

WWII: Frank Bowman

The World War II as told to Patchwork by Frank Bowman

Interviewed by Vanessa Reed, Katura Dove, and Abby Sterneman in the Spring of 2003.

Patchwork: What's your name?

Bowman: Frank Bowman

Patchwork: What was your rank in office?

Bowman: Oh, I was a private.

Patchwork: Private?

Bowman: Once in a while they would make me a PFC but uh I was young and foolish, I went back to a Private pretty quick.

Patchwork: What is a PFC?

Bowman: It's Private First Class.

Patchwork: How old were you in the war?

Bowman: I was 18.

Patchwork: And you left before you got your diploma?

Bowman: Yeah Oh Yeah, I left high school and went to work at the ACF.

Patchwork: And that is?

Bowman: American Car and Foundry, we made tanks.

Patchwork: What was your job in the war?

Bowman: Well, I went to a radio repair school, at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, then I went overseas as a radio repairman, when I got to England they didn't need radio repairmen, so they made me a truck driver.

Patchwork: What branch of the military were you in?

Bowman: I was in the Signal Core

Patchwork: And that is?

Bowman: Well our job was communications between the Divisions.

Patchwork: Ok

Frank Bowman: We'd lay telephone lines and then pick them up and carried radios such as they were, they were big back then, they were the size of that cabinet back there, and you know what there like today.

Patchwork: Um, were you drafted or did you volunteer?

Bowman: I was drafted right here with this bunch right here.

Patchwork: OK, how did the town change when you returned?

Bowman: Uh didn't change too much.

Patchwork: Were you changed?

Bowman: Yea probably, yea I don't know to tell you the truth, I was sort of wild when I went in, they tamed me down a little bit.

Patchwork: Ok, How has being a veteran changed your life?

Bowman: It hasn't changed my life at all, I just worked hard all my life, and just like everybody else I guess.

Patchwork: Uh, we know this might be difficult but would you be able to describe what it was like over there, or what you did on a day-to-day basis?

Bowman: Well, its sort of hard to say, being a truck driver, I was all over France, Belgium, Germany, the main function driving truck was hulling gas, two hundred five gallon gas cans on a six by six truck.

Patchwork: Did you see anything out of the normal while you were over there, any battles?

Bowman: Yea uhh, No I was shot at and shot back but I was just lucky I guess.

Patchwork: Did you ever have to do anything like defending your self?

Bowman: No the uh only thing I had to do was jump out of the truck; you can imagine hauling a thousand gallons of gasoline...

Patchwork: Um have you kept with any of the men or women you met in the service?

Bowman: Uh nope all the guys I met went to New Mexico, this bunch here like a bunch of flies scattered to the four winds, only one of them I had anything to do with was from Berwick, his name was Gary, he came back home he was a barber up there, I think he still is.

Patchwork: How does the new American policy like in regards to Iraq?

Bowman: Like you mean compared to back then? Hard to tell, we were forced to fight; now were sort of forcing someone else to fight, which is debatable I think.

Patchwork: How has the military changed since when you served?

Bowman: I can't really say because of by the looks of the equipment they have they are really better equipped than we were. Our main weapon while driving truck was a Bazooka, ya know what that is, its kinda of a rocket launcher.

Patchwork: Did you ever have to use that?

Bowman: Oh yea I fired it, but I hope to no effect it didn't hurt anybody, we'd uh drive the truck I remember the worst trip I ever had we had a load, convoy going into Berlin, we were going down Hitler's Reichsbahn, I don't know, ya ever hear of that. That's a big eight lane highway he has down there, we had to turn off to go into Berlin, then we were ambushed, we had to abandon trucks. Three or four of our truckloads of gas blew up, I was lucky. But we made it in! And a I got up and loaded, unloaded gas right next to General Patton's tank don't know whether you ever heard of him or not he was too young Patton ?? carried two pistols at his side and ah I loaded gas unloaded gas right next to him there and then we turned around and got outta there just as fast as we could, of course, but but that's as close as I ever come to that combat. He was on one side of Berlin and the Russians over here on the other side I never got to see any Russians but they were right there. I may have seen them and didn't know, didn't recognize them what scared me more than anything was travelin down these roads and see the German prisoners comin out roads little side roads carrying their guns as if they were going to shoot somebody but yet they were surrendering. But, heh, seems so funny they way things happened I tell ya they surrendered by the thousands. The worst job I had I guess while I was in the service was working for graves registration, boy I hated that. I was a literally about 4 of us, heh, called us hot shot truck drivers and they sent us down to a town headquarters and we picked up a bunch a bunch of replacement guys we went over to the repo depo and we each got four four men, I had a sergeant with me, staff sergeant, and we would patrol the Rhine River, the Rhone River looking for bodies, and don't think that was a pleasant trip. It was not fun. You have to see a body that is floating in the river for three or four weeks to aa appreciate it.

