John A. Adams '71 Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis
Military Oral History Project
Interview with LTC Alfred Alvarez by Cadet Michael Mozelle, October 24, 2006.

About the interviewer: Cadet Michael Mozelle (Class of 2008) is majoring in History.

Mozelle – The following interview is being conducted for the First Division Museum at Cantigny and the John A. Adams '71 Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis as part of the requirements for History 393—History of World War II. The interviewer is Michael Mozelle. The interviewee is LTC Alfred Alvarez. Today is 24 October 2006. We are meeting over the phone in Preston Library at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia.

Mozelle –Good afternoon Colonel Alvarez. If you could give us a quick autobiographical sketch of yourself to start this off.

Alvarez – I'd like to say good afternoon. My name is Al Alvarez, Light Colonel, retired. We start out with the earliest days of 1942, right after Pearl Harbor, as a 17 year old individual who felt like enlisting. I found out they wouldn't take you unless you had your mother's signature so I had to wait until I was 18 and that put it to the 28th of July 1942 when I entered the service. I always believe that all of the schooling that I had in New England, which was pretty extensive, and the fact that I had been moved through the grades very quickly and graduated at the age of 16, I had some good tickets. The Army recognized that information and sent me to different schools in electrical engineering and communications.

For about 18 months I was at Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey and graduated from a number of signal schools, finally entering into radar schooling at that time, which was a fantastically new item in the early part of the war. I want to then believe that World War II had progressed to the point where they needed bodies, not brains, and thus we were all shipped out to Europe and I joined the First United States

Infantry Division. It was the oldest division in the United States Army and had the greatest amount of combat time at that time, having fought in Africa, Tunisia, Algeria and made the invasions of North Africa and Sicily. They had arrived in England and the rest of us neophytes married up with them as recruits or replacements.

We then went through six months of their training. I guess the best thing to do was call it survivor's school because we were great communications people only. We could make radios and telephones and everything commo sing but we didn't know how to tie our shoes or clean the mud out of our ears. We received fantastic instruction from these—what I believe to be—older people, guys in their 20s. I remember some of the great functional things that I learned, to live in the mud. One of them—I'll always remember—was when you do anything, tell three people! Alongside of that was, when you didn't do something, tell three people! And you'd be amazed to find out how everybody in your immediate vicinity knew what was going on. I've since then have seen so many occasions where everyone runs around in the fog of war and we don't know what's going on!

As far as our safety was concerned, they said carry two or three canteens of water, because we were always needing it for some reason. Carry many first aid pouches. The first aid pouch that was issued to us was with a little packet that we put on our side. At first we thought everybody would get wounded, as we did in training, with one round in the left arm because we were all right handed, so we could bandage up our arm and look good. No, it wasn't like that. A mortar shell would come in and tear your side out or tear a leg off or something horrible like that and those bandages naturally weren't so good. We carried three or four of them. We carried a lot of them on our equipment, taped on there. The other item issued us was wound powder and it looked like gold dust—little packets of gold dust. Those we poured on the wound and covered it up with the bandages and that could get the injured person through until he got medical attention.

Since we were in communications I knew how to use a radio, but they said take a 50 foot extension so that you could get away from the radio, because the enemy would line up on the transmissions that were being sent. Stick the radio inside of a chimney so the antenna would go up the chimney and you wouldn't be seen. These were the simple types of life-saving things that we were learning from them. The other lesson was, any time you stopped, dig. So we learned to dig a hole. It

became obvious to us when we entered combat in Normandy that a lot of units alongside us hadn't learned those deadly lessons and they would be the ones carried away when we had any mortar attack or artillery attack. The thing to fear was the unannounced mortar coming into the area, I guess within 50 yards of you. The shards would travel through the air and light somebody up.

With that knowledge we were able to get through the first military encounter, which was D-Day. I was assigned to a seven-man team—two officers, a sergeant and the rest of us as communications people and survey people. The officers would provide the command capability. So we were there, sort of doubled in strength, because somebody—not me (because they wouldn't let me in on any of the secrets)—decided that we needed to have two officers for the rationale that one might be lost. Well, it just so happened that we lost both officers in the surf. We, therefore, just plunked down in the water, which was about a foot high, and we stayed there. The reason I mention that is because in later years when I was giving classes on leadership, I brought out the fact that there I was—a 18 or 19 year old foal—lying in the water and I'd probably be there to this day if someone hadn't gotten me out of there. That's what it takes in a lot of situations in the service, is for somebody—and who the heck it's gonna be, we don't know—to stand there and say what this new lieutenant said (who was procured and brought to us and looked down at us, I guess with disdain as we lay there in the water) "Come on, let's go." And we all stood up. When I say <u>we</u>, I mean me, the guy alongside of me, the guys in the engineers, the guys in the infantry, anybody around the place who were looking desperately for someone to get them out of that water, and this amazing young fellow provided that leadership. I'll always remember his name. It was Mel Ferrara from New Orleans. We went through the surf. We went through the mine field. We went up the bluff of the hill and finally get to the top and we laid there, trembling, and amazed that we were still alive because so many had fallen by the wayside.

