

Paul French audio log

Narrator: Paul French

Interviewer: David Meyer (O'Shea)

Date: April 12, 2014 (before and after business meeting)

Transcriber: Carol Slezak

Transcribed on: June 16, 2024

Log compiled by: David Meyer, May 2025

Summary:

This is the log of an in-depth interview conducted on April 12, 2014, with Paul French, a WWII veteran who served in the 547th AAA Automatic Weapons Battalion of the U.S. Army. French recounts his early life, military service, and experiences during the war. He was born on April 6, 1923, in Galena, Kansas. French served from January 1943 to January 1946, reaching the rank of Staff Sergeant and Platoon Sergeant. The interview covers his assignments, including guarding bridges, facing artillery fire, and encountering German troops. French shares personal anecdotes about his time in the war, such as being drafted at 18, getting married just before deployment, and the hardships and camaraderie among his unit. He also discusses post-war experiences, liberating concentration camps, and the challenges faced by the displaced persons. The interview emphasizes the personal experience of one veteran with wonderfully specific descriptions concerning the artillery pieces that Mr. French used.

LOG:

Note: This interview was conducted in two parts – one recording 34 minutes before the annual business meeting and the concluding recording after the business meeting. For purposes of the 95th Infantry Legacy Foundation Website the two recordings have been combined into one file. In that file there is a two second gap inserted between the two recordings. That gap will be noted here in the time code/subject but the time codes are marked continuously as though there is one long recording.

Time code Subjects covered

00:00	Introduction and Setting the Scene. Recording done at Wyndham Garden Hotel, OKC, Oklahoma April 12, 2014.
00:29	Introducing Paul French. Born April 6, 1923 in Galena, Kansas. WWII veteran.
01:11	Served in 547th Automatic Weapons Battalion. Served January '43 until January '46.
01:59	Roles and Responsibilities in the Military . Assigned for aircraft protection and infantry support. Supposed to shoot down airplanes, too, "But there weren't."
02:27	Highest Rank Achieved Staff Sergeant (Platoon Sergeant.)
02:40	Personal Background: Called "Red" because he had red hair.

- 03:09 Mother "Ruth" – housewife until Father "Orin" – justice of the peace- died when Mr. French was two. Move to St. Louis when 5 year old.
- Two siblings – older brother Tom and older sister Wanda. Moved to St. Louis when 5 years old. Life in Great Depression. Mother works in shoe factory. Health problems so he and sister put in orphans hom for six months until Mom better then all live in rooming house where mother worked and also for one dollar a day at Goodwill.
- 06:00 Meeting and Marrying His Wife Just celebrated 71st anniversary.
- Family life Has two children. Maria and Barbara.
- 07:02 Hears about Pearl Harbor while working as a clerk at Kroger's store. Doing inventory on Sunday about 1 PM I was young and didn't realized how "bad it was."
- 08:28 Drafted. 18 years old Army was okay. We doing what we had to do. We all waited some volunteered, Waited so he could take care of his mother since she was dependent on his salary. Goodbyes. "A few tears."
- 09:30 Sent to Jefferson Barracks. (Heard other draftees crying for their moms.) and Initial Military Training
- 10:14 "Snuck in a marriage before he left." Just before receiving the draft notice (Knew it was coming.) "I was 19.. Marie was 17." Stayed with his mother during the war. Made a bracelet for him. Had that and his wedding ring. Gives service number (in transcript). After Pearl Harbor working selling cars when drafted.
- 13:54 Basic Training Experiences Physical training easy. "Everyone in good shape." Oldest guy was 38. Most young. .
- 15:00 Training in the Muroc Desert. Drill instructor sneaks up and bites him on ear. "Be alert." At Camp Haan near Needles, Az. Training w tank corps for Africa
- 15:55 Instead to Europe (shipped out from Ca.) Train to NY. Then USS Mauretania across. Fast boat. No escort
- 16:33 Unit 547th. AAA—Anti-Aircraft Artillery. Automatic Weapons. I was a corporal. It was a buck sergeant's job; and I got my three stripes before he went over I went over as a crew chief. Two guns
- Didn't get my platoon leader stripes until just before the war was over.
- 17:30 Duties two artillery pieces, four 50-caliber machine guns on an electric turret, and a 40 mm Bofors automatic for anti-aircraft.
- 18:30 Target practice in the desert with anti-aircraft in the desert Fly target (big silk sleeve) behind "a real slow airplane."
- Wonderful descriptions of ammunition saving strategies during training. Then how to fire at target, calculating, range finder. Digging in deep. One experience of firing when in combat. Ack-ack same as "Bofors"

