, and he was carrying an old, beat up rifle that probably came from the American Revolutionary War and he's standing there and he's scared to death that we're going to kill him and all we wanted to do was get his name and serial number. So, Heekin walks over to him. He thinks that he's got a little command of German. So, he wants to say to him, which was a stupid question to begin with, he wants to say, "Why did you shoot at us?" So, instead of saying, "*Varum haben sei auf uns geschosen?*" he said, "*Varum haben sei auf uns gescheisen?*" which, translated, means, excuse me, microphone, "Why did you shit on us?" instead of, "Shoot at us." He never expected this and ... [the German] starts to laugh. Heekin is angry and, as sure as the three of us are sitting here, he started to pull the .45 out of its holster. I said, "Will, take it easy." I put my hand on his arm and said, "You know what you said?" "Yes, I asked him." "No, you didn't. Here's what you really said, and then, he sort of relaxed. If I hadn't put my hand on his arm, he would have killed him, without a doubt, but he was still a great guy. I used to correspond with him at Christmastime and New Year's, then, one day, I sent him a Christmas card and it came back, deceased. He lived in a place called Moline, Illinois.

SI: Was there time for you to form a working relationship with your unit in the 95th or were you just thrown in as a replacement?

SS: No, we joined the 95th to augment their troops. Now, we weren't a replacement, because they weren't in action. We joined them here in the States, prior to going overseas. We were just extra troops that were allotted to them, because they decided they needed more infantry and they didn't need, you know, any more service people, MPs or Signal [Corps]. They wanted infantry and that's the reason we joined them. So, we were a cohesive unit.

SI: There was time to work together.

SS: Oh, yes, yes, not too much, but we had enough training, between the MPs and the 100th. By the time we got to the 95th, we had enough training, but, I tell you, speaking about having enough training, when we were first committed to action, we were in Patton's Third Army and Patton called our officers up for a critique, welcoming us to his corps. He was in the XX Corps and our officers came back and told us what Patton said. He said, "Tell your men to forget everything they learned in the States. They got a rifle in their hand and a bayonet; kill the son of

a bitch in [the] blue uniform anyway you can. Forget this creeping and crawling and everything else they learned. Just kill the son of a bitch.” That was Patton’s remark to our officers, to us.

NM: When you went to augment the infantry division, did they just send a whole group of MPs or did they combine you with other groups

SS: No, no. By the time we got to the 95th, the MPs were two organizations ago. I was coming out from the 100th Division.

NM: When you went to the 100th, did they bring you together with other disbanded units?

SS: I don’t know the answer to that. I know the 505th was not completely disbanded. They were still a unit, because, later on, when I was overseas, we heard our old 505th was in Holland, in a place called Maastricht, Holland. ... Some of the guys that were with me originally from the ... 505th were there, we commandeered a jeep and we went to visit some of our buddies who were still MPs, but now on duty in Holland.

SI: Once you got into combat, did you feel that you had been well trained or were there things that you could not have been prepared for?

SS: No, nothing like that at all, because every situation was different than something else and, really, it’s not like a chess game, where the moves follow each other consecutively and this follows that. It’s a catch-as-catch-can situation, because you don’t know what you’re going to find behind the next bush or in the next apartment or what have you. ... So, really, to me, a good soldier is a guy who follow orders and who could just get used to what’s in front of him and act accordingly. I mean, some of the things that they taught us back in infantry training was really of no value. I mean, hygiene was good, how to take care of your weapon was good, how to use your weapon, but, as far as tactics were concerned, that was not your function. The tactics were the guys who were in charge, the Captain, the Major, etc. These are the guys who told you what to do. You had a rough idea of how it would be done, but it’s not like a checker game.

SI: How quickly did you adapt to combat? When did you learn to differentiate between your artillery and their artillery?

SS: The first day we were committed to action; I remember, it was at night. We crawled up a hill and there was a gully. We all laid down in the gully and, for the first time, although, in the past, we had heard artillery fire from way off in the distance, but, while we were lying in the gully, we realized that the artillery was a lot closer. You can hear these shells screaming, going over head. Luckily, none of it crashed nearby, but it was difficult to distinguish between your fire and enemy fire, except the way the shell was going. If you hear the whistling coming from behind you, you know it’s your guys shooting over your head, toward where the Germans were, but there was never that much of a differentiation at all, no.

SI: How long were you in the infantry before you switched to battalion intelligence?

SS: Maybe a couple of months. I really can’t be sure about that. I don’t remember.

