

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

Question: Your name is?

Answer: Erik O. Petersen, don't make a Swede out of me.

Question: You'll be chatting with Adolph.

Answer: Adolph, that's a good German name.

Question: About as German as it can get.

Answer: My middle name is Otto.

Question: Oh really.

Answer: My uncle Otto was on Hitler's staff and he got executed by the German's at the end of the war.

Question: Was he from Denmark?

Answer: He was born in Germany but the family my grandparents moved to Denmark.

Question: Were they in contact with your uncle Otto during the war or?

Answer: No, we were cut off pretty well. My dad went back to visit Denmark in 1939 and he no more than got there that they were invaded by the German's and I didn't see him for seven years.

Question: Your father?

Answer: My father, yes.

Question: Did they inter him or did he just get stuck there?

Answer: He was born in Denmark so he blended in with the population so it was no problem even though he did work in the underground.

Question: So he must have been German speaking?

Answer: No, he was Danish, he was born in Denmark. My mother spoke German, my grandparents spoke German so I picked up on it.

Question: Did your mother get stuck over?

Answer: No she stayed in the United States. She ran a beauty parlor back in New York. Unfortunately she died in 1940 so when I wanted to join the navy that I couldn't prove that I had become a citizen even though they had become citizens I thought I was naturally a citizen through the immigration policies when the children automatically become citizens.

Question: How old were you?

Answer: Seven, I was only seven.

Question: And how old were you when your father went back to Denmark?

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

Answer: Nineteen.

Question: Just you and your brother was it or?

Answer: Just me and my brother. My brother joined the army in 1941 after Pearl Harbor. I tried to join the navy. I wanted to be a navy pilot and they wouldn't accept me because I couldn't prove that I was a citizen unfortunately and I had to wait and join the army.

Question: So were you still living on a farm at that time or?

Answer: No we lost it to the bank in 1932. The bank took it, in the great depression, you know. It was a nice dairy farm. About 10 cows, 300 chickens and.

Question: So what did you do during the depression did your father find something?

Answer: My father had been a journeyman carpenter in the old country so he went back to carpentry and my mother started a beauty parlor and she did quite well, in fact better than my dad did.

Question: And that was in New York was it?

Answer: That was in Long Island, Great Neck Long Island, New York.

Question: That is where you get your accent from.

Answer: Pardon me?

Question: That is where you get your accent.

Answer: I have a New York accent.

Question: Yeah.

Answer: A New Yorker thinks I have a Danish accent.

Question: Oh really, so you must speak Danish then?

Answer: Yeah I speak Danish and I speak German a little bit. It came in handy overseas. All through France we had French Canadians in my outfit and they were able to interpret real well but when we got to Germany I was the only one in my outfit that could understand German so they used me a lot.

Question: Do you remember Pearl Harbor when it occurred?

Answer: Oh God yeah.

Question: Where were you at, do you know?

Answer: I was in New Jersey working as a machinist. It was a Sunday I remember. Friends were visiting. We heard the news over the radio and we went into shock because we

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

knew we got both the Japanese and the German's and probably the Italians to fight. That's why I remember.

Question: Then you decided you wanted to enlist at that point?

Answer: Yeah. I was thinking the navy. I've been a kayaker most of my life and I like the water. I like to be near the water and I thought a small PT boat would be just ideal for me. We had a neighbor when we lived in Long Island, Walter B. Chrysler, he was an automotive czar I guess you might call him, and every day he would take his yacht to New York City instead of taking a train or a car. He could do that in about twenty minutes and it would take him over an hour by train. And that yacht was like a PT boat and I remember the name was Frolic, was the name of it, I knew the engineer and I went to school with the engineers daughter and I just loved that boat and I thought that would be ideal for me to be in a PT boat, or a fighter pilot. It didn't work out.

Question: So the navy had a problem with immigration?