- 23:07 Life on the Ship to Europe Slept in Hammocks. Terrible smell. Funny story about other GI needling the Sergeant whose name was Green by yelling "What color is chicken shit" and everybody shouts out "GREEN" the name of the Sgt. Guy sent to brig. F-a-u-l-k (might have)
- 25:45 15 of us in a squad. Four squads in a platoon. Was in D battery – eight guns. Everybody had a duty on the gun. Everyone had a position when lifting. Spring-loaded fulcrum type.
- 27:50 On leaving from NYC. (28:21) At Mess table served by German POWs captured in Africa. Shirts had "P" on the back. Had it good.
- 29:03 Arrival in Liverpool England and Initial Impressions Joining Patton's Army Land in Europe (France) two months after D-D. Moved around.
- 30:23 Hearing General Patton Speak "Every S.O.B. that comes out of those woods with any ammunition, I'm going to be on the other side. If you come out with any ammunition, I'll shoot you myself [laughs]" Malarky.
(Business meeting starting. Plan to meet after.)
- 33:18 Interviewer says because history isn't taught so much, Mr. French's interview is a gift.
- 33:54 Close call when shrapnel misses him. "See it on the ground smoking." But felt like in a storm with lightning and "the lighting isn't going to hit me
- 34:47 END OF FIRST RECORDING for Mr. French to attend business meeting.
- 34:49 Continuing the Interview Re-identify interviewer and Mr. French.
- 35:31 Lands in Normandy. Remembers being at Moselle when all their trucks are taken for the Red Ball express.
- 36:40 Travelling East toward the Moselle River. Travelled with the guns. "Didn't have to walk. That was good. "
- 37:03 On getting stuck in the mud. Had winches on the truck. You could usually get out excepts one night stuck in combat in mud. Pulled out by a Sherman tank. Lucky because if had stayed out in field until daylight the Germans "would have got us for sure" if not with artillery then with mortars.
- 39:06 When crossing Moselle saw first dead G.I. in foxhole laying on the ground. "A shock to me." Don't like to talk about.
- 39:47 Crossed on pontoon bridge. Night before. Dug in to foxholes. Then river came up Flooded foxholes. Like Drowned rats. Crossed in early morning or nights.
- 41:31 When first saw German soldiers. "Seen a lot of dead ones." Capturing 32 German Soldiers who surrendered on night. Strange self-generating flashlight.
- 42:53 In Metz. German prisoner who (unarmed) grabbed at his Corporal's rifle. Corporal killed him.

