VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Veteran's Name: James Woolner
Interviewer: David Meyer (O'Shea)
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Transcriber: Carol Slezak
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Interviewer: Hello, this is David Meyer, son of Earl D. Meyer, Company H 379th, 95th Infantry.

The following recording is a compilation of two interviews with Major James Woolner, battery commander, Battery A, 360th, 95th Infantry. The first interview was done in Metz, France, in November 2004. The second interview, which corrects and adds new stories to the first interview, was done at Mr. Woolner's home, White Plains, New York, July 2006. The interviews are dedicated to Mr. Woolner's grandson J.T., and to my father Earl D. Meyer, Company H, 379th.

Woolner: Jim Woolner. I was battery commander of A Battery, 360, military battalion, the 155 outfit. I went in as a second lieutenant in the reserve in July '41. And was present at Camp Swift for the activation of the 95th Infantry Division, and was there at the deactivation in October 1945. There weren't many infantrymen that started and went all the way through and finished, because it was in the infantry that 90 percent of the casualties were. We had some in the artillery and we had guys wounded. In my own battery we didn't lose any men but we had nine wounded. But they all survived. We were – I came out as a major.

Woolner: I came out as a major. But we were a very fortunate division.

Meyer: We will insert there.

Woolner: At the time I was being separated from the service, the officer in charge handed me my final papers. And he said, "Do you know that you're now a major?"

And I said, "No I'm not a major."

And he said, "You've just had a separation promotion to major."

And I said, "Why?"

He said, "Well if you look at the last sentence here, you'll see why."

I looked at the last sentence on this document, which described my duties as a battery commander, which is what I had been now for a long time. And it said, "This officer received three excellents and seven superiors during his term at the army."

And he said, "That's why they promoted you."

And I was totally bowled over. I didn't put on the [oak leaf?] (laughs) – I was getting out. I was proud of my captain's bar, and all the garbage we had. But I was absolutely flabbergasted. It didn't make any difference except I was in the reserve, and if I got called active duty I'd be called as a major.

And that happened to have enormous influence on me because when Korea happened, they called back a lot of the reserve officers, but they didn't call any majors or lieutenant colonels. They didn't call what was called the field officers. They only called the captains and lieutenants, because they wanted to promote the West Pointers to the higher grades. Otherwise they'd be blocked by our dates of rank, which go back to 1945 [laughs], when we separated.
So they didn't call me. I was called for a physical, I passed the physical, and then they told me I was not going to be called. I stayed in the reserves until they advised by letter around 1953 or '54 that if you wish to get out of the reserve the army, will release you. And I did, because at that time—

Meyer: You had a life.

Woolner: I had a child and I was buying a house, and you know, things were – I didn't want to stay in the reserve because I had no plans to go back in the army. But that's how things affect you.

Meyer: That's interesting how small things affect you at the end.

Woolner: I'll tell you another small thing that affected me and I don't know if we covered it. When I was a sophomore at Yale, 1938, '39. In 1938, we went back to college in September, and Munich had just happened. The treaty at Munich with Chamberlain, and coming back to London and holding up papers and saying, "Peace in our time."

And I had a professor named Frank Monaghan (PH), history professor. Great guy. And that next day after this came out on the news reel and on the radios, he told us in class, "They might as well have written that treaty on toilet paper," he said. "Meaningless. There will be a war." And this was 1938, in September.

And that weekend I went down to New York to see the folks and told them I thought about getting into the reserve. Told them what Monaghan had said. And they said, "By all means, go do it."

So I went to the colonel at the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] building, to see if I could get in because I hadn't taken freshman year; it was a four-year course. And he said, "Don't worry about it, the first year is nothing but horsemanship. And since we don't have horses anymore [laughs] you haven't given up anything important." He said, "Just join the sophomore class." I'd missed maybe two sessions because the class had started already.

And there was a full course. I went to camp and end of junior year ROTC camp. And we got trained pretty well. Nothing like we needed, because we didn't know much when we finished that.

Meyer: Trained like physical training, Or train--

Woolner: We were, in effect, GIs. We learned how to handle a gun, how to handle, we learned gunnery, we learned how to fire a gun, how to handle a gun and so forth. But it was nothing like it really needed to be, because it was all over in six weeks. It was not really productive.

But then I got called to active duty right after I graduated. Actually, at commencement I was handed my letters to active duty, with my degree and with my commission.

Meyer: Really?

Woolner: Yeah, all three [laughs]. All at the same time in the middle of June, 1941. And at the end of July, I reported to Governors Island, New York, and was held around a few days. And then was sent to Fort Bragg in North Carolina to a replacement center. And we trained draftees for—I guess I was there from early August until February. Then I went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for really valuable training. Finished that in May, then went to Camp Swift to activate the 95th Infantry.

Meyer: At Fort Sill, what did you do?

Woolner: Artillery school. Fort Sill is the artillery school like Fort Benning is the infantry school. And it's a great place to learn about gunnery and learn what you need to be a knowledgeable officer. It doesn't teach you how to be an officer, but you either have that or you don't. And I was pretty fortunate that I'd spent those months at Fort Bragg, because all the noncommissioned officers were regular army, and were tough, knew what they were doing, and they taught us how to handle recruits.

Meyer: Where were you when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Woolner: Fort Bragg. That was December 7th, and I was on guard duty as it turned out. And we heard about it, the afternoon, Sunday afternoon. And it was exciting that they were at war. None of us really knew Pearl Harbor. We know it now. But I mean, if you'd asked me where Pearl Harbor was I'd say, Pacific somewhere. I didn't know it was in Hawaii. And this was not something that I happened to know about. And I was pretty well educated, and I didn't know about it.

So we got to Camp Swift. We had a cadre, a nucleus, from the 7th division in California, Fort Ord that was sent, these guys were sent as cadre to the 95th Infantry Division, and they were—every key job in the battery was either a staff sergeant or a sergeant or a corporal. They looked for section chiefs in charge of the howitzers, and the wire chief, and the radio sergeant, and the mess sergeant, and the supply sergeant, and the first sergeant – all the jobs were filled with the cadre.

And some of them were excellent, some were being shipped up and out, which is the army way to get rid of somebody. You hoped they—if you get the opportunity to get rid of somebody and a couple of them we got were [laughs] old, regular army guys who no longer were able really to do what had to be done. And the first cadre that we were called upon to send out, that's where they all went. They went to the 97th division from us, because we cadred the 97th division about four months, five months later.

That gave us the opportunity to pick our brightest guys, and give them the key jobs that were vacated when we sent the cadre, most of the cadre out.

Meyer: And they were from the 7th division?

Woolner: They were from the 7th division to us, and then we sent some of them to the 97th division which was activated about four or five months after we were. And then we sent officers. And that's how I became a battery commander. Because the battalion commander sent the A Battery commander out on cadre and promoted me.

I'd just made first lieutenant not too long before that. There was a job for a captain. So I'll never forget the man. He was a great man. His name was Henry P. Gantt, G-a-n-t-t. A Virginia gentleman. Wonderful person. And I can still remember his leaning back in the chair and telling me, "Lieutenant, I'm making you battery commander of Battery A." And he closed his eyes and sat there a minute and said, "But you're so young."

Well, I was twenty-two. And he had been in the army for I don't know how many years. And had spent a long time as a lieutenant before he made captain. He was now a lieutenant colonel, of course, the top commander. But it was difficult for him to accept the fact that all we, all the young guys were going to have jobs that he took years to get to. Because in the peacetime army, there was no attrition, and there was not much promotion.

So this is what happened all over the country. These divisions got activated and were staffed with guys my age, that had been ROTC, or OCS [Officer Candidate School]. My three officers at that time, junior to me, were OCS. And they'd been soldiers, and knew what they were doing, and they had the same course at Fort Sill that we had, except they had a lot more discipline. Because they were not officers yet. They became second lieutenants at the end of that.
And I was very fortunate in getting Jay Badeau as exec, because he could do it all. He was a terrific man. Still is. He's ninety years old and just great.

Meyer: Where does he live now?

Woolner: Annapolis, Maryland. In a retirement home, he and his wife. And I hear from them. They came to our last reunion. He grew up on a farm. There wasn't anything he couldn't do himself. So he became a terrific officer because they knew that he could do it better than they could. There was no explaining to him. Nobody wanted to try. He said, "I told you how to do it, now do it. That's it."
[Difficult to hear the next approximately 90 seconds because interview has moved outside and wind interfered with recording.]
He was a terrific guy, still is. He made the last reunion.

Meyer: What's his name?

Woolner: Badeau. B-a-d-e-a-u. Jay Badeau.

Meyer: And people would punch him in the stomach?

Woolner: He let them do it. Oh, yeah. … He never was going to fight anyone. Not that kind of a guy at all. He just was physically remarkable.

Meyer: Was he older?

Woolner: Four years older than I am. But he wasn't much older then. I was twenty-one when I went in the army at Camp Swift Texas and ended up with the battery after a year. Battery commander, he was my exec. But at that time I was twenty-two, and he was twenty-five or six.

We were all the same age, whether you're nineteen or twenty-two, it didn't make any difference.

Meyer: It didn't make any difference.

Woolner: But we were a very fortunate division. We had good training, we were in Texas quite a while, we were in Louisiana maneuvers, California desert maneuvers in the Mojave, then back to Indiantown Gap. We had some mountain training in West Virginia, and then we went overseas. And we were there quite a while after the invasion.

Meyer: What boat did you go overseas on?

Woolner: Went over and came back on the same one, we were on the Mariposa. My particular outfit was. Mariposa.

Meyer: Were you part of the Red Ball Highway?

Woolner: Red Ball Express.

Meyer: Red Ball Express.

Woolner: I was given the privilege of having fifty trucks and 200 men – 250 men, actually, we had extra because we had four men to a truck, two men and two men. We went from Cherbourg to Soissons (CK), and then further up after the second week, carrying all kinds of stuff, mostly gasoline and ammunition.

Meyer: Did you drive day and night?

Woolner: Yeah. We had two men in each truck. You'd make a circle. We had a base camp near Chartres, which was halfway around one side. It was all one-way traffic. And our trucks would go back to Cherbourg, and come by Chartres, drop off two men, pick up two new men, take off, hit Soissons, come around, do the same thing, load up again, come back. And we had that for about, a little over two weeks. And we had Evanson (PH), and the mess sergeant. Some very good men. Never had any problems. Nobody took off to Paris.

Meyer: One driver told me that at least once he did the exchange with the other driver and he did it by climbing over the hood and going in the window.

Woolner: (laughs) I'm glad I never knew about that one. I never even thought of that one. We took the tops of the trucks, the canvas tops. And sewed them up like a Battery Street (CK). And men lived in those when they weren't driving or sleeping in those, in Chartres. They worked out fine. You could load a lot more in a truck when it didn't have a top on it. A lot easier.

Meyer: But that was only about two or three weeks?

Woolner: That's right. It really wasn't three weeks.

Meyer: So when you landed, you landed in Normandy?

Woolner: Yeah. Uh huh.

Meyer: What did it look like when you landed?

Woolner: There was still debris around; it wasn't in the way. It looked like the pictures you see. I can tell you it was amazing what these guys captured. I don't know how they got through, up the hill – damn, amazing.

Woolner: Our first action was up fairly close to the Moselle. We went in to relieve the 5th Infantry Division, which is the regular army division which had seen action everywhere. Very tough, experienced outfit. And we went in, put our howitzers where theirs were, and the same up and down the line. It was really a seamless transfer, and there were no problems of any kind.

I asked the battery commander where his OP was, his observation post. And he said, it's up a ridge about a mile in front of us. And he said, you know, "I'll take you there."

I said, "Well, we can just follow the wire you laid up there. I'm sure we can find it sooner or later."

He said, "It will be a lot easier if I show you how to get there."

So off we went. I rode in his jeep with him. It was very nice of him to do it. He didn't have to. And we got up in the side of a bridge and we had a traverse that was steep. And his driver suddenly stopped and the battery commander said, "What's wrong?" And he said there was something in the road.