Answer: Yeah, I couldn't prove I was a citizen but the army accepted me. And my brother who was in the 13th armored division at the time told me, be in a man's army, be a tanker, he talked me into it. So I pulled up stakes in New Jersey, drove all the way to California to the northern part of California was the camp. I can't think of the name right now, you know when you get to be 82 years old things slip away from you, but he was there as a sergeant major. But I joined the outfit and I was there for three days and they kicked me out because everybody entered the army through the selective service system, so I had to wait to be accepted by the selective service. So when they finally selected me I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky, and I became a tanker there and they had a program 36 weeks long and that's a long time. Normally its twelve weeks or so but we drove every vehicle the army had plus we fired every weapon the army had, and when we came out of there we were fighting soldiers. From there I became a tank driver instructor and then got sent overseas with the 16th armored division in 1944. I was a tank driver. I wanted to be a tank driver even though I'd gone to tank mechanic school. They wanted me to be a tank mechanic. I didn't want to do that I wanted to just drive a tank. I thought that was fun. It was as fun as flying an airplane. You could run over fences and jump ditches and stuff like that. I loved it. I guess you couldn't call it love but I liked it better than anything else. It sure beats walking in the infantry in the mud and all that.

Question: So where did you embark at?

Answer: In Normandy.

Question: I mean when you left the United States where?

Answer: That was we left Camp Shank, New York, and I think we went to Hoboken, cause this was all under the cover of darkness. You couldn't see. We went in a closed van and when we went up the gang plank of the boat it was in total darkness you couldn't hardly tell you were on a boat. And when we got to our bunks we had all our luggage and everything to put on our bunks and they were five bunks high on the boat. I hated that. It was the worst trip of my life on that ship.

Question: You remember that trip over there.

Answer: Oh God yeah. There were 39 ships in that convoy and they would go from storm to storm so we wouldn't be detected so I was constantly sea sick, I think I lost about 20

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

pounds. It made me think well maybe I shouldn't have joined the navy, but there again everybody else was seasick so I wasn't alone. Probably if they hadn't been that sick I wouldn't have been that sick either. I think the two times I was really frightened during the war was on that ship when we got attacked by submarines and the ship in front of us was dropping these depth charges called ash cans. And it seemed like we'd run over them and the concussion would knock the side of the ship in about a foot and the guys on the bunks on the side got thrown out and had to stand up for the rest of the night and this went on for a couple of hours but we got to Normandy I talked to one of the sailors that was on a destroyer and he pointed to a ship that was up on dry dock and he said see that gash on the side, we ran over a submarine.

Question: He was on his way to Europe and he ran over a sub, huh?

Answer: Yeah, we didn't the destroyer did.

Question: Huh.

Answer: We were fortunate.

Question: So did you go to England is where you're headed?

Answer: No we went directly to Normandy.

Question: When was it you got to La Havre?

Answer: That was well 1944, in January, no, no in December, right about Christmastime. Yeah.

Question: So was it settled pretty well at this point?

Answer: The front had been established pretty well in Normandy and we got brand new tanks and we started heading north into Belgium, Luxembourg, and I said oh gosh I looked on my compass and I says we keep on like this and we'll be in Denmark you know. Liberate my dad.

Question: What kind of a tank did you have?

Answer: Mostly all our tanks were the M4's or M4 chassis, the regular M43 were Sherman's and the M7's were the ones with the 105's on them and I knew them well because I went to tank mechanic school but we didn't like the fact that they have governor's on them. The engine was a Ford V8. It had originally been a V12 built by Ford for the air force. The air force rejected it, so they cut the block down and made a V8 out of it and was rated at 500 horse power at 2500 RPM, but being a mechanic I says this is war time I'm going to by pass that governor. It was a court marshal offense to mess with the governor and it was checked quite often so fiddling around with it I was able to bring the Rpm's up from 2500 to 3500 and I had a fast tank. My buddy asked me if I'd do it. I said I'll do it but promise me you'll watch the temperature gauge so you don't blow the engine because then we'll be in trouble. We could get a good 35-MPH out of our tanks.

Question: Is that your tank had a bigger gun on it?

Answer: What was that?

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

Question: Your tank had a bigger cannon on it?

Answer: 105.

Question: 105?

Answer: 105, yeah.

Question: Was this considered a medium tank?

Answer: Yeah a medium tank. The 105 we sometimes call a howitzer or an assault gun. Your charges could vary. It had seven bags of powder in it and normally it was a charge three, because the first three bags were larger and it'd taper down to smaller bags. A full charge seven you could fire at targets seven miles away but we liked to between a mile, three miles, or even closer.

