JAMES MONTGOMERY BURGESS

WWII Oral Histories

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Atlanta History Center

Interviewer: Marilyn Parr

Transcriber: Joyce Dumas

**[Tape 1, Side A]**

**Interviewer:** Today is Wednesday, January fourteen, two thousand four. My name is Marilyn Parr and we’re at the Atlanta History Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Could you tell us your name and your date of birth, sir.

**Burgess:** My name is James Montgomery Burgess and my date of birth is May thirty, nineteen twenty-four.

**Interviewer:** And were you born here [inaudible]?

**Burgess:** I was born in Athens, Georgia.

**Interviewer:** Athens, Georgia. Could you tell us just a little bit about your early upbringing?

**Burgess:** Well, we didn’t live in Athens very long. I don’t remember that. I grew up basically in the South, mostly in Atlanta and I’ve lived here, except for two or three times when in my business I was in other cities. This has been my home all along. I lived in San Francisco, Chicago and Philadelphia. I graduated from North Fulton High School here and from Georgia Tech. So I’m pretty much of an Atlanta person.

**Interviewer:** Now were you…when you went to Georgia Tech, did you finish college before the war broke out?

**Burgess:** No, I had two years before I was called up in the service. And then after the war I went back and graduated.

**Interviewer:** So you were drafted?

**Burgess:** No. Well, I was an ROTC at Tech and they called up all of the ROTCs at the same time.

**Interviewer:** What year would that have been?

**Burgess:** Nineteen forty-three.

**Interviewer:** So the war had been going on for a while. You were in ROTC.

**Burgess:** Yeah, it’d been about a year and a half it’d been going on. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And you expected that eventually you would be called up.

**Burgess:** Oh, yes. Yes.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell us what that was like when you first actually, officially knew?

**Burgess:** You mean being called up or after I got in the service?

**Interviewer:** Either.

**Burgess:** Okay. Well, there were many rumors around at that time that they were gonna activate the ROTC, which they did. And they took us out to Fort McPherson and swore us into the service, sent us back to school and we were there for about two or three weeks and then we were sent to basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama. And we were there for seventeen weeks, about four months being trained. And then from then on, it became strictly a military thing. I was through with the school until after the war at that point.

**Interviewer:** In your training, you had basic training and then how did you get into a particular area, I believe you were in rifle?

**Burgess:** I was in infantry, yes. Well, I was in the infantry ROTC, so that was my…my ah…ROTC training. And then I stayed in that once I went into the Army itself. And we got infantry training at Fort McClellan and then later went to Fort Benning and got further training before we went overseas.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell us a little bit about that basic training? You went with your unit…I’m gonna stop.

**Burgess:** Is this okay the way…what we’re doing? Okay.

**Interviewer:** We just had a brief mike adjustment and we’re going to go back and continue the conversation. We were talking about your beginning basic training. And you were in the ROTC, so when you went to the first place, were you with fellas that you knew?

**Burgess:** Yes. In fact, it was…our entire ROTC class was sent en mass over to Fort McClellan, Alabama. Then we got basic infantry training over there for four months. Very hot cause it was in the summertime and the training was very rugged.

**Interviewer:** Were you anxious at that time to go overseas? What was the feeling amongst the…

**Burgess:** I think so. I think just out of patriotism, I think most people in my age group and all at that time were very anxious to go in the service and to be part of it. So in that sense, yes we were.

**Interviewer:** So you’d been following what had been going on in the war.

**Burgess:** Oh, yes.

**Interviewer:** Did you know at that point during your training, did you know which theater of operations that you would be sent to?

**Burgess:** No, it could have been either the Pacific or Europe. As it turned out, we went to Europe.

**Interviewer:** When you went to Europe, can you tell us what month and year that was?

**Burgess:** Nineteen forty-four. We went over in April. We arrived in…we left from Boston and we arrived in Liverpool, England, about the first week in May. We were just a general group at that point. We weren’t assigned to any particular division or anything. But we were…once we got to England, they assigned us to…in my case, to the Fourth Infantry Division and they were, at that time, had already been there and they were training their troops in southern England in Exeter and Exmouth and Portsmouth area. And we were brought into there. And see, this was very close. We got there in mid-May and the invasion was in the first week in June. So we only had about two weeks or three weeks to learn the people there that we were gonna with and be integrated into their operation. So it was a very tight schedule at that point.

**Interviewer:** And at that point, you didn’t know what the invasion plans would be, did you?

**Burgess:** No. We just…no. We just knew that we were ultimately going to invade Europe, but didn’t know where or exactly when.

**Interviewer:** So when did you find out and what was that like?

**Burgess:** Well, they sent us to a marshalling area, which was near Plymouth, England. And it was totally isolated from a security standpoint. There was a barbed wire in this big, wooded area. We were in tents. We had absolutely no communication in or out with anyone. And we were there for a week before they loaded us onto boats to make the invasion. So there was no in or out communication at all for that week. And we knew then that it was very…serious, yes.

