

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Veteran's Name: Paul French

Interviewer: David Meyer (O'Shea)

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Transcriber: Carol Slezak

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(Note: This transcription is made from a compilation of two recordings – both held on April 12. One in the morning before the annual business meeting of the 95th Infantry Association and one following the meeting. For purposes of the VHP, the interview was presented on two separate CDs. For purposes of the 95th Infantry Legacy Foundation, the two recordings are combined into one entitled “FrenchPaul547thAAcombinedsession.”)

Interviewer: This is David Meyer, son of Earl D. Meyer, Company H, 379th, of the 95th Infantry. Today is April 12, 2014. We're sitting in an atrium of the Wyndham Garden Hotel, Oklahoma City, near the airport. It's now 9:19AM, and today I have the great privilege of talking to—Mr. French, could you just say your name?

Paul French: Paul French. F-r-e-n-c-h.

Interviewer: And you were born—?

Paul French: April 6, 1923.

Interviewer: And Happy Birthday.

Paul French: Thank you.

Interviewer: Where were you born?

Paul French: Galena, Kansas.

Interviewer: And what war did you serve in?

Paul French: World War II

Interviewer: This recording is for Mr. French's family, and also the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress, if he so decides. What were your service dates?

Paul French: January '43 until January '46. That'd be three years, right?

Interviewer: And what branch of the service were you in?

Paul French: I was in the Artillery, the automatic weapons, the antiaircraft.

Interviewer: And what was the name of your battalion?

Paul French: 547th Automatic Weapons Battalion.

French, Paul; Platoon Sergeant, 547th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion, 95th Infantry WWII

Interviewer: Were they part of a bigger group?

Paul French: No, we were assigned to different outfits for aircraft protection and to support the infantry. Infantry support. And if there were any airplanes, we were supposed to shoot them down. But there weren't any [laughs].

Interviewer: Had you been assigned to any other divisions before the 95th?

Paul French: No.

Interviewer: What was your highest rank?

Paul French: Platoon Sergeant.

Interviewer: Your name at birth, was it the same?

Paul French: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you have any nicknames?

Paul French: Not really.

Interviewer: Well, you did tell me before—?

Paul French: Red [laughs].

Interviewer: Because you had red hair. You said you'd go to reunions and what would people say?

Paul French: Well, Where's your red hair, Paul? You know. When I first walked in [laughs].

Interviewer: What were your parents' names?

Paul French: Ruth was my mother's name, and Orin, O-r-i-n was my father's.

Interviewer: And what did they do for a living?

Paul French: My mother was a housewife, and my father was a justice of the peace in a little town in Kansas.

Interviewer: Was this still in Galena?

Paul French: Yes, Galena, Kansas.

Interviewer: Did you move from Galena?

Paul French: Yes. I was about five years old when we moved to St. Louis. Less than five years old. I was probably four. Just four.

Interviewer: Do you have memories of Galena?

Paul French: No, not too many. I have an older brother, and he used to take me under his wing a little bit. But that's about all I remember that young, as a child. My father died when I was two. My mom raised me. During that darn Depression. You know how that was.

Interviewer: How did she get by?

Paul French: Well, she worked in the shoe factory for a while. Then she had some health problems, and my sister and I were put in an orphan's home for about six months. Then when mom came out, I don't remember just exactly how she got by, but the lady who was our landlord, she owned a house in North Saint Louis, so she allowed us to remove there rent-free—it was a rooming house—if my mother would collect the rent, clean up after the people who left, and greet the people as they came in. Then she worked for a dollar a day at the Goodwill. And that's how we got by.

Interviewer: So growing up in the rooming house you saw a lot of different people.

Paul French: Yes, we did. Everybody was the same. Some of the men were lucky enough to have jobs but there weren't many in that time.

Interviewer: So you're in Kansas. Is that the center of the Dust Bowl?

Paul French: No. I don't think so. We were in St. Louis during the Depression.

Interviewer: That's a big city.

Paul French: But it was a small area we lived in [laughs]. No automobiles, you know, for us. We got by, you know. Everybody got by. And everybody helped everybody. Later on, I was lucky enough to meet my wife. We moved to her house. We lived next door to each other. And went to the same grade school [laughs]. And we just celebrated our 71st anniversary.

Interviewer: Congratulations Mrs. French on your anniversary! So how many siblings did you have?

Paul French: I had two. Two girls.

Interviewer: And what were their names?

Paul French: Marie and Barbara [PH].

Interviewer: Those were your siblings?

Paul French: No, my children. That would be Tom [PH] was my brother, and Wanda [PH] was my sister.

Interviewer: Were they both older?

Paul French: Yes, they were both older than me.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you were doing when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Paul French: Yes, I do. I was taking inventory at a Kroger's store. I was a clerk at a Kroger's store.

Interviewer: I grew up in Cincinnati. All my relatives worked at Kroger.

Paul French: I was a clerk at Kroger's. You took inventory every month in those days. It was Sunday. We were leaving around one o'clock and we heard about it.

Interviewer: What did you think?

Paul French: Well, it didn't hit me that—young guy, you know, 17 almost 18, you don't realize how bad it was. It's awfully hard to realize until it actually starts to affect you personally. That's the way it is here now, too. If it don't affect you personally, it's not on your mind. It's a shame. But gradually our country, gradually, got together because we were all in it. Everybody was in it.

Interviewer: Growing up, did you think about going into the service?

Paul French: No. Never thought about that.

Interviewer: What was going on at the time—did you join or were you drafted?

Paul French: Drafted. I was 18 years old.

Interviewer: Did you want to go anywhere else besides the army?

Paul French: No. It was all right with me. Everybody was doing what we had to do, you know? If you were drafted, you went. But we all waited to be drafted, mostly. Some young guys volunteered. But I had my mother to take care of, mostly. She was more or less dependent on my salary. I wasn't about to go off and just leave her, you know? So I waited to be drafted.

Interviewer: How did your mother take it?

Paul French: Mom, she's a very strong lady. But she was worried about me.