There was a series of wooden steps leading up the bluff and they happened to be mined so a lot lost feet, legs and everything else. Amazingly, that same lieutenant had been hit in the crotch and when we got to the top he was bleeding profusely from the groin. Luckily for him and for me, I guess, I'd been a Boy Scout and I knew certain things about first aid so I stuck a stone in his crotch, took his belt off and tightened it up and it stopped the blood. We were able to continue on with what we were doing there on the bluff and he was somewhat comfortable. Later on the wound started to bleed again. The point I want

to make at this time is that we put a bandage on him and then I took the first bandage and dug a hole with my little entrencher tool and buried it! The point I'm showing you is that, at that moment, I wasn't thinking very clearly. I thought it was necessary to be fastidious on the battlefield. These are some of the crazy thoughts that pass through people's minds in explosive situations.

There was a little bit of firing going on at that particular time and the officers that were around were leading men into counter-sniper roles or something like that. My radio was working but there was nobody to talk to so we followed the officers and fired our weapons on automatic into these holes. I dragged out an Oriental son-of-a-gun from a hole near us. I always remembered that because I thought, "Gee, I thought we were fighting the Germans." It turned out that the local expert—there's always one—said "No, that's not a Japanese. That's a Korean worker who had been dragooned into doing the work over here." That got us through the first day and then the German air force came over and strafed us and that sort of ended the day.

For the next so many days we existed on the beach and then we moved into what was known as the bocage--the hedgerows of Normandy. It's amazing that the vaunted Army that we were in had never told us about the terrain. They told us about the enemy and they told us about the weather, but they didn't tell us what the terrain would look like. The terrain, in this particular location in Normandy, was the result of the labors of the Norman farmers of 500 years that had decided they would protect themselves from the cold Channel winds and they would also outline their property by building these little mounds. Well, over these 500 years the darn mounds had grown up, not only 20 feet high, but 20 feet wide. The farmers also ambled through with their wagons and developed these into sunken roads. That's what confronted us when we went into Normandy. We stayed there for 30 or 40 days, unable to move. The U.S. Army progressed 14 miles to Caumont in those 30 or 40 days, losing approximately 30,000 people. Now those figures sound fantastic but it shows you what can happen when forces didn't have the total information and intelligence!

The job of the infantry was to sneak down these sunken roads and pop through the hedges and unfortunately look right into the machine pistol of a German who had been training for four years in that area and knew it so well. Our answer would be to grab a tank and run it up against the embankment. But as it exposed its vulnerable belly, it would get hit by a rocket, so that took care of that solution. But as

always, in every army, there's a sergeant and the one we had was a fellow by the name of Culin—C-u-l-i-n—and he was a dirty, friggin' old guy that scratched his crotch all the time and spit, but he was brainy. He said "Hey, why don't we go out into the surf and cut, with acetylene torches, all the obstacles that are laying there in the water and weld them on the front of the tanks. With those we can ram the abutments and crash through?" He did and they did and we did, and we finally went through those mounds and pushed the Germans out of Normandy.

Then we exploded into the northern France area and, say, at 40 miles a day we scooted across France and all the ladies came along and dropped flowers down the barrels of our weapons, gave us kisses and we drank all the liquor that was available and we called it the Champagne Campaign. We progressed in that particular fashion until we arrived at the Siegfried Line. At that time we were entering Belgium. All the Germans in their vaunted armies they had were on the Channel coast and I guess the high command decided to move them administratively back into Germany, but we were barreling up from France, tactically, and we hit them strategically and they were all captured. The remembrance I have is sitting out there in a warm Belgium afternoon, watching all these Germans—thousands of them—sitting around tables and chairs with white tablecloths, drinking champagne, the servants feeding them, and the rest of us outside of a little wire that the engineers had strung with dirty hands, dirty uniforms and we looked like the proverbial poor person looking in to see what the rich people were doing. Many of us wondered who was the prisoner and who was the guard.