**Interviewer:** It was real and it was going to happen.

**Burgess:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Were you apprehensive, excited?

**Burgess:** Oh, yeah. I think so. Because, you know, it’s so brand new. You’d never…had never been through anything like that before. In training, we had had exercises where we’d crawl on the ground and they would shoot machine gun, live machine gun fire over us. But this would be the first when someone was actually shooting at you and also the artillery that we had not had any of that shot at us. So, yeah. Everybody was very apprehensive about it because it was so new and dangerous.

**Interviewer:** So they’re loading you on the ships.

**Burgess:** They put us on the ship, yes.

**Interviewer:** What was your expectation of what was the first thing that was gonna happen?

**Burgess:** Well, we didn’t…they told us just briefly what was gonna happen. They told us this was the invasion. And they put us on an ocean-going ship—it was not a large ship—in Portsmouth, England. And we pulled out into the English Channel and we went almost to the French coast. And I might say one thing. The one group, not my group but another group ahead of us had gone out the night before and weather was bad and they had to come back in. We did not. We stayed in the port. And then when we finally went, we went all the way on over. They anchored the ship out of sight of land. We could not see the land. We could hear some guns going off. Then we climbed down what’s called a Jacob’s ladder. It’s a big rope, mesh rope ladder that’s on the side of the ship and they put us in LCVPs. That’s landing craft vehicle and personnel. And these were the landing craft. And the whole front of it is a ramp, a metal ramp. So they put us on that and then we went into the shore on the LCVP until it grounded on the sand there. And then the ramp came down and then we went onto the beach itself.

**Interviewer:** Before we get to the beaches…

**Burgess:** Okay.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell us a little bit about…you’re in first the larger ship and then in the LCVP. What are you seeing around you?

**Burgess:** Other ships just like that. [laughter] There were lots of them. And then there were a lot of warships there, too. The Navy had battleships and cruisers and all. They were firing at the time that we were transferring to the LCVP. They were firing into the shore. Again, we couldn’t see where anything was landing. It was dark for one thing. That was it. But there were ships all around us and LCVPs coming and going. It was just like a traffic jam almost. They would take a group in and then they would come back and get another group and go in.

**Interviewer:** So at…about the time that you hit the beaches, could you remember about what time that would have been?

**Burgess:** It would have been in mid-morning. My regiment was not the first one. There’s three regiments in the division and another one of the regiments went in first. They went in about six o’clock. Another group went in shortly thereafter. It must have been, I don’t know exactly. It must have been ten or eleven o’clock in the morning on June six.

**Interviewer:** And this…could you tell us a little bit about the number of men that were actually in the LCVP that you were in? And did you know all of them? Were you still together as a unit [inaudible]?

**Burgess:** Well, we were all the same unit. I didn’t know all of them though because I hadn’t been with them that long. Probably fifty were in there. There were no vehicles in ours. It was strictly just troops and we were lined up and we had to come off two at a time once we got to the grounding of the LCVP.

**Interviewer:** So the door comes down.

**Burgess:** The whole front comes off…comes down, yes.

**Interviewer:** Just tell us about those next few minutes.

**Burgess:** Okay. I have a funny little thing that happened there, too. [chuckles] At that time, I smoked. So I had taken a bandolier, which is a canvas or cloth type arrangement that you wear on your shoulder and you put cartridges in there, a clip for the M-1 rifle, in the little pockets in this sash that you have. Well, we were told ahead of time that they didn’t know when they could re-supply us with things like cigarettes, so we cut the straps off and sewed the bandolier inside of our field jackets and these pockets that fit…the eight-round clip fit into were exactly the same size as a pack of cigarettes. So I had ten packs of cigarettes sewed into my field jacket. Well, we got onto…when the ramp came down, I was the second one off on my side. The first guy had got up there and he and the one beside him got up and he yelled back at the man who was running the LCVP and said, “The ramp’s not all the way down”. At that point, he steps off and he’s about knee-deep in water and by that time, I had gotten into the middle of another man next to me and he let the ramp down the rest of the way and it flipped both of us over. We went head first and I cigarettes all over me. I had tobacco coming down my clothes. [laughs] Anyway, but I was frightened and I didn’t pay much attention to it at that point. We were being shot at. There were shells coming. The LCVP right next to us was hit and sunk. But most…I think most of the guys got off of it okay cause it was shallow water at that point.