Interviewer: Do you remember saying good-bye?

Paul French: Yes. For us, it was a few tears. The one thing I do remember though—Jefferson Barracks is where we went—I could hear guys crying, and their moms. All the draftees actually crying [laughs]. I didn't cry, but I could hear it.

David Henton (son-in-law): Paul, don't forget to talk about how you snuck in a marriage before you disappeared.

[10:12]

Interviewer: Talk to me about that.

Paul French: Yeah. We married just before I went in, my wife and I.

Interviewer: Was that after you got the draft notice?

Paul French: No, just before.

Interviewer: So you knew it was coming.

Paul French: Oh, sure. Everybody knew you were going to go. Everybody had to serve.

Interviewer: So you were 18, and got married?

Paul French: I was 19, I think, and Marie [PH] was 17.

Interviewer: Aww...very sweet. Where did she live?

Paul French: Next door to me.

Interviewer: And she stayed with her parents when you went away?

Paul French: Yeah. And we came home—we had a leave and we had a baby right after that [laughs].

Interviewer: You had everything set up.

Paul French: Yeah, I came home, and we had a little girl. That was my oldest girl, Marie.

Interviewer: So the first place they took you was Jefferson Barracks?

Paul French: Yeah. That's where they put you on the train. They gave you your clothes. What did they call it—depot, or something like that. And you get the train out of there and they sent us out to California.

Interviewer: So you were just 18 in April of ...

Paul French: '42. Nineteen. I was 19, yeah.

Interviewer: So you're 19, and they took you in what month?

Paul French: January, I remember that.

Interviewer: So from the time you were 19, almost eight months passed before you got in.

Paul French: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you get married. How was your wife when you left?

Paul French: Well, everybody was crying. Everybody was unhappy. But everybody was in it, you know.

Interviewer: Did anybody give you anything to carry with you?

Paul French: Oh, yes. My wife had a bracelet made for me, an I.D. bracelet. I had my ring, my wedding ring. I had those things, yes.

Interviewer: Can you remember your service number? What was it?

Paul French: 37415382 [laughs].

Interviewer: Now the first days, basic training. So you were working as a clerk at a Kroger store—.

Paul French: Actually that was at the time—December 7. But after that I was working for an automobile agency, selling cars. I worked my way up a little bit, in the financial field.

Interviewer: Basic training—was the physical regiment hard or easy for you?

Paul French: Oh God, it was easy. It wasn't hard for anyone; we were all in pretty good shape. You know, young guys. I don't know of anybody that dropped out because of physical fitness.

Interviewer: Do you know anyone who dropped out in those early days?

Paul French: No, I can't recall anybody. Unless they were disabled. Even our cook had a bad leg; he limped around the kitchen. Yeah, the oldest guy in my crew was 38. That was the cutoff line of the drafting, I think, 38.

Interviewer: The drill instructors—.

Paul French: Oh yeah, they were fun [laughs].

Interviewer: Do you remember anything specific?

Paul French: One time, I was supposed to be on guard duty. I think we were out in the desert some place, Muroc Desert, and he snuck up behind me and bit me on the ear. He said, Man, that'll tell you to be alert [laughs]. It hurt too. It didn't draw blood.

Interviewer: But still, you never forget that.

Paul French: No, I'll never forget it.

Interviewer: You said they sent you to Muroc?

Paul French: We were out at Muroc Air Force Base, we were at Camp Haan, we were at Needles [PH?], Arizona. We were all over that area. We trained with the tank corps. Actually, what I think they were doing is they were training us to go to Africa, if I'm not mistaken. Because everything we did was related to hot weather. And then that was over in Africa. When we got all our training in, they sent us to Europe.

Interviewer: So after the desert, where did you go? How long were you there?

Paul French: Well, we were there forever until you went overseas.

Interviewer: You went overseas from the desert?

Paul French: Yeah, we shipped out of California.

Interviewer: You did! What boat did you ship out on?

Paul French: No, on the train. It took us to New York. We crossed on the Mauretania. Without an escort. We didn't even need an escort, that's a fast boat.

Kay Grosinske: What unit were you with?

Paul French: 547th. AAA—Anti-Aircraft Artillery. Automatic Weapons.

Interviewer: Were you assigned to a company yet?

Paul French: Oh yeah. I had a gun section then. I was a corporal. It was a buck sergeant's job; and I got my three stripes.

Interviewer: Before you went over?

Paul French: Oh yeah. I went over as a crew chief. Two guns.

Interviewer: You went up in the ranks very fast.

Paul French: Well, I didn't get my platoon leader stripes until just before the war was over.

Interviewer: But still. Most guys, by the time they go to Europe, they're privates.

Paul French: Oh no, I was a buck sergeant.

Interviewer: What were your duties?

Paul French: I had the two artillery pieces, four 50-caliber machine guns on an electric turret, and we had a 40 mm Bofors automatic for anti-aircraft. We did some target practice and all that thing out in the desert, and, you know you get pretty good at it. We had a good crew.

Interviewer: To practice anti-aircraft in the desert, would they fly something over you?

Paul French: Yes, they had a target flying behind us, a real slow airplane. Of course we had fields of fire. You couldn't fire past that or you might hit the airplane. But to save on shells, this is interesting, what we did. One time, instead of using the 40 mm's, they kept a ball of 50-caliber shells in different colors. Red for one, blue for another, yellow for another, and so forth. And they mounted a 50-caliber machine gun on top of our Bofors to save ammunition. And if you hit the target, that color would go into the sleeve, and they could tell who hit the target, by color.

Interviewer: Was the target—?

Paul French: Like a big, silk sleeve behind that airplane. I wouldn't want that job flying that plane, would you [laughs]?

Interviewer: No. Not with everyone learning. Did you ever see anything that was like, Whoops?

Paul French: No. We hit the wire a few times and knocked it off the plane, but that's about it [laughs].

Interviewer: When there's wind coming, did you have to make adjustments? Or did you just aim and fire?