We didn't see it, but the driver got out and picked up some hay that had been thrown down on the road. And there was a Tellermine about the size of a dinner plate. We never would have seen it. My driver and I never would have seen it. And it was our first day in action. It could easily have been our last. If it hadn't been for this battery commander being a really good guy and taking the time to take me out and show me where the OP was.

We happened to get shelled that afternoon. The Germans knew we were coming in, and they they were going out. But my own battery didn't get hit. Charlie Battery got hit pretty hard their very first day. Lost a couple men.

It was quite a first day for a lot of us. But uh…

Meyer: When, was this early November?

Woolner: Oh, no. It was October.

Meyer: October.

Woolner: Yeah.

[1e]

Woolner: What had happened was the Third Army had been stopped by the fortifications around the city of Metz. Metz had been fought over for a thousand, 1200 years, and it never had been taken by assault. The fortifications were really impregnable.

I remember Fort Driant and Fort Jeanne d'Arc, Fort Gambetta. I don't know how many hundred GIs were killed in trying to take those forts by frontal assault, which is what General Patton ordered.

Patton was of course a great tactician, a brilliant general. A colorful man. Tremendous press. When you were in his Third Army, you knew that your division was getting headlines back home. It was quite something to be in the Third Army.

But as great a tactician as he was, Patton couldn't stand the fact that for two weeks, three weeks, his army had been stopped. Not just by the gas shortage, but by the fact that these forts were impregnable.

Some of them were hundreds of years old. Some of them had been built in the 1870s by the Germans and then over the period of time, World War I, improved, and our shells bounced off those forts. Some of their walls were twelve-fifteen feet wide.

Concrete. Impossible to penetrate. And there was no way they were going to be taken by frontal assault without staggering losses.

[1f]. 20:07
Woolner: The 3rd battalion, the 377th, had fought its way through Maizieres [-les-Metz] and taken the steel mill, taken the slag pile, and was facing Chateau Brieux, which was a beautiful old building. But they'd been reinforced. It was occupied by damn good German troops. Which turned out to be a very, very difficult battle trying to take that.

What had happened was that General Patton in his anger called for a night attack all up and down the Third Army front. Both corps, the 20th and I think the other corps number was either 13th or 18th, I've forgotten. General Walker was the commander of our corps, the 20th corps. And we had the 90th division, 95th division, 10th armored. And he called for a night attack in November. Seventh, I believe it was. And really it was an absolute total disaster as far as our ability to capture the chateau.

It was a dark night, a rainy night, cold as hell. And night attacks were almost unknown to the U.S. army and to the German army. Patrols, of course. Combat patrols, possibly, definitely had been used. And reconnaissance patrols always used. But a mass attack by all units, they really hadn't had any real training for it.

The Germans hardly ever attacked at night. And this was a real problem. Ours was a diversion. The main attack was further south, to go across the Moselle further south. We were to, the 3rd battalion was to capture the Chateau Brieux.

Meyer: How many men were involved in this attack?

Woolner: There were two companies of the battalion on attack, and another company in reserve.

And I was in the 3rd battalion command post. Lieutenant Colonel Ross Hall was the battalion commander. A wonderful man. Knew what he was doing. Had enormous respect from his men. And I thought he was one of the best officers I'd ever met.

He and I plotted some concentrations around our perimeter.

And the day before the attack, actually the morning of the attack, I had to go register our battery on the chateau. Our battery, my battery, was in direct support of this attack. Normally we were general support of all three regiments of infantry, but in this particular case my battery was assigned for this particular attack on the chateau.

So I had to get up and register the battery on the chateau. And I had a vague idea how to get there, but it was territory I really didn't know. And I went to the battalion commander and said, "I'm going out to register my battery," so I could bring in the battery, the battalion, and the corps, if need be. Once you get one battery registered, you can bring in every artillery piece you have available. And I said, "I need to go out there."

He said, "I'll get you a man to take you out there, because you'd never make it on your own, you haven't been up there, don't know how to get there."

So he called up I Company, and told the I Company commander to send a man up to take the artilleryman up to the perimeter. And this GI appeared and off we went. A big, tall guy. All I saw of him was his back. I stayed very close to his back, believe me. It took us fifteen minutes, maybe a little more, to get there. The last part of it, the only time during the war I was on my hands and knees, my elbows. Crawling.

Meyer: So he went down and then you went down?

Woolner: Absolutely. I mean, I followed him because it was not a place for a forward observer normally. We were under observation. And we got out there, fine.

Meyer: So he took you out there in part because he knew where they looked?

Woolner: He took me because he'd been there. And he knew what was the safest way to go. And I just followed him as closely as I could (laughs).

And came back the same way. And he brought me right to Colonel Hall's CP. And I never saw him again. I didn't know his name.

After the war I saw in the 95th Division Journal that I Company in the 377th was going to dedicate a plaque on the wall of the chateau in Maizieres. And I wrote Steve Bodnar, whom I had not met, but he was the one that had written a letter to the journal about it. And I sent him a small check as indication of my wanting to help out. I'd been with them. I wrote a letter and said I'd been with them in Maizieres. I told him briefly about the fact that this GI took me out to the perimeter, never knew who he was, but I felt that he'd been a pretty important man in my surviving.

And four days, five days later I get a phone call, "Is this Jim Woolner?" I said, yeah. He said, "I'm the GI that took you out to the perimeter." This was in 1992. And it turned out his name was Harold Odom (PH), he was a Presbyterian minister. By that time, a retired Presbyterian minister. And I met him over here for the first time at the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Metz. And we became very close friends. It was quite an experience for us to get together after all that time. And particularly in what he meant to my own survival. He was a wonderful man, unfortunately died just a few weeks ago and couldn't make the 60th [reunion].

[1g]

Woolner: It was a terrible night. The assistant division commander, General Faith (PH), appeared in the command post eight o'clock at night, and told us he was there to see that the attack went off on time. And I remember vividly Colonel Hall saying, "Can't this wait 'til first daylight?"

And General Faith said, "No, we're going to attack at 8:30."

And I found out later in a book by Stephen Ambrose called *Citizen Soldiers,* that General Eddy and General Walker had both contacted General Patton to see if the attack couldn't be postponed until the following morning, 'til first daylight, rather than do it at 8:30 at night. And General Patton told each of them, "Attack on schedule or choose your successor." Which is pretty tough talk from a three-star general to a two-star general. But that's what Patton was famous for, tough talk. And he was a tough guy. And he'd have done it himself, but.

So the word came on down: the attack will take place. And everybody knew it was really, really a difficult situation. It was dark, and cold, and raining.

And we started our barrage at 8:30.

Meyer: Was there any moon out or anything?

Woolner: No, it was raining.

Meyer: Raining. Oh, God.

Woolner: And the infantry kicked off at 9:00, right on schedule. And almost immediately ran into serious difficulties. The men couldn't tell their own men in front of them, who they were. They lost track of– it was terribly dark, it was terribly difficult. And the attack was, in blunt words, a disaster. A failure. And we lost a tremendous number of men. Not all killed, but casualties. We lost them for all practical purposes. Infantry. Mostly riflemen.

And next morning the Germans counterattacked, and overran K Company, and we could hear it over the radio. K Company commander yelling that he was being overrun, and they're coming through. And, it was a bad time.

Colonel Hall immediately sent everybody out of the command post to defend it. And he turned to me and said, "Fire those concentrations that you and I worked up."

And the concentrations were around the perimeter, and some further in between companies. And so I went to work. And our telephone went out because the Germans were firing mortars and artillery around the command post in that area. They knew where it was, it was a big building; the only big building in the area. They knew where it was. It was a big building. The only big building in the area. And so our telephone lines back to my battalion, to my battery and to the battalion headquarters, the fire direction center went out. We used the radio. And to fire those concentrations, which proved to be of some help.

But it was the infantry that stopped it. And it was the command post men, staff. And it was the battalion commander, his own men, his own staff, that was extremely important in defending the command post.

That morning, they attacked and they broke through Company K – I can still hear the commander's voice screaming, "They've broken through, they're coming." So, it was a dreadful time.

The first thing was the battalion commander said that … the battalion commander called to me and said, "Woolner, I'm taking everyone outside. I want you to fire those concentrations."

And he was gone. He took everybody in the command post out to defend the command post. And because that company… [Interview occurring outside, wind interference making it difficult to hear conversation.]

And I found the building when I was there last year. It's still there. It's a hospital for children.

So I called in … my battery, this concentration, and they started firing. The infantry saved us. The infantry always saved us.
They fought a different war than we did. I've said that many times. But that was a time when my own battery was there for me. Because the radios and the driver and I were the only ones left at the command post.

Meyer: Holy cow.

Woolner: We went upstairs. Because if the Germans had broken all the way through, all they would do was drop a grenade at the steps, you know? We went upstairs, and I was with the radio firing these [missions?]. They were critical to the infantry and … that was a case where my own men saved me.

Meyer: What time in the moring was this?

Woolner: Around 10 in the morning.

Meyer: So you have to attack at night but the Germans get to attack in daytime.
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Woolner: Sure. You know, this was General Patton's idea, doing something different, you know.

Meyer: You said it was a counterattack.

Woolner: Well, it's always … (laughs)
We always said the Germans counterattack. We call them Jerry, you know? The expression was: Jerry – "Jerry always counterattacked."
It was always a counterattack, because we were the attackers. We weren't on the defensive. We were the attackers. The whole American approach was attack. And the Germans were on the defensive. And they were superb soldiers. The Germans were superb. Jerry knew what he was doing and his men were well trained.

We went up against old men and boys like the last couple of weeks in the war, when they were manning the defenses, the last-ditch stuff.

No, these were superb soldiers. And they knew what they were doing.

And we were fortunate that we were able to stop them. Because if they had broken through at that command post, there was nothing between that spot and all the rear echelon units.
If they'd penetrated there we really don't know what would have happened. Certainly my battery would have been overrun.

My battery was back maybe 1,500, 2,000 yards behind the command post. We had to be within 3,000 yards of the front line, because our job was counter battery.
Our mission was to knock out German artillery. That was our primary mission. And then we had many other missions, but that was the primary mission of artillery is to knock out the other guy's artillery.
So we had to be within 3,000 yards. The German artillery was within 3,000 yards of their front line. Our best, we were accurate up to 10,000 yards; most accurate at 5,000 yards. And we could fire 15,000 yards if we had to.

Meyer: How accurate could you be there?

Woolner: Not really. At the range of 15,000 the probable error for each gun would be at least 200 yards.
And that's not close enough. And depending on the weather also, when you get firing that far, that long range. The weather factor comes into effect. The wind and so forth. And we had that information from the meteorological units. They called it metro messages. And that was transmitted to each artillery battalion. More than once a day. And we would apply a correction factor as needed. Not we, but the fire direction center would give it to us. Instead of giving us a range of 7,300 yards, they would give us a range of 7,400 yards, and so forth. This kind of thing. To a target. And that's the correction factor. K-factor we called it.
The K-factor was also why the army was famous for hurry-up-and-wait. Because the general would say, "We'll start at 9 o'clock," and everybody would take ten or fifteen minutes off of that, right down to the sergeants and the corporals, make sure that they were on time. So you'd end up waiting forty-five, fifty minutes for (laughs), for something that– it's because of the K-factor, we used to call it. Anyhow, one of those things.
But Colonel Hall was a terrific battalion commander. And the whole infantry, 90 percent of the casualties in the division were in infantry. And mostly riflemen. Mostly the rifle companies. There were only about 3,500, maximum 4,000, guys continuously in small arms range, and that's where all the casualties took place.
The next day or the day after that, we captured the chateau.

[1h]
Woolner: When I describe the attack and how devastatingly bad the situation was, I remember writing in one of these speeches that I gave:

It was the worst night of my life, without any question.

It was the worst night of my life, when we attacked at night and we lost all these men and it was a disaster.

Meyer: Did you know immediately that it was a disaster?

Woolner: Within an hour we knew. These guys were– we could tell by the radio. Guys coming in. They weren't getting to their objective.

There were new guys on the radio because the other guy had been killed.

And it was – I can't say we knew it was going to be a disaster, but no one believed it could really be successful, attacking in the dark that way.

And the fucking minefields were there.