We then progressed into Germany. There we came to a screeching halt. We had run out of gasoline and whatever other POL that was necessary to move the troops and the Germans now had the fortification of the Siegfried Line to hold us up. We stayed there for about 20 or 30 days and then we encountered—on the maps it was called Huertgen Forest but we referred to it as the Hurtin'—H-u-r-t-i-n—Forest. It was just dense greenery that we couldn't progress through. As far as the artillery was concerned, we couldn't see through. As far as the vegetation was, it produced a sound blocking affair and we couldn't tell where our rounds were landing. The tanks couldn't get through it. All the infantry that we sent in there were just proceeding at a snail's pace. So we stayed there for about a 30 day period and we lost immense numbers of people.

The remembrance I have there is that recruits would arrive in the evening, in the darkness, and they would be separated out to their squads. Remember, I existed below the company level. My lieutenant was God to me, and a captain was someone I kowtowed to. But, working with the sergeants, they received their replacements in the evening. They must have parceled them out to wherever they went. The next morning we could jump off for the attack and when we would get to our destination, they were gone. What happened to them? I don't know. They were either wounded, killed, captured or deserted, for all we knew. So the next time we'd start with another bunch. If you'd been around for a certain period of time, you could exist. I don't know what the magic was. So, ever so often, when an old-timer would become a casualty, we all felt bad because it shouldn't have been. He was one of the immortals, as we considered ourselves to be.

The captains in our infantry companies of the battalion that I was with—the 3rd Battalion of the 16th Infantry—were around for quite a while so I got to know them well. There was Captain Cutler, Richmond and Wolf and I don't remember the others. Anyway, they lasted for a little while and finally they disappeared. The battalion commanders became celebrated and eventually, when the war was over, they went on, to the other wars, they emerged as generals down the line. Ltc. Darrell Daniels was a battalion commander. He ended up as a two-star commander of the 11th Airborne Division, where I was a captain—that sort of thing. It was a preparation for our greater responsibilities.

We hung around in the Huertgen Forest and we lost members of our artillery F.O. [forward observer] teams and those were always a blast to me because you talk about a guy you knew very, very well. For example, our team had been on the line for a couple of weeks or so. Remember, when you say a couple of weeks, you're talking about a 24-hour day, so you woke up in the morning, you worked all day, you went to sleep, you woke up the next day, and you sit in the mud and that sort of thing. So two weeks is an extremely compressed amount of time. The lieutenant got hit and we never got a replacement so we operated with a corporal in charge. Finally, we got a new team out to replace all of us and the radio operator was a very good friend of mine. His name is Joe Gallauci from Philadelphia. I always remember because he received a watch from his home and he showed it to me when we left. That night, when I got back to the battery area, they put me on watch on the switchboard and that's when

the word came through that a round had hit the OP and he was killed. So we went back the next day to retake that whole area. That's the way it continued. The days were forever. They just ate away at you.

By this time it was December and they pulled us out of there and sent us to a town called Chaineaux. I always remember that because we had the wonderful job of setting it up for incoming battery. We scrubbed the schoolhouse out and we made eyes with the local girls in their boots as they stood in the pig-sties taking care of the animals. We acquired some food and wine and had a good time and went to sleep. Woke up the next morning when the firing battery came in. They thought they'd be there for a certain amount of time to rest, but about that time we were notified that the Germans had broken through and were headed our way so we had to move out. Our team was given to a light colonel by the name of Davisson and they put together a Task Force. Since the on-coming Germans were loaded with tanks, we were an anti-tank setup and the task force meeting was a group of military commands that arranged to do a certain type of job. The recon units that we had were to find the Germans. The engineer units that we had were to fix the Germans. Tank units would fight them and the tank destroyers to destroy them. We ambled down the road and it was snowing quite badly and our jeep was destroyed by some tank who fired his weapon at us. Our supply sergeant came out to see us the next evening and brought us a new jeep. They told us we were involved in something called the Battle of the Bulge and we had no idea what was going on, or what he was talking about!

We started taking a beating from all the tanks that were coming across our area, painted white, with accompanying Germans draped in white sheets. The reason we were being beaten at the time was the fact, although there might have been ammunition, it wasn't being parceled out to us. We had lost our priority and the teams on the right got all the ammo. Eventually they stopped the on-coming Germans. The Germans were commanded by a Colonel Peiper—P-e-i-p-e-r—and we thought of the Mad Piper with all his rats going across the front. The Germans then hit us but we worked a little bit getting prepared. I always remember watching a group of engineers up in front of our position, carrying a lot of dishes and plates from the Belgian homes around there. It was interesting to watch these fellows doing their little work. The sergeant would pace out, say, five or six steps and then they would place a plate down. I finally realized what it was. Apparently they didn't have enough mines so they were placing these plates out there and the snow would cover them and these little pimples in the snow would resemble some sort

of a landmine field. Then I noticed that he put real mines out there too and covered those with the platters—the point there being that when the Germans arrived with their mine detectors they might be fooled into thinking this was just another plate. So this showed you some of the clever preparations that were occurring at that time.