Paul French: Oh no. We knew what we were doing. We would lead the plane, we had all of that. We knew what we were doing before hitting the target. You'd zero in your gun on a certain distance, and then you had that zeroed in, just like you would a rifle, you know. You hit what you aimed at. But a moving target, of course, we had one for vertical, one for azimuth. This guy would figure out how high it was, the other guy would figure out how fast it was going. And that's the way you did it.

Interviewer: So if you would see a plane in the sky, you would know how far it was.

Paul French: Yeah, I first started out as a range finder.

Interviewer: Did you have a device?

Paul French: We had an electric—they called it a rangefinder—I was a range setter, that's what it was. The range finder was a box. That's what it was. And we hooked it up to the gun. And then I would stand behind it, and I would figure out the distance. And I had one guy on each side, spotting and cranking. And then when they got it in their sights, they knocked my hand off, and that engaged the gun. And the gun would fire.

Interviewer: They knocked your hand off and that engaged the gun. Did they have to pull the trigger?

Paul French: The gunner had to push the pedal down with his foot. You see a lot of those movies, where they were firing off the ships?

Interviewer: Like ack-ack guns?

Paul French: Same kind of gun. There must have been thousands of them made. They called them Bofors.

Interviewer: Or what they call the ack-ack? Did they carry the Bofors on a flatbed truck, or what?

Paul French: No, I had two trucks on ours. I didn't have the halftrack.

Interviewer: So you had two trucks, and that carried the guns. So they were always exposed to the elements?

Paul French: Yes, yes. We would try to dig them in as far as we could. And we found that you don't dig them in too deep. Because if you dig them in too deep, then you can't fire the low flying aircraft. We found that out one day [laughing]. These planes were coming over so low, they were coming through the valleys, and we couldn't get our guns down. So we had to take a couple rows of sandbags off [laughs]. You could actually see the pilots as the German planes went by. You could almost see their eyes and everything. That's how low they were. That was just one experience.

Interviewer: How was the trip across the ocean for you? Were you used to the sea?

Paul French: Well, no. Oh God, it was terrible. I never got sick. But oh, you couldn't stand it. The smell [laughs]! And they stacked us up on hammocks that you fold up through the day. And we were stacked one on top of the other, you know. When you got in a hammock, you couldn't really get out, you know.

Interviewer: Were you at the top?

Paul French: Oh, I was about the middle, I guess. I don't remember. I gotta tell you one funny story though. We had one guy, he was sort of a rebel. And the lights were out. And he shouted out—and we had a Sergeant Green [PH]—and he yelled out, What color is chicken sh—? And everybody shouted out, GREEN!

So here's what they did. They got a hold of this guy and they put him in the brig. So he's in the brig. We're in these hammocks, all the way over. So they put an MP badge on me to go get him out of the brig. Here he's in a quiet room, with a mattress, a light where he could read. I'm telling you, it was amazing. I went, Oh my God, I wish I was in the brig! It was funny. He went on, he did pretty good. He was a fellow we always used to say, Even at attention he always looks like he's at ease.

Interviewer: Do you remember his name?

Paul French: Oh God, I'm trying to think of his name. I just can't think of his name at all. I'm trying to remember if it was Faulk, F-a-u-l-k?

Interviewer: So how many people were in your section?

Paul French: Fifteen of us.

Interviewer: Is that a platoon?

Paul French: I would call that, compared to the infantry, a squad.

Interviewer: Was it like three squads in a platoon?

Paul French: Four.

Interviewer: So you ended up as a platoon sergeant. So you were in charge of 4 x 14—.

Paul French: No, there was only A, B, C, D Battery. I was in D Battery. So that would only be eight guns.

Interviewer: And how many men are on a gun?

Paul French: Well, we all had a duty. Everybody had something to do in the gun section.

Interviewer: What are the duties?

Paul French: Well, they're so big when you set them up, each person has to have a position to get this thing off the wheels and onto the ground. That's what you had to do. And then when you lift anything onto the truck, each man had a position to lift.

Interviewer: And did you have pulleys and cranes?

Paul French: No, muscle power.

Interviewer: You lifted the heavy gun?

Paul French: Oh no, the guns were—they were spring loaded, but they were the fulcrum type. I guess up and down. But it was muscle power, yes, to keep them up and get them down. I guess that would be muscle power, yeah.

Interviewer: So you left from New York—from New York City, New York Harbor?

Paul French: I don't know if it was New York Harbor. We were in New York City, in that area.

Interviewer: Did they give you any days off before you left? Did you see the city?

Paul French: No. They gave us a physical examination. The one thing I remember is all the POWs that they had captured in Africa, they were our waiters. They served us in the mess hall.

Interviewer: What were they wearing? Did they have prisoners'—

Paul French: They had a P on the back. But they had a lot of freedom. They had it good. They weren't mistreated at all.

David Henton: Were they German prisoners?

Paul French: Yeah, German prisoners. They waited on us.

Interviewer: Any Italians?

Paul French: No,, I didn't see any Italians that I know of. They were only there a few days.

Interviewer: Where did you land?

Paul French: We landed in Liverpool. England.

Interviewer: And how were the British? How did they treat you?

Paul French: Okay. A little indifferent. They'd seen so many, you know. So many GI's, even before us, coming and going.

Interviewer: So when did you get to Europe?

Paul French: We got to Europe right at the beginning of August.

Interviewer: So about two months after D-Day. Where were you when you heard about the invasion?

Paul French: I guess we were still out in California.

Interviewer: What did you think?

Paul French: Well, I was glad to get it going. Get it over with. You know. We were lucky, the 95th—that we were attached to the 95th—we were lucky because we were with Patton. We didn't get stalled down like some of the outfits up north. You know, they hit a brick wall a lot of times. He just kept us moving. We moved and moved and moved. Very few times we stayed in one place more than one or two days.

Interviewer: Did you ever get to see him?

Paul French: Oh yeah. Heard him speak?

Interviewer: You what?! Tell me about that.