I didn't even say that.

There were minefields there, and the Germans were in a fortified chateau. They had all the weapons they needed to knock us off. And the GIs couldn't see to fire their own weapons. It was awful.

And we uh… we actually, firing those concentrations were critical to saving that, there's no question about that. I didn't really say that. But uh… I don't like to blow my own horn that much.

But my battery was (snaps fingers) like this -- they were alert, they were ready, and they brought fire down just where we had asked for it. It was great.

Meyer: How many men attacked?

Woolner: There were two companies of a battalion, of the three rifle companies that attacked. And elements of the heavy weapons company was also involved. But again – an infantry company is about 180 men – you have to deduct the kitchen and the maintenance and the supply. These are all people that have to be behind, not take part in the attack. They're not trained for it; their job is to supply. Or administrative or whatever, but mostly supply. Ammunition carriers. These guys – the ammunition guys would bring the ammunition up to where the infantry was as they needed it. You had eight men, it's hard to come up with a number, but in a group of 180 men my guess is there probably were 125 in the line of attack. Maybe even a little more than that of each company.

Meyer: And in the attack you bombarded at?

Woolner: We shelled for half an hour.

Meyer: At around 8:30?

Woolner: We started at 8:30; they kicked off at 9:00. And we knew where we were firing – we were firing at the chateau. We were registered and we knew what we were doing. But they were prepared for it, they were sandbagged in and protected. The chateau was built like a fort. It was a wonderful building.

I think I told you, one of my sons and I went back there in 1980 or '81, I forget just what year it was. Eighty, I guess. I'd been talking to him about the chateau. I said, That's the first thing we'll do. We stayed in a motel overnight, and the next morning we up and decided to drive through Maizieres. And I couldn't find the goddamn chateau. I said, "Damn, I know where it is."

He said, "Are you sure?"

I said, yeah, because I had found the battalion command post, which was a children's hospital now. It's a good solid building and it was still there. And we started from there, and I knew it was off the left and up forward, maybe 800, a thousand yards. We get up, there's nothing there.

So I asked around where the mayor, the town hall was. And they told me, and I went and I found the mayor, and his secretary spoke English. I explained who I was, and he was very nice. And I said, "I can't find the chateau."

He said it was leveled after the war because it was so completely destroyed that it could not be rebuilt. And the family dedicated the property to the town as a park.

[TIME 5:22]

And the countess of the Chateau Brieux – her name was Brieux, I don't remember her first name – was there ten years ago, not five years ago, not at the '94, I mean, at the '94 reunion, not the '04 one. And I introduced myself to her. And I said, "Unfortunately I was the artillery man who had to destroy your chateau."

And she said, "Why?"

And I said, "Because the Germans occupied it and they were fighting to keep it. It was a strong point. And as long as that was there we couldn't pass it. We had to capture it." And we did capture it a couple days later.

She said, "But you didn't have to destroy it."

I said, "You know, the Germans were shooting at us and we were shooting at them." And I said, "I can't tell you any more than that." But she was not very nice about it. But, okay, I can understand that. If you're not in it, it's pretty tough to visualize. She had no concept, really, of how brutal that attack was that night. It was a terrible night. I say it was the worst night of my life.

Meyer: Is that the first time you had seen action like that?

Woolner: Yeah. It was by far the toughest action that I'd been involved in. We were involved in a lot more during the rest of the war, but this was a hell of an ordeal.

Meyer: When did you know you'd be alright? That the Germans weren't going to overrun you? When did you finally feel safe again?

Woolner: When the lieutenant commander came back. Until then, I didn't know. I couldn't see them, there was a wall that they hadn't gone through, and outside— Because they didn't wait for the Germans to come any closer. They went out and tied up with one of the platoons, the K Company, and they reformed K Company with the staff from command post, and held, held the position there. And I was firing over them.

It was – you never think you're going to get killed. It's something you're doing and you're doing what you were trained to do. It's not that you're brave to do it. People ask – one of the guys at the club said, "You know, I wasn't a hero like you were."

And I said, "Charlie, the heroes are all dead." I said, "I wasn't any damn hero. I was trained to do what I did; I did what I was trained to do."

[1i]
Woolner: And the next day, or the day after that, we captured the chateau. And then infantry continued to fight its way into Metz.

Meyer: Was the attack that you were a diversion for, was that—?

Woolner: Yeah, they got across the Moselle, but they didn't get very far. But they did get across the Moselle.

Meyer: So from Patton's point of view –?

Woolner: From his point of view I'm sure he thought it was successful. And we could have done the same thing in the daytime, that's all I have to tell you. We had superior force, we could have done it in the daytime. But that was General Patton, and it was his style to do something different. And he was a tough guy, no question about it.
We met him twice. Met him. He spoke to us, all the battery company commanders and all the first sergeants, first time, before we went into action.

Meyer: He told us in his own language how we were going to go through the Germans like shit through a tin horn – that was his expression. And he said, "Don't worry about your flanks." He said, "Don't worry about your flanks. Let Jerry worry about the flanks we make for him when we go through. Because when we create our own flanks, we're creating flanks for the Germans also, and when you do that, and then you go like that and spread out." And no argument with him. That was basic [laughs].
And the next time, before we kicked off to go through Saarlautern, just before the bulge, he had us again.
The other thing that Patton told us during the second time he spoke to us, which was just before we attacked Saarlautern, he said, "I know you're going to screw the women but don't get caught." (laughs)

Meyer: So even though he didn't care that much, was there affection for him or was there??

Woolner: Not really. We were proud to be in the Third Army. Because the Third Army… he was trying to shorten the war, and he lost out to Montgomery as far as the gas was concerned, and that's what changed things.
And the infantry had to continue working its way into the city of Metz proper. And I stayed with Colonel Hall during that two days. And we didn't do a lot of firing, but we fired some missions at his request and at our company commander's request. And I think we were pretty effective. That battalion is the group, I Company in particular, that captured the concern where German high command was. And one of the companies was in the tobacco factory, which was also captured. And Metz fell really on the eighteenth of November, and the chateau had been attacked on the seventh or eighth of November. So there was a ten-day period there of working through and going around the forts. I don't believe any of the forts were ever taken by assault. When the German high command surrendered Metz, they surrendered the forts also. And I think the twenty-second of November was the actual day that the official liberation took place with the French officials.

Meyer: Was the capture of the general the final straw?

Woolner: Just about. General Keitel (CK) I think his name was, was wounded and evacuated and his second in command was the general who surrendered the city of Metz. And Metz had never been taken by direct assault ever, and it wasn't then. We really went around the forts and captured the headquarters and that's how the surrender actually happened. At a major cost of GIs.

And the next big target was Saarlautern. Saarlouis is now Saarlautern again, it's German again. And the battle for the Saar River. GIs captured first bridge, the best bridge that was left, and we were able to get troops across the Saar River fairly early, fairly quickly.

Meyer: Why was Saarlautern important?

Woolner: Saarlautern was the beginning of the Siegfried Line. The Siegfried Line was not like the Maginot Line because there wasn't much underground. It was pillboxes, it was dragon's teeth, they called them, the big concrete [structures] that looked like teeth. Like teeth. They were there to keep attacks from going through. What they did was blow up those dragon's teeth and make a pass for the tanks as fast as they could.

But Saarlautern was a fortified city in that it had pillboxes spread all around the city which were occupied by darn good German soldiers. And Saarlautern was house-to-house fighting, the toughest kind.

Before we captured Saarlautern, December was bitter cold weather. The Germans shelled us, my battery, and they started a fire behind one of the howitzers and the powder bags. The powder bags varied in size from about a half-inch in thickness to about three inches in thickness. There were seven different powder bags and we normally, normally fire charged five, just because that's the range that we were most – it would give you the range that we needed, not any more, not any less.

So they would throw the other powder bags aside, and then we'd bury them, or burn them, or what the hell we did with them, I don't know. Didn't burn them, because they'd explode when they got on fire. But anyhow, I wasn't even there, but Badeau, Lieutenant Badeau, was the exec in charge of the firing battery, it was his responsibility. He personally put it out by taking a ramrod and separating the powder bags and kicking on the ones that were burning, and put out the fire. But we did get guys hurt that day. But we got them back. They were not wounded so that we would lose them.

Woolner: We had captured Metz, and we were fighting our way towards Saarlautern. Saarlautern. Which was called Saarlouis, and it's Saarlautern again, it's German again. We went back there the last trip.

But when we were trying to capture Saarlautern, the day before, a bridge was captured by our GIs. We were, I was on a ridge over the town of Dillingen, which was on the Saar. And it was cold and snowy. We were wearing blankets that we'd cut a slit in and used as a poncho, and then we had sheets, white sheets, done the same thing, cut a slit, put them over that. So we were in effect able to--

Meyer: Camouflaged.

Woolner: -- work in the snow. Where we had to go forward, and our observation point was on a ridge that was covered in snow and we were ready for it.

And we'd been up to this OP, which was on the top of a ridge on the backside overlooking the Saar River, which had not, which the infantry had not yet captured the bridge. And we were just up in that OP maybe two hours, late in the afternoon, my driver and my radio sergeant and I, and we'd dug in on the back side, below the top. And it got dark, we left, there were no troops around. It was not a very good position for us to want to spend any more time there.

Next morning, early, we wanted to get up there really before full

. We got up there early, because it was an exposed position. We left the jeep because it was steep. And we were walking up this ridge, a path there that really we had made the day before, walking through the snow, very visible. And for some reason, I stopped. Very close to the top.

Maybe I stopped because I didn't want to be seen at the top of the ridge. Or maybe I stopped, I don't know why. But I stopped there, just paused, and looked down at the path.

And there was a trip wire on its end. w A German grenade.

Meyer: Just right in front of you?

Woolner: Right smack in front of me. Right where we were walking on this path. The Germans had seen us the day before, set up that OP, sent a patrol out, either at night or early in the morning, earlier than we got there, found the path, and set a booby trap there.

Now, you know, you have to be lucky.

It was just one of those things.

I…. I… There's no real reason why I stopped except that we were all by ourselves and I was being cautious anyhow. So maybe that's why I stopped. Because it was not a healthy position to be there. But we had to be there. And that was that.

We had put our radio in, we were using radio, and we'd run wire down to the jeep and the radio sergeant would then forward the messages by radio back to the fire direction center.

But it was not a good place to be. And we didn't want to fool around with this thing, we weren't trained for it. But we figured out exactly where it was as far as on a map, exactly the location of this thing. And when we got back we contacted the engineers and gave them the coordinates of what it was and where it was, if they ever had time to send somebody out to do it. But they probably didn't, because it was not that vital a thing to waste time on. But it was not for me, for sure, to try to explode the damn thing, because we'd end up having trouble with it. But again, it was one of those things. Who the hell knows why I stopped.

Meyer: So when you looked down could you believe your eyes?

Woolner: Oh sure, I recognized it right away. I mean, we knew. It was not unusual for the Germans to booby trap things. But they didn't booby trap a path.

They might set up a minefield, or put a sign saying Achtung Minen where there were no mines, just to deprive us of the freedom of using that area. They'd maybe string wire around an area and put a sign Achtung Minen and not waste time putting any mines in. That was not uncommon.

We ran into that later on when we were up in the 9th Army, just before we crossed the Ruhr, and the first battery position we were assigned to was an area that when we got there had "Achtung Minen' there. So [laughs] we went around it, and went to a position a close distance away from it, but we didn't take any chances on that.

Now, I had authority to move. As I told you, we were assigned an egg-shaped area, not a specific exact coordinate. So if I had reason not to go into position all I had to do was report where I was going into position, so that the battalion would know where we are, and where they could then survey us in.

About six or seven hundred from that bridge, we left the ridge, because that wasn't the area where the action was. The town of Dillingen was not fought over at that time.

We moved down to Saarlautern itself and found a house that was in good shape, and with a good cellar and a good attic, which was important because we liked to get up [break in recording, repeats last few lines]

We moved to a house…

in the attic so we could we could see a long distance. We were on the side of a hill.