**Interviewer:** And you just told…you were just pushing forward.

**Burgess:** Correct. And then when we got onto the…we fortunately had a fairly easy beach from a geographical standpoint. We went in Utah Beach and Omaha Beach was to our left. It was a lot rougher cause they had cliffs there and they had some severe fighting trying to get up those cliffs. Ours was very much flatter than that one was. And it was a flat beach and then sand dunes beyond there. And there’s one other thing I’ll tell you in a minute though. But anyway, we came and got off and as soon as I got up out of the water [laughing] with all my cigarettes, we went onto the beach itself and our assistant division commander was standing there. He was General Teddy Roosevelt. He was the son of President Teddy Roosevelt. And he was a brigadier general. He was the number two man in our division. And he was standing on the beach and he was yelling at everybody, “Get off the beach. Don’t get killed here. Keep going.” And all of that was easy as far as walking and that’s concerned. We were getting no small arms fire. There were no rifles being shot at us. Artillery was coming in. But see, up ahead of us were two other regiments of our own company that had gone ashore for several hours before. So they had pushed on through and it made it a lot safer for us to get in. But just over the sand dunes was a marsh area there and it was controlled by some canals that they had, some irrigation canals. And the Germans had opened them all up and flooded it as soon as the shelling started. And you had parallel roads off the beach that there were maybe four or five of them that got you across this marshland. But…and we had to use those. You couldn’t walk through the marsh. But the problem is the Germans had all those roads zeroed in with the artillery. So you had to pick your time when you ran down it. And that was probably five hundred yards that you had to go on those roads. That was the toughest part.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like it. What were the noises like?

**Burgess:** Lots of noise. [laughs] Great deal of noise. Explosions, ours and theirs both. But it was shocking because none of us had ever been through anything like that before. So, then I think finally you just go on adrenaline. You get paralyzed as far thinking about anything except what you have to do itself.

**Interviewer:** So even though you were trained to fight, there wasn’t an opportunity for you then to use your rifle. You weren’t shooting…

**Burgess:** Well, not at the moment. There was very shortly thereafter, as soon as we got to the hard land, then they started spreading us out and the units that had gone ahead of us were off somewhere else. And we just went on. We had objectives that we had to reach, a crossroad. We were going toward a town called Sainte Mere-Eglise, which is very well-known in that area. But we went in maybe a mile, something like that. And then turned and started toward the city of Cherbourg which forty, fifty miles away. It was our objective ultimately. We didn’t get there for two, couple of weeks.

**Interviewer:** So that first day though, you land around maybe nine in the morning or so.

**Burgess:** Except it would be a little later. Yep.

**Interviewer:** And then how long do you go that day before that day ended for you?

**Burgess:** A long time because at that time of year it doesn’t get dark until ten o’clock at night, in that northern latitude. So you fight as long as you can see something and then we stopped and dug foxholes and got in there. So that was it. So I’d say we were actually…of course, we’d been on the LCVP since sometime during the night. That must have been four, five o’clock in the…no, earlier than that. Two or three o’clock in the morning we got on it. So we’d been on it since then. Landed say eleven o’clock, something like that and then we were fighting until ten o’clock at night. And you don’t stop. You keep…guns are still firing all night.

**Interviewer:** Did you have a sense then that you were part of something really…

**Burgess:** Oh yeah.

**Interviewer:** You knew then.

**Burgess:** Yeah. With all those ships and all…everything that was going on, we knew it was large. And of course, we knew it was the invasion of Europe, which everybody had talked about before that.

**Interviewer:** And did you have a sense from your commanders and what you were doing that things were going well? Did you have a sense of how things were going that day outside of your unit?

**Burgess:** Yes and no. I think no, you don’t know overall how it’s doing because you’re too compartmentalized and everything. We knew what our company was doing and what our platoon was doing. But as far as the First Army or what another division was doing, we had no knowledge. You could hear sounds and you could figure they were inland, so they had landed. The paratroops had jumped the night before at midnight, around midnight. Two divisions there, eighty-second and the hundred and first. And one of our missions was to connect up with them. And we started connecting with them that same day, later in the afternoon. And they were…they came through us and then went on back to England after they had been relieved by us.

**Interviewer:** But you stayed on in France and your objective then…[inaudible].

**Burgess:** First…first…excuse me?

**Interviewer:** You said you were on your way to Cherbourg.

**Burgess:** Cherbourg. That was our big, main objective early on.

**Interviewer:** And you got that objective.

**Burgess:** We got that about the eighteenth or nineteenth of June, yes. So what…that would be what? Two weeks. Something like that. We had to fight all the way there. There were Germans everywhere.

**Interviewer:** And then how long did you stay there before you…

**Burgess:** Not long. They pulled us back out again and we leaped [sic] around and came back down to Saint Leu and there we had a big bomb raid. They used three thousand American planes that bombed in front of us. And then they got out of the way. Then we made an attack. We’re going south. And I didn’t get very far cause I got wounded. [laughs] Right after that I was hit with some shrapnel from an artillery shell and I went back to England at that point.

**Interviewer:** So at that point near Saint Leu is where is when you first got wounded.

**Burgess:** Yeah. Just about three or four days after Saint Leu, yeah. I was wounded on the thirtieth of July.

**Interviewer:** So from that point, can you tell us a little bit about what…you’re a wounded soldier. How does that work to be taken off the battlefield and sent back to England? Give us some details on that.