During the silence of one particular day we were alerted to the fact that something was noisily happening off to one side. Down the only street in town came a careening U.S. jeep with Germans inside firing and we were firing at them. It crashed off to the side of the road and Colonel Davisson sent somebody out there to get the Germans. Our men machine gunned everything and took the survivors and spread-eagled one on the hood of the jeep and an officer was seated in the co-pilot seat. They showed up and this fellow—he was strictly out of Hollywood—had a peak hat…he had everything but a monocle—leather coat and gloves—and, in perfect English, he demanded medical attention for his people. At that moment somebody came over with a rifle and hit him on the head and damaged him severely because there was blood racing from his eyes and ears and they took him away to the hospital. Later on the next day we received a growl from the regimental headquarters that this fellow was an officer and courier who was carrying the photographic proof that the Germans had burst through our lines and were on a successful jaunt through the U.S. area. They needed the photographic proof that he was carrying. So we got a detail and went out in the snow to see if we could find the film. Somebody did find it and we turned it in.

That was 50 or 60 years ago. Now, every so often, I still see all these Battle of the Bulge stories or scenes that are shown on all the historical TV shows and it's these same ones. There's the Germans rushing across the snow, smiling at the camera, eating American food, taking shoes off of American dead. There's a jeep racing by with flames coming out the backend, and the whole scenes are very theatrical. It's that film that was used and found by us. It's become the Battle of the Bulge classic photographic incidents that everyone has to look at now!

We stayed there for a good month or so and it became January of 1945 at which time we were alerted that we would be now coming out of the Bulge and we'd be attacking the Germans. So that was now a case of trudging through the snow. I knew I'd be walking a lot so we made all the preparations. First I got a sled. Then mounted my radio on it. Then decided that what I needed was energy so I ate

everything I could find and I ate and ate and ate and ate. Then I stored all the remaining food I could find on the sled and when the word came along—I think it was the 14th of January—we jumped off and we trudged through that snow. It's not like the Hollywood version of the people charging across the trenches, yelling and screaming. It was just a bunch of tired old people with a heck of a lot of clothes—I had about five sets of clothes on. A lot of the older soldiers had rolled blankets around their feet. Some had put barbed wire on their shoes so they could get traction on the snow, and we just very slowly proceeded through the snow. The Germans hit us with machine guns and everything else but my forward observer—Lieutenant Cangelosi—put some accurate fire out there and they would stop. I was happy because I had the food. The lieutenant was happy because he had my communication, and the infantry around us was happy because we were curtailing all the enemy actions.

It was around February the sun came out and it got a little bit warmer and I guess the snow melted and the Task Force disappeared in the spring. Now it was a case of going the rest of the way through Germany. I guess we started hitting a lot of fortified German towns then and they seemed to be constructed the same. They had prepared for months, taking telephone poles and sticking them in the ground around the roads leading into town, so when we approached the town there was this gigantic 20-foot wall in front of you and you wondered how we'd get through. Engineers can always figure these things out. They just blew the houses down on the sides of these fences and we just drove up the first floor, second floor, third floor, then down to the first floor and we arrived at the other side and proceeded on. I always thought that was pretty clever on our part.

This particular town that we went into—and I've forgotten its name. I have it written on my record. We had a jeep and we had a trailer with everything we carried, and I sat on the back of the jeep with my feet sticking over the side. As we went around the corner somebody set off a command detonated mine and it blew the trailer away and disengaged it from the jeep. It must have happened right alongside my toes because my legs felt bad after that, but, basically, my ears went bad. I think I have been slightly deaf from then on. We never did salvage that trailer and we never did get a replacement so, from then on, we had to double up everything on the jeep.

Then we started hitting 20 to 30 miles a day in Germany and we came to the Remagen Bridge. We just lined up and went across it. Now historically you realize it was a fantastic occasion but to us it

was just another bridge that we had to cross. We got into Germany and we were at some place in Germany and suddenly we got this new word that we would turn hard right and head south as fast as we could towards Czechoslovakia. Today I realized what it was. The American intelligence had denoted what they called a "rural insurgency" situation, that the end of the war would bring a certain amount of insurgency. The thought was they needed a lot of regular hard driving units down in those areas to curtail this unpleasantness, because everyone else would be going home or going to the Pacific, so that's how the First Division ended up in Czechoslovakia. It was called the "German Redoubt" and, happily, it didn't occur, so now we were the first unit in Czechoslovakia and the war had just about expired. By that time it did. We just sat around and enjoyed the scenery because we were in a wonderful wine district and beer and we just had ourselves a gay time waiting out our call.