And when the infantry captured this bridge, which was a big surprise to everybody that the bridge was still standing, the Germans hadn't blown it. Our engineers got in there and cut the wires, this was really a terrific thing for our division to have that bridge to cross over the Saar River, which is not a big river but it wasn't something you could wade across, for sure. It was a full-size river.

The Germans tried to knock out that bridge. And that was an experience for us. They fired some regular artillery at it, but that would not destroy a bridge. You'd have to hit it with something big. So they went and they brought up a railway gun. We couldn't see it, it was probably 20 miles behind the lines. A railway gun, as you know from World War I – they were famous in World War I for the siege of Paris and cities like that – they'd fire these huge shells. And all of a sudden – we didn't know this –all of a sudden, our house shook, stuff fell off the attic roof [laughs], an explosion like we'd never heard. I mean, we got so we could tell a 105 from an 88, a shell and a mortar, a big mortar from a little mortar, you do it by the sound and so forth. Then sometimes there might be a shell go off 200 yards away, we wouldn't even blink. I mean, we knew it wasn't on us. We knew it was far enough away so we were okay. You k're in action long enough, these things become part of staying alive. You hit the ground when you should, but you don't waste time hitting the ground if you don't have to.

Meyer: [explains backup recorder]   1:06:03. But you were talking about the railway shells. What did they sound like?

Woolner: [Laughs.] Nothing I ever heard before. It was a, they were a tremendous, tremendous explosion. We'd been in the attic; we got to the cellar pretty damn quick, I assure you. We didn't know what it was at first. We knew it wasn't an 88 or a 155. It was a big shell. It may have been just a 240, which is a pretty good size, eight or nine inches, but I think it was bigger than that.

They only fired three shells, that's all. And they all landed in our front yard. All of them. And they were right in a line.

And ordnance people came up, we phoned them, told them – they might be able to tell something from the location of the shell holes. This was something that, there was a group that did – they would examine the shell holes and see where the debris was, what direction the shrapnel had gone in, and theoretically they could determine the linear location of the shell. Not necessarily how far away it was, that was more difficult. That you really need triangulation for, but they didn't have that. They'd moved that railway gun anyhow I'm sure, immediately.
But they established what size it was from the size of the of the shells that were all over the place, including some on the wall of our building.

It was amazing [laughs], the big shells like that.

But you know, again, it was – we were lucky and it wasn't any big deal. But they stopped trying to knock out, they gave up trying to knock out the bridge.

And what we were getting, you know in artillery there's overages and shorts. You try to get a bracket, an over and a short, then you know you go right in the middle.
they never got a bracket on the bridge or they would have kept on firing. But for whatever reason, and I don't know, I never knew anything about railroad guns, but these were all overs, and that gun probably was maybe 10, 15 miles back, and they were firing at whatever range they needed because those things could fire tremendous distances.

Meyer: So that meant that they had in Saarlautern some observers calling it in?

Woolner: Oh, absolutely. They were still, we were still fighting in Saarlautern right across the river.

End CD1.   73 minutes

Begin CD2.

Meyer: This is the second compact disc of an interview with Major James Woolner, battery commander, Battery A, 360th, 95th Infantry, World War II. This is David Meyer, son of Earl D. Meyer, Company H, 379th, 95th Infantry, doing the interview. This CD is a compilation of two interviews with the major. The first was done in Metz, France, November 24, 2004. The second was done in the major's living room and at a nearby restaurant in White Plains, New York, July 24, 2006.

Woolner: Saarlautern was a fortified city in that it had pillboxes spread all around the city which were occupied by darn good German soldiers. And Saarlautern was house-to-house fighting; the toughest kind. And it's not too easy to fire in the city – to find targets that are worthwhile for artillery – but you've got to do it because the infantry needs that support. But it's pretty tough when there's only a street in-between.

Meyer: What do you do?

Woolner: It's very difficult for artillery to fire that close to our troops. We didn't dare do it. It required high-angle fire, which is very difficult to do. Because you only want to move 50 or 75 yards forward, and it's very dangerous fire because the margin is so small. And when you're firing high-angle fire, the – normally you raise your muzzle of the guns to increase range, but when you're firing high-angle fire, you're up over 45 degrees. And to increase the range – it's a very tricky situation. To shorten the range is even more dangerous.

So it's not something that we did a lot of training on. And I didn't do it. It was much too dangerous to our own troops to try to fire one street away with artillery. You needed self-propelled howitzers, which we found. Corps had them, and they were brought up, and they helped penetrate the pillboxes – direct fire of a 155-howitzer on a tank drawn, on a tank vehicle, armored vehicle.

Meyer: Howitzers were what?

Woolner: 155 howitzers. We were the – that's medium artillery. Two-forties [240] are heavy artillery. But we were.. we had three batteries, 360th military battalion with three batteries of 155s. And we were good. We were a very good battalion of artillery. In my opinion – I was the battery commander, but I think the other two batteries were just as good as ours, and we thought we were pretty good.

But we were in the Saar Valley when the bulge happened.

Woolner: --go a short distance. So the higher your gun goes, the shorter the distance that it will go. When you bring it down to 45 degrees you have maximum range. But when you go above that – let's say the Germans are on one side of the street and we're on the other. And I was in that position a couple of times. I can't fire at them. I don't dare, because if it's 50 yards short it's going to land right on top of us. The street's only 50 yards wide. So that made it very, very tough for the infantry. Particularly if there was a pillbox there. What we did was bring up a self-propelled 105 that came up the street and fired directly at the pillbox and knocked it out. At least one that I saw. I don't know how many they did.

Meyer: Self-propelled 105?

Woolner: Self-propelled 105, yeah.

Meyer: Is okay. They'd just drive it up?

Woolner: Yeah, it was a self-propelled, mean it was track drawn. It was like a tank. Not armored, though. And there weren't very many of them. I only saw one in action. Today there are self-propelled 155s. There are no more 105s. There's 155. And this has nothing to do with this, but you know you read about the roadside bombs, and you know what they are? They're two 155 shells tied together. There's tremendous fire power in those things, and they explode underneath your vehicle, your vehicle is destroyed and so are you. That's what's happened over there. These are not Tellermines, which are bad enough. These are shells this big – 95 pound shells. And six-inch diameter. They're huge. And you get two of those together, you got a horrible weapon.

Meyer: What do they use to set them off?

Woolner: I don't know how they do it; they're remote-controlled, I think.

Meyer: Oh, so they're watching.

Woolner: They're wired. Oh, yeah, they're watching.

Meyer: Okay. It's not that they run over it.

Woolner: No. No, they don't trigger themselves. There's a guy in a building, watching. And he presses it when he sees the-- I mean, you're not going to waste time on a jeep if there's a truckload of soldiers behind it; he's going to let the jeep go and get the soldiers. That's what happens.

Woolner: I was confident that we were a good battery. And that my forward observer was a good artillery man, good gunnery officer. And I knew I was a good gunnery officer, and I used to relieve him, as you know. And I simply relied on what I knew. And I had confidence that between Badeau and myself we would make the right decisions. When they would assign an area to put our battery in, it wouldn't be just space for four guns with 75 yards apart. It would be a goose egg. Each battery would have three firing batteries. Each one, usually we were in the front, A, B, and C. That's just the way it worked most of the time. Sometimes it was turned around. I could go anywhere within that area. It might be 300 yards up that way from where the battalion commander thought I was going to go, it might be 200 yards back here. Wherever I could find the best position for the howitzers to do their mission. And it had to be where they could fire over the trees, where the trees where either down or low – because if you hit a tree the shell's going to explode.

And so we would pick gun positions. I would pick the gun positions while on reconnaissance, within a range of a couple hundred yards. Then Badeau would come up and we'd say, "I think it ought to be 1, 2, 3, 4." And he said, "Captain, let's go back here, I have a better field of fire back here." I said, "Okay fine."

You make the best decision you can; it depends on how much time you have to make the decision. If it's daytime and you're moving, you make it pretty damn quick, because you want to be in position to fire as quickly as you can. At night it's not so much of a hurry, you're a little more careful, a little more deliberate, because you don't know what's in the road, you don't know what you're getting into, even though I've been there on reconnaissance – you don't see everything.

And we got into one position where I stuck my howitzers in the mud. Put them in a position where it was soft. And these were track-drawn vehicles. These were like tanks. They were full track. I had five vehicles like that. Four were pulling the howitzers and one was pulling what we call the fifth section, which was ammunition. Big trailer. And I used the fifth track vehicle to pull the others out. It was hairy. It was really a bad time. I had been assigned the area, it looked fine. And walking around didn't make any difference. But when the full-track vehicles churned it up, it was mud underneath. Like a golf course, you know? You know what a full-track vehicle would do to a golf course – it would go through that turf that deep right away.

Anyhow, it was generally not difficult to do, to find a position. As a matter of fact [laughs] it was several years after, at home, riding along the Hutchinson River Parkway, I would unconsciously say, Jesus, that would be a good gun position. You know? It was strange [laughs]. [unclear] after that, somehow. I dreamt a lot over the years.

Meyer: Do you still dream of it?

Woolner: No. It's over.

Meyer: It's over.

Woolner: Yeah.

Woolner: When we were still in position outside of Saarlautern, and we were strafed by a German fighter pilot. We never saw him coming. He zoomed in over us and fired at us. He hit one man but not seriously. Punched a lot of holes in our camouflage nets. Just blew it apart. But he made a big mistake. He came back for a second pass. He went back over our lines – he'd come straight across – and he made a mistake, he circled around and he came back to hit us a second time. Because he knew he could see us, he knew where we were.

We had anti-aircraft attached to us. I had a unit of multiple, not multiple 40s, two 40 mm. guns hooked together, and multiple 50s. Four 50-caliber machine guns on the mount. A terrific weapon. And it wasn't our unit attached to my battery, but it was one of the units attached to one of the other batteries that actually fired him down. It was a man by the name of Vitiglio (PH) that got the credit for it. And he was over there.

Meyer: Yes, I talked to him yesterday.

Woolner: Boy, he's a piece of work, Vitiglio [laughs]. He's something. He got credit – I don't remember what it was he fired, but he got credit. Anyhow, the pilot made a fantastic landing. He started to smoke immediately, his plane, when he got hit. And we knew that he was landing. We were still on the plateau above Saarlautern. And he [laughs] – poor guy – he made a great landing apparently, because he was shot up. And he got one leg over the side of the plane after it landed and a GI killed him.

Which was terrible for lots of reasons. Forgetting the fact that it was a human being, we were ordered to capture pilots if at all possible, because the intelligence was dying for information about the German Air Force, which really hadn't shown up very much. And this was information that they really wanted. And this guy, he could have been a hero and captured this guy. Instead he was court martialed for having killed what was in all effect was a prisoner. But it was just a damn shame.

Sideline: somebody else already had his boots when I got there. And I got there within two minutes of his having landed, because it was very close to us. Somebody [laughs] took his fur-lined boots, or whatever they were. Their air force got the cream just like ours always did with that kind of stuff.

Woolner: We were in the Saar Valley when the bulge happened in December. December 16th or thereabouts, I don't remember the exact date anymore. And we were plugging and slugging

away, trying to get through Saarlautern when we were stopped. Patton pulled the 90th out, and the 10th armored, and turned them around, headed them up towards Bastogne. And we took over the 90th zones of fire. Which meant we had to widen our division to take over on the ground of the two divisions, ours and the 90th.

We picked out new gun positions. I felt we could have done it right from the existing gun positions, but I was a captain, not a colonel – I'm not making those decisions. But we did move a couple other positions. Not backwards but just further out. We surveyed positions behind us. Each battery commander picked out two positions, five miles and ten miles back, in case we had to pull back because of the penetration of the bulge north of us. Because we were sticking out like a sore thumb. We were the most eastern troops at the time of the bulge. And then after the bulge took place we were a lot further out than we had been before, without moving [laughs].

The front had moved around us, back of us in the north. But you all know how that came out.

We were then taken from there and set up around the bulge, which was over. Around the bulge, up north, into the 9th Army under Montgomery for the attack to cross the Ruhr River – to cross the Rhine and encircle the Ruhr.

We had a pretty tough time crossing the Ruhr. It was in flood because the Germans had blown the dams up above. And the engineers put across pontoon bridges.