SI: Did you have a particular position within your squad? Were you just a rifleman?

SS: No, I was strictly a rifleman, plain, ordinary dogface, as they say.

SI: How often would you be committed to action?

SS: It depended upon the situation. We never knew from one minute to the next. Sometimes, they would put you back to an area where you could take it easy for three or four days, in a so-called rest area, even though it may have been close to the lines, ... because there was nothing going on at the time. We were never in a situation where we were the victim of a surprise attack. That never came up, that I can remember. No, there was never any real surprise.

SI: How close would you get to the Germans in an attack? Did you see them?

SS: Well, the only time I could really see them was when [I saw] the guy who shot me. He was standing as close to me as you are right now, because our vehicles were almost touching. They rolled up right alongside of me, because, as I said, they couldn't pass us because of the armored vehicle [that] was covering the road. He was just as close to me [as you]; ... I could just about make out a vague form. That was the closest I ever got, but you know something, I think there had been surveys done and reports made that very few soldiers really were killed by rifle fire, hand-to-hand combat. Practically, most of the time, on both sides, [it] was done by artillery. Oh, you know, you could maybe see a figure 150 yards away and shoot and think that you've hit him or not, but you never really, at least I didn't, get that close, with this one exception.

SI: How often would you have to fire your rifle?

SS: Well, first of all, when I was in the battalion, I got rid of my rifle. I carried a pistol. I didn't really have to fire it that often, really not that often at all. I'm trying to remember if I ever really got into a firefight with a rifle. There were a couple of times when, just for effect, just to create a barrage, we might be in a position where we're firing in the general direction of where we thought the enemy was, but without really seeing somebody.

SI: Artillery was the biggest threat you faced.

SS: Oh, yes, no question about it.

SI: How often would you come under artillery fire?

SS: Again, it really depended. I can't pinpoint if it happens maybe six or seven times; that's about it.

SI: What would go through your mind during an attack? How did you take cover?

SS: Be scared, [in] plain English, be scared, sure, and trying to do the best you can and put yourself under cover, if you can, and get out of harm's way, if you can. One day, we roll into

this town and the best place to sleep was in the basement of the house, because, in case the artillery comes in, if they wreck the upstairs, it's okay, but, if you're down in the basement, fine. I go down in the basement and there's a big pile of coal and I had a sleeping bag. So, I unrolled my sleeping bag and [I am] just about to crawl into it and I see a violin case. So, I opened it up and I'm looking at it. No, I don't know anything about violins, other than the fact that my brother played the violin when he was a kid. I looked and, you know, there's an S-shaped curve in the violin, near the bridge, and, looking at it, it said, "Antonio Stradivarius, 18--." I said, "Holy smoke, a Stradivarius violin. This is like fifty thousand dollars and up." So, I think, "I've got to do something with this." So, I put it back in the case and I wrapped it up with some cloth and I shoved it aside in the corner, where nobody would see it, and, just then, we got the word to go out and do something, attack an area, figuring, "I'll go back and find the violin." After the engagement was over, I got into a jeep, rode back to the house, found the violin. The problem is, somebody found it before me and used it as a baseball bat. [laughter] It was in a hundred pieces. Now, I was so proud of that story and I kept telling it to my friends, over and over again. One day, I was introduced to a man who was a violin collector and he says to me, "Did it say Antonio Stradivarius (*Faceba?*)?" I said, "Yes, (*Faceba?*)." He says, "Do you know what (*Faceba?*) means in Italian?" "Facsimile," it was not a real Stradivarius. I felt a lot better about losing the violin.

SI: During combat, what was your average day like?

SS: Sleeping wherever you could, you know, on the ground or digging a foxhole or, if you were lucky enough to be in a little town, commandeering a house and using the rooms in the house, which was a plus. Luckily, there was never a situation where we were without food. It seems that the chow wagon was able to catch up with us. Sometimes you were in a situation where all you had was this high-density chocolate bars, which were very, very filling and something you really couldn't chew. It was so thick and dense, you had to scrape it with a knife to get the chocolate off, ... which meant that it would last a long time, if you had to save it for other occasions. Eating was never a problem, you know, but I guess, when you're tired from marching and whatever, when we slept, we slept pretty good. The idea was just trying to stay alive.

NM: When you moved from place-to-place, did you always march?

SS: No, sometimes marching, sometimes by truck. If you had a long distance to go, it was by truck, like when we went from, I believe while we were in Germany, up to Holland, to join the British Army was by truck, but there was other instances where we marched, maybe two, three hours, to go from one place to another. You walked in the rain, if necessary, depending upon the situation.