**Burgess:** Yeah. Well, I was hit in the leg so I couldn’t walk. I was helped out by some of the guys in my unit. We didn’t have a stretcher or anything like that, so I leaned on them and they got me back…I guess, several hundred yards until there was…there were some medical people there and they had a stretcher. They put me on that and carried me another few hundred yards to a Jeep. [coughs] Excuse me. Put me on a Jeep and I was taken from there to an aid station with was, I guess, a couple of miles more back. And I got my first treatment there. They had to cut my clothes…some of my…legs of my pants off and they had to work on the wound and all. And they gave me some…a bandage there. Then I was put in a…there, I was put in an ambulance and taken to a field hospital, very much like a MASH that you can…have seen on television. From there, I was put on a hospital ship and went back across the English Channel to Southampton and then they…then I was put in an ambulance there and taken to Oxford. And I spent two months in the hospital there recovering and riding bicycles a lot, [laughs] rebuilding my leg. And then went back to my unit again.

**Interviewer:** Did you expect when you got wounded and sent back to England that you would be back in France again?

**Burgess:** Didn’t know. You always…you were hoping you were going back to the States, [laughing] but…mine was not that bad. It was bad enough. But you just don’t know. You have no idea how serious it is or you know, what the recovery period is gonna be or how you’re gonna be after you recover. Excuse me. Could I have some water, please?

**Interviewer:** Sure.

**[tape stop]**

**Interviewer:** So we were talking about…you’d been…you were in England, you recovered and now you’re going back…

**Burgess:** Correct.

**Interviewer:** …to France. Do you join up with the same…

**Burgess:** I did. You didn’t always. Many times they sent people to other units. I made a lot of noise and said I wanted to go to my old unit, so they did. They sent me back there. I missed one thing. My division was the…were the first Americans to go into Paris to relieve Paris and I missed all that completely. I was in the hospital in England so I didn’t get to see Paris then. I saw it later. But by the time I rejoined them, they had gone back into the area of the German/Belgium border and the Siegfried Line, which was a big fortification that the Germans had were there. So I rejoined the unit there. And shortly after that we got into the roughest fighting that I was in. Much worse than the beach was the Hirken [phonetic] Forest, which was a major forest just south of Cologne, Germany. And we were in there for the whole month of November. I got back about the end of October. Shortly thereafter, we went into the Hirken Forest and as I say, we had a month of absolutely the toughest fighting that we had. I was later in the Bulge. It was not nearly as bad as Hirken Forest. Hirken Forest was the roughest thing that I saw.

**Interviewer:** What was different about it? Could you tell us what a typical day would have like?

**Burgess:** [laughs] Yeah. The roughest thing…first of all, there were excellent German troops there. Probably their best divisions, I think, that we saw at all were defending it. They were trying to protect Cologne as a major city in Germany. It would have been the first major city that Americans had captured. So there was a psychological reason, I guess, for them to fight there. So they had excellent troops. The terrain was very hilly and heavy woods, very heavy woods. And occasionally they’d have fire breaks cut through the woods and the Germans would bring the tanks into the fire…into the fire breaks and shoot at you with…and we had great difficulty getting our equipment in there because there were no lead-in roads from our direction. And then it was very cold. We’re into November then. We’d get periodic snow. And remember, we were living on the ground. We were living in holes in the ground. There were no buildings for us or anything like that. So it was very tough in that respect. So you had excellent German soldiers against you, you had bad terrain and you had bad weather. So the combination was about everything that you don’t want. And it lasted a month. It took us a month to get through this forest till we finally broke out and got through it. But I think that was my, without any doubt, was my toughest time. I also got a silver star in there. [laughs] So I was…that came much later. I got the award very much later.

**Interviewer:** Will you tell us a little bit about the service that warranted the silver star?

**Burgess:** Well, it was in the Hirken Forest and we were dug in in foxholes [sic] along a fire break. And we’d been there for a couple of days, I guess, fighting with the Germans and the Germans brought some tanks up into the fire break and started shooting at us. And then they brought some sort of vehicle. It must have been a halftrack or something like that. It had a loudspeaker on it. They were…they asked us…not ask. They demanded that we surrender. So we didn’t and they said they would give us thirty minutes to surrender when…

**Interviewer:** They did this in English?

**Burgess:** Yes. And…so at that time, I crawled out of the hole and went back to our company command post and got with the artillery forward observer and we called for artillery fire on those tanks. We got the tanks out of there. They pulled out when artillery shells started hitting all around them. Well then we got an order evacuate, to pull our…all of our troops out. So I went back up there and we got…one of them…I had to help one guy out. And we got out and we were missing one of the guys. So I went back and got him. He didn’t get the word. And I brought him out and they gave me an award for all that. I don’t know.