- 43:56 Mainly attached with mostly 105 Howitzer Group. Only time attached directly with infantry was after 95th had captured the bridge crossing the Saar at Saarlautern. Guarded it. Second time he sees Patton. (44:40)
- 44:50 Lucky Escape from Mortar Fire for one of his crews. Decided not to sleep in gun turret but under bridge. Random mortar shell hits the gun turret. Would have been killed. New gun shipped to them right away. A lot of action in Saarlautern
- 45:46 On the guns. Replacement in 2 days. Four 50 caliber machine guns on one turret. Shot clips. Four in a clip. Guys would keep putting in clips. Held down pedal it would fire. Could fire four at a time.
- 47:26 Hearing isn't too good. On the Power of 155 Shells firing behind you. "It would just raise you up and inch or two. "
- 47:54 Proximity Fuses. "Would fire when they got near anything.: Fire four at a time with our 105s at first and they'd explode over our men. Changed to firing one, then two, then three, then four.
- 49:24 What about replacements. On attitude in squad We were "so close." "I seen they got everything they needed.:
- 50:14 Recalls some of men from his 15 man platoon. Each outfit got to send one man home on points. Smith
 And another – 38 – called him "Pappy" Youngest called "Junior" just a year younger than Mr. French. Story of John Little (interviewed a few years later) who volunteered to play the bugle but was so bad at basic, Captain said, "We'll play a recording" instead.
- 52:17 Memories. First time hear German fire. (53:14)Two showers in 111 days. On wonderful shower near a creek. Shaved every day in helmet. Took bath in helmet.
- 54:52 Most of time was a gun sergeant. Didn't get to be a platoon leader until near the end of European War. Guys before . (55:34) A cohesive little unit in the gun crew. One set of guns assigned to one outfit, Battalion split into these crews who were sent out and spread across for miles. 15 in crew - "I'm 20 years old and I'm taking care of the other 14."
- 56:43 The Importance of Clean Socks. Patton says you have to have clean everyday. How one got gangrene. Was a replacement and "old dyed in the wool guy" wouldn't listen to anyone. Got rid of him. After that "all of my guys were great."
- 58:21 Seven Days Without Sleep. Battery under fire. All the medics killed by shells that would hit frozen ground when they were out helping. Spent seven days scrounging for medics for his men. Couldn't sleep. Turning grey like zombie. Lost all his hair. Grew back. Texture changes.
- 01:00:11 Admiring Commanding Officers. Captain Oaks. First Lieutenant Stevenson for our battery and "a crackerjack" - shared his liquor rations with us. Split it between the gun crews. Would visit exposed gun crews. On good leadership and bad.
- 01:02:09 On the close call and Shrapnel and Its Dangers

01:03:30 Relaxation. "No time in combat." Not until Belgium (after combat).

01:04:30 Memories of specifics. Roosevelt dying. Thanksgiving. Hot meal a rarity.
Then food. K-rations. C-rations "10-in-1 rations" - like fancy C rations. On contents.
Living conditions. No pup tents. In the field usually just "dig in." Cold. Out shaving in the snow. But whenever we could, we slept in a house, when we were traveling.
That was Patton's orders—kick 'em out, move in. (Did with Germans not with

01:08:13 French not too friendly. Thought we were overbearing. Dutch and Belgians were "kind people. Good people." Tells of time on way to bulge lost his one gun and half his crew. Belgians gave them feather-beds to sleep in and under. Went back after the war gave them clothing.

01:11:50 on liberating a Displaced persons camp Nazis were teaching prisons to be soldiers. Didn't have a bar of soap. Clothing not washed. Horrible treatment Burned barracks down because full of lice. Collected food from the farmers around. Every two or three days another one. BurGermans around say, "We didn't know what was going on."

01:13:00 Then a concentration camp near Czechslovakia – passed by and Captain wouldn't let us go in. "You guys dont need to see this. Just keep going." People liberated couldn't believe it. Germans said that we'd kill them.

01:14:34 Mail from Home. Every night his wife Marie would write him "V-mail" every night before she went to be. I wrote back whenever I could. Had a box of them lost after the war. Has pictures from her with messages on the back. Sweet. Receiving special packages. Kept spirits up.

01:16:21 Change in duties after promotion to platoon sergeant.
Pay raise to \$90/month. Sent it all home to wife and mother.

01:17:31 On daughter Marie born during war. Mr. French went home on leave when in Ca. And got wife pregnant. But her parents didn't know they were married. And now she is pregnant so had to confess secret marriage.

01:18:21 Story of details of Secret Marriage. Hid marriage license because her Dad "would have killed me."

01:18:45 Priest wouldn't marry us. Both father-in-laws throught priest out so we got secretly married by justice of the peace.
When came back Dad was "wonderful guy" and her mother "an angel."

01:20:97 Conclusion and Acknowledgements
Identify Mr. French and David Henton (son-in-law) present

01:23:33 End of interview