Meyer: Was that hard?

Woolner: In flood time it's damn hard for them, to do it in flood time. The stream becomes a river. The Ruhr was not a big river, but it was wide because of the floods. Of course, the ground was swampy around it. And we got dive bombed on the pontoon bridge as we were going across it. The infantry was ahead of us, they were across it. We were trying to bring the artillery across at night. And in the daytime we went up on reconnaissance, and we got dive bombed on the bridge. They weren't after us, they were trying to knock out the bridge to cut off the supply line.

Meyer: What did you hear?

Woolner: It's like an incoming shell at first when the plane came in. We never saw it, they came in low. And they bombed us but they didn't hit the bridge. This was an unfortunate time for us. Our battalion commander was not in great shape. He cracked up as a result of the bridge crossing. And he had jumped out of his jeep --.

Meyer: Where was this?

Woolner: As soon as he got over the bridge. And he jumped off onto the side. But there was no room to pass him, his jeep was still on the bridge. He was on the far end of it, the first ground that he could see. And we were sitting there on the bridge. Nothing we could do except yell at him to move his jeep. He got back in the jeep finally and drove another couple hundred yards, and hopped out again, and we went past him to get away from that area.

He was relieved that night by our battalion executive, and was evacuated back to a hospital in the rear somewhere for combat fatigue. And our exec took over, and we continued fighting our war.

Meyer: And you had run with him all the way back in Louisiana?

Woolner: Well, I'll tell you the whole story. He'd been transferred into our battalion, to replace Colonel Gantt, whom we all loved and learned from – a highly respected man. And this man came in, and he had a football coach's mentality – which he was, a football coach in Maine. Bangor, Maine. I happen to know someone in Bangor, Maine, that knew him very well. And after the war I found out about him, more about him. But that I suspected.

He was a bully. And he came into our battalion. And we thought we were a decent battalion and he told us how lousy we were, time and time again. And I must have registered in my facial expressions that I didn't like it. And he called me in and asked me what was bothering me. I said, "Nothing's bothering me."

"Yes there is, I know there must be, because I can tell that you don't like some of the things I'm doing."

I said, "Well, sir, I thought we had a pretty good battalion before you came."

And that was not the right thing to say. He said words to the effect that we'd be a much better battalion in the future. And that was the end of the conversation.

But we went from there to the desert. And it seems that the division commander had issued instructions that commanding officers should be ruthless in weeding out officers that they didn't think would make the grade – words to that effect. And I was a reserve officer. I had gone to Yale. And what else was involved, I have no grounds to say. But he was after me, and he took it out on my battery. And he was going to replace me one way or another. We were in the desert maybe three-and-a-half months. All during that time he was – it got so bad, his working over our officers and our noncoms – that I finally said, "We're not going to discuss the colonel at meals." It was ruining our meals. We'd sit down and someone said, "What do you think the son of a bitch said today to me?" This is what was happening. And I said, "Fellows, no more about the colonel at meals. Talk about him other times, but let's not ruin our meals. We've got to relax."

Along came the army ground force tests, which determined, the sum of all of them determined whether our division would go overseas or not. The artillery tests were tough. To my great pride, my battery led all the division artillery batteries on the two tests that were given. Critical – different tests. One was a simple firing problem, another was a night occupation mission. Very difficult. And we led everybody.

And the battalion executive was a good friend of mine. And he got the results of the tests. Snuck over to me, and said, "Jim, you led everybody, but don't let the colonel know I told you." Ten minutes later, the colonel drives by and stops at my battery. Said, "Captain Woolner, I want to tell you that your battery led every other battery on these tests."

And I said, "Thank you, sir." Turned around, and that was it. I mean, I didn't say anything to him. This was my moment, boy. You son of a bitch. You know? And that was the last time I – he was off my back. There he had no chance of transferring me, or reclassifying me. And he gave me a superior rating – which he should have. [laughs] We'd done a hell of a job on all my officers.

But he was a nasty bully, and we all knew it. The battalion that he came from was thrilled to get rid of him. I still bump into Al DeLong (PH) down there, and Al DeLong and I were roommates at Camp Swift. And [laughs] the colonel had been the battalion executive of his battalion. And they hated him. When he got transferred over to us they were all thrilled, they all got drunk [laughs]. They were so glad to get rid of him, and we had him. We had him.

And this was the guy that had battle fatigue. Combat fatigue. He's the one who cracked up, finally. And I think it was fake. He'd gotten the Silver Star, because all four division artillery battalion commanders got Silver Stars. He was a coward. He never went to an OP. He was a miserable guy.

Meyer: OP is what?

Woolner: Observation Post.

Meyer: Oh – he never went to an OP?

Woolner: No. Too dangerous. It was too dangerous

Meyer: And he slept with a loaded gun?

Woolner: He slept with a loaded pistol [laughs]. They found him out on the street one night, waving his pistol around. "I heard something, what's going on here?" He thought there was a plan, you know, he thought people were after him. Maybe he was sick, I don't know. But boy, we were so glad to get rid of him. He was not a good officer.

Meyer: And who was brought in after him?

Woolner: That was our S3, who was Judd Clansit (PH), an ex-battery commander. He had commanded Battery B. He came in on cadre and was the only battery commander that they kept. And then he became a major, they moved him up to corporate, and they moved him up to battalion [laughs]. And he was a very, very good commanding officer. He'd been an excellent battery commander and he knew what he was doing.

And the battalion exec was a very good friend of mine, Cliff Jones, had been to Fort Sill with us. And he became lieutenant governor of Nevada after the war. Cliff Jones. He became quite a guy. He had a, obviously, well thought of in Las Vegas, which was his home before the war. And afterwards.

As a matter of fact, when we were down in Shelby, Mississippi, he got a telegram from Senator McCollum, the airport's named for him – offering him a circuit judgeship, $25,000 a year. When we were still in Shelby, just getting out of the service, getting separated, and he got a telegram. Came over and said, "Take a look at this. Twenty-five thousand dollars." And he was earning seven thousand dollars, maybe, as a major [laughs]. But he became very wealthy in Las Vegas. A good guy. Anyhow.

And one other thing. A legitimate battle fatigue case, which also was a big surprise. I had a sergeant by the name of Rockwell (PH). He was a good sergeant. Good training sergeant. He was a fine athlete. And we had a chance to send him to commando school, and he learned martial arts. He was a rough-and-tumble guy, anyhow. His nickname was Rocky, but then his name was Rockwell. But he a nose all out of shape, he'd been a boxer or something. A good man.

And he developed combat fatigue. Legitimate. And he could not stand being at the guns. Couldn't stand it. And he was a career army noncom. And had come on cadre to us from another division, but he was excellent. And he was chief of firing battery, which meant he was the senior noncommissioned officer on the four howitzers. And he had a staff sergeant rating.

And I didn't want to send him back. I didn't want it to be a disgrace to him in any way. What I did was, I took away his staff rating, remained a sergeant. And I put him in charge of the ammunition trucks. They go back to the rear, get the ammunition, bring it up, go back again, get more, bring it up. And he was away from the guns.

And that was a case – this guy came to me almost in tears and said, "I can't stand it anymore, Captain. And I know you don't know anything about it, but," he said, "I'm not in good shape and you may have to send me back."

And I said, "Rocky, I don't want to send you back." I wanted to preserve him. And I was able to do it. And he stayed with us all the way, did a good job, but he was away from the howitzer. This was a case of fear, brought on by who knows what. But here's a guy that we sent to commando school. You know, he was a tough guy. And so it just shows you, not necessarily the football coach and all that macho crap. Or here's a guy skilled in martial arts, rough and tumble guy, didn't seem afraid of anything. Yet he had a legitimate case of combat fatigue, and I was able to hang on to him. Because he didn't want to get sent back. He didn't want the disgrace of combat fatigue on his record, didn't want his family to know and everything. So he lost his staff rating. He probably told his family he got dropped and I broke him, took away the staff. Whatever.

Meyer: Whatever it was, it gave him the ability to—

Woolner: Yeah. To live through it. And he went right on through, did a fine job.

Meyer: I bet he was grateful.

Woolner: I'm sure he was. I'm sure he was. He had been a real good noncommissioned officer for the two years before we went over. It was just – it was a shocker, though, because you wouldn't have picked him. We had men that were meek, quiet, and yet ready all the time. You just can't figure. If you think you can figure who's going to be a real good man and who isn't going to be, you have to be awfully lucky. Because I never in the world would have thought that this guy would have to be handled carefully. Never.

Woolner: The place we lost two men, I think, was at Wallerfangen. Again, I was with the infantry, I wasn't there that day. We got shelled the day before; my jeep got hit. And it broke the glass, we didn't use windshields anyhow. And it was down, and covered, but mortar landed on it. But we had two guys get badly hurt down there. And neither of whom came back to the battery. I think I told you one lost a leg. Dave Ketchinson (PH). And Joe Smith was a big Texas illiterate, couldn't read or write. How he got in the service, I don't know. And he got wounded. And he didn't die, he made it all right. But he was hurt.

Meyer: For every new person that came in, did the sergeants and everyone brief you about them? Did you know them? It seems like you knew almost everyone.

Woolner: Well, I knew my men.

Meyer: All 150.

Woolner: The new ones I would meet. It was no big deal for me to talk to them, and kind of size them up. Depending on what their education was, where we would put them. We had need sometimes for guys with good math educations for our survey team - instrument section we called it.

Meyer: What did the instrument section do?

Woolner: They were surveyors, mostly.

We had to survey our position in to map data. So they would be able to combine our fire with the other batteries, and fire the whole battalion at once at the same target. But we'd run surveys, that was their job. There were benchmarks all over Europe. The Europeans totally surveyed; they had maps. We had good maps everywhere we went. Louisiana and the desert we only used air photos, we didn't have any maps [laughs]. We had air photos, that was much tougher. Tougher to read, naturally. And not as accurate. But why, I don't remember. But map data was map data, and you could count on it.

Our guns were pretty much out in the open in a town called Wurms – W-u-r-m-s. We were on the far side of the town. The positon we'd been assigned to, when we got to it, was roped off by the Germans and an Achtung Minen sign put in.

Meyer: Which meant?

Woolner: Which meant, "Attention Mines." So we had a big problem. The battery was coming up, it was a position we'd been assigned to go to, and I didn't dare put my section in there. Maybe it was fate the Germans did that – they'd just string some wire around and put a sign up, and that would deprive us of using that area. If you want to take a chance and blow up your men, you could do it, but it didn't make sense.

So I moved them to another area. And it was kind of far from town, but I wanted the men to be able to sleep inside. So we assigned them houses in the town of Wurms. And my reconnaissance officer, a great guy named Linden Thayer (PH) from Nebraska, a farmer, and I found a German dugout about the size of automobile. Not quite as long, but long enough to put two sleeping bags in. And it was about five-foot deep. It was well dug down below the level of the ground.

And we went and got a bunch of doors from town, and put them on top, and then piled dirt on top of that. And we put a stove in because it was wet. It had been raining, it was wet. We had a small stove that we carried in the jeep. And we lit the stove during the day to try to dry it out. Which it did. That night when we turned in we both were dead tired, we fell asleep. The middle of the night I heard Thayer saying, "Captain, captain, wake up."

I said, "What's the matter?"

He said, "The side is falling in on me, I can't move."

The side of the dugout had collapsed as it dried out, and the pressure of the dirt and the doors on top. And a big slab had fallen on him and he couldn't move at all. It caught his arms, and his body. Fortunately, I was okay. My side hadn't come down. I was able to break up the slab and he and I got the hell out of that dugout.

We could so easily – as another case of the small thing being a tremendous thing – it could have collapsed entirely on us at night, no one would have known about it. We would have been—

Meyer: You would have been gone.

Woolner: --been gone. But we were lucky, it only trapped him. If it trapped me, I couldn't have moved. He could not move, and he was a strong guy. This was a big slab of mud, dried out, and it just absolutely trapped him. So we got out of there. Just a short story about one incident where little things make a big difference. But suffice to say, we didn't go on sleeping in any dugout there. It was out in the middle of the field, and I wanted to be near the guns, and that's why I was up there. But we moved out of there the next day anyhow.
But while we were in that position, the gun position, the V-1s, the German V-1 bombs, decided to come over on their way to, I think to Antwerp. These were headed for Antwerp, not necessarily for London. I'm not sure of my geography on that. But they were putt-putts. They sounded like outboard motors.