Patchwork: Was there any family members that were a hurt when you left like that didn't want you to go?

Bowman: Oh no, no, couldn't wait to get rid of me! Yes I remember I had an older brother that was in he is he's gone now, but he went over and went in on the invasion of Africa when he got ashore all he had on was a wrist watch and a hard hat, and a course his clothes and he didn't have any gun no ammunition they didn't have anything they'd never made an

invasion before you know that was the first time. So they had a rough time, I would too. But he survived and went all through Africa over into Sicily and up into Italy.

Patchwork: How long did all your training take from when you first went into the service to when you finally went into ???

Bowman: I a tha That's hard to say cause you're always training, you're training from day one. Course you go through basics training that really tried to put some muscle on you I guess. Gets you ready to go, but a I didn't like I said this situation they got going on now they should gather up us old men and send us over, rather than all the young guys we'd get it over with in a hurry hopefully!

Patchwork: Were there any unique things you saw over there?

Bowman: Yea! I uh enjoyed that uh I didn't like the job of grave registration pickin up bodies, the castles the old German castles along the Rhine and Rhone River at night they're beautiful uh I thought some day I would get back there to see em. I really don't have the urge.

Patchwork: What was your most powerful or most unique memory of the war?

Bowman: Graves Registration stuck with me. The odors and the smells stuck with me.

Patchwork: What was your most positive memory of the war?

Bowman: When the war ended haha, nah I'd say when the war in Japan ended. When the war in Europe ended we convoyed down to Masay ya know where that is on the Mediterranean? We were stationed at a staging area there and we equipped for the Philippians when the war in Japan ended we were out in the middle of the Atlantic that boat we were in just sat there and went right around in a ring. A whole convoy lined up just going around in a circle. Then the captain came on and said this boats destination is Norfolk, Virginia. Boy what a day that was!

Patchwork: What happened?

Bowman: Well the war was over in Japan we went right to Norfolk, Virginia, third boat in. We went in there and throwed us ashore all our baggage and everything we waited till the next boat to come in and got caught in a hurricane and the whole convoy had to go back out to sea and keep circling until the hurricane passed. I was in wis the with the discharge processed and we were sent home for thirty days. I was about fifteen days before the rest of the crew got in from that convoy. But you have to be on one of those troop ships to appreciate it. I'll tell ya. Uh. The bulwark of that thing would just snap and crack and you'd think the boat was just gonna fall apart! Course we were awful sick, I couldn't stand the ocean at all.

Patchwork: How long were you on the boat for?

Bowman: About six days altogether. Left Marsay in the Strait of Gibraltar headed for the Panama Canal. I wouldn't want to go again, not with that group and I wouldn't mind going over there and helping them guys out now.

Patchwork: Did you make a lot of friends on the ..?

Bowman: Yeah, I made some good friends there all gone now.

Patchwork: Were you um friends with any of the higher ranking officials?

Bowman: Nah, I was sort of a rebel.

Patchwork: Did you lose any of your good friends in the war?

Bowman: Yeah, I lost some.

Patchwork: How was that?

Bowman: Well they were killed over there and a some of them ...I lost a couple down before we ever left the country down on maneuvers in Tennessee that was where we formed a I was one of the groups formed what we called the 306th Signal Battalions. We were stationed in Camp Chappee, no at that time we were at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. We were a Signal Battalion between the 20th Armored division and the 12th Armored division we had to keep peace between the two divisions. But every night boy there was a fight,

buuh, course we had to get in the middle of it! We had a good time, it was hard, I guess. Like I said there was an awful lot of it I'd like to forget.

Patchwork: How old were you when you finished?

Bowman: I got out when I was 20, 21 I guess maybe.

Patchwork: How old were you when you got your diploma?

Bowman: Carol, where's my diploma??!! I can't find it!! I haven't got ??? you should. Oh, I never thought about lookin in there! I made a mess of your desk. Yeah, I was in there lookin for it. Now ya can see what they look like cuz she's gonna get one.