**Interviewer:** I’m sure both not only the country but that individual is very happy that you went back there.

**Burgess:** Yeah. I lost track of him. I have no idea what happened to him afterwards.

**Interviewer:** What’s his name?

**Burgess:** I don’t know. I don’t remember.

**Interviewer:** But you mentioned that it was for that the you got the Silver Star.

**Burgess:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** You got the Silver Star when?

**Burgess:** It was awarded…I don’t know. It was about the end of the war in Europe. I knew I’d been put in for it, but I didn’t know it was coming.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell us about that day that you got it? I know we’re kind of jumping ahead here, but…

**Burgess:** You mean when it was awarded?

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Burgess:** Well, they had…it was in Germany. It must have been after the war was over. And they had this big parade ground. They made the awards and they called…they had that…our whole regiment was there. And they called your name and you had to go up and you were given that out in this field. That was one award. The other important award I got was…well, I’m jumping ahead on it. Cause it…

**Interviewer:** It’s okay.

**Burgess:** Okay. At that point, I had gone into the beach when we landed in Normandy. I was a corporal. I went up, got promotions right up because people were getting killed and wounded and all and became a tech sergeant, which is the…it’s the highest rank in the individual platoon. The second lieutenant is the officer and the tech sergeant is the next ranking person. So I had reached that. Unfortunate, [sic] most of the…I guess it was unfortunate. Most of the time, I had no lieutenant. They would get hit or wounded or something. So I ended up running the platoon most of the time. So my company commander put me in for a commission. So I got a battlefield commission and it was awarded to me by George Patton, which was an interesting thing. It was in Luxembourg City where Third Army headquarters were [sic] and this was in January. They took us into…there were eight of us who were getting them and they took us into a building that…must have been a school building or something. It looked like that. And this very large room. It would have been a…to us it would be like an auditorium in a grammar school, except there were no seats in there. So we were lined up. The eight of us were lined up and we waited and we were very grubby looking cause we’d all been line soldiers who were dirty and unshaven and everything. And in walks George Patton [laughing] with his pearl-handled pistols and his riding boots on and all. A very striking man. And he walked in and spoke briefly to all of us. And then he came down the line and there was a major with him and the major had a clipboard with name and all on it. He would show it to General Patton and he’d stop at each one. He got to me and he said, “Where are you from?” And I said, “Atlanta”. And he said, “Atlanta’s a good town to go to. Columbus is terrible, but Atlanta’s good.” [laughs] Just to lighten the thing up. And then the major did pin my bar on my collar and then Patton went on. Then he made another little brief talk and left. But it was something I’ll never forget anyway.

**Interviewer:** That must have been such a highlight. Did you have an opportunity to write home to family to tell them about that experience then?

**Burgess:** Not entirely. I just told them I’d gotten the commission and I increased my allotment, I think, at that time. [laughs] I was single in those days so I didn’t have any responsibilities much.

**Interviewer:** We’re just gonna go back a little bit we left off [sic].

**Burgess:** Okay.

**Interviewer:** So after the Hirken Forest…

**Burgess:** Okay.

**Interviewer:** That was successful, but then you had the Battle of the Bulge.

**Burgess:** Yeah. And that was unexpected. Of course, it was a big surprise to all of us. Anyway, they took us out of the Hirken Forest and we were pretty well decimated as far as troops were concerned. A normal platoon, my platoon, would have had about fifty people in it. I had no officer at that time. I was a sergeant at that time. I had no officer, so I was responsible for it. And out of the fifty, we came out of Hirken Forest…we had about thirty. The others had been either killed or wounded. So we lost maybe twenty people in there. And then…so they said, “Okay. We’re gonna give you some replacements for the people that you had lost”. So I got nineteen replacements and the next day they evacuated twenty-one of my people with frostbite and frozen limbs. So I gained nothing. In fact, I lost two more in numbers. They took us at that point and moved us down to Luxembourg and [inaudible] rebuild the division and get us back at full strength again and we’d have a rest period in there. So we got down there and we dug in. We were outside of a town named Ekerknock [phonetic] and we were there about a week and the Bulge hit. And we were the southern corner of the Bulge and we held. And we were told, “You’ve got to hold” because Third Army Headquarters, Patton’s headquarters, is in Luxembourg City and it’s a straight line from where the German were coming in. So we did. We held. And we finally…well, the Germans were finally defeated, particularly [inaudible]. Then we went into Baston [phonetic] to relieve some of the hundred and first there, the airborne there. That was the Bulge. The fighting was bad. It was very, very cold and we had ice and snow everywhere. I can remember seeing our tankers, the guys running the tanks, get up in the mornings and come out with a blow torch and cut the ice off of the [inaudible] of the tanks so they could traverse their guns. They’d freeze up solid every night. Again, we were living outdoors in holes in the ground and it’s not very comfortable.

**Interviewer:** Did the expectation that the war was wrapping up…when did it feel like to you that it was close?

**Burgess:** I think immediately after the Bulge. We weren’t sure about the Bulge. We didn’t know what anybody else was doing other than what we were doing. If the Germans had gotten through all the way to the English Channel, which was their goal, it could have…it would have split our troops north and south and we’d been…devastating. But they didn’t. We held. Americans held. And then they had to pull back. The Germans had to pull back. They ran out of everything; ammunition, gasoline, everything else. And I think once they were defeated there, we started moving forward. We felt like it was over. And literally it was, in most instances, for us because from now…we crossed the Rhine River at a town called Wrms, W-R-M-S [sic]. From there, every day we just rode on tanks. We’d go from one village to the next and go in and clean up the village and then some other troops would come in behind us and they’d stay and we kept going. We’d go to the next one. We did that from…literally from February till May eighth, when the war was over.