NM: How was the weather?

SS: The weather wasn't bad. It would rain, occasionally, but the winter of '44 was rather cold and sleeping in a foxhole was tough, because it was cold and you don't build any fires, of course, and it was rough, but this too shall pass.

SI: What kind of casualties did your unit suffer?

SS: Well, when I was with the 95th, December 3, 1944, we lost a third of our men, both killed and wounded. Other than that, I can't use the word "normal" amount of casualties, because what the heck is normal? but, every now and then, we would lose a couple of guys. I mean, it wasn't a wholesale loss, ... forty or fifty guys would be killed in a day or wounded in a day, but it was slow, staggering.

SI: Were you usually like undermanned because of the losses?

SS: No, no, the situation never came up, no.

SI: How did you get replacements and integrate them into the unit?

SS: I really wasn't part of that. If they did, they would come in through Headquarters Company. I wouldn't be a part of it. I mean, all of a sudden, just a new guy would show up and what he went through to get there or how he got there, I really wouldn't know.

SI: When they would show up, how did you and the other men in the unit react to them?

SS: Of course, we try to be friendly with them. We knew they were probably just as scared as we were, maybe more so, because this was new to them, being in combat, but we try to be as friendly as we possibly could, make them feel at home. It seems like a ridiculous statement, but, I mean, try to quiet their fears, if they had any, sure.

SI: We talked about artillery attacks and other kinds of attacks. Did you ever come under aerial attack?

SS: No, never, not once.

SI: Did you ever come under friendly fire?

SS: Never, not to my knowledge, no, never.

SI: What about harassment type attacks, like mines or snipers?

SS: Once, we lost one of our guys who stepped on a mine. He's about twenty-five feet away from me when he stepped on a mine and we lost him, but that was the only incident I remember about mines.

SI: One of the biggest battles for the 95th was Metz, France. What do you remember about the battle for Metz?

SS: Metz was a very, very highly fortified city. The way it was constructed, it was almost like, have you ever been to Spain, to Avila. There's a big wall that surrounds the city, completely surrounding wall. As a matter-of-fact, if you remember an old motion picture with Frank Sinatra and Sophia Loren called *The Pride and the Passion*? Anyway, they stormed the City of Avila

and they had to get through this huge wall and there was something similar around Metz. It was a very highly fortified city. Now, we were all set to storm it, but, for some reason, and I don't remember why, it was called off. So, we didn't have to storm it. We were able to get into Metz without too much of a problem. That's my recollection of it.

SI: On the day that you lost a third of your men, what were you doing?

SS: Well, there was a little bridge, I would say a large footbridge, that crossed over the Saar River, I guess, and we had to get to the other side and the other side of the bridge was the equivalent of a two-story building. We had to get there for some reason. That was going to be our headquarters, that we were to stay crossing that bridge. I guess the Germans were waiting for us. They had pinpointed [it] before, knowing that was our only access to get across. They had pinpointed it for their mortar barrage and, as we crossed the bridge, they opened up, and so, we lost most of the guys. I was lucky I didn't get hit.

SI: It seems that there were a number of rivers and natural barriers in the path of the 95th. What was a river crossing operation like?

SS: Okay, we got to the Rhine River and there, in front of us, was this huge, huge bridge, which we were supposed to cross. On this side of the bridge was a huge building, the size of Macy's in New York, and we had no idea what was in this building. So, a squad of us, a squad is twelve, we very carefully opened the door and walked into this building and we realized it was the winery and, [at] this particular winery, they produced the best cognac made in Europe, something called (Imperial Du Jordan?), and, believe it or not, the bottles were full and the twelve of us walked in and, before you know it, there was a little drinking going on, with the rifle at [the] ready. Battalion found out about it, regiment found out about it, division found out about it. It didn't take two days, SHAEF Headquarters in Paris was sending trucks up for the liquor, cases and cases of liquor. Somehow, we never crossed the bridge on the Rhine River. What happened or why, we never crossed the bridge.

NM: Were most of your combat experiences against just infantry? Did you see any of the enemy armored vehicles?

SS: We never saw German *panzers*. No, I don't remember ever seeing any *panzers*. I never saw any German parachuters, never saw any long range German artillery. The best gun in World War II was owned by the Germans. It was called an .88. What made the .88 so great, it was antipersonnel, antitank and anti-aircraft. It was that versatile. It could be used in any sense. It was very accurate and, when we realized, occasionally, that we were going to be up against the .88s, that was a problem. Luckily, we managed to survive. The .88s were a big problem.