Paul French: Well, he had all the first three graders and the noncoms and the officers, we all went out in this field. And he was up on this—like a big scaffolding. Where they hang people maybe, I don't know. Anyway, he started giving a speech and every other word was a cuss word. I don't know if you know this or not from other interviews. But he said, 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]. Which is a bunch of malarkey, you know. But that's the way he talked to the troops. He was something else. He had a siren on that doggone jeep, did you know that?

Interviewer: No.

Paul French: He had like a fire siren. You could hear him coming up the road. And he had those two guns on him. ...

Interviewer: I've heard he'd wear boots—.

Paul French: Oh yeah, he was in the calvary, you know [laughs].

Interviewer: Did he have his dog with him?

Paul French: No, I didn't see that dog at all.

Interviewer: I heard his voice was higher than you'd expect.

Paul French: Yeah, he wasn't a real—he had a high-pitched voice, yeah. Did you see that movie, the Patton movie? He didn't talk like that all [mimics a deep voice]. Kind of sissy-like. If you listen to his language, you know he's not a sissy [laughs]. He was just trying to inspire us, I imagine.

Interviewer: So when he was done talking, did you feel inspired?

Paul French: No. We went back. We were in pup tents at the time, which are pretty uncomfortable, waiting to go on to be deployed into combat. And we were just trying to stay comfortable. Stay alive.

Interviewer: [Meeting is starting] I'll be here right after the meeting if you want to talk more.

Paul French: We had different things happen, but you don't dwell on that stuff.

Interviewer: They don't teach WWII in history anymore. You give people a gift because they get to hear it. You don't know who's going to hear it 100 years from now. And they'll say, OK this is what matters.

Let me ask you one question. Do you remember a time you felt nervous or afraid?

Paul French: Well...Not really. Not really. No I can't remember the exact—we might have been a little overzealous. We might have been. I don't know. We'd think, This one won't get me. I can see that shrapnel right now. I can see laying on the ground smoking. Where it missed me. Didn't hit me ...

Interviewer: Did you feel like, My number wasn't up?

Paul French: Yeah. I'm going to be fine. It's like they got a storm out there and it's lightning. The lighting isn't going to hit me. That's how you feel.

End Part I (34:55 on recording)

Part 2 (after business meeting)

Interviewer: This is David Meyer, son of Earl D. Meyer, Company H, 379th, 95th Infantry. It is now 11:47 AM on the 12th of April, 2014. I'm continuing an interview with—.

Paul French: Paul French, 547th Triple-A Automatic Weapons Battalion.

Interviewer: I wanted to go back for a second to landing in Normandy. Were you there for when the 95th was doing the Red Ball Express?

Paul French: That came later. The Red Ball Express came later. I think we were right at the Moselle River, and they requisitioned all our trucks for that. I'm not real sure, but I think the division crossed the Moselle, and then were running out of supplies. I think they pulled back—this is history I'm not real sure of—but I think they pulled back to the other side of the Moselle. And the trucks, took all the trucks, and all of our drivers were in the Red Ball Express. And we stayed there until we could get more ammunition. And gasoline, and so forth. But we were on a roll. We were going. And we had to stop.

Interviewer: Did you always travel with your guns with the vehicle?

Paul French: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: You weren't on the forty and eight. You weren't on the trains at all?

Paul French: No, no, we were always riding. We didn't have to walk. That was good.

Interviewer: Somebody said it was very rainy, and mud was a problem.

Paul French: Oh yeah. We got stuck numerous times.

Interviewer: What would you do when you got stuck?

Paul French: Well, we had winches on our trucks. Good electric winches. And you could just do about anything with those winches. You could hook to a tree, or another vehicle. No matter what position you were in, you could get out one way or the other. Except one night, we were in the middle of a field. We were under artillery fire, the little town where we were. And I could not get out of that mud. So the tank battalion was right there and they were doing anti-battery fire. They didn't just use the tanks on the roads.

Paul French (cont'd): They used them for artillery also. So there was about four of these Sherman tanks firing at the enemy. Of course, they were all buttoned up. So I walked up there and I took my rifle and banged on the top of the tank. And I asked, it was a lieutenant, if he could take one of the tanks and pull us out of the mud. He said, Sure. He backed up that tank and pulled us out of the mud [laughs]. But, to me I didn't even realize that they would use them that way. But that's what they were doing.

Interviewer: That's interesting.

Paul French: Yeah, they were using them for anti-battery firing against the Germans. But we were all under shell fire at that time. If we had stayed out in that particular field until daylight, they would have got us for sure. If not with the artillery, they would have got us with the mortars, you know. But he got us out of that mud. ...

Interviewer: Do you remember crossing t?

Paul French: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Paul French: That was when I saw my first dead American. Right there. When we crossed the Moselle. That was a shock. To see a GI, you know, in a foxhole dead. Laying on the ground. That was a shock [voice low]. Yeah, I don't like to talk about this.

Interviewer: That's OK. But you know, there's always a cost. When people hear a little about the cost, then they'll appreciate it. Did you cross on a treadway bridge?

Paul French: Yeah, the engineers had worked. We had several bridges across that thing. Pontoon bridges like you know.

Interviewer: Was it wide where you crossed?

Paul French: It didn't seem very wide to me. The night before we crossed, we were all dug in on our side and we thought oh boy this is great. We're fine. We're going to be warm. And god darn that darn river came up and flooded all our foxholes. So we were like a bunch of drowned rats the next day [laughs]. I tell you—you realize you're around the river bank, and the water table came up, right in our foxholes.

Interviewer: Can you do anything when you're we?

Paul French: Well, not much. It wasn't really that cold. It was miserable. We were underneath, like an overpass. And we managed to get some wood and we were drying our shoes and that with a little fire. But we would cross the Moselle at night. Early morning and night.

Interviewer: Would they lay down smoke or anything?

Paul French: I don't think they had to during the night. It was just move, move, move, move all the time.

Interviewer: When was the first time you saw a German soldier?