Patchwork: Did you graduate with the class of 2002 or the class that you ...

Bowman: That's a funny comment.

Patchwork: Did you graduate with your original class, or?

Bowman: No, I didn't graduate, I wasn't there for the graduation.

Carol (wife) Bowman : That is why he got this now. (referring to his diploma)

Bowman: No wonder I couldn't find it, you hid it on me! HaHAHA

Patchwork: When did you receive this diploma?

Bowman: Hmm, when did I get this honey?? Just last fall? No it wasn't, the 19th day of February it says here.

Carol: Yeah but your picture in the paper was the 23rd.

Bowman: Okay

Patchwork: Was there special ceremony for you or did you graduate with the whole class?

Bowman & Carol (at the same time): umm, oh no, there was a special ceremony, there it is, your picture in the paper. He just had to go before the board, school board, and they gave it to us.

Patchwork: You had to ask for it or..?

Bowman: Yeah, my son, he was a schoolteacher over in Hazleton; he was the instigator of that. He thought I should have it, I guess.

Patchwork: What was his name??

Bowman: Charlie. He was a school teacher.

Patchwork: Were you the only one that got the diploma at that time?

Carol: He was the first one.

Bowman: I was the first one..

Carol: It was something the state decided to do, didn't they, to honor people that went to war and couldn't get to theirs.

Patchwork: Were there others that got their diplomas after you?

Bowman: Oh since, yeah, there have been a few in the services that have been up there. Yeah, I've seen their picture in the paper.

Patchwork: When you went over there what kind of ship did you take over there, was it...?

Bowman: We went on the Queen Mary's Elizabeth, did you ever hear of that?

Patchwork: Yeah

Bowman: It was a huge ship. Terrible trip, they changed course every fifteen minutes. It would sound like this that's when fifteen minutes later the ship would rock over to the other side. Now you ever try to walk on a hill like this here first thing you know you go that way

and there you are on a heap down on the floor. HaHA. But what got me was the it was an English ship, little English ah people who worked on the boat they'd be carrying these big trays of sandwiches down, they'd be walking along like this the boat would turn and they would go the other way and never lose a step! There we'd be laying all over the aisles, alley ways ooh what a mess.

Patchwork: Was it just the military traveling on that boat?

Bowman: Yep, it was I forget I think they said there was 14,000 of us on that boat at the time.

Patchwork: All Privates?

Bowman: Nooo, officers and all!

Patchwork: How was the food on the ship?

Bowman: It was good if we weren't to sick to eat it ha. We'd sit down there to eat and if ya didn't grab your food, then when the boat would tip it would go that way. And then the first thing ya know it would come back. Boy and then your stomach would go with and it and boy you wouldn't eat much.

Patchwork: Was that the only ship you took?

Bowman: Going over.

Patchwork: Yea

Bowman: Yea when we went over we had to dock way up in the northern part of Scotland because they didn't want to go down into London or wherever the home port of that ship was because the submarines in the English canal and at that time Hitler was sending his U2's, they were a rocket they would come over England like that you didn't know where they were going to stop and the engine would stop and down it would come. So there for we docked way above the shore of Scotland. And went all the way to the shore in small boats. And convoyed down to England, bivwacked in Manchester, and we crossed the English Channel.

Patchwork: What happened then?

Bowman: Well we drove down right into the sand and they would make you get out and these guys would get in your truck and they would back that truck into the boat faster then I would drive it forward, couldn't understand how they could get it in there so quick. And they would say there you are soldier chain it down. And we would get these big chains to put on these trucks and hold em in place, and in the English Channel they would come up and say your on KP. And say I'd have to? And he would say yup, get up in the galley.

Patchwork: KP is what? Kitchen Patrol?

Bowman: Yea Kitchen Patrol. I was supposed to help em serve a meal, but all I did was grab the railing and feed the fish, couldn't stand that rockin and rollin.

Patchwork: What was the name of the ship you came back on?

Bowman: The S.S George S. Squire.

Patchwork: ??

Bowman: Yea it was a small ship, only about five or six thousand of us on that. We uhh were headed down to the Panama Canal like I said, the war ended and boy I just didn't get caught in that trip to the Philippians. Clear across the Atlantic and over the Pacific more water than I cared to see?

Patchwork: And what were you going to do over in the Philippians?

Bowman: We were going to reactivate as a Signal Battalion.

Patchwork: And what does that mean?

Bowman: Well communications between divisions.