SI: Did you encounter any SS troops?

SS: No, no, never ran into any of the SS people at all.

SI: Were there any combined operations with other forces?

SS: There must have been, but I really was not into it at all. I mean, we did arrive on a tank if we were going from one place to the other and, [if] the tank happened to be going in the same direction, they would give us a lift. ... Otherwise, I can't remember any sustained attack involving us and tanks, never.

SI: When you went north to the Netherlands, were you under the command of the British?

SS: For the short time that we were there, yes.

SI: Were you actually working with British units or were you still working as your own unit?

SS: I really can't answer that question. I was really not privy to what was going on. I knew we were there in conjunction with the British troops. I mean, who was running the show, I really don't know.

SI: Did you run into any British units?

SS: The only time I really had action with the British was when we left England to go to Normandy. We went aboard a little British boat and, although I hate to say it, I found that the British were [a] very ... dirty and sloppy organization. The boat was so unclean and seemed to be badly operated, that there was junk lying all over the place and, you know, military men are supposed to be dressed in a certain manner. I'm not saying dressed-to-the-nines, but, you know, you wear your uniform with pride, but these guys, ... they were dressed like stevedores. One afternoon, as we were crossing the Channel, it got to be four o'clock and we could hear on the loudspeaker system, you know, it is still a custom in the British Navy, four o'clock, all the crew people get a rum ration. It's tradition in the British Navy. So, about four o'clock, we heard over the loudspeaker, "Attention, Flotilla, rum ration." So, we figured, "What the heck? We'll get on line, too," and we were stopped. We were told it was only for the British seamen. That sort of cemented our relationship. [laughter]

SI: What kind of interaction, if any, did you have with civilians?

SS: Oh, quite a bit, because of the fact that I spoke a little German. Whenever we go to a town and we would stay there for a while, I was the communicator between the commanding officer and the civilian populace. I would tell them that, if we created a curfew in the town, told the people not to be out of the house after a certain time or, if they had any radios, that we would confiscate them. I was the in-between. I also had the job of throwing the German civilians out of their houses. If we walked into a town and command headquarters decided that's going to be the house for command headquarters and they needed three or four or five rooms to set up, it was my job to go there and tell the people, "Please, go live with your brother and sister down the street, get out of the house. Take whatever belongings you have and leave."

SI: Did anybody ever give you grief about it?

SS: No. They knew there would be no point in resisting, because we were soldiers with guns, so, there were never really any problems. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You mentioned that, since you spoke German, you were moved up to battalion intelligence. How did they find that out?

SS: One day, when I was still in the rifle company, they had taken a prisoner and Lieutenant Heekin was trying to get some information out of him. So, I said, "Lieutenant, maybe I can help you." He said, "Find out what his name, rank and serial number is and where his outfit is located." I asked the guy and he said to me, "You, I want. I need you in battalion headquarters." So, he went to my captain and they arranged a transfer.

SI: Were you mostly interrogating prisoners once you were there?

SS: Not mostly, occasionally. There was still a lot of regular soldiering, the interrogation was part of it.

SI: How would an interrogation go?

SS: ... What we did was, we would ask them for information that would be valuable to us on the battalion level, and then, we would turn them over to regiment. Regiment would interrogate them on a regimental level, and then, to division headquarters, and then, [from] the division, either to corps or an internment camp, but we would only ask them questions like, "Where are your men who are located near here? What kind of supplies do you have?" etc., etc., "What's your ammunition situation?" things that would be of help to us on an immediate basis. That was the story I told you, ... the story I told at the meeting. Do you remember it?

SI: Could you tell it again for the tape?

SS: One night, we were sitting in a house, playing cards, and a runner came, saying, "They want you at headquarters. They caught a prisoner," and I went over to headquarters and there was this German *Wehrmacht* [soldier] and we got his name, rank, serial number, etc., and whatever information we wanted and the Captain said, "Take him to regiment." So, we sat him on, you know what a jeep looks like? We sat him on the hood, with his feet dangling in the front. Now, the front of the jeep [is], if you ever notice, [it] has a very tall, thin rod, like this, which is razor sharp in the front. The reason [is], the Germans used to string piano wires across the road and if you had your windshield down and, if you're driving the jeep, it would cut your head off. So, we had him sitting on the hood, with his feet wrapped down and holding on to this post, and I'm sitting at the back with a rifle, guarding him, and there's a driver and another guy alongside the driver and we're slowly going back and here's the conversation going on between the two guys in the front. "Hey, how far back is it to regiment?" "I don't know about two-and-a-half miles." "It's crazy. Stop the jeep; we'll take the *Heine* in the field and stick a knife into him." I couldn't buy that, so, I had to plead with these guys not to do it and I finally convinced them that we don't just [do] cold blooded murder, German or no German. So, when we finally brought him back with the MPs at regimental headquarters, the MPs at regimental headquarters said, in as much as,