**Interviewer:** Where were you at that point, when the war was over?

**Burgess:** We were at Badtolzt [phonetic], which is a spa and a very…a resort city south of Munich, right on the edge of the Alps. And there was snow on the ground May the eighth. [laughing] There was a lot of snow cause we were right on the edge of the Alps, so we were getting some elevation there.

**Interviewer:** How did you actually get word that the war was over?

**Burgess:** I don’t remember. I guess…somebody got it on a telephone call or radio call, something of that type. It was very frightening that night cause the guys shot guns up in the air and we weren’t sure whether we’d be shot by our troops or not. Cause everybody was very excited.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember where you were when Roosevelt and how you got the news?

**Burgess:** Yeah and we thought it was not true. We thought it was German propaganda that he was dead. That was what? April the thirteen, twelfth or thirteenth, I think. And we were in that period where we were riding tanks everyday. We’d stop at night. The only good thing about that trip was number one, we got to ride instead of walk. And number two, we got to sleep in a house at night cause we’d just take over a house in one of these villages and that would be it for the night. So that period was very comfortable. And the Germans weren’t fighting much then. They were pretty well through.

**Interviewer:** So when you got the news, you weren’t sure…

**Burgess:** We thought…yeah. We thought it was propaganda. We didn’t think it was true. It was probably the next day before it was confirmed that he had died.

**Interviewer:** Once the war was over, you stayed in Germany for a while longer. How long were you there?

**Burgess:** We were there…the was over on May eighth and they…we were in the Badtolzt [phonetic]area. We must have stayed there for a few days. I might tell one little story there, too. And then they moved us from there. But on our way from…into Munich. We did not go into Munich itself in the beginning. Another division had gone in there. Our mission was to go around Munich and cut it off so that they could not re-supply it from any other direction. That’s why we ended up down near Austria and Switzerland. But on the way down we were straddling the Autobahn that went into Munich itself. And the Germans…the airport at Munich had been so bombed and torn up, they couldn’t use it. All the runways had huge craters in them and all. So the Germans had gone out to the Autobahn and they paved over the grass median and they were using that as a runway for the airplanes. Then they’d back their planes off into the woods on each side of the runway. Also, when we came down there we looked over. We saw Dachau, the horrible prison camp. And after the war was over on May the eighth, about the ninth or tenth, two other lieutenants and I got a Jeep and we went back to see Dachau. And that was a shocking thing. They had been released, the prisoners had, for, I guess, two weeks by that time. The gates were open. They weren’t leaving. They didn’t know where to go or what to do. So we went in and we were looking around. And I can attest to the fact, there absolutely was a Holocaust cause I saw it. But while we were there, a Jeep came up with a major in it and he had a film crew and they filmed something there. They were starting to film everything there. So there must be a record somewhere of all of that. But he came to us and he wanted to know what we were doing there and we said we were just looking. And he says, “You’ll have to leave”. So he outranked us, so we got in our Jeep and left. But it was really shocking. It really got to you. I can remember it even today. But that was…Dachau was, I don’t know, maybe ten or fifteen miles outside of Munich. It’s in that area. But anyway, afterwards, we went back and then they moved our division up north of Munich in the neighborhood of Bamberg, Germany, and we were there from May eighth…about May the fifteenth when we moved, probably till the end of June. And then they put us on boxcars, freight boxcars. This is not first-class travel. [laughs] But we went across from Bamberg all the way across Germany and across France and went to Le Havre, France. And they had a big camp there. So we were there for a couple of weeks and they put us on ships and brought us back to the States. We got home in the middle of July. I did get into Paris. [laughing] I got in there for a couple of days. And it was very nice.

**Interviewer:** To make up for the time you [inaudible].

**Burgess:** Yes, it certainly did. And the other thing, that trip back from Le Havre, though, was not…we’d gone in convoy over when we’d gone through the year before, when we’d gone over to Europe. But on the way back we were just alone on a liberty ship and it took fourteen days. It was no challenge to the Queen Mary or anything like that for speed. But we came into New York City and went up the Hudson River. And they gave us a salute with the fireboats and all and our ship went on up under George Washington Bridge, up the Hudson, almost up to West Point. And then they anchored the ship in the river and they took us by boat over to the land. And there’s Camp Shanks, Calif…Camp Shanks, New York, was up there and we were there only a couple of days and then left and got home. So that was pretty much it. [laughs] That’s the war.

**Interviewer:** That’s pretty memorable. We’re about to wrap up. Was there anything else that you wanted to talk about or add?

**Burgess:** No, I guess not unless there’s, you know, some particular questions about it. The other thing is I finally got back home and went back to Georgia Tech and graduated. Got married. Three years later my wife was pregnant with twins and I got orders to go to Korea. I was in the reserves. And my twins were born, I saw them one day and left the next day on a troop train to go to Korea. And the next time I saw them they were fifteen months old. So, that was…my wife always said that I left on purpose, so I didn’t have to handle two girls at that age.

**Interviewer:** So you came from World War Two. Did you have any other training before you left for Korea? Did you have any inkling that you would serve again so soon?