The word was that we were all being sent to the Pacific and we had a point system. You got so many points for each battle, so many points for being in the Army, so many points for being overseas, so many points for being wounded, and everything like that. Well, I had the sufficient number of points to be coming home. We pulled out of Czechoslovakia and were put on boxcars and sent towards France. It took us about 45 days to go from Czechoslovakia up to north of Paris and then down south to Marseille, and then to get on a LST and cross the ocean. Finally we arrived in Newport News and they had a Newport News welcome home dinner. You got all the chicken or all the steak you wanted and all the milk you could drink. That was one of the big remembrances I had—drinking this milk. It was served by Germans. They had been in the States for <u>years</u> and they had our ways. They looked at us and we looked at them and nobody was mad. Everybody was happy as all heck. All that mattered at that time was the war was over.

I guess, as I've told many, many people, I was probably the only man in the world that re-enlisted at that particular moment. I went home and spent a certain number of months on rehabilitation leave and awaited my next assignment. I think I've worn out this telephone. Can you interrupt at this time?

Mozelle – Yes sir, I'm still here. What were the enticements being offered by the Army for people to re-enlist at the end of the war?

Alvarez – That you could get any location you wished and so I asked for my hometown so I got located in Boston at the Boston army base, which happened to be a very boring function. My function

was sort of driving fat old colonels around the area. I guess they were National Guard or Reserve instructors or advisors and they must have gone and advised because I sat in the vehicle and cleaned my fingernails. In looking through the record I saw the Army was asking for parachutists and I figured the extra money was for me. So I applied for parachute duty and went down to Ft. Benning and fell out of an airplane and it wasn't that tough. From then on it was a case of airborne assignments throughout the Army. Do you want me to continue on, or do you want me to stick just with the war?

Mozelle – I wanted to ask a question. You mentioned a lot about your interactions with the Germans, with the prisoners, etc. When you were in theater in Europe, how did you look at the Germans you were fighting? Was it that you really disliked them, that you really wanted to kill them, did you hate them—or was it something less than that?

Alvarez – I think I mentioned this the other day. You've got to remember that I was an 18 year old foal and killing people was the furthest thing from my mind. My mother said never kill anybody. I was surprised when I bumped into the first ones. They were just the fellows who had given up on the beach and they were just all standing around, glad to get the food that we were giving them. Everyone always seemed to be hungry. We seemed to have more food than anybody else. We sort of lorded it over them so we'd toss a can to an individual without anything. Then, in Normandy, we bumped into the 3rd Parachute Division and they were a little bit different. One, they wore different uniforms. They had little round helmets and they wore smocks. They all had machine pistols and they gave us a lot of trouble. So that was a new bunch of people and they seemed to be a little bit more confident in what they were doing.

After I got to be an old-timer at this, I started to see the difference between the German soldier and the S.S. soldier. The Hitler-Jugend was the first S.S. division composed of youngsters who had started out in the Adolf Hitler regime and then went into the service, and they were son-of-a-guns. Many of them got killed, I guess, because we didn't take too many of those as prisoners. Finally, we started dealing with the S.S. They had a tattoo under their armpit or on their arm or something like that so when we ran into them—and they were identified by having camouflaged jackets and camouflaged helmets—we'd rip their jacket off of them and boy, they changed their appearance, and they were frightened because they thought something drastic was going to occur because of the tattoo they had under their arm.

The officers were always aloof. You've got to hand it to them. They were sharper than we were. They stood there. One, they smoked their cigarettes differently and they'd cup their hand and put the little cigarette in there. I wish they'd had a monocle because that's all I asked for—they looked the complete Hollywood part. They looked down their noses at us. It was unbelievable. They were the prisoner, but I felt like gee, I'd better wash my hands before I talked to these fellows. They had trained themselves to believe that they were the better man and they conducted themselves in a fashion—at least, in my case, we just acknowledged them. I know that when the war was over we had a number of German generals in the area and I saluted every one of them. I figured that something would go wrong if I didn't. They didn't lose any stature and that's the interesting thing about them. I guess I learned something for my future!

After the war was over I got stationed in Germany and everybody was a war veteran of some type, be it an American or a German. None of the Germans—if they had been in the army—claimed to have fought against the Americans. They all fought against the Russians. I wondered, oh, what the heck. If we'd lost the war and somebody came over here, I'd probably say "No, I never fought the Germans. I fought the Japanese," or something like that. But those are remembrances I had. You have to realize that all I saw was two feet in front of me. To my right and my left the peripheral vision was not there to see all the things that I've now read about in books. What's another question?