“What, are you guys crazy, coming back three-and-a-half miles with just one guy?” inferring, “You should have done away with him before you ever got here.”

SI: Do you know how common that was?

SS: Oh, I don't know. I have no idea to what extent this was done or wasn't done. ...

SI: Did your unit start taking large numbers of prisoners towards the end of the war?

SS: No. ... I wasn't with them when the war was over, because I got hit on April 12th and the war was [over] on May the 8th, so, between those two dates, I had no idea what they did or what they didn't do. I don't know.

SI: Did you sense that the German resistance was weakening or had broken by the time you were wounded?

SS: No, I wasn't aware of that, no, because we weren't privy to any information of what was going on. We only knew what was going on in our immediate area. So, we really didn't know.

SI: Could you sense that they were falling back?

SS: No, I was not aware of it.

NM: Did you see any changes in the caliber of troops?

SS: Oh, yes, towards the end of the war, you didn't see the so called veteran troops and you could tell by the quality of their uniforms and their arms, towards the end of the war. We saw fourteen and fifteen-year-old kids carrying rifles, men seventy-five and eighty years old carrying rifles. We could tell that their manpower supply was really running short and maybe this was coming toward an end, but I really couldn't comment.

SI: Before the day you got shot, what other close calls can you recall?

SS: No, I really don't remember. I don't think I've ever had another close call, besides that, no.

SI: Which action were you decorated with the Silver Star for?

SS: Because, when I got hit, ... I had the presence of mind to direct fire from the other three guys in the jeep towards the Germans, after I had killed the one guy. As it turned out, they didn't kill anybody. Their fire was off, but my commanding officer decided, because I had the presence of mind, even though I was shot, to give me a commendation, because I had the presence of mind to direct their fire, even though it was valueless.

NM: What did you do in your free time? Did you read the Army newspapers? Did you read magazines or did you write letters home?

SS: Oh, yes, oh, sure. We got V-mail. You know what V-mail was? Okay, the Army gave us special paper that you have to fold in such a way. It was very, very small and you could write your message inside, fold it the way it's supposed to be folded, with the address, and then, this was turned over to some kind of a machine, which would, in turn, take that and turn it into another document, which was larger. ...

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

NM: Please, continue. Did you have a lot of correspondence with your family?

SS: Oh, sure, I wrote my parents. At that time, I had a girlfriend and I used to correspond with her and my family, of course. I couldn't correspond with my brother, because his outfit was also overseas and he was moving around a bit. I don't think I ever wrote him at all. By crazy coincidence, one night, we decided to go somewhere in Belgium. They decided to give us a bath, a shower, and, of all places, they took us to a coal mine and we went down a shaft in a coalmine. At the bottom of the shaft was a showerhead and we all got a very nice, clean shower. We had this laundry truck available, which cleaned our clothes, and, when we came back upstairs, waiting for our trucks to come pick us up, we're standing on the side of the road and this convoy comes scooting by and I looked at the rear of the trucks. [It] was the 72nd Light Pontoon Company. That was my brother's outfit and there was my brother, in one of those trucks [that] screamed by in the middle of the night, and I hadn't seen him in about two years. I couldn't stop the convoy. [laughter]

NM: How often were you able to get clean?

SS: Not too often. It was really something to look forward to, to take a shower; never had a bath, just a shower. Every once in a while, we would get in a situation where we could, but, sometimes, days, maybe a week, would go by, even weeks, without bathing. We were a smelly outfit.

SI: How often were you able to get a hot meal, as opposed to cold rations?

SS: Pretty often. They were pretty good with bringing up hot meals, yes. I must admit that they were pretty good with that. Occasionally, you're in a situation where the chow truck couldn't come through, [so], we had the C rations, comes in a small can, spaghetti and meatballs or what have you, or this very hot condensed chocolate, which was very nourishing and filling, and it would last a long time.