**Burgess:** No. No.

**Interviewer:** So you left again, went to Korea and served there fifteen months?

**Burgess:** Fifteen months, yeah. Then came back home. Then I got out of the reserves immediately after coming back. [laughs]

**Interviewer:** Just quickly, in comparison, Korea versus World War Two, your experience, how different?

**Burgess:** I was…well, it was very much different for me because I was not in the infantry in Korea. I was in intelligence and although I was still in the Army, I was attached to the First Marine Division in Korea. And my job there was really was [sic] screening prisoners and refugees and things like that. So I was in no great danger in Korea, so I didn’t have that threat over me at any time at all. The weather was bad there in the wintertime. I just followed bad weather wherever I went apparently. It was not…the danger was not there. So it was very different. I was just anxious to get home and see my family. In Europe, I was…you always had that constant fear because people were getting killed at all times. And you never got over it. It was night. Day. And constant. So, that pressure is very different, I think, from anything else that I’ve ever had in life.

**Interviewer:** That leads me to my last question. The impact that your having served in the military had on the rest of your life.

**Burgess:** Well, I think it gave me discipline that you don’t normally get. I think it gave me a lot of memories and you…I guess those are the two biggest things. I think the other thing, the shock part of it is, I think of all the time I was in Europe, I got to the point very early that it didn’t bother me to see dead German soldiers, but I never got over seeing a dead American. It just…it always got to you. Okay?

**Interviewer:** Thank you so much.

**Burgess:** Okay.

**Interviewer:** This is Marilyn Parr again and we’re still with Mr. Burgess. We concluded the interview, but found that Mr. Burgess has a lot of artifacts and materials and we’re just gonna talk about some of those. So you had a story to tell about…

**Burgess:** About this medal here. This is a German medal and it’s called a “Deutsch A Muter” [phonetic] and it was given out by Hitler to German mothers who in effect signed their children over to the German government. And they agreed to put them into various youth programs and bring them along. I picked this up as we were in the final stages of the war when we were going between say Frankfurt and Munich. And we came to a small village. I don’t even remember the name of the town now. There was a large building in there. It was a hospital and so we went into the hospital and everybody in there were pregnant females. So we asked questions and found out that that’s what they were. They were in there and they were gonna give their children after they were born to the German government. And for that, they gave out medals, this being one of them. And on the back is Hitler’s signature and that’s it. And I got this from one of the supervisor women there. She had received it earlier in nineteen thirty-eight. This would have been nineteen forty-four, forty-five, I guess. So, it was that much earlier. I got that and that was one of the artifacts that I brought with me. I have some others here. This is off of a cap. It was a swastika that was on a German soldier’s cap and this was a breast plate that was from another one. And I have lots of things of that type. You wanted to find out something about what my family was doing here while I was gone and that sort of thing.

**Interviewer:** While your family was here, your Atlanta connections.

**Burgess:** Okay. At that point I was not married. I had been a student in college and my mother and father and two sisters were here in Atlanta. And this is…we went to Peachtree Road Presbyterian Church up at the corner of Matheson and Peachtree. And when I was awarded the Silver Start, my father gave them a copy of the citation [laughs], so they printed it in the church bulletin. And this is what this is right here. I have two maps here of my division. Half of it is from the beach up through Paris up to the German border and the other half is from the German border on down to the end of the war in Munich. This is a copy of the Stars and Stripes Newspaper the day the war was over. They had…you can see here everybody was very happy about that one. That’s pretty much it.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned being very proud of your…

**Burgess:** My division? Yeah. The Fourth Division right now is in Iraq and they are the division, they are the people that captured Saddam Hussein recently. And they’re there now and they’re taking some heavy casualties, but I’m always proud of them.

**Interviewer:** We’re gonna talk again a little bit about your experience in Korea.

**Burgess:** Okay.

**Interviewer:** Talked a little bit about it before. Can you again tell us, when were you notified, when did you know and how were you notified that you would be going to Korea?

**Burgess:** I was notified with some orders that were sent to me by the Army. I was notified in September of nineteen fifty. And I was told to go to Fort McPherson and get a physical and be prepared to be called up on active duty. So I did that. And as I said, my wife was pregnant with twins at that time. And they were born on December first. In the meantime, I went to Fort Mac and passed my physical. A funny thing there, the psychiatrist that you had to check was…he asked me, he says, “I only have one question.” And I said, “What is that?” And he says, “Are you happy about going back to the war?” I said, “Absolutely not.” And he says, “Okay, you pass.” So, anyway I was put back in the service then. I went to…first I went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. We were there briefly and then back to Fort Gordon over at Augusta. From there, as I said earlier, I got on a troop train after having seen my children for one day and we went to Camp Stoneman, California. And they put us on planes there and they flew us to Toyko, outside of Toyko to a Japanese, what had been a Japanese camp. And we were there for a couple of weeks, I guess. Then they put us on ships and took us into Pusan [phonetic], Korea. I was part of an organization called UNCACK, which was United Nations Civil Assistance Command Korea. And actually what it was, we did not function as a civil assistance unit. It was set up by the UN to essentially put the Korean nation back together after the fighting was over.