Mozelle – So then, your impression was that the officers had this haughty attitude—that they were the best and were above you—but what about the common soldiers you ran into. Were they the image that we get now that they were just kind of pressed into this or did they really believe it?

Alvarez – They acted just like we did. I'll give you another occasion. When the war was over in Czechoslovakia, I had the great important job of standing on a road intersection as the Germans would come by in their wagons—remember, we didn't fear them and they didn't fear us any more. The war was over. So, as they marched by they were directed to throw their weapons in this pile—the rifles went here, the pistols went there, the bayonets went there—that sort of thing. They very easily complied and they piled the stuff and it went up like mounds. I was sitting there smoking and not paying attention. I was the typical PFC that didn't do my job. So, as a wagon came by with women and men and kids and soldiers and everything else, I pointed to the soldier and said "Toss your weapon over there" and he did. In this particular case, this guy, probably my own age, looked at me and said "Wasser" which meant "water" and

so I took out my canteen and I threw it over to him and he took it, drank, wiped it, and then he threw it back to me and he said "Thank you very much." Not a big deal, but everybody in that German crowd looked and I understood their German. They said "Did you see that? That American soldier gave him water." Apparently that was a big gesture to them, that an American soldier could do this with an enemy of yesterday. The guy was just a young guy, and I was just a young guy. "We'd been in a stupid situation and the stupid situation was over and we didn't have to keep up the stupidity." That's one way of explaining the whole damn war! Those are the remembrances that I have that created the idea that they were just normal people—the soldiers, not the S.S. That was different. I, later on, went to the ovens at Dachau and Nordhousen and that was unbelievable to see—unbelievable to smell—that any people could do that to somebody else. Have you ever been to any of the ovens?

Mozelle – No, I haven't been to Germany to see any of that, though I certainly want to experience that.

Alvarez – One way to look at it is that is was so efficient. For example, at Dachau, it was built in the side of a cliff. They had all these trucks, vans, and inside they had faucets up in the ceiling. The point being, when the people were tossed in and the doors closed—the people were naked—and they thought they would be getting a shower, but, instead, gas would come out of the damn nozzles. Well, realizing they were dying, they would scratch with their fingernails on the wall and I remember there was one in English that said "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do." That's what the last words of Jesus were. I said "I can't believe what I'm seeing here." Then they removed all the bodies and put them in the oven, which were on trays. They went into slots and they were burned and cremated to ash and dumped off the side of this cliff into containers that had wheels which were taken and tossed into holes. This had been going on since 1933 and it was now 1945 and you had to beg the question, how many bodies does it take, when they're turned into ash, to fill up one of those buckets, which were then continuously moved over to this gigantic hole and dumped in there? What we were seeing was tons of ashes that signified hundreds of thousands of people. That, unbelievable!

In Nordhousen, which we ran into <u>before</u> the war ended—we ran into the smell first and didn't know what we were encountering—dead rats or something of that nature, and there were all these dying people. Again, as a private, you get the most disagreeable jobs that can be found. My job, with a bunch

of us, was to burn all the furniture. So, like goofy kids that we were, we took all the furniture, piled it all up, lit it on fire and we watched as all these large cockroach-type things fled from the flames. Then we got gasoline and made a big circle so when those things would race away, they'd encounter the flames and pop like popcorn. We giggle and think that was the funniest thing we'd ever encountered.

My friends in the medics were given the worst job. They had to go into the huts and remove the dead and dying bodies and bring them out. They started out using stretchers and then they ran out of stretchers and they used planks. They would put the naked bodies on the plank and the arms and legs would dangle as they were doing this. Eventually, someone in authority decided that all the local Germans would do that job and so the next day all these women and old men and children—because there weren't any young men around, they were all in the service—they all appeared and they had to carry these bodies out. I guess they were taught a lesson. They probably claimed they didn't know what was going on but the camp was adjoining the town. It was many, many, many low-hanging huts with the people inside, laying. I didn't really go through them but once and I have no idea what happened in the days after that. Thank God we left. There were maybe about 10 or 15 of these camps strewn all along eastern Germany. It was done with the full concurrence of all the people in power, all the way up to Adolf Hitler. From what I know of responsibility, authority and everything else, it bubbles all the way up to the top and anything we are doing, the President is aware of certain things that are going on in our country—the buck stops there. What else?

Mozelle – For all these things you're describing, certainly a very surreal experience—the war and seeing what the Holocaust produced—how did your training beforehand prepare you for all these things—or did it at all?