SI: During your interrogations, would the prisoners just reply with their name, rank and serial number or would they give you other information that you wanted?

SS: Most of them would. They were on a lower level. We weren't talking to any high ranking officers. We were talking to privates and corporals and, for them, they realize the war was over and they were not more than happy, but they didn't give us too much of a problem. The Army taught us, in case you have somebody who doesn't want to give you the information that you ask them, don't get excited, don't yell and scream. All you have to do is just say, "Well, I've got to

tell you what our Army code is. Anybody who doesn't want to tell us what we want to know is automatically shipped to a prison camp in Russia." That's something they didn't want to hear, because they knew what the German Army was doing in Russia to the Russian civilians and they knew what the recriminations would be. ... I never got to that point that I had to refer to that.

SI: Did you have any particular desire to fight the Nazis? Would you have been just as pleased to fight in the Pacific?

SS: Well, being Jewish, I think my motivation may be a little bit stronger than somebody else, considering what Hitlerism did to the Jewish population and to a lot of other people in Europe, but, otherwise, it didn't make that much difference. By the way, one interesting story, you say, by going to the Pacific, I found this out in *Stars and Stripes* or *Yank Magazine*, I forgot which one. After the war was over, which was May the 8th, the story was, the 95th was going back to the States and they're going to be reequipped to go to the Pacific, to fight there. There was such an outcry, by not only the men, but the wives and sweethearts, etc. Believe it or not, it got to the floor of Congress and this is one instance where the Congress overruled the Army. The Congress said the 95th does not go to the Pacific and they didn't go, because the attitude was, "They have seen enough combat. We have enough men to take care of the Pacific action," and, because of Congress, the 95th didn't go.

SI: You may have been pulled out before this would have been a factor, but did you see any displaced persons or were involved in any camp liberations?

SS: No, ... not at all.

SI: Can you tell us about the medical care you received when you were wounded?

SS: Oh, yes. As soon as I realized what the situation was, ... Lieutenant Heekin was saying, "Lay down on the floor, take it easy," and, with the radio, they called for medics. I don't remember whether it was an ambulance or some other vehicle came up with a couple of medics and said, "We're going to pump you full of morphine." I say, "Why?" He says, "To get rid of the pain." I said, "But it doesn't hurt." He says, "Don't be a smart guy. You're going to feel it Right after the shock wears off, you're going to feel the pain." So, they pumped me full of morphine and they took me back to a MASH hospital, where they operated on my arm, set it properly and, in a couple of days, they flew me back to England. The care I got ... in Cambridge, England, at the Army hospital was superb, couldn't complain about that. It was great.

SI: Did you ever get to leave the hospital and see England?

SS: Oh, yes. As a matter-of-fact, while I was in Cambridge, V-E Day came about, May the 8th, and we were told we could go into town and celebrate. The town of Cambridge, which is Cambridge University, is a beautiful, typically English university. I mean, it just drips with English atmosphere, really beautiful, and we went into a bar and we had some beer and the English people were delighted we were there and nothing was too good for us. The war was

over that day and we were toasted and they were giving us all kinds of food to eat. The bar was on the house. It was a great day. That was May the 8th, yes.

SI: Do you remember V-J Day?

SS: I sure do. V-J Day, I was in Fort Devins, Massachusetts, had a hospital called, I can't remember the name of the hospital, but, again, they gave us leave on V-J Day, which I believe was August 3rd. We went into Boston and we had a time. It was a beautiful, beautiful day. If you've ever been to Boston, you know the Boston Common, which is their park there. We were walking around there and, again, nothing was too good for the boys in uniform. They treated us royally. It was a magnificent day, yes.

SI: Did it compare to the pictures you see of New York, where there were people all over the place?

SS: Except not quite as many. ... I mean, New York and Times Square was humongous. This was of a smaller scale. It was nice.

SI: You do not remember any anti-Semitism of any type during your training.

SS: No, not in training.

SI: Do you remember any instances throughout your time in the Army?

SS: No. I can tell you one thing. I'll tell you about this one guy who was put in the stockade after he was in the construction company that built it. When I first joined the outfit, he was in Tennessee, he was a real hillbilly. I mean, you can see it. He come up to me one day and said to me, "Hey, Sam, you know something, I hear you're Jewish." I said, "Yes." He says, "You don't look different from anybody else." I said, "What did you expect?" He said, "I don't know. People tell me that Jews look different." I don't think that was an anti-Semitic remark. He just didn't know any better. I don't think he had any basis for anti-Semitism. He just thought that Jewish people look different than other people. Maybe he was looking for horns, I don't know.