Paul French: Well, I saw a lot of dead ones. Lot of dead ones. But they weren't surrendering so much about that time. They weren't really giving up in groups around our area until Metz. Then like gangbusters they would turn themselves in. We captured 32 of them one night. Well, they gave up. I shouldn't say we captured them. They gave up.

Interviewer: Did they use a white flag?

Paul French: They had their hands up and they were yelling, Comrade, Comrade. Of course we took them. We made sure they didn't have any weapons on them. And they had these strange little flashlights that they squeeze and squeeze. They had like a little generator. You know the ones that they got now ...? They had very sophisticated equipment. We didn't have any. We had battery flashlights, you know?

Interviewer: Nothing that self-generated.

Paul French: No. Isn't that something?

Interviewer: That is something.

Paul French: First time I ever saw anything like that. Yeah, we were in Metz. Dug in in Metz that night. That was the first ones that we took. Then when we came on down off of Metz, guys went out to get a group of them, and one of them grabbed [one of my corporal's rifle]. He pulled the trigger and it killed him. Killed the guy. He must have been a fanatic or something to grab—you know. He was unarmed, and he grabbed a rifle. You know.

Interviewer: So the German grabbed the rifle?

Paul French: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you're attached to the 95th Infantry. Did they send you to the 377th, 378th, or 379th? Are you attached to one of the regiments?

Paul French: We were mainly with the 105 Howitzer Group. We were attached to that most of the time. The only time we were directly with the infantry was down in Saarlautern. They had captured a bridge across the Saarlautern. And we were down there guarding that bridge in Saarlautern.

Interviewer: I know that bridge.

Paul French: We wanted to keep that bridge open. That's the second time I saw Patton. He came down there. Congratulated us, you know. Fine job we were doing [laughs].

Yeah, he came through there. One of my young crews, he was so lucky. They were guarding the bridge and underneath the bridge they decided they weren't going to sleep in the gun turret. They were going to sleep under this bridge. And nobody was out on guard duty. We always had somebody awake, but nobody was out from under the bridge. And doggone it, if they didn't destroy that gun with the mortar. And this wasn't at night. They were just randomly firing these mortars back at us, you know. And one landed right in that gun. If any of the guys had been in there, they'd all have been dead.

Interviewer: That is lucky.

Paul French: Oh, lucky is right. Saarlautern, there was a lot of action going on down there. Everybody was in that.

Interviewer: When your gun is destroyed, do you tell headquarters?

Paul French: Oh yeah, they brought another one right up. I think about two days we had another gun.

Interviewer: Was it one of the ack-acks?

Paul French: Well there were four 50-caliber machine guns on one turret. I wish I had brought all my pictures along; you could have seen some of that.

Interviewer: I wish you had. I talked one time to Mr Vittiglio. (PH).

Paul French: Oh you did?

Interviewer: Last reunion. And he had that story of a plane shooting down that plane, I think with a 50-caliber machine gun.

Paul French: Yeah. Well, we had four of those and a 40-millimeter. So we had a lot of firepower.

Interviewer: Forty millimeters. How big—?

Paul French: Well they're about that big around and about that long.

Interviewer: So about two inches—.

Paul French: Forty millimeters is a pretty big shell. They were in a clip.

Interviewer: How many in a clip?

Paul French: Four in a clip. The guys would just keep putting them in there. It was automatic—as long as you held that pedal down it would fire. You could fire one at a time, or four if you wanted to. It was a pretty good gun.

Interviewer: Was it loud?

Paul French: Oh yeah. You know. Just artillery.

Interviewer: How is your hearing now?

Paul French: My hearing isn't real good. But what really battered me was the guns flying over us. Like the 155s are behind us, and we'd be dug in in front of them. And when they fired, oh my God it would just raise you up an inch or two off your foxholes. It was, you know, Boom Boom.

I'll tell you an interesting story with the artillery. Probably the guys sitting here with the artillery told you this. But they came out with those proximity fuses. You know what they are? They would fire when they got near anything.

Paul French (cont'd): Okay? Well, we didn't know too much about them because they just gave them to us. [Aside: I'm telling him about those proximity fuses.] Well, we got those. We always fired four at a time with our 105s. Well, when we fired four of them at a time they would be near each other and they'd be exploding all over our own men.

So what we did, we changed our firing pattern to one, two, three, four. And then as they went over the shells wouldn't be near each other. And then as they got near a tree, the tree would explode, see. That was an amazing concept, those fuses on those shells. In fact, in the Pacific they even were sending them over there, because they were taking a beating on the ocean with those kamikaze guys. They sent them over there for the 40 millimeters. We didn't have those on the 40s.

Interviewer: You know, talking to some of the replacements, like Walter Blenko, who had come in as a replacement, I've heard some people would say, We're not going to get to know your names because you're going to mess up and then you're going to be gone. Did you see that attitude?

Paul French: Well, no. Nooo. We were just so close, you know.

Interviewer: You were.

Paul French: Oh yeah. We had to back (?) each other. You know. Fifteen of us. I'd just see that they got everything they had to have. And stood up for them.

Interviewer: Do you remember some of their names?

Paul French: Oh, there was Goins [PH]s, and Randon [PH], who got killed, and...I'd almost have to read them to you. I can't—oh, Smith, Smitty [PH] we called him. And he was lucky. He had a family. And we were on the Rhine River. I don't know how it happened, but each outfit was allowed to send somebody home on points or something before the war was over. And he got to go home. He lived in Texas. I remember him real well. He was a great guy, too. I remember Pappy [PH], he was the oldest guy.

David Henton: How old was he?

Paul French: Thirty eight. We had another one nicknamed Junior, he was the youngest [laughs].

David Henton: A year younger than you.

Paul French: Isn't it funny I can't recall those names? But I look at the pictures and I recall them.

Interviewer: Did you keep in touch with them after the war?

Paul French: Some of them I did. For a while. John Little, he still makes these things. John was in my outfit. He was in Headquarters. Dare I tell that story about John?

Interviewer: Sure.