Question: So I don't think anyone has actually explained that before. So you didn't use like a shell you loaded it like a 16-inch gun on a ship. You had a bag of powder and a projectile.

Answer: Well if you took the plain round and shoved it in the cannon, charge seven you know, but we would set the fuse for so many seconds and during the war they came out with a proximity fuse. The shell would go off when you got within 90 feet of the ground or so and our gunner had to go back to school for two weeks to learn about this fuse because it was kind of a top secret thing then. While the gun was gone instead of bracing our manpower they would send us off to different prisoner details. I was sent up to the rural pocket where they had about 220,000 German prisoners and I was there for the two weeks. That was a miserable place. One compound can you believe with so many. They even had a Russian outfit that came in, bellied right next to us. They had their women with them and everything, but they had no pity on the Germans. Even though these were prisoners.. they didn't walk fast enough they'd shoot them.

Question: You were there when the Bulge occurred?

Answer: No we cleaned up after the Bulge. I remember anti aircraft artillery unit 90 millimeters and when the German's came through on the Bulge they had deserted their weapons instead of lowering their 90 to shoot at the German tanks they had deserted. Each man got busted. I was on prisoner detail to hold the prisoners. I had no pity for them at all.

Question: So your tank was more of a howitzer, was it?

Answer: Yeah, it was a howitzer, yeah.

Question: So you wouldn't normally get in a tank to tank battle with that type of?

Answer: No you would back off and shoot indirectly. Get behind a building, hill or anything.

Question: It had a high arch?

Answer: Yeah, with a charge three, perfect. I have a picture of a tiger tank we knocked out. We just knocked the track off of it. That thing has so much metal on it you can hardly destroy it. You can shake them up pretty well and kill them but you can't knock that tank out.

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

Question: So after going up to the rear pocket to help police prisoners while your governor was away you kept on moving?

Answer: Yeah, I was assigned to different infantry divisions for fire support. Most infantry divisions didn't have enough armor for the Germans so it wasn't until I got to Nuremberg that we became a division.

I remember Patton, the first time we first got there. Patton says, he has the whole division out there, I want you men to wear a neck tie and you keep that neck tie on until you kill your first blankity blank kraut and then you take it off and you throw it away. Well after a couple of fire missions the word got down we could take our neck tie off because we didn't wear the complete uniform with the jacket. That was in our duffel bag, but we wear the complete uniform OD's with a field jacket and in the wintertime we always had scarves too and our field jackets in the tanks always got so oily and dirty that we would wash them out with gasoline.

Question: When did you first contact the German's after getting to Normandy. When did you first get.

Answer: We had fire missions almost immediately and of course indirectly, you don't actually see them. Tanks you don't see many people or if there are people they are probably down in the cellar or underground someplace. The city is bare when you go through it.

Question: Did you take incoming fire when you had fire missions or?

Answer: Oh, yeah, you could hear it sometimes behind you, mostly behind you.

Question: Do you remember what that was like?

Answer: Well, I can remember that really sunk into me, we had a fire mission someplace in Germany, I can't remember where but the big artillery behind us was firing over us and to hear those shells go over is the weirdest noise. See in those days you never heard a jet, now you're used to it, but in those days the first time you hear a jet it's weird but a 240 round going over you one right after the other its got the weirdest noise. I was thinking oh my God this is terrible, what is going on over there, what is going on over there. Anyway to make a long story short that was the only time I was really frightened, the rest of the time you are doing your job and you don't think about it or anything like that. When we got to Nuremberg in Germany, beautiful city, I'd been driving all night long because we did most of our moving at night in the darkness. The tank in front of you had these little dim cat eyes that you would follow. If they got close together you were too far away, if they got just about like this you know where you were, you can also feel the exhaust from the tank in front of you. I can remember seeing about four tanks in front of me making a lot of sparks like they were climbing over something, the next tank same thing, got to be my turn, I was looking for sparks but didn't see anything, but I climbed over it. It was like a bump. And then we went maybe a hundred yards and then we stopped for the night. We all slept under the tank and I hear this growling, what's that?, well the next morning when it got daylight, we were right next to the lion's den at the zoo and ah walked back to see what I ran over and it was the main gate to the Nuremberg Zoo and had been held up by two Alaskan totem poles and it was wrought iron so when the tanks went over it sparks were flying from tearing the metal and while we were there the next day I noticed this big German with a long leather coat, he must have weighed 350 pounds and was 7 feet tall, he was big and he walked with a cane and he was up there talking to the officer so when the officer saw me he said Pete come over here and see what this guy wants so I went up there and says what is going on in German. He told me he was the curator for the zoo and he had an elephant that had just been injured a day or