NM: You said that the group of men you were with in the military police were from the Midwest. When you went to the 100th, were they different?

SS: Where they were from, I really couldn't answer you, but the same type of people, generally speaking, same type of people.

SI: In some of the research I have done on the 95th, it said that the division's Army classification tests were higher than average and there were a lot of ASTP guys thrown into the division. Did it seem like the people you were with were fairly well-educated?

SS: Some of them were. As a matter-of-fact, we had one guy who was a college professor. I remember one guy, what he was doing in the infantry, I don't know, but he was a pilot. You would think, automatically, he would be in the Air Force, but, generally speaking, they were all,

I would think, mid-educated people, high school graduates, most of them; college, I'm not too sure about that, I don't know.

NM: When you served as a translator, what kind of education did the other translators have?

SS: There was one fellow in our outfit who I think was not as qualified as I was. When I became the translator, he was eased out. I don't know whatever happened to him. I don't remember whether they transferred him or he was just another guy with a rifle, I don't remember.

SI: Did you study German in school?

SS: No. It's a funny thing how I learned German. When I was in high school, I took two languages, which were compulsory. I took French and Hebrew, but, then, they assigned me as captain of the bookroom squad, to hand out books. The bookroom happened to be in the back of the German class. So, I sat in the last row, in the last seat, and there was this big, huge walk-in closet with the books. In the meantime, in front of me, kids are studying German. So, I said to myself, "Learn something. You'll never know when it comes in handy." So, I just paid attention. I didn't take any tests, I didn't do any homework, but I guess I retained enough and, also, my parents spoke Yiddish and there's a tremendous similarity between Yiddish and German. So, between the two, I was able to make myself understood.

NM: Did you know French as well as you did German?

SS: A little bit of French. French, I had taken in high school. I had three years of French. So, I know enough just to get into trouble.

SI: In the weeks before you went into combat, when you were in France, do you remember what you thought about the prospect of going into combat?

SS: Didn't think about it. I found the best way to handle it was just think about the day in front of you and let tomorrow take care of itself, when tomorrow comes. That's the way I handled it. I didn't want to get involved with, "What am I going to do three weeks from now? What if I'm down the line?" or what have you. Let me worry about that when the time comes.

SI: Do you know of anyone in your unit who had trouble coping in combat, like mental fatigue or combat fatigue?

SS: We were once in a situation where we were in this house and the Germans were maybe two hundred yards away in another house and there was sporadic fire back and forth. I don't know how it happened, but, one day, this German soldier landed about twenty or thirty feet from the edge of our house, dead, laying on the ground. ... we had this Southern guy in our outfit and it was his turn for guard duty and, [for] guard duty, [it] happened the best location was standing on the toilet bowl in the bathroom, looking out a window. That was the best vantage point. Directly in front of him is this dead German laying there. All of a sudden, we hear Willie. He was yelling and screaming about the horrors of war and he's really going off. "Wow, there's a

dead guy here” and, “Oh, my God,” and he’s really screaming. So, we got the medics. The medics took him away, and then, we heard he was coming back and the Captain had a meeting with the men. “I don’t want to hear nobody make wisecracks about Willie because he went off his head. Just, “Hello, Willie, nice to see you again. Welcome home, and leave it at that,” which we did. Two days later, Willie was off again, yelling and screaming, and, this time, he was transferred and we never saw him again. He couldn’t take the idea of a dead body laying about twenty or thirty feet away, just laying there, and, even though it was the enemy, he just went completely nuts.

SI: Did you find, for yourself, that there was a detachment between what you were doing, eventually killing people?

SS: No, no.

SI: You just thought of it as your duty.

SS: That was, if you want to call it, “the job” and that was the job, to do the best you can with what you got and try to stay alive.

SI: Is there anything we forgot to go over or anything else you would like to say about the Army?

SS: I can’t think of anything. I think we’ve more or less covered it.

SI: Can you tell us about the process of getting discharged from the Army and going back to school? Did you go back to NYU right away?