Paul French: We were in basic training, and the captain says, Who can drive a truck?, and who can do this, and who can do that. Who can blow a bugle? And John says, I could blow the bugle when I was in the Boy Scouts. So he's our bugler. But he was so bad. He could not play that bugle. So the captain said, John, we don't really need a bugler. They played a record each morning—Oh, what a wonderful morning...[laughs]...And Taps was the record. John never did blow the bugle [laughs]. Don't tell John I told you that story.

Interviewer: Where was it that you first heard German shelling?

Paul French: While we were waiting to get assembled. You could hear it. That was in France.

Interviewer: So it was before you got to Metz.

Paul French: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Way before. Just as a personal thing, how long was the longest you went between showers?

Paul French: I had two showers in 111 days. I remember that.

Interviewer: And where were those two showers?

Paul French: They set them up. One of them was in ... we had taken over the line from the 5th, and the 5th was in reserve. And it was pretty—there wasn't much going on, they didn't think. So they set up this shower platoon near a creek, and a truck. And they had some machines in that, and they could heat the water. And we'd get the water, I guess, out of the creek. They had to set them up where there was water, I guess. So, oh God, it was great. But what you had to do, because everything was so scarce, they would get you wet, then you'd soap down. There'd be no water while you were soaping down. Then they'd rinse you off, and away you went. They gave you clean underwear and socks. And away you went [laughs]. Those guys. But you know. We shaved in our helmets and took a bath in our helmets, you know.

David Henton: But did you shave every day?

Paul French: I did. I did, yeah. I shaved every day. My men did, too. It was just a matter of keeping clean.

Interviewer: As a platoon leader—.

Paul French: Most of the time I had a gun. I was a gun sergeant. I didn't get to be a platoon leader until almost the war was over. Almost. European war. Some of the guys, the platoon leaders before me, got battlefield commissions and then they just moved me up.

Interviewer: Even as the gun—.

Paul French: --- We were a cohesive little unit, separated from everything. You couldn't put all the whole battalion right in one spot, so they'd just send one set of guns to one outfit, another one to—we were all over the place. I didn't see my buddies hardly at all overseas. We had the gun crews.

Interviewer: So you'd just see the people you were with on your gun.

Paul French: Yeah.

Interviewer: And how far away would the next gun be?

Paul French: Well, it would depend where the artillery was or—actually I guess we'd be spread out for miles, as big of an outfit as we were.

Interviewer: So the five of you—.

Paul French: Fifteen.

Interviewer: The 15 of you, you guys were just out there on your own.

Paul French: I'm 20 years old, and I'm taking care of the other 14. Making them do what they're supposed to do [laughs].

David Henton: Tell them about the socks.

Paul French: They wouldn't change their socks. You know, Patton said you had to have clean socks on every day. So, here they come with this box of socks. Well, I'd make them give me their old socks and I'd give them clean socks every morning. They didn't want to change their socks. And I told them, When you go in your bedroom at night take off your shoes! But I only had one guy get gangrene. He was a replacement and he just wouldn't listen to anybody. I lost some of my men, and he came as a replacement. So we got rid of him in a hurry.

Interviewer: You just said to someone, Get him out of here?

Paul French: Yeah, we couldn't tolerate him. He wouldn't do anything. I don't think he was actually afraid or anything. But he had so much experience and illusions, you know. He was an old dyed in the wool guy, he wouldn't take orders from anybody, you now. They had a depot—I forget what they called it—where they would send in replacements.

Interviewer: The repo depo [?].

Paul French: Yeah, that was it. They sent in replacements from there. You didn't know who was coming. But after him, every one of the guys I got were great.

French, Paul; Platoon Sergeant, 547th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion, 95th Infantry WWII

David Henton: Did you tell the story of how you didn't sleep for seven days?

Paul French: No, I didn't tell him that.

David Henton: Go ahead, Paul.

Paul French: That was just a phase I went through there for—we were under battery fire for a while.

David Henton: Weeks.

Paul French: What happened was the ground was frozen and the medics couldn't get to anybody. All the medics got killed. Because the shells would hit the frozen ground when they would be running out to help people. And we lost all our medics. And I scrounged around, scrounged around, trying to keep everybody safe and everything. I didn't realize it, but I wasn't sleeping. I just wasn't sleeping. So they grabbed me up after a few days, the guys, and took me back to where the medics were. So they put me on a cot and put me to sleep. About seven days I was away from the gun. But I just could not sleep. And I was turning gray, you know. Just walking around, you know, like a zombie.

David Henton: And your hair fell out.

Paul French: Oh yeah, lost all my hair. Every bit of my hair. Was bald as a [pig in poke?].

Interviewer: Was that at the time they brought you in?

Paul French: After. I was combing my hair and my hair just kept coming out and coming out. My hair really didn't come back until I was in Belgium after the war. It come back real kinky, you know.

Interviewer: It came back changed. Same red color?

Paul French: Yeah. They were giving me shots. I don't know what kind of shots they were. Some kind of a hormone shot or something to get me going again.

Interviewer: Did you admire your commanding officers?

Paul French: Yes, our Captain Oakes was a—.

Interviewer: Captain?

Paul French: Oakes, O-a-k-e-s. Our battery was Lieutenant Stevenson [PH] and Lieutenant Kierney [PH]. Lieutenant Stevenson was a crackerjack. He was our first lieutenant. And he was a crackerjack. But Lieutenant Kierney didn't come out too much. He stayed back. They sent him home, too [laughs].

Interviewer: So he was a little nervous.

Paul French: Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you describe instances of good leadership and bad leadership?

French, Paul; Platoon Sergeant, 547th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion, 95th Infantry WWII

Paul French: Well, yeah. I think it's just not thinking of yourself and putting the other people before you. Don't you?

Interviewer: Sure. Can you share anything specific? Lieutenant Kierney, what made him a crackerjack?

Paul French: Lieutenant Stevenson.

Interviewer: Yes, Stevenson.