Meyer: Can you do an imitation of the sound?

Woolner: It was, Puttputtputtputtputt is what it sounded like. And they weren't high. But we were ordered not to shoot at them because they would explode on top of us if you did that, see. And we watched these things going over. And suddenly one cut out, and not on us, but it landed on a 105 battery about 500 yards in front of us, 920th battalion, and killed about ten men. Landed right on top of a Howitzer section.

It was something that just happened.
It just cut out. It wasn't supposed to.
I mean, they weren't wasting these things on line troops. These were aimed at cities.
Of course, later on the V-2s came along. But those you couldn't see. Anyhow, but we could see these V-1s. We could see them coming. They didn't travel very fast. We could have shot them down. And the British shot them down on their way to London. But we didn't. We were told not to try.

Meyer: How high up were they?

Woolner: Maybe 800, a thousand feet. Not high.

Meyer: You'd just see them coming around?

Woolner: Yeah, you could see them coming. Amazing. And that was a sad thing. It was a hell of a thing to have happen.

Meyer: Did you know people in the other battalion?

Woolner: Well, sure. We'd all trained together in Texas. I knew the original guys because we were there without any troops at first. It was just the officers and the cadres – we didn't have any troops. And you know, we ate together. The artillery officers all ate in the same place. So we knew a lot of the guys. I knew a few of the noncoms but mostly it was the officers, some of whom had been at Fort Sill, my class at Sill, at the artillery school. One of my closest friends was battery commander of a battery of 105s in the 920th, but it wasn't his battery that got hurt by that.

We continued fighting our war. The Ruhr was – once we got over it, there wasn't a lot of opposition between the Ruhr and the Rhine. Infantry got to the Rhine pretty quickly; we went through Monchengladbach without firing a shot. We went through Krefeld with minimum opposition. And there we were on the Rhine at Duisburg, D-u-i-s-b-e-r-g, which is not too far from Dusseldorf.

And we [laughs] – there was a distillery manufacturing schnapps, in these big casks, with straw around them. We've all seen those. And my first sergeant came back to my command post with one of these casks of schnapps. And I was a very serious battery commander. And I said, "Well, sergeant I want you to split that up, make sure each section gets some of this schnapps, because it's strong stuff and they'll love it. You divide it up evenly." I was being very precise about it.

And he kind of looked at me and grinned and said, "Captain, each section already has two of these." So I was [laughter] – I realized what a jackass I was; I should have known that. If there was one cask there was more there. It was a good thing we didn't have to fire that night; the guys had a pretty good night. But we didn't have any fire missions that night.

Meyer: Where were you sleeping there?

Woolner: In cellars. In cellars, sure. Wherever we could, we were in cellars. Most of the time we found houses, at least. And if you got on the first floor of a small house, you felt safer. And of course you were warmer. It was cold as hell. It was the coldest winter in the history of that area at that time. I think last year was maybe colder, but it was the coldest winter on record up to 1944.

Meyer: Was there a lot of snow?

Woolner: Snow. My forward observer and I, we all had white sheets cut into poncho-type things that covered us, cover our helmets and everything, because we were out in the snow. Not our howitzers, they were in the snow but they didn't, they were [?] It didn't take too long after we were in position for our guys to find a place to sleep. I always found houses. Always. They would assign me an area. The way the army does it, battalion commanders assign A Battery here, B Battery there, C Battery there. They draw a circle on the map and you'd go find gun positions that would give you the proper field of fire to accomplish our mission.

And usually I'd find a village of some kind that we could get our men inside at night. Daytime, too. It was cold. It was a tough winter. And we learned how to stay warm. We had newspaper inside our galoshes. This generation probably doesn't know what galoshes are, but we all grew up with overshoes. We put them on over our combat boots. And we put newspaper under our shoes. It helped. It still was cold. It was cold. I don't know what the temperature was, but it was cold. New records. Heavy snow. But we made do.

Woolner: We made do. Everybody had a stove they'd take with them. Not individually, but each section. You have four gun sections, you have a wire section, you have an instrument section, and so on and so forth. Supply group, supply ammunition section. We were full-track vehicles, pulling our howitzers. And they were wonderful vehicles. And full-track, could travel on anything, just like a tank.

Meyer: Did all your men travel in vehicles? Or did they march, too?

Woolner: No, no, we had trucks for everybody. We had five prime movers, full-track vehicles, with the howitzers, and one extra one to pull the ammunition trailer. We had two 3/4-ton trucks with a wire section. I had a jeep and a command car which was worthless. We had a supply truck, a mess truck. We had a motor sergeant and a 3/4-ton truck and another truck. We had about 25 vehicles.

Meyer: How fast could you—

Woolner: You never went over 25 or 30. That was the fastest you got. It seemed like faster, but that was the maximum you went because you didn't want the tracks to break up. The bogie wheels inside the tracks that run it were a little fragile. They were replaced as the war went on with better ones. But we could move as fast as any 105 outfit, who were pulled by GMC trucks, 2 1/2-ton trucks. The 105s were. We were pulled by a tracked on vehicle. Our howitzers were much bigger. Our shells weighed 95 pounds. That's a good size, a six-inch shell, a 155. Six-inch shells, damn good size piece of equipment.

Meyer: How big are they?

Woolner: Oh, maybe 20 inches. The actual projectile itself. Maybe a little bigger. No, that's about right. With a fuse on the end, another three to four inches. Then you had powder bags behind it, which propelled the shell when they were set, when you pulled the lanyard and the breechblock fired it. Recoil was tremendous on those things.

Meyer: How many men did it take to fire them?

Woolner: Well, each section had twelve men, but you could fire at night. A couple of rounds a minute is all you needed at night, the interdiction fire.

You could do it with three men. We had three shifts of four each, four men each. So they would take turns at night. And in the daytime, of course, if it was active and were really in, had a lot of missions to fire, you had the whole crew.
It takes men to put fuses into the projectiles, and to set them.
And it takes men to load.
And it takes men to bring the shells over.

But at night, the three men, particularly if they were strong. You could put a projectile in by yourself. You could put a shell into that breechblock by yourself if you were a big – could handle

a 95-pound shell. And we had men that could do that. But normally they would put it on a little metal tray and then ram it into the howitzer. And it would take two men holding the tray and one man with a rammer. You didn't do it by hand, you had a pusher. I don't know what the hell we called it, but they would clunk into the breechblock.
But as I say, at night, when there was no pressure, we were just doing interdiction fire, you could do it with three men.

Meyer: And the fastest you could fire it?

Woolner: You were limited by the fact that you would burn out your tube if you fired. We could fire five or six rounds a minute. That's fast, every ten seconds a shell going in. Because every shot that was fired would throw it off just a fraction. And the recoil was such that while we had big spade-like things at the end of each trail – it was a split trail, where the original howitzers were one trail, these were split into two that dug into the ground and we had railroad ties that we put up against that we carried with us to keep it from moving.

Still, the gunner had to put his eye on the panoramic site and just make final, minor adjustments after every shot. And that would take a couple of seconds, that's all. But if she fired more than six rounds – you couldn't fire six rounds a minute very long because your breechblock would get so hot it would destroy it. Not the breechblock, the tube itself. And the insides of it would just be destroyed by the heat.

We got pretty far east before we turned around when we were crossing the Rhine. We got almost to Paderborn, which was the furthest that any of our troops went at that time. Then we turned around, started fighting back towards the Rhine again. Only this time we were fighting east to west instead of west to east. The Ruhr was mountainous. People don't realize there were mountains in the Ruhr. The cities near the Rhine weren't, because that's where all the big cities were, Dusseldorf and the rest.

Dortmund, the night we captured Dortmund was the night that Roosevelt died, which I'll never forget. No one will ever forget that who was alive at the time. It was such a shock. What had we been fighting for, who is this guy Truman? Some senator who'd been involved in the contracts checking on government contracts or something. But who is he? Is he going to be able to get along with Churchill? I mean, this was two o'clock in the morning when we heard it. Demoralizing.

Meyer: Did you know that Roosevelt, was Roosevelt sick and you knew?

Woolner: No, we didn't know.

Meyer: So this was just a shock.

Woolner: Nobody knew he was sick. We knew he had polio, but he used to go down to Hot Springs, and spend time down there, recuperate and whatnot. But we hadn't seen the pictures that showed how gaunt he was. The pictures of Roosevelt the last three or four months of his life where obviously the man was wasting away. But whatever.

It was a bad night. But what I started to tell you about, when we were fighting in the Ruhr, in the Ruhr mountains, we had a company of the 101st Airborne attached to us. We were teamed with them. My battalion, not my battery, the whole battalion, and the 101st Airborne. A company of the 101st Airborne. Because there were German troops around in the Ruhr. And some of them had fled up into the mountains, trying to get home or whatever. They were fast realizing the war was lost.

And the first night that we were with them, the lieutenant in charge of that company found me and said, "Captain tell your men that our men shoot at anything that moves at night. Just tell your men."

I said, "I certainly will, thank you for telling me." Because we had a certain amount of night discipline, but then you didn't walk around flashing lights and stuff like that. You didn't do stupid things. But as far as getting up and going out to take a leak – they just wanted us to know that anything that moves they shoot at. They were tough. But that was their discipline, their training.

After we crossed the Rhine, it took Montgomery three weeks to get across the Rhine, it took Patton 24 hours. But Montgomery waited until he had tremendous support of every kind and then went across. And who's to say it was right. In any case, we had to go around the Ruhr, and come back and we were fighting west. After we went around the Ruhr and we came back, the First Army and the Ninth Army got together. The First Army from the south, the Ninth Army, which we were, from the north. And we fought back parallel to each other all the way to the Rhine.

But by that time the Germans were beginning to surrender. They knew it was over. And we got outside of Hamm, which was a major railroad center. Ruhr, of course, was German industry, tremendous German industry. And we were out on farmland outside of Hamm, no infantry around, just our battalion. And my battery was all by itself in the zone that they'd assigned me. Couldn't see anybody else.

And there were just two houses there. And I knew we were exposed. And the Germans were still fighting. And they had left men behind with radios. We had been told officially. And there were woods about 1,000, 1,500 yards to the left of us. And my instinct, my training said that we got to dig in. And we were supposed to dig in every time we stopped, we went into position. Dig in means you dig a parapet around the howitzers to protect them, and then you dig in. You make dugouts or slip throughs or trenches for your own men to go in to.

Meyer: Just narrow trenches?

Woolner: Yeah, but a dugout would be about six feet by ten feet, down as deep as you could go easily.

Meyer: How long would that take usually?

Woolner: It all depends on how many men you had to do it. But usually the cannoneers did it all themselves. The drivers took care of their foxholes in the back, or they were usually able to find a house. Wire section had a house, kitchen had a house, instrument section, I don't know where they were, I've forgotten.

Anyhow, the cannoneers had the job of taking care of the howitzers and themselves. And we started to dig and I got to the point where I knew something was going to happen. I just knew it. I sent an order to the first sergeant, I said, "I want every man up to the howitzers, and dig in the howitzers." And they all came. Each section came up, grabbed a shovel, helped dig.

The wire section, the sergeant in charge of it, said to the first sergeant, "No, my men are tired, let the cannoneers take care of their own problems."

And Sergeant Philbrook [?] was about six-four, 260 pounds. Big man. Damn good man. Good soldier. And he said, "Sergeant, I'm giving you a direct order. Take your men and go help dig in the howitzers."

And the sergeant, "We're too tired. My men are tired. We've been working all night, we're not going to go."

He said, "Come with me."

And the first sergeant brought him up to me, told me what it was all about. And I said, "Sergeant, I'm not going to give you a direct order, because if you refuse it I'll have to court-martial you. But I'm asking you this. Did Philbrook give you, did the first sergeant tell you to bring your crew up here and help dig in?"