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

two before in the bombing and they want to have him put down but they don't have any means to put him down. Besides they needed the meat because the other zoo animals hadn't been fed for a week so the captain says ok Pete take your 50 off the top of the tank and go down and do the job for him. Oh ok. I did. My buddy, I carried the receiver and he carried the barrel and I took a short clip of maybe 12 rounds of 50 caliber and went down there and we walked to the elephant house and the curator says get up on the balcony and get him between the eyes. So I get up there and set up the gun and the elephant is looking right at me and I can't do this so my buddy says ok I'll do it. He couldn't do it either. We looked at the curator, he says, ok you do it, I showed him how to press the butterfly trigger and he did it. I had to turn. I couldn't see that. Being a tanker you don't see what you're doing, you see an explosion and that's all but I couldn't even look at that poor animal. By the time I had that 50 put back on its mount on the tank, I see all these German's with all these wheel barrows bringing it to all the carnivorous animals. From there we went down to the stadium where the whole division finally got together. That is the first time I felt so good about it. Now we're a division again. Now we're a division. We're working on tanks there and I remember hearing clomp clomp clomp clomp clomp, it's General Patton on his white horse, he says how are you doing boys and he clomped off again and we felt real good about our division so we moved out from there and

Question: Was that the famous Nuremberg Stadium where they held their rallies?

Answer: Yeah. Yeah.

Question: So when you see pictures of that it is sort of awe inspiring when you see the stadium. Was it?

Answer: Oh yeah. They took down that big Nazi swastika. They had a big swastika in the back. Some of the engineers took it down.

Question: MMMM

Answer: I think they blew it off of there.

Question: You had gone through how much of Germany to get into Nuremberg? How far is it into Germany?

Answer: Nuremberg is about I would say two thirds of the way east towards Czechoslovakia.

Question: So had you been fighting all the way up to there?

Answer: Yeah, we had missions.

Question: Going from town to town. Did you in your job in your tank did you enter towns when they were sort of occupied?

Answer: Any town you go into you don't see anybody. Everybody is down in the cellar and if there is any opposition it is behind a wall or behind a building or something like that. I remember passing a building once and I saw three tanks one was about ten to fifty feet beyond the other one and each tank had a hole through the turret. The first got hit, the second got hit and the third got hit and I had an eerie feeling about passing that tank because it killed most of them.

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

Question: Was that a moment when you realized how dangerous it could be?

Answer: Yeah, you do, but you're still busy. You're thinking more about what you have to do than what could happen.

Question: Did you ever have anyone go after you with a panzer paunch or anything?

Answer: No, no, we didn't.

Question: Your engine ran on gasoline?

Answer: Everything in the army ran on 80-octane gasoline including the light airplanes.

Question: So it'd be a pretty good fire if you got hit.

Answer: I remember once the gas truck came up to supply us with all these five gallons cans and he looked like a watering truck with all the gas leaking out you know. And I says don't park near us, don't park near us, if somebody lights a match we're done. So I got to talk to him after awhile and I says where did you get all those holes in your gas tanks. He asked us to use them first before all the gas leaked out. He says about thirty miles back. That shows you the armored division gets through the lines you know when it's quiet. Once you get through the lines it's quiet.

Question: Even though you pass in enemy territory.

Answer: Yeah. Yeah. We're used for breakthroughs. The armored division is used mainly for that not so much to hold the line. We exploit is what we do.

Question: So you'd break through the lines at a certain point and the sides would still be established.

Answer: Right, and they could close in behind you too like this poor guy in the gas truck, I felt sorry for him.

Question: Did these towns that you went into were the German's pretty diehard or?