Alvarez – I don't think it did. Here I was a nice Spanish kid from Boston, Massachusetts and I brushed my teeth every day and did well in school and everything else. I never figured on going to college because there wasn't any money. It's a difficult thing for a lot of people to understand when I speak of poverty, that there wasn't funds available to do anything, so no one thought about it. I never thought that I'd ever go to one day of college, but once I got in the service, I found out the service could put me through college. So it took me 25 years but every time I got a chance I took a course and finally got enough credits, so to speak, to be able to go to a degree completion stint in Kansas and finish my

degree. That's the way most career officers got their college education in the Army. Every time, in between assignments or something such as that, you dashed off to a school and got a course in.

Mozelle – So you think most of the experience as far as what you had, you could apply to the war and everything, you probably got once you got in the theater and got amongst other veterans?

Alvarez – Eventually I was taught by the people who had fought in their wars and then, later on, I was a survivor and I taught other people. In those succeeding wars—I ended up serving in four wars—by the time I got to Vietnam I knew quite a bit and I foisted it on other people. Some wise people said the most important requirement of anybody in the service, is that they be lucky and I certainly must have been.

Mozelle – One instance that I came across as I was researching this was a day where 30 Silver Stars were handed out to your unit and this stood out to me, as it did in the recording of this. Could you elaborate on what happened that day?

Alvarez – Sure. The first thing is that with the letter I sent off today, I included a copy of the orders identifying everybody who received one Silver Star. On that order the battalion executive—that's the number two man in the battalion—on down to a private, received Silver Stars. Now this was probably the second week of June so, therefore, in the job of printing this thing—it took them a week or two—these were then their actions of D-Day. On D-Day a 500 man artillery battalion assaulted Easy Red beach with twelve 105 howitzers. The bosses—I'll use those words—were able to get them to the right place, unload these weapons from DUKWs. Do you know what a DUKW is? It's a two and a half ton truck that has been remodeled so that it floats and it has a 105 on it and that's a lot of weight. Then it had 10 guys on it, which is a lot of weight, and then you had ammunition on it, which was a lot of weight, and it was a very thin-skinned vehicle. As they're coming through the surf and the Germans are dropping shells on them, any round close by, the fragments would penetrate it and it would sink. Of our 12 gun battalion, we lost six weapons from counterbattery fire! People were wounded, people sunk, people swam. Some of them swam back and got on ships that would take them back to England. We had 60 people disappear in the surf and I think it was 27 people wounded, so that cuts down on your 500.

The remainder then landed on the beach we had to get through the mine fields and a lot of people were wounded there. Then they had to go across the marshes and then up what we called the

bluff. On our maps that was the thing that everybody was wondering about. Could we climb that steep son of a gun? In my case, because I had a 50 pound radio on my back, but the only thing I feared more than that bluff, was the sergeant. He said to me "You SOB, you better get to the top of that thing," I knew I had to. This boss and his immediate bosses could get us to do these particular things—and in this case the boss was a fellow named LTC George Gibbs. I saw him as he was directing people as he was standing up. Most of us were laying down. So right then and there it showed he had a little bit of moxie because standing up was not the right thing to do. He got the people to move up the cliff as he did—he got a DSC. The other fellow was a captain and he grabbed a bunch of people and they went in and destroyed a couple of machine gun pits. The third guy was what was called a T-4. That's a sergeant with a T in the bottom, which gave him no authority but he had knowledge and therefore got more money. He grabbed a bunch of people, put them in a tank and, with the tank, destroyed a pillbox. So those were the three highlights and they got DSCs. The other 30 people were involved with situations such as that or busting up different recurring situations. Remember, there were something like three battalions of Germans right there in their back yard. We were all intermingled with these people. They were inside of holes and trenches and pillboxes and they were firing and we were just waterlogged in the surf and tried to stumble out of there and do something positive!

That D-Day morning, of what's called the 16th RCT—infantry, artillery, engineers, everything mixed together—a regimental combat team. We lost 2,000 people as casualties—lost, missing, wounded, killed…everything....that's a lot of people—within the space of six or seven hours. We got there at 6:00 in the morning. The first time I had a chance to look at my watch was around noontime. All of the Allied people who hit Omaha beach—that was the 29th Division, our 1st Division, the corps and Navy and everyone else like that—we lost 9,000. Now those are not numbers I throw out. Those are facts and figures that you can check in many of the books written on D-Day. There are a lot of them and I've read them all. What was turning into a fiasco, was immediately saved by these people. Realize that the first preparation we were going to get was an Air Force bombing on the beach so it would be softened by the time we got there. According to the books that are written, the Air Force felt the weather wasn't clear enough so that they could bomb where they wanted to, so they said they would delay a little bit and

bomb inland. Well, they must have killed every cow in Normandy but nothing landed where we were going to be. So now the beach was not prepared for us.