He said, "Yes sir."

"And you refused?"

He said, "Yes, sir."

I said, "Well as of now you're a cannoneer. And you're a private. And you will report to Sergeant [Hahn?], on No. 2 howitzer."

And Philbrook went and got the rest of his crew, brought all the wiremen up, wire section up to howitzers and split them up, digging. (knocking) Guess we've got to go.

Woolner: So we had everyone digging us in. We were almost through. We dug them pretty deep, the ground was soft, it was farmland and it was excellent digging. And we got them down deep, and large enough to get all twelve men in, and right in the middle, not in the middle, it was toward, we were almost done. We got shelled the hardest we were ever shelled the whole time we were in combat.

And we thought there was a group of 88s not too far away, maybe five, six thousand yards away, that had been left behind to do stuff like this. But we really got hit. And I had men hurt there. Not killed, but I had two men hurt, one pretty seriously. And one just as serious, he ultimately lost a leg. But we'd have been, without those dugouts we'd have lost an untold number of our men, and our howitzers.

And we lost one howitzer, and we took a hit, a fragment, knocked out the panoramic sight, which meant we couldn't use that gun until we got another panoramic sight, which we were able to get the next day. But my instinct was right. This was a time when we had to dig down. We were totally unprotected by infantry, there was nobody around. We were highly visible because it was the plains, it was flat. And there had to have been people in those woods, with binoculars and a radio. And they finally got somebody, and picked the right time to do it as quickly as they could, obviously. But if they'd hit us under normal circumstances where we would be digging down, three men digging and the rest taking it easy, we'd have been devastated there. It was a bad place to be, right out in the open with no cover at all. And we were, my instinct was right.

Meyer: Two questions. One, digging down a howitzer—

Woolner: Well you don't dig the howitzer down, you dig a wall around it. A parapet, is what you would know it as. A parapet. And you'd dig it up as high as you had time to dig it. Don't forget the muzzle has to be able to be depressed and swing through an arc. So you wouldn't dig it down like a dugout.

You'd dig it like, put it – you'd build a wall around it as best as you could. Which is what we did, and that saved three of the four howitzers. And the dugout saved the rest of us. And I was in the dugout, trying to get under my helmet, along with everybody else [laughs] that was working. We were all piled into the dugouts.

Meyer: Your instincts are always so good.

Woolner: I'm only telling you about the good things that happened. I had plenty of mistakes [laughs].

Meyer: Did you?

Woolner: Sure.

Meyer: What did the guy who broke to private, I mean, when he found out you were right?

Woolner: He never spoke to me again, and I never spoke to him again.

Meyer: That was it?

Woolner: He was a private now. I didn't need to talk to him. Not that I didn't talk to privates, but I didn't have to have any communication. I mean, I knew all my men, first name and last name, and some of them I knew their wives' names. But he was just another cannoneer to me. And one that I didn't have any respect for. This was not a – he chose to defy the first sergeant, and to defy me. And I could have easily have court-martialed him for that. Easily. But he'd been a good wire sergeant. He had a good section. But he picked the wrong time to try to show he didn't have to do it just because we said so.

Meyer: But when you look back and see how your instincts were right, you don't think anything about it?

Woolner: No, no. Well, yes I do. I often think of that particular situation where what I'd been trained for came right to a head. We were told, you get in a position, you dig until you leave the position. And we didn't do that. Very few people did that. You were in terrain sometimes where you didn't need to, where you had natural protection. You had walls to get behind. You had a cellar to get into. Digging was awful tough when the ground was frozen, you know. But we went through Louisiana. We went through the desert. And we had inspectors coming around evaluating the worth of the officers and the sections and the gun crew. I mean, the battery itself. And you had to be doing the right things. One of the right things was you dig. For safety. And Lord knows this proved it –I mean, we saved our, we didn't have anybody killed.

Meyer: How many men were under you?

Woolner: There were at that time about 125, because I had, I think, twelve anti-aircraft men attached to me, give or take five or six, because we had men who were wounded, who were in the hospital, weren't around, we didn't get replacements.

Meyer: What an accomplishment not to lose anyone.

Woolner: Yes, I'm very proud of that. You know, I had good men and they knew what the hell to do. They were well trained, and they knew what to do.

I had an interesting story. I don't know if I told you this or not, but one of the things that helped me get the respect of the noncoms happened very early. When we went to the division, there were no troops, just cadre. And we still had reveille, we still had retreat, we still had all the formations. And I was a second lieutenant at the time, but these guys didn't know that I'd been in the army by that time almost a year. And I'd been trained. I'd been working with regular army noncoms, I knew my way around the army. I was not a brand-new guy coming onto active duty after ten years of being home working somewhere. I'd come right from college into the army, right into Fort Bragg, and it was hard duty, Fort Bragg. Training troops is hard duty. And I knew my way around after being there for months.

And about the third morning, I pulled reveille.

"Pulled reveille," the expression means that it was my turn to be there at 6:30 when reveille took place; one officer had to be there. And we took turns.

Not the captain, the captain doesn't stand reveille. But I was a lieutenant at the time.

And [laughs] one of the sergeants, his name was Dobos, D-o-b-o-s, a big rugged guy, regular army, tough as they come. And he didn't come out for reveille. He figured I was a new shavetail. That's what they call second louies, you know?

And so [laughs], reveille was over, he hadn't come out. I told the first sergeant, "Go get Dobos."

They brought Dobos out. I said, "Dobos, where were you?"

He said, "Well, I don't have a clock, Lieutenant."

I said, "Is that so? Why don't you have an alarm clock?"

He said, "Well on a sergeant's pay I really can't afford it."

And I said, "Next time we'll see how you can afford it on a private's pay. Next time."

And that was the end of the conversation. I gave him – in other words, you're a sergeant, and you don't become a sergeant overnight, you know. I mean, you earn that. And he was a good sergeant. He was testing me, that's all. And he didn't know I'd been in the army for a year and I knew that I wasn't going to take anything from him. But I also didn't want to break him because he was a good man. So that helped me with the rest of them. He went back and told everybody about it

[laughs], told all the other noncoms about it. And that gave me some kind of, a little more, I'd say a lot more respect than I had any reason to expect.

Meyer: Had you worked with a lot of people before that you had that knack to manage people?

Woolner: No, no. I've always been pretty good with people. I'm pretty good at sensing whether people have the right stuff or don't have it. And, you know, you have to accept everybody. You can't always have everyone of the stature that you'd like to have. If you can get rid of those that you know are going to let you down. I mean, you know, you can sense when a guy is an eight ball, the guy is a screw-up. You know very quickly. The word comes back to you almost within 24 hours. The sergeant will tell the first sergeant, "This new guy isn't worth a shit. Get rid of him if you can." You know? If you can. Then the first sergeant would come to me and say next time they ask you—

What would happen was the sergeant major of the battalion would call down to the first sergeant and say, "We have to send a group of ten men out to such-and-such a unit, and be transferred permanently." So, here's our chance to get rid of a couple guys. We get two of them, of the ten, we would get two. There are five batteries, the headquarters battery and the service battery.

So, I'd get rid of two eight balls that way. It would happen all the time. Sometimes you'd get a chance to send somebody to school, doing something. Send a guy out. Maybe he'd come back, maybe he wouldn't. But generally the men take care of the problems themselves. The battery commander doesn't have to. Generally, the noncommissioned officers handle these problems, some of them better than others at doing it.

Something I forgot. We were in the, I think at the, before we crossed the Ruhr, the sergeant major called up and said, "Captain Leyshon wants to get rid of Dobos." Captain Leyshon was my closest friend. He was battery commander of C Battery, and a good man. He's a lawyer. He's a wonderful man. He had a problem with Dobos. What it was, I didn't know. And the sergeant major said to the first sergeant, "Dobos wants to come to A Battery."

So the first sergeant came in and said, "Guess what, do you remember Dobos?

I said, "Sure."

"He wants to come to A Battery."

I said, "Take him. Big, rugged guy, I'd be glad to have him." He'd been busted. He was no longer a sergeant. He was a cannoneer and I can always use a big guy carrying 95-pound shells around. And I knew he knew his way around, and he wouldn't give me any trouble. I knew he would not give me any trouble. He tested me once and he would never do it again. So that's kind of how things what goes around, comes around, sometimes [laughs]. Dobos was good.

Meyer: So Dobos wanted to come back?

Woolner: See, I'd been transferred to another battery. Dobos was in the first battery I was in. And when I got the opening to become exec and then battery commander of A Battery, they transferred me to A Battery and I had nothing to do with Dobos at all after that. He was in C Battery. But then he came [laughs]. Halfway through combat he came over, and did a good job the rest of the war [laughs]. But he wouldn't have asked to come to me if he hadn't thought that I was straight.

Meyer: Yes.. well they knew you were --.

Woolner: I was straight with them.

Meyer: You were straight with them.

Woolner: Yeah, that's all. I mean, I could have busted him and he knew it. But you don't bust a guy who's been a sergeant for something like missing reveille. You might take away his weekend passes for a couple of weeks, or something like that.

End CD 2

Begin CD 3

This is David Meyer, son of Earl D. Meyer, Company H, 379th, 95th Infantry. This CD is the third in a compilation of two interviews with Major James Woolner, battery commander, Battery A, 360TH, 95TH Infantry. The first interview was done in Metz, France, November 24, 2004. The second interview, which corrects and adds new stories to the first, was done at Mr. Woolner's home, July 24, 2006. Also, in a car en route to his home from New York City, and at a nearby restaurant on the same date. The interviews are dedicated to Mr. Woolner's grandson, J.T.

Woolner: We then began to capture Germans in large quantities. I mean, they would give up. Give up. I mean, I remember my forward observer came back with forty men one day, forty Germans, marching them back [laughs]. Geez…

Meyer: What did you do with them?

Woolner: We had our guns on them, and we turned them over to somebody else. We called battalion and said, "Send somebody down, we've got forty prisoners here." [laughs] They wanted to surrender to somebody; it was not exactly heroics on our part [laughs].

I had a 30-caliber machine gun mounted on my jeep. If I'd ever had to fire it, it probably would have exploded. It was a symbolic weapon more than anything else. I had it mounted on the fender, right front fender of the jeep. But it was – I never cleaned it, and my driver used to clean it once in a while. But you know, you'd get mud in it and everything. But it was a symbolic weapon. They knew we had it, they could see it.

Meyer: Where were you on V-E Day?

Woolner: Munster. We were out of action about four or five days, and we were in Munster, just preparing for whatever happened next. And we were temporarily really cleaning our equipment, and getting back in shape again. We didn't know for how long we were out of action, but they were taking division out because they didn't need them anymore. And they didn't want conflict with the Russians, so they were keeping troops back. But we were there V-E Day.

And then I got a break and pulled the right straw, and got a week down in the Riviera. It was wonderful. [laughs] Going down there we had an experience, another guy and I. We pulled into

Leon on the train, and we hadn't had anything to eat; they didn't serve any food on these trips, you got what you could at the station. So we hopped out and ran into the place where they were serving food, and we waited to pick something up. And somebody yelled, "Train's moving!" And there we were 100 yards away from the track.

So we ran out and there's a freight train between us and our train. [laughs] I crawled across a flatcar, a moving flatcar, to get across to our train, which was also moving. And somebody opened the doors on the side we were at and we climbed in. Our papers, our jackets, everything – all we had identification was our dog tags on. We didn't have our orders, or anything. We were dressed like you are, you know, a shirt and that's it. It was hot. And the train— [laughs] That was the only time I ever crawled across a moving flatcar.

Meyer: What did you do for relaxation?

Woolner: We only had three days off the whole time.

Meyer: Three days off the whole time? From starting--

Woolner: We were in action 105 straight days. We had three days R&R as a whole division. We were out of action for the three days. I don't know what the hell we did. Cleaned our guns. That was always necessary.

Meyer: The atomic bomb – do you remember that?

Woolner: Yeah. Sure. Shelby, Mississippi. Waiting to go to Japan. We had gotten in our new equipment, and our men – replacements – we were all geared to go to San Francisco. We were in what is called preparation for overseas movement, POM. And we saw on that [?] we were listening, no question about it.