Paul French: Lieutenant Stevenson was a—he shared things with us. Like they had liquor rations. Every officer had liquor rations. Well, every gun crew got part of his liquor rations. It might only have an ounce, you know. But he split all his liquor rations with all the gun crews. That kind of thing. Everybody liked him.

Interviewer: Camaraderie.

Paul French: Yes. And he was not afraid to be out. He'd come out in the jeep and visit the gun crews, you know. And they were exposed. When they did that they were exposed.

Interviewer: You mentioned one time you saw in Saarlautern shrapnel fall that was still steaming, but you thought, Well, it's not for me.

Paul French: In fact, we were in Lieutenant Stevenson's jeep. I don't know what we were looking for. Maybe another gun or something. And we're riding down there, and man that stuff starts falling. Smoking, you know? And he took me back where the gun was and then they went on back. Because no sense in him staying out there and being exposed. And one of my guys got hit there. Just a scalp wound. We put some of that sulfa powder on him and sent him back to the medics. He got that fixed. But none of us got hit with that stuff.

Interviewer: In the museum yesterday I saw the different sizes it was.

Paul French: And how jagged

Interviewer: And how jagged it was.

Paul French: I didn't see that but that's what it looks like.

Interviewer: It was shocking to see. And that stuff would come in red hot.

Paul French: Man it would probably take your arm off. It was that big, some of that stuff.

Interviewer: Did you have any time for relaxation? Did you do anything for relaxation while you were in the service?

Paul French: Not while we were in combat, no. After we came out, we went to Charleroi, Belgium. We were billeted in a schoolhouse, and they took our whole outfit and had them guarding trains. It was my duty to keep the train guards—we'd have two on standby, one at the station, and another one riding, just rotate those things. And there we could go to town and stuff like that. But then the war was over while we were there.

Interviewer: Do you remember when Roosevelt died?

Paul French: April.

Interviewer: Do you remember voting?

Paul French: Uh-uh. No.

Interviewer: And how about Thanksgiving? Didn't Patton make sure everybody—

Paul French: Yeah, we had a hot meal.

Interviewer: Was a hot meal a rarity?

Paul French: Um, kind of, yeah. See, we were so spread out. But once in a while the cooks would give us a treat. They'd come out and surprise us with fritters and stuff like that.

Interviewer: So they'd come out to you with a surprise.

Paul French: yeah.

Interviewer: But pretty much, when you're out there with your gun, do you have just K-rations?

Paul French: Yeah. Towards the end of the war we got 10-in-1 rations. They were much better. They were like a fancy C-ration, only they were in a box for 10 guys. So I got a box and a half. And everybody fought over the half they were going to get [laughs]. It was crazy. But the C-rations weren't that bad. In the little cans. They weren't that bad. But the K-rations, that was nothing. Gee whiz.

Interviewer: That was like an energy bar?

Paul French: That was like a Cracker Jack box.

Interviewer: What did it contain?

Paul French: They had three cigarettes. They had lemonade.

David Henton: A candy bar.

Paul French: Yes, some of them had—depending on what you got. And they had that cheese that you would melt in there. Oh, and they'd have Nescafe in some of those.

David Henton: So what did you trade your cigarettes for?

Paul French: I didn't trade them. Whoever wanted them they could have them. I didn't smoke.

Interviewer: Did people have card games going on?

Paul French: We didn't do anything like that, no. We didn't have barracks—we were in the field.

Interviewer: I've heard how rainy it was. Did it get cold?

Paul French: Oh my God, yeah. We'd be out in that shaving in that snow [laughs]. You get acclimated to that stuff, don't you think?

Interviewer: Where would you sleep at night? Did you have pup tents?

Paul French: No, usually—we'd try to dig in. Have a little—we'd get some straw or something. But whenever we could, we slept in a house, when we were traveling. That was Patton's orders—kick 'em out, move in.

Interviewer: So you'd just say to them, We're staying here?

Paul French: Or, Get out of here.

David Henton: That was the Germans.

Paul French: That was the Germans. No, not the French, we didn't do anything like that to them.

Interviewer: I was talking to Mr. Paglieri and he said he didn't like the French.

Paul French: Well, they didn't like us too much either. I don't think so. We were overbearing to them. They thought. At first, I'm sure, it was different. But at the time I went to Paris they didn't seem too friendly to me.

David Henton: But the Dutch and the Belgium folks were really good to you.

Paul French: Yeah, we were billeted when I lost my gun that time we were enroute to the bulge; I lost my one gun and half my crew. And they billeted us in Belgium with this house. It was a farmer's house. They were afraid to sleep in the upper because of buzz bombs, so they gave us their beds, the family. We slept on feather beds and under feather beds.

Interviewer: What a treat.

Paul French: Yeah, we had about a week of that, living with this family. And it was great.

I went back there and gave them some clothing and stuff after the war.

Interviewer: Oh, you did? And they remembered and everything?

Paul French: Oh my God. Yeah. They were kind people. Good people.

Interviewer: Does their name come to mind?

Paul French: No—I have their address someplace in my little collection at home. I don't have all that in my mind. I'm sorry.

Interviewer: That's okay. The other thing is, something might occur to you later. I'll be sitting out here. Always feel free to come talk and we'll start again. You can always add on.

David Henton: Paul, did you talk about when you came in and liberated the concentration camps?

Interviewer: Will you tell me about that? Where were you?

Paul French: This was in Germany.

You might as well call it a concentration camp, but they call them displaced persons. And they were captured Polish adults. And they had taken the young ki—14, 15, 16 years—and separated them from these people and billeted them in a, like a school. They were teaching them to be soldiers. They were going to use them as soldiers. Make them Nazis, in other words. But the people that they couldn't use—they might have used them for labor because they had a big cheese factory up on the hill. So they might have done work. But they did not have a bar of soap. It was just horrible the way they were being treated. Their clothing hadn't been washed. The barracks was unlivable. We burnt the barracks down.

Interviewer: Because it smelled?