Answer: Most of them were pretty well subdued. Very seldom would you see a diehard German except in the army. They had Nazi's in each unit to make sure they followed the party line, more or less. It got so we would realize that. We had a system. I cut up a Nazi flag and made handkerchiefs out of it and when we had them line up I told them (in German) the war is over. This is what you have to do and take out my Nazi handkerchief and blow my nose in it and the guys would watch. The real Nazi would go berserk they couldn't tolerate that, we would separate them and the rest of them were ordinary docile soldiers. No problem.

Question: So you must have talked to quite a few prisoners then?

Answer: Yeah, oh yeah.

Question: So what was the, what type of conversations did you have now they had surrendered?

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

Answer: Well, I don't know if they lied to me or not but most of them said they were drafted, they are no different than we are, they are just fighting for their homeland. They weren't Nazi's.

Question: Did you ever develop any report with some of the fellows?

Answer: After the war I did. This photo outfit I joined after the war we had a German photo outfit had been captured and we used them to work for us developing pictures and stuff like that. I got to talk to one guy he had a terrible scar around his neck and he had been on the Russian front and he had gotten shot and he was laying there and some Russian took a knife and tried to cut his throat you know. He survived. Poor guy he had a terrible scar.

Question: So some of the soldiers you were guarding were left over from the Bulge from that offensive?

Answer: Yeah, we had some of those but most the biggest compound was the Ruhr Pocket which was. I looked at them, I could tell they were old men or young boys and we'd march them from one place to the other. The young boys would help the old men. Well, 60's and 70's you know, even some looked older than that. Here I am 80 years old talking about stuff like that, like it happened yesterday, but you know there are so many things I've forgotten I've just wiped out of my mind, unpleasant things you know.

Question: So when was it when you got there that you thought this is a horrible place and this is a horrible thing. Was there a moment like that where you saw some wounded or?

Answer: When we got to about 75 miles out of Cologne and the bombers came over to bomb Cologne and we counted roughly 5,000 bombers but we could hear the bombs dropping and we knew people were getting killed by the thousands and it kind of hit home, it kind of hit home. I says gee. Can't we settle this some other way? Can we bring a tank in there? No. It actually darkened the sky and that kind of hit home. But as we progressed further we saw all these bombed out cities one after the other. After awhile you go miles and miles of bombed out this and bombed out that and you get used to it and you don't see any young men around working, it's all the old men that weren't drafted carrying wheel barrows or bricks trying to repair something that's livable.

Question: So as you're moving through these towns you're advancing and the German army is moving out and then you come to these towns and take care of any resistance and the people do they, did you stop in towns?

Answer: No we never stop in towns. They also had a rule or policy that we were not allowed to fraternize with the German's and this went on all the time we're in Germany. I couldn't speak to a German unless I was appointed to talk to a prisoner or like that. But we weren't allowed to fraternize.

Question: So you would camp out, your division wouldn't stop in a town, they'd keep on moving.

Answer: No, no, you don't set up camp in a tank outfit you sleep in it or under it.

Question: So you stop whenever?

Answer: I remember when we crossed the Rhine we had been moving for three days straight and they gave us pills to keep us awake and they said this is a rest camp you bring

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

the tanks in here and oh while you're in there resting put the end connectors on the tank. You know like putting tire chains on a car the whole track has to come off and you put the end connectors on. That's a job. That took about, well it took one day, but for most the guys two days. I was a tank mechanic I knew how to do it real fast, but it took hammers, assigned a guy a sludge hammer, went real fast had to lay the track out but they tried to do it with the track on, oh God.

Question: So that was three days of running.

Answer: At best, but you know we slept, they let us pitch our tents which we hadn't done for a long time and we slept straight for 24 hours. I couldn't believe we missed a whole day and missed the meals. Each bridge in Germany has the silhouette of the largest vehicle that can go over it. Most bridges have the silhouette of a truck. A truck is what, two tons, two and a half tons at best. Well here we are 35 ton tanks, so needless to say a lot of bridges went down. I can remember one bridge we got to it, the tank was down about twenty feet down and the engineers came up with a bailey bridge and put right over the top of the tank and used the tank as a base to hold it up. Those guys that is their home you know, they stay right there. And I remember crossing bridges naturally they didn't become bridges after we crossed them with a silhouette of a motorcycle and I noticed most of the bridges had railroad tracks as supports over little creeks and bridges and stuff like that now some of the towns that settled near rivers had stone bridges and they usually had one after the other buildings on top of the bridge like a tunnel you go through that tunnel was wide enough for maybe two single horses and wagons to go through and pass one another but our tanks didn't have a foot on each side. I remember the first time we went through we just eased through you know but then we got used to it you know it was a challenge to not slow down to keep right on going. I remember looking up ahead at tanks going through and I could see all the siding shaking and the plaster falling off the building up above the bridge so he didn't do a good job of going through it but he made it alright, didn't hurt the tank any.