We were early in the morning. It was hot, not air conditioning. Third floor of an old house in Hattiesburg, with another couple staying in the same place as we were. And we heard it through the window. Somebody's got a radio on real loud, and we hear, "Atomic bomb dropped on Japan, the war may be over!"

Meyer: Holy cow.

Woolner: All over.

Meyer: So when they disbanded all of you at Camp Shelby were you all together, still in the--?

Woolner: Yeah, and we'd get out, five or six every day, and there'd be more guys. Some had gotten out in France, out of the battery, and come back ahead of us. Because they were getting out and we were going to Japan. Because we didn't have enough points.

Meyer: How did points work?

Woolner: Five points a year. Five points for medals.

Meyer: How many points did you need to get out?

Woolner: You needed 85. I had 80. And then they reduced it to 80 and I got out. And then everybody got out.

Woolner: My first parade when I was battery commander was our first parade, period.

It happened to be, we didn't have a formal parade until we got to Fort Sam Houston, by which time I was battery commander.

And I got a call from the sergeant major who became a warrant officer, great guy, regular army, talented guy.

He could draw anything. He was very clever. At one officer's call, I stood behind him and he was drawing something. He drew a picture of a horse's ass, and then put the colonel's name on top [laughs]. Everybody felt the same way.

But anyhow, he called me and said, "I need somebody to carry the guidon from Battery A." The guidon is the flag, in the form of a pennant. You've seen those. Each battery, each company, has a guidon. The expression comes from "guides on the line" for a parade, or really for any formation. They say "guides on the line," one man goes up and stands on the right-hand corner of the first [inaudible], and everybody lines up on him. Then it developed that, it became in use in the company flag, a battery flag. So he would not line up in the right-hand corner, he'd line up up front.

Anyhow, he called me and said that, I was still a lieutenant. He said, "Lieutenant, I need one of your men to carry the guidon."

I said, "Okay. Sure. Tell me, what do I have to teach them?"

He said, "What are you talking about?"

I said, "Well, we've never had a parade, Bill, and I want to be sure that he knows what he's supposed to do, and I can tell him."

And he said, "God damn it, Lieutenant, send me your tallest man." [laughs] That's all. They'd tell him what to do when he got up there. That's what comes when you try to be a little too precise about things.

Woolner: We had one guy, Cornelius Esperan (PH), a Minnesotan, a lumberjack. We used railroad ties for the recoil, to guard the recoil. The recoil would send the whole gun back. And we'd have a railroad tie behind each--

Meyer: Yes, to stop it from going—

Woolner: To stop it from going back. He would pick up a railroad tie himself, and drop it off the truck. He was a powerhouse. Big lumberjack. He was used to lifting logs, you know? Quiet man, never had much to say, always there on time.

Woolner: It was all listed up how much each man would get, how we'd draw $3,000, or whatever the amount, exact to the penny, what it was supposed to be to pay every man what he was supposed to get. It came up ten dollars short. Obviously paid ten dollars to somebody twice. Stuck together. So, I put up the ten bucks myself.

Next morning, the first sergeant handed me ten bucks. I said, "What's this for?"

He said, "You were short yesterday, and the men cut the poker game." It was very nice. But I never made that mistake again.

Woolner: The Superior Mess, which meant the best of 90 kitchens, twice. And they had three different tests during, when we were in this country, and we won two of them.

And this man could make apple pie. I've never had as good an apple pie as he could make. People could tell you, I used to drive Trudy crazy, I said, "It's almost as good as Sergeant Evanson's." [laughs]

But Evanson as a mess sergeant was, if we were going to have to move, I would stop by him before I even came into the battery area to tell the first sergeant that we were going to move. I'd always tell the kitchen first, because they were cooking the meal. They had to do something to put their stoves back on the truck, and pack stuff up; it depends what time of the day it was, it could be any time, you know. But all he needed was five or ten minutes more than everybody else in order to get ready. And I always went there first and said, you know, tell him, "March order in fifteen minutes, get ready." March order being the expression for we're going to move. And he always appreciated that because he might be baking pies, or something, and not be able to move for a few minutes.

He was a wonderful cook.

Our men never complained about the food. Never. Except mutton. We had men who would not eat mutton. Absolutely wouldn't. Some couldn't stand the smell of it. Depends on how you're brought up.

We had to build for the Louisiana maneuvers, the GI ice box. Which is zinc line (CK), with insulation that thick, and about so high. [A few feet high.] And about this big. It would go across the back of the truck.

Meyer: Okay. Fifteen feet (CK).

Woolner: And it would keep ice very, very well. And so it would keep stuff cold. And it was hard to clean, because it was so high. So Evanson would take his shoes and socks off and climb in, and scrub it. Fuller brush, get down on his hands and knees and scrub it. Because you couldn't lean over.

Meyer: No. No, you can't.

Woolner: Commanding general came by one day. Army, the whole division. Unexpected. Just dropped in. We knew that we'd won Superior Mess and he thought he'd take a look. And there's Emerson barefoot in the ice box, you know?

And General [Harry Lewis] Twaddle looked at him and said, "Sergeant, is that the only way you can clean that?"

And Evanson never said a word. He handed the brush to the general [laughs]. He said, “Yes sir, that’s the only way. If you’d like to show me a better way.”

And, of course, the general broke up laughing. He broke up laughing.

But there was no way. You could not bend over and reach the bottom of the damn thing and put any kind of leverage at all.

Meyer: Did you like General Twaddle?

Woolner: Oh, yeah. He was a great man. He was such a wonderful man. Imagine the tension that man lived under, being under General Patton. He was not a West Pointer. And he was a gentleman. And he was more concerned about dead bodies, not having them, than Patton ever – Patton didn’t give a damn about how many people died.

General Twaddle was the only general, the only division commander, to go through from day one to last day as commander. Every other division changed division commanders at one time or another. He stayed put. He became a major general, and he got the job. He’d been working in Washington, in plans and training, and he was just a hell of a fine man. We were glad that he was allowed to stay with us. Of course he probably would have wanted to be a Corps commander, but he wasn’t a West Pointer.

Meyer: Oh.

Woolner: Makes a difference. But no matter what they say, it makes a difference.

Meyer: But if you’re talking to J.T. now, any words of wisdom? Or what would you tell him about why it’s important to remember what happened? Or what would you want to say to him about this? This is like a gift to him, too. What do you want J.T. to remember about it?

Trudy Woolner: He’d have to have some history, I think, before he read it.

Meyer: Well, he will. Why is it important to remember? Because a lot of people don’t.

Trudy: Certainly the example of a man leading a country who wants to destroy everything else around. He wants control over everything else. And certainly the Russians had that idea, too. And I’m afraid that the Chinese are eventually going to work themselves into that. Democracy must be anathema to any big leader who can’t stand … I don’t know.

Woolner: What is important to J.T. is that he may have to help defend this country. And not to hesitate. And don’t get in the infantry.

Meyer: And don’t get in the infantry.

Woolner: I mean that. That’s a different life. They fight a different war.

Meyer: Do you remember your service number?

Woolner: Sure. 0414626.

Meyer: How did the war change you?

Woolner: Well, I went from 21 to 25 in that period. And I guess normal maturing may have been speeded up a little with responsibility. Because at 22 I was suddenly responsible for a lot of men. And as Colonel Gantt kept saying, "But you're so young. You're so young." And I was.

Meyer: You were.

Woolner: But I wasn't – I was one of millions who were so young.

Woolner: They gave me this plaque.

Meyer: Our captain then, our captain now. … Let's see, Swift, Sam Houston, Polk, Coxcomb…
Woolner: Coxcomb was the desert.

Meyer: It's the desert. Indiantown Gap, Myles Standish…

Woolner: That's where we shipped out.

Meyer: Where you shipped out. Liverpool, Omaha Beach, Red Bull Express, Battle of Metz, Saarlautern, The Bulge, V-E Day, Munster, Myles Standish, then Shelby.

Woolner: Yeah, Mississippi. And we had – we had a good bunch.

Trudy: When Jim went overseas, we were engaged at that point. But at any rate, I'd get *the New York Times*. And every time his division was mentioned, I was thrilled. And when I didn't see it, I knew he was in action. When they didn't report it. And it was panic time every time I couldn't find the 95th. But he did come home. I want you to know that I am also an Iron Man of Metz.

Woolner: That's right. She was the

Trudy: I have a tag, it says Iron Men of Metz.

Woolner: We were adopted by the, by I Company.

Meyer: You were?

Woolner: We have a document that says so, in the stairwell.

Woolner: A man walked up to me, this was packed up in a box. And he said, "Here, GI, this is for you." And this is a copy, of course. He didn't make it, he bought it, but he wanted to give something. And his address was on it, and I wrote him, we go back and forth and we correspond. And I got a letter from one of his children that was in English. He writes in French but she writes in English. It's really great. [laughs]

Meyer: It is nice. Was he old? Or was he old enough for that?

Woolner: No, no. My guess is he was in his forties, 45, maybe, that's all.

Woolner: I said, "I got about six minutes' worth of music I would like to have played."
And he said, "Well, it depends on the kind of ceremony."
And I said, "Well, what are you talking about?"
He said, "Well, in a memorial ceremony, that's fine. In a regular routine, it's not usual."
I said, "No, but that's what I want." Then he said, he's a wonderful man, young guy. Starts out loud. [plays music] Krupa. Harry James, Teddy Wilson, Lionel Hampton, Bobby Hackett, Cooter Williams, Jess Stacy and Benny Goodman. These are the guys that [unclear] And I listened to this. I have the whole thing. The whole concert.

Meyer: Is this Carnegie Hall?

Woolner: Yeah.

Meyer: I know, Teddy Wilson on the piano.

Woolner: Oh, boy, he was great. And Krupa.

Meyer: Oh, Krupa.

Woolner: That's Harry James. My generation, the wife will be in in a minute. But there will be a lot of people there from the club and everything. I assume [unclear] something important at the club. And they don't [unclear] I always have had a good time in my life. Why go out in doom and gloom? When you're 86, you've had your share, you know? And I may go to 90, I don't know. What I have then [could be better or could be worse?]. It's a lymphoma.

Meyer: (referring to music) That's beautiful. God. Is that Harry James?

Woolner: Yeah. All the trumpets.

Meyer: All the trumpets.

Woolner: Blue skies. And blue skies are important to me. I call them Colorado skies. I've been up to Colorado. [skiing?] I've been there a lot. It's not today's music, but it's—

Meyer: Oh, this is great.

Woolner: People will get a kick out of it.

Meyer: Do you like to dance?

Woolner: Yeah.

Meyer: Yeah, it's hard to [be still?]

Woolner: Today's music I can't dance to. This was before long playing. It had just started then. The "Sing, Sing, Sing" was one of the first big ones. It's not on this, but on the regular recording. This is just the two songs. "Blue Skies" and "Blue Room." The thing about Benny Goodman's music, people are always smiling when they're dancing. They show these things every once in a while, Goodman concerts, you know, on TV. And the news commentator always says, "Look at these people." [unclear] And they're all smiling. Fun music.

Meyer: Yes. Why these two songs?

Woolner: Well, "Blue Skies," I picked. And "Blue Room" happened to be very close to it on the recording. So I said, "Blue Skies" is really the one. And "Blue Room" just happened to be a good rhythm that I liked. And just wonderfully played.

Meyer: Ballroom dance has had a resurgence.

Woolner: Yeah.

Meyer: My wife and I started taking classes.

Woolner: Really? Good for you.

Meyer: It's a lot of fun. In fact, we're trying to find a place where you can dance the fox trot. The Rainbow Room is now a hundred dollars a person. Roseland seems to be [unclear] We'll have to search the web and try to find somewhere. Ever seen him live?

Woolner: Sure. Danced to them many times. He was a, [unclear] at one time he was at the Pennsylvania Hotel in New York. I was at Penn Station. Where Pennsylvania 65000 comes from. That was the number of the—

Meyer: Oh, sure. Pennsylvania 65000

Woolner: Yeah.

Meyer: That was the number of the hotel?

Woolner: Yeah. Pennsylvania 65000.

End CD 3