SS: No, I was discharged in November of 1945. On discharge, I went back to work at Abraham and Strauss. As I mentioned before, I was assigned to the executive training program. I don’t know whether it was a couple of weeks or a couple of months after that that I decided I was going to enroll at NYU School of Retailing, which I did. I did not graduate, but I took enough courses there that I thought could help me in what I wanted to do and that was it, and then, I began working at Abraham and Strauss. I was with them for quite some time. Eventually, after Abraham and Strauss, I went to work with Stern’s Department Store. ... I wound up at Bloomingdale’s in New York, in the furniture department. ... Of course, the training that I had at NYU really helped. They teach you a lot about retailing math, how to do things. It was good training and I liked what I did and I wound up selling furniture, which was a very nice job. It was almost a job like being in business for yourself, because, when you work on straight commission, what you make is based on your own efforts. So, the more time you spend there, the more chance you have of making money. At the time that I was working in Bloomingdale’s, for a short time, I still lived in Brooklyn, but, then, when I came to New Jersey, I’ve been living in this neighborhood now for twenty-two years. I was still working at Bloomingdale’s, which meant I commuted every day into the city, and, in order to get home at a decent hour, I wouldn’t wait for the store hours to be over. I used to leave early, but that was never a problem. As long as I didn’t leave a hole in the floor, I mean, of people-wise, as long as there was enough coverage, I more or less could come and go as I pleased, because, as I say, what I made

depended upon my being there, but, luckily, I made a decent living and I was able to come home at a decent hour, have supper with my wife and it was a good job. I hated to leave it, but there comes a time when you just want to say good-bye. ... Again, as I said, when I walked out of Bloomingdale's, when that escalator got to the subway, I completely forgot that I ever worked in the store. Again, I don't know whether that's good or bad, I mean, to have that kind of detachment, but that's the way I am.

SI: You were on the GI Bill at NYU.

SS: Yes.

SI: Do you think you would have done it without the GI Bill?

SS: I don't know. It was there, so, I never thought of the alternatives. It was available, so, I never thought, you know, how it would be if I didn't have it, but I had it, so, I didn't think about the alternatives.

SI: Did you use any other parts of the GI Bill?

SS: No.

SI: Was the A&S training program run solely by the company or was it in tandem with the GI Bill?

SS: You actually went to class. They ran classes daily and they exposed you to every facet of retailing, the buying, the management, publicity, anything that makes a department store work. So, you could be assigned to work with a buyer for two or three weeks, or even a month, to learn the process of how to buy things, not a specific item, but the concept of buying and, also, the concept of management. How do you schedule people, how do you do this and publicity, where do you advertise, how do you advertise. So, they expose [you] to every aspect of retailing and, ... if you should happen to be assigned to an area and, all of a sudden, you feel, "Hey, this is the kind of thing I want to do," you would request it and, if it was available, that's where you stayed.

SI: Were many of the guys in this training program GIs?

SS: I don't think so. I don't remember any of them at all.

NM: Did your brother use the GI Bill?

SS: No, I don't think he did, no.

SI: Your brother was with this pontoon unit. Could you tell us a little bit about what he did?

SS: The light pontoon company, I'll just tell you, again, the story of the infinite wisdom of the Army. He was stationed in Panama. One day, the order is, "Pack up, we're going." They put them on a boat from Panama to New Orleans. When they got to New Orleans, into a railroad

siding, ... this entire company, which I presume is 180 men or so, were put on a train and they went all the way from Louisiana up to Camp Upton, Long Island. Now, you know what kind of a trip that is? Long Island is right here. They were told to detrain. They got off the train with all their baggage. They stood there for about fifteen or twenty minutes. "Everybody back on the train," right back to Louisiana, okay. [laughter] The light pontoon company was, when the Army realized that they had to cross a river or a stream or anything and there were no bridges, they had to create one. So, they had these light pontoons, these hollow metal things with tracks for trucks and they would ford the river and build a temporary bridge right across the river, so, [that] the Army, either the men or the trucks or whatever, or even the *panzers*, the tanks, could cross it. Then, as soon as it was done, uproot it, put it back on the trucks and go elsewhere. This was the job of a light pontoon company and that's what he did. He went through the war unscratched and, unfortunately, he died about three years ago, but that happens.

SI: Is there anything else you would like to put on the record?

SS: I can't think of anything, off hand.

SI: If there is anything you want to add, we can just put it in the transcript later.

SS: All right. So, that's it.

SI: Thank you very much.

SS: My pleasure. I'm glad I've been some help to your historical society. I'm pleased.

SI: This concludes our interview with Mr. Samuel Schmidt on December 3, 2004, in Monroe Township with Shaun Illingworth and Nicholas Molnar.

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

Reviewed by Michael Sorge 10/27/04
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 11/7/04
Reviewed by Samuel Schmidt 1/19/05