**[Tape 1, Side B]**

**Burgess:** So, we couldn’t understand why we were there yet, because it was not time. So, they said, “Well, you’re here and you’re trained.” So some of us were put into a group to serve as intelligence people. The First Marine Division did not have that type of organization in their structure. So I was attached to the First Marine Division the whole time I was there. And we were basically up around the thirty-eighth parallel and we spent our time back and forth in that area. Again, my activities there were quite different from what they’d been in Europe, because there I’d been in infantry and been fighting and this one I was basically just interviewing prisoners and refugees. And there were lots of refugees who came flowing through there. Trying to spot anybody who shouldn’t be there. And we found quite a few. And that was it. I lived there. I lived in the Marine Division Headquarters. And division headquarters is very different from a line company where the fighting was going on. I lived in a tent, had a stove in the tent. And it was very cold, but it was quite comfortable. We had hot food all the time. Had showers, which I had no idea existed in wartime because we’d had none of that in Europe. So anyway, came back after…I finally got to Korea in December of fifty, later December. In January of fifty-two, which would have been thirteen months later, got to come home. They brought us back to Japan. Didn’t fly us back. We had to get on a ship then. It was a slow trip. We came back to Seattle to…I can’t remember the name of the fort. Fort Lewis, Washington. And we were there for a few days. And then flew back to Fort Benning and I was released from Fort Benning then and got to see my children who were then fifteen months old for the first time.

**Interviewer:** During the time that you were there in Korea, what kind of communication were you able to have with your wife? Did she send you pictures?

**Burgess:** Yeah. Oh yeah. Constantly. And they were good. She sent me little flip books with the pictures in them. And she wrote a lot more often that I did and she kept me informed as to how they were coming and I heard lots of terrible stories about how bad these kids were, which was not true. But they…she got my sympathy anyway.

**Interviewer:** What were your children’s names?

**Burgess:** My children’s names? Well, the twin daughters, the one was named Jan and the other was named Kim. She was named after her mother. Her name was Kimsy [phonetic] and we called her Kim. That was a family name. And Kim lives in Atlanta now. She lives in Garden Hills. And Jan lives in California. The twins have split. And then I have one third daughter, about a year after I got back.

**Interviewer:** And her name?

**Burgess:** Her name is Katie. Katherine. She also lives in California.

**Interviewer:** So for you the military part was definitely going to be over.

**Burgess:** Oh yes. I got out of reserves at the end of Korea. I think I’d had enough. The one other funny thing, several years later, I guess, one morning when I walked into the kitchen, my wife was there and she said, “What are you doing here?” And I said, “What are you talking about?” And she says, “There’s a war going on in Vietnam. Why aren’t you there?” [laughter] I said, “I’m going to skip this one, I think.” So I didn’t go there.

**Interviewer:** In comparison to World War Two and you had said earlier that you were expecting that you knew that you were going to go.

**Burgess:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Korea was a different situation.

**Burgess:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** How did you feel about the war in Korea compared to World War Two?

**Burgess:** I didn’t question our need to be there. I questioned my need to be there. [laughs] I don’t think there were many others who could go who hadn’t been anywhere before. There was a small degree of bitterness there, I guess, that I got called back again five years after having been in Europe for a long period of time. But no, I felt that we did a good job there. I think we accomplished our purpose there. It dragged on, on and on with those talks that they had at Padamajam [phonetic]. I was gone when they were still talking about that. And that part was unpleasant, but I think we proved our point there, that we stopped the…first the North Koreans and secondly, the Chinese from taking over the rest of Korea. And I think all of Korea today exists because we fought that war and saved the country for them.

**Interviewer:** So you were here in Atlanta then when you got news that end of Korea. It wasn’t the same as victory in Europe when you were in Europe…

**Burgess:** Correct.

**Interviewer:** …when Korea was over.

**Burgess:** Right.

**Interviewer:** Tell us about that day when you heard and knew that Korea was over.

**Burgess:** Well, I’m not sure that I felt like it was completely over because it was a truce, but there was no…as you said, there was no victory and I think, again, there was a feeling of pleasure that we had accomplished what we were there for. But you never trusted the North Koreans, that they would live up to the agreements that they made and they even sit there today. And I think one of the great problems today is that we’re afraid that they may come back again. And the city of Seoul is within artillery range of where the thirty-eighth parallel is. They can actually reach it with artillery pieces. So it’s a very touch and go situation. So there’s not the feeling of elation like you had when the Germans had been defeated and later the Japanese were defeated. So, you never had that strong feeling like that after Korea. You just felt like, “Well, they’re not going to fight anymore. We’re not going to have anymore casualties.” But…and we stopped them where they are. But beyond that it was…that was it. Okay?

**Interviewer:** Thank you very much.

**Burgess:** Okay.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for taking the time again and share with us your artifacts.

**Burgess:** Okay.

**[end of tape]**

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WWII Oral Histories

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