Question: So all this time the infantry is moving with you?

Answer: No, no, the infantry is behind.

Question: Coming up in tracks?

Answer: The army division the infantry doesn't walk, it rides. Normally they have twenty men to a truck, two and a half ton truck. That's twenty men with their baggage, but when we took prisoners we folded up the seats on the truck and could put 75 prisoners in it standing up. Yeah.

Question: Did the infantry ever ride in the tank with you?

Answer: No, no never, that's very dangerous to ride on the outside of a tank, they would never allow it. I know passing through France they had the FFF, The Free Fighting French. They wanted to join us on the tank but we had to kick them off. They wanted to go with us and fight the Germans. They couldn't understand it.

Question: Did you pass through France real quick or did you?

Answer: Several months.

Question: So were the French people, did you go through towns liberated before you got there?

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

Answer: Yeah, there was quite a bit of devastation where we went through.

Question: The French were they nice to you?

Answer: They tolerated us. The Belgium people were more pro American than the French were. I think there might have been a little jealousy or envy, I don't know. I always felt that. The farmers of Normandy, we were parking our tank and I saw this farmhouse so I says gee I see all those cows, I wonder if they have milk, so I go over with my canteen to the barn, so in my high school French I say (in French) got milk?

Qui, right in my canteen. Well it was cold that night and the next morning I had my cereal with real milk cause we were only issued powdered milk and powdered eggs and you get tired of that. Our rations on the tank are mostly D-rations that come in a big box and you put down where the ammunition is under the floor board so we could probably last a month no problem, but its nice to get an occasional fresh egg, milk or butter or something like that, bread.

Question: What was a D-ration like?

Answer: Pardon me?

Question: What was a D-ration like?

Answer: D, they are more like chocolate bars and canned Spam, like K-rations, we didn't get much of that it was mostly D-rations. We had coffee, we had a little burner, gasoline burner, that we could make coffee, we did that a couple of times a day even inside the tank.

Question: So life inside a tanker was definitely better than being an infantryman.

Answer: Oh, I would say. If I had to do it all over again it would be definitely. Living in a tank through the winter of '44 and '45 at night time when we got to sleep I had to stay in my drivers seat but I could raise the drivers seat up even with the transmission which is always warm after driving and the instrument panel is all level. I put my sleeping bag across that and that's where I slept and I remember sometimes the transmission sometimes was so hot I put on the asbestos glove we use for handling hot shells I put it down so I wouldn't burn my butt. I remember complaining to the medic, I've got a sore butt. I don't know what is it so I'd like to have it checked out. About a month later his jeep comes up looking for Petersen with a red cross on it, it came from medivac someplace. He said are you Petersen, yeah, get in the jeep, I says what is going on, I've got to take you down to medivac. I couldn't understand it so I started thinking, my brother is in the south Pacific in fighting there, they are going to break the news to me he got killed. So I'm praying and praying you know so I finally think if I'm the sole survivor they're going to send me home so I don't want to leave my buddies you know so I made the decision I wasn't going to leave my buddies. We got to medivac and I go in the tent there and the doctor says, Petersen, let's see your butt. Oh thank God. So that was a little rash that turned out to be T-cell lymphoma. I don't know how I got it or what but I still got it.

Question: In a tank crew, besides you the driver, how many are in the tank?

Answer: Our crew had seven, I was the driver, the tank commander, the gunner, the number one man, he is the one that cocks the gun and a loader and two ammo preparers to prepare the ammo. You take it out of the canister, the shell is inverted and stuck into the shell, you take the shell out and if it says charge four you take out three and tie with a little

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

string so you cut the string off the end of the shell casing and put the blanks in put the shell on and then set the fuse quick. Fuse quick goes off right away. Fuse delay whatever or timed fuse, 19 seconds whatever. It's effective to see six shells going off the same time maybe 100 feet off the ground. It's like watching fireworks. You're really proud when you see something like that. That's why my hearing is going, but 90 millimeter. That'll do it.