Paul French: Oh, it was full of lice. Everything. It was just awful. So we got those people in other buildings. We just took all those people and put them in other buildings. And then—we were only there two days by that time, but then we sent our trucks out to all the farmers around there and collected food for these people. Because we didn't have enough food to feed them. There was a couple hundred in this one place. And doggone it, another two or three days there was another one of them. And the Germans people said, Oh, we didn't know it was there.

Interviewer: They'd say that.

Paul French: Yeah. Yeah. And then we went to a real concentration camp. We were passing through there. They'd already liberated that thing and the captain wouldn't let us go in. He said, You guys don't need to see this. Just keep going. It was so horrible, they tell me. Well, I've seen pictures of it since. But we didn't even go in there. We just passed it up. I think that was right near Czechoslovakia or some place.

Interviewer: How were the people that you freed from the camp? Were they grateful or just weak?

Paul French: Yeah. They just couldn't believe it. Couldn't believe it. The Germans told everybody we were going to kill them. They told all of the people, The Americans will kill you when they come through here. They had them all scared to death. And we weren't allowed to do anything like that to them, naturally.

Interviewer: One of the people I've talked to was in the Navy; he was on the USS New York, and they went to Saipan. And in Saipan, the Japanese had convinced the natives that the Americans wanted to eat them. So they had one Mexican onboard the ship whose mother was Japanese. And they put him on a loudspeaker and he would tell the people, We will not eat you; we are your friends. But still the people were scared to death.

Interviewer: How about mail? Did you get mail from your wife?

Paul French: Yes, I did. She wrote email—not emai....

Interviewer:V-mail....

Paul French: V-mail. Every night before she went to bed she sent a V-mail. She wrote long letters every day or two. I had a stack on me all the time.

Interviewer: Would you write her back? Did you have time to write back?

Paul French: Not as often as that, but I did every chance I got.

Interviewer: Did she save any letters?

Paul French: I don't think we've got any letters to tell you the truth. Oh, you know what? When we moved that one time, that box that went off the truck with all our records from our marriage and all that? I never could find that box after we moved. And I'm sure that's where some of those letters were. Oh god, I've got pictures with her messages on the back of them.

Interviewer: Oh, you do.

Paul French: Yaaaaaaaah [gentle laugh].

Interviewer: Oh, that's sweet. I was going to ask you if you received any special packages or anything.

Paul French: Well, yes. I think they were allowed to send a box overseas if they could prove it was requested. So I would have to write a letter. The boxes were limited to size. Of course, 15 guys, you give them all a bite and it's gone [laughs].

Interviewer: But that's how you keep your spirit up.

Paul French: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: So near the end, when you became the platoon leader, how did your duties change?

Paul French: Well, I was away from my crew, naturally. Then I went to, like a headquarters. And then, as I say, I set up that train schedule for the train guards, and stuff like that. It was towards the end of the war. I have pictures before, pictures as a staff sergeant and some of those pictures, it just changed position, it wasn't that much.

Interviewer: Did you prefer being with more people?

Paul French: I liked the extra pay.

Interviewer: Yeah, sure.

David Henton: And what did you do with all that extra money?

Paul French: I think we went up to \$90 a month, or something like that. It wasn't that much.

David Henton: You sent it all home.

Paul French: Oh yeah, yeah. Oh sure, I had a wife and a mother.

Interviewer: But David, I think, said there was a time you had leave. And you also had your first daughter? Was that after the war or—?

Paul French: Marie was born during the war.

Interviewer: So just before you left to go to Europe?

Paul French: No, I came home on leave and I got her pregnant [laughs].

Interviewer: And then you went back to Europe?

Paul French: No, we were in California.

Interviewer: Oh.

Paul French: Then, I think in July, I got a furlough. Then we went back to California, and I was at Muroc Air Force Base when I got the telegram that she was born [laughs].

David Henton: He didn't tell you the whole story. Their parents didn't know they were married. So you gotta tell the story. Because she hid the marriage license and her mother and father didn't know she was married until she was pregnant and she had to confess. So that's the beginning of the story. He can tell the rest.

Paul French: Well, here's what happened. During the war, the priest didn't want to marry people. He didn't think the boys would come back whole or come back at all. So the priest came to the house to interview my wife's dad to see if it was okay for us to get married. Well, pop through him out. He got mad and ... he was kind of an outrageous guy anyway.

David Henton: Like Most fathers-in-law.

Paul French: So he threw the priest out. Anyway, Marie and I say, Well, he ain't going to marry us, so we'll just go get married by a Justice of the Peace. That's what we did. See, in those days you were young but you were responsible. I was working and she was working. We just thought, Well, we're fine.

Interviewer: But you hid it.

Paul French: Oh yeah, because her dad, he would have probably killed me [laughs].

Interviewer: So when you came back, and her dad first saw you?

Paul French: See, he was a great guy. And her mother was an angel, so.

Interviewer: Well, let me stop right now. There are just a few more questions. ... If you remember anything, write them down and we'll sit down again.

Paul French: I told Dave a lot of stuff. I don't know why, I just get to talking.

David Henton: Nobody else will talk to you [laughs].

Paul French: Yeah, something will come up and I'll start talking...

Interviewer: Just wonderful stuff.

Interviewer: This is David Meyer, son of Earl D. Meyer, Company H, 379th, the 95th Infantry. It's 12:33 PM, and if we didn't have another interview scheduled I would love to keep talking right now.

Paul French: Well, I don't know what else to tell you [laughs]!

Interviewer: We'll follow this up later. Right now though, I've had the great privilege of talking to Mr. French.

Paul French: Thank you, David.

Interviewer: Could you state one more time what unit you were with?

Paul French: I was with the 547th Triple-A Automatic Weapons. Attached to the 95th Division.

Interviewer: And your final rank was?

Paul French: Staff Sergeant.

Interviewer: It's been a great privilege. And David Henton is here, your son-in-law.

Paul French: My son [laughs].

Interviewer: I hope if there's a moment you can come back and we can talk a little more tonight.

1:23:33 – End of Interview