The weather was supposed to be cool enough so that everybody could float in. The weather was very severe so, what was not hit by artillery and sunk, floundered because of the excessive waves and everything else. The other artillery battalion (III Arty Bn) alongside of us—that was supporting the 29th Division—they lost all 12 of their artillery weapons so they all reverted to infantry! The enemy that was supposed to be a battalion of overaged individuals, turned out to be seven battalions of the first class 352d German division that had been moved into that area. The Germans either knew we were coming or we didn't know what we were doing, but there were too many enemy there. All their weapons were sighted, as we could see when we went into their holes. There were little pictures and marks out in the water to help the gunner sight his weapons. Everything was against us—the weather, the terrain, the enemy, etc. So it took the bosses—I always used that word because a boss spelled backwards is a "double SOB"—and he's the guy that kicks you in the can and makes you get up out of that water and says "Let's go!" And you're staring right into the rifle of an enemy who is trying desperately to kill you. All these people moved others out and we got to the top of the cliff. I think that's the best answer for the 30 guys.

After that there were 56 guys who got Bronze Stars. I think there was one guy that got the Legion of Merit. It sounds like a lot of awards but it's a big hunk of recognition for all the people who participated. There was a number of Medals of Honor given. We didn't receive any. The 16th Infantry got three or four. Most of the kasernes—that's a German barracks area—were later named after the First Division heroes of that day. I remember when I went to Europe years later I looked and saw O'Brien Barracks, Montief Barracks, etc. These were the lieutenants who had gotten the people off the beach and got killed. I guess that's the difference between a Medal of Honor and DSC—you've got to be alive to get the DSC and you die to get the Medal of Honor. Give me another question. [end of Side A] [start of Side B]

Mozelle – You mentioned that you lost so much equipment coming ashore on D-Day and you were discussing all the weapons that you were using, including captured German ones and such. How much did the surrounding units try to conscript you guys as infantry. Since you were forward observers, did they try to keep you safe?

Alvarez – Keep in mind that we're talking about the infantry, a horrendous bunch of fighting young people who have been ill-trained and they show up there, they have clean clothes on so you can immediately identify them as non-knowledgeable individuals. They had no idea that their job was to protect us and certainly all they could think of were creature comforts. They wanted to stay warm and get food, etc. and stay alive. The knowledgeable people—bosses—would be the platoon sergeant, because the squad leader was somebody that had been there one day before the recruits. The platoon leader—the officer—who had just been there yesterday with clean clothes on also.

The company commander was a surviving lieutenant who had made captain, so he's been around for months so he knew a little bit about it. He knew that he needed our high capability, which was the 105 rounds landing in front of you. We only had two people who thought about us and that was the platoon sergeants and the company commanders. In all the books I've read, most of the division commanders—two-star generals—realized that to get their division to continually move, they desperately needed the help of the artillery and the artillery was controlled by the forward observer. He was the fellow who sat out there and spotted and destroyed the enemy!

Mozelle – Sir, do you have anything to add that you feel elaborates on any of these things we've covered today?

Alvarez – What I sent you was a bunch of stories that shows—remember, these were published in magazines—what I did as a young soldier, guided by corporals and sergeants and finally ends up as a last story of what I did as a colonel, where I inflicted leadership on my underlings. It shows you what happens when a person can progress from an 18 year old follower to a 49 year old leader and, to me, that's what the military service can do to an individual—a receptive youngster with potential. If you can survive, you can emerge as a boss. I was fortunate because after I left the service I took up some interesting jobs. I was the Human Resources Director for the state of North Carolina and then, later on, was the Community Planner for Cumberland County and admin stuff such as that. Then, later on, as I matured I ran department stores around town and then I taught management subjects at the community college and was a radio announcer for military shows, etc. All of these things came from the fact that I started out as a bumbling youngster and emerged as a no-nonsense winner. I think that what I'm saying is the military service is a wonderful instrument for challenging and then changing a person, if he wishes

and exercises his potential. If you've eaten smart pills, kept your health, and are lucky, you can emerge, as I did, with a career culminating with induction in the U.S. Army Hall of Fame.

Mozelle – Very wise words. Thank you very much, Col. Alvarez, for agreeing to document this very valuable interview.

Alvarez – O.K. In the next couple of days you can receive the pamphlet and it's got these stories. I hope you chuckle when you read them because they were made for humor.