Question: Pretty loud?

Answer: Oh yeah. The 90 millimeter I became a tanker first sergeant later on, and that 90 mm on the old M26 had so much concussion that a rock as big as your head sitting on the ground in front of the muzzle would bounce off the ground about 4 to 5 feet and the muzzle throws everything back at you. The first time I fired the 90-millimeter I think I must have blacked out for a couple seconds. It was. As my hearing got used to it I became used to it That's why they'd tell me don't worry you'll get used to it, and that's why I'm wearing hearing aids.

Question: With all seven people inside the tank was it cramped?

Answer: Oh yeah it was.

Question: That one time when you were moving constantly and not sleeping

Answer: I'm the only guy not sleeping. They could take naps any time they wanted to.

Question: So you were just moving as fast as you could.

Answer: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Question: There was no other driver than you?

Answer: The loader I broke him to be my assistant, he was a good driver, those tanks you had to double clutch you know and its not too easy to drive one. You have these laterals to steer with that worked through the transmission and the clutch was just about that big and the gas big but the gear shift was pretty much standard except you had an extra gear and then reverse you had to press a button.

Question: How many gears were there in a tank like that? How many gears forward?

Answer: You had four forwards and one reverse and downshifting you had to double clutch. In the new trucks now a days probably don't know what I'm talking about but the old guys know and to do it smoothly is important to the passengers you shook up. You shift a lot driving a tank and they hate you if you shake them up too much anyway the new tanks are so modern and so complex several years ago I got to ride an M-1 tank. I just last year got a computer and its going to take awhile to get used to that but everything is computerized, shells and everything.

Question: Did some people not make it as a tank driver? Were there people they wanted to train as tank drivers that just couldn't learn how to drive a tank?

Answer: Well if I was going to choose a tank driver I don't want a 130 pound driver because these laterals when you pull on them to stop a tank you have a safety belt to hold you back otherwise you pull yourself forward and you can't stop that tank. But I see these

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

little guys they put their feet up on the wall and then pull back on the laterals. I don't want that for a driver.

Question: It takes a lot of muscles to drive a tank?

Answer: When you line up a tank crew back in those days you could always tell who the driver was, he had these big arms. I could chin myself with one arm in those days.

Question: So your father was in Denmark all this time and you had not heard from him at all?

Answer: No we had not heard from him but through the Red Cross we were able to notify him that mom had died and that's all.

Question: So he didn't even know that his wife had passed away?

Answer: Not until we sent through the Red Cross.

Question: So were you worried about him all that time?

Answer: Oh definitely, yeah.

Question: You were not sure he survived the war?

Answer: I had no idea, no idea, but through the Red Cross my brother in the South Pacific got his address and he sent it to me so after the war. Right away I put in for a leave to go to Denmark but it was turned down every time because it was not occupied by the American troops. The area between us was Danish. I got turned down so I got stationed before I got shipped home near Wiesbaden Near SHAEF headquarters where Eisenhower was. So I took one of the jeeps I rode up there parked right in front of it. There was two MP's standing at the entrance they said you can't park there, but I didn't care. I wanted to go in there and demand a leave to visit my dad so while I was arguing with these two MP's a colonel came out and he said to me what's the matter son, and I tell him the story. I want to go see my dad and they won't let me take leave to go see him. He says come with me, we go inside he types out a leave notice for me to go, fifteen days in Copenhagen plus travel time. I says WOW, I can take all the time I wanted to. I went back to my outfit and I showed the first sergeant and he says WOW how'd you get that. I said I went to SHAEF Headquarters, he says OK, pack your bags you're on your way, I'll see you when you get back.

Question: So how did you travel up to Denmark?