Patchwork: How many people were in that?

Bowman: In the Battalion?

Patchwork: Uh Huh.

Bowman: There's probably 400-500 all together. Had headquarters A,B,&C Company. I got to be a truck driver and they put me in C Company. Cause the headquarters company didn't need any more repair people. I drove truck. Hauled rations for the whole company out we'd get on Hitler's Reichtbaughn and we'd barrel down into Belgium, to the Depot and pick up the rations and tear back to camp as fast as we could.

Patchwork: How fast were you driving?

Bowman: Hitler's Reichtbaughn has no speed limit. Ya know so what we do is hotshot, we'd get a stick about that long and put it on the foot feed and hold it down and put it up against the seat, and put our feet up on the dash, and we'd sit and try and stay awake. And this wide open all the time, see there are four lanes going this way and four lanes this way. We'd come up to a convoy, and you could see it way ahead of you and what you do is shift over and into another lane and go right on. And if you hit a convoy on another lane that you would just go back over.

Patchwork: What were the convoys carrying?

Bowman: OH everything, gasoline, food?

Patchwork: Were they American?

Bowman: Yea

Patchwork: Were you the only people on the road?

Bowman: NO every body drove it, there weren't to many civilians out there, and they had no gas no vehicles. All that was there was military. We had to leave a lot of convoys, you'd wonder where they were going.

Patchwork: Were you ever told where you were going, or were you not told where you were going?

Bowman: Oh yeah lots of times, like when we crossed the English Channel we didn't know where we were going. Went to Omaha Beach. When we got ashore we would just beat out of there as fast as we could. And went to Camp Lucky Strike. Ya ever here of those camps over there? No your just a kid too.

Patchwork: Did you have any communications back home?

Bowman: Yea, I had letters from my mom , don't you laugh!

Patchwork: How frequently did you receive the letters?

Bowman: Once every week or so we would get a hand full of them

Patchwork: How long did it take to send them?

Bowman: Didn't seem to take them too long. They had pretty good communication. Mail planes must have flown daily.

Patchwork: Were there any interference with the mail or anything.

Bowman: No I don't think so. Where ever we would put up camp the first thing we'd establish was the mess hall, guys were always hungry. Except I had a lot of fun over there, we got to go to these outdoor things, and I saw Bob Hope over there a couple times. In his group, course I don't know if you kids remember him or not. Hey Tom, these kids never heard of Bob Hope. I got to see him over there a couple times over in France.

Patchwork: Was it free?

Bowman: Oh yea yea it was free.

Patchwork: Was he in the war?

Bowman: NO he was a tour, he was an entertainer. He had all his crew. I did get to go to Paris one time, on a three day leave, that wasn't pleasant, dog gonnit, I known people at that time were coming back to Germany, see when German left it seemed like they took all the women with em, every women they could find, weather they was eight or eighty-eight. They took em with em. And those poor people were all coming back into France. Walked miles and miles they walked, some of em had shoes and some of em didn't. They came into Paris one section of Paris there was these huge buildings that looked like apartment buildings and these houses women in there try to clothe them and rehabilitate them, it was really a sad affair. I felt so sorry for them.

Patchwork: Did you receive leave while you were there?

Bowman: NO not while the war was on. When the war ended though like I said we had three days , they give us three days in Paris. That was a big thing then. We saw the Effile Tower and the Arch De Triumph, and that big church.

Patchwork: Notre Dame

Bowman: Yea we were in there. But it wasn't pretty it was all ashambles.

Patchwork: What did you do after you came back from the war, like did you come back and fit naturally back in or did it take a while?

Bowman: Yea well I was sorta ichy for a while but uh no uh everything came back pretty normal. My older brother was out then when I came back?

Patchwork: Was he discharged to ?

Bowman: Yea he was discharged , quite a while before I was. He was an old National Guard Man from Delaware. They were a search light company, I don't know if you've ever seen a search light, a big round light they used to shine em up to spot airplanes. Coarse when they went into France they lost all of them. Don't know exactly what happened, I bought him a wrist watch and sent it to him.

Patchwork: Has your life changed for the better since....

Bowman: Oh yea yea I've had a good life, had a good job.

Patchwork: Have you learned anything valuable that you have applied to every day life?

Bowman: No I can't say really. A lot of hard work though.

Patchwork: Thank you for having an interview. Thank you, Thank you.

Bowman: I get a little emotional when I talk about the war.

Patchwork: Thank you for your time.