Answer: I had a guy take me down to the train station. Those days military travel was free. Trolley cars, trains, buses, whatever. So I took the train up to Amsterdam and Holland and then says WOW what do I do now. So I talked to somebody who could speak English and take this bus to someplace and I run into this other army sergeant and he was going to the same place I was and he said let's buddy up. He couldn't speak Danish and I could. We got rides in trucks and different things up to the border between Germany and Denmark and I got to talk to the official at the border at the gate and I could speak Danish with him and he said there is an American navy captain that comes by here every Thursday. He is an engineer and he is working on Copenhagen Kastrup Airport and he is in charge of it. He comes in a jeep and maybe you can get a ride with him. Take you right to Copenhagen. So sure enough he shows up and he's got a driver navy guy and he has his luggage in back. You know how small a jeep is. Well here are the two of us with our luggage. So it takes a few hours to drive up to

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

this town of (Olmes?) Which is a big coastal city on the coast of Jutland And then we take a ferryboat over to Copenhagen. The train goes on the ferry boat, cars, buses, and we go down there standing at the railing this sergeant and I looking at the water and the sights and this guy comes down all dressed in black you know really formal looking and says the captain would like you join him at his table for dinner. Wow. We followed him up there and sure enough the navy captain and this ships captain was having dinner and we got to sit down with him all the way to Zealand where Copenhagen is you know. So we get to Copenhagen and he drives us with the jeep. Where to drop you off? I know the street cars, drop me off anywhere near a street car, I know where I'm going so my side kick is still with me. I thought I'd get rid of him, so we go to where my dad was supposed to be and he was visiting his mom down on the farm for Christmas. It was Christmas eve now, so we stayed at his place and the neighbor took us to the train station the next day and took the train down to (Neswick?) in Zealand. I got off and the sergeant had to go further a couple more stops to his family.

I get off I got my duffel bag and they have never seen an American uniform you know and I was hitchhiking trying to get a ride even a horse and wagon to go by you know. But I had to walk all the way to this town called Neswick about two miles away. And I seen this old guy walking down the street with his son and I says I'm looking for widow Petersen, that's my grandmother's name, widow Petersen, she's a widow, don't know her he says but I'll ask my dad right here. Ok so, that old guy with a beard he didn't know her either, but I'll ask my dad across the street and the old guy with a cane comes out there. Oh I know that girl, that's my grandmother, so he tells he tells his great grandson with a bicycle you take that bag, you take him down to the house so and so. So I went down there and that's the first time I saw my dad in seven years. He almost went into shock. He had no idea where I was, if I was dead or alive or what so it was a happy reunion.

Question: Probably a great thing for him to find out you are ok.

Answer: Oh yeah.

Question: He was probably pretty proud of you too I'll bet.

Answer: Oh he was Especially since his own brother my uncle had joined the Gestapo. Of course naturally when the war ended he took off for Sweden. He wouldn't stay. No good. my Uncle Freud. I asked about him and my dad wouldn't tell me. We don't talk about him and it wasn't until about thirty years later I asked my cousin, whatever happened to Freud, oh didn't you hear about that, three months before the war ended he joined the Gestapo and he packed up and went to Sweden.

Question: That is something, isn't it?

Answer: Yeah.

Question: So I suppose the family never saw him again?

Answer: Wouldn't have anything to do with him.

Question: Probably not very safe in Denmark after that.

Answer: No. Had another uncle that joined the German navy as a pianist and they gave him a good deal but my dad wouldn't talk about him either. But can you imagine my grandmother when she saw me in an American uniform and she had her own son in a German navy uniform. You know months before that.

Erik Petersen

Tape 1 of 2

Question: Your grandmother probably hadn't seen you for years and years.

Answer: She hadn't seen me since I was seven.

Question: Did they show you off in town to everybody?

Answer: Oh yeah yeah. Good God. I remember sitting on a trolley car, cause I spoke Danish you know, there were two women sitting across from me sitting down. What is he? They were referring to me. The other woman said I think he is Canadian. I let them talk awhile you know then when I finally got up I said, no, I'm an American soldier.

Question: They just didn't expect it huh?

Answer: No, in Europe when you go from town to town in those days you have to report to the police. My dad said we've got to report you to the police. I said what for, he says when you move around from one city to another you've got to let them know. I said I'm just visiting. Well, we got to do it anyway especially when you're visiting. We went down to the police department and he says well we can't do anything about that you have to go see the American consulate and report. Well we went to the American consulate and he says oh we've had groups of American soldiers go through here in their parties but you're the first one that's come through here alone. I showed them my leave papers and everything so it was amazing.

Question: So were you born in this town where your dad was at?

Answer: Copenhagen, Copenhagen