

Condensed Transcript provided by the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project with Conscientious Objector Rothacker Smith, March 24, 2006

Rothacker Smith: I got drafted into the Army and went through various training cycles and transfers until I ended up in the only totally Black Infantry regiment in World War II. The 366th Infantry regiment which was commanded by a Black Bird Colonel, and everybody in the regiment was Black. As was the usual thing in the Army in those days, the Government figured that black troops were not fit for combat, and that since most black people lived in the Southern United States, that the Southern white men were best to be their Officers. So our regiment was a political football.

We were trained as infantry, but we were not supposed to be fit for combat, and they really did not know what to do with us. But we ended up being sent to Southern Italy, and we landed there sometime in April 1943. I'm sorry, April 1944, and we were scattered all over Southern Italy as air base security, as guarding bomb dumps, and various other kind of guardian duties. I was a medic, a conscientious objector, and a non-combatant, and since there was no combat, there were no casualties. My duties were very light, and my sojourn in Southern Italy was a very pleasant occupation.

I remember lying down under a tree, on D-day when more than 4,000 men were killed on the beaches of Normandy, I was stretched out under a tree looking at the sky and saw an armada of planes which had formed up and headed toward Southern Europe. But two months after D-day the Government decided that Black troops could go into combat, and the first elements of the 92nd division were landed in Italy in August of 1944. By December our regiment was assembled together and we were attached to the 92nd division. So I went on the front line on the first of December, 1944. We were greeted by our General, who was from Virginia, and he told us that "I didn't ask for you, and I didn't want you, you have too many high ranking officers," and some other things of like manner. So our ammunition was rationed. Each weapon received 16 rounds per day. This led to some rather strange happenings, but on the 26th of December, the day after Christmas in 1944, I was stationed in a small Italian town called Somacollona on top of a hill in the mountains, and the Germans were just across the little shallow valley on the next hill and on the 26th of December we were attacked by the enemy. They decided that they wanted to take back Somacollona, and as much more as they could, to see if they could break the Army supply line. In the fighting that day, I was hit by a 120 millimeter motor shell, and had many wounds, and then we were surrounded. One piece of shrapnel hit the crazy bone in my right elbow, so that hand became numb. I had a hole in my shoulder, I had a piece of glass under my eye, and a rather large hole in my hip.

During that time I had to treat the Sergeant who was in the same room with me when the shell exploded, and had to bandage his wounds. The little finger on his right hand was hanging down by his skin. He had a hole in his upper thigh. I put a 4x4 bandage on his thigh. I went through the hole instead of covering it, and I had to tie his bandages with my left hand and my teeth, because my right hand was numb for about three days.

During this time I had been baptized as a Christian, and I had been serving the Lord partially, but I knew that if I could feel blood running down both legs, and my arms that I was about to bleed to death, and that when I woke up I would be facing eternity. I was in a panic, and at the same time the Germans were advancing, bullets were ricocheting, and men were screaming and I had to dress the Sergeant's wounds. I was trying to pray and to confess my sins, and that was a most agonizing time. I finally was able to get an answer from heaven that my sins were forgiven, and then a great peace came over me. I knew that I was going to die because it had been rumored that the Germans took no Black prisoners. I later found out that it was true that Hitler had issued a standing order to that effect and so I didn't expect to live, but I felt that when Jesus came again that he would awaken me and that he would look me in my face with a smile on his face because I had accepted him, and so I was at peace.

That same morning a couple hours later I heard our cannon, 105's down in the valley start to fire, they had just received their sixteen rounds for that day and two of the shells hit the house that I was in, one hit the upstairs, and another hit the street out in front. I was lying next to the Sergeant, and I said "Sarge, this is it." Then no more shells came near us that day. About 10 minutes later I heard a fuselade of shells, I had no idea what they were, but then the guns went silent for the rest of the day, and the Germans did not come in and take us until the next day. Fifty years later I found out that the fuselade of shells had been called for by a Lieutenant John Fox who was a forward observer for the artillery, and he had called for fire on his own position, because he said the Germans are about to surround us. "There were more of them than there are of us". The shots were finally fired. I heard the shots that killed John Fox and I didn't know anything about this until 50 years later.

They belatedly decided to give the Congressional Medal of Honor to Black troops, and so I was present at the White House 50 years later to see his widow receive his Congressional Medal. I do thank God for the experience he gave me and my brief encounter with warfare. Of course there is much more to this story because I spent 4 months in a German prison camp.

I had to walk something like between 20 to 35 miles, three days after I was hit, various other things happened, but there is too much to tell this story, Thank you.

Minneola L. Dixon: And you know I am just so pleased to hear this story, Dr. Smith. First of all you need to know who I am. I am Minneola Dixon and I am the College Archivist for Oakwood College, located in Huntsville, Alabama. I know that you have given us just a preview of more to come. I have about your experience as a military person in the United States during WW II. And I would like to encourage you to continue this story. We have a few more minutes, but while you are thinking about additional information to give to us about your Army experience, let me ask you first of all you gave us your name at the beginning of this interview, but give me your full name? I know you're Rothacker C. Smith, what does the C represent?

RS: Childs, that's my middle name.

MD: Spell Rothacker for me.

RS: R-O-T-H-A-C-K-E-R.

MD: And where were you born Dr. Smith?

RS: In Harlem.

MD: Give me the full city location, and state.

RS: New York, New York. At the time my Father was teaching at Harlem Academy.

MD: OK. And what year were you born?

RS: 1923.

MD: 1923, Bless your heart. OK that's good, June 10, 1923 is the full date of your birth. When did you enter the Army?

RS: Actually, March 1, 1943.

MD: 1943?

RS: Right.

MD: This is just 20 years after you were born, you were in the Army. What made you choose the Army above the Navy or any other branch of service?

RS: I was drafted, so they chose it for me. In those days during the war, anyone between 18 and 45 was eligible for the draft. And Sometimes they let some choose, but most of the time they put you in whatever branch of service they wanted to.

MD: And what was going on in the world that was causing such a drafting of men?

RS: OK, this was WW II in which Hitler had invaded Poland and then the low countries, and France thought he was on the verge of taking England. But he got stopped there and then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, which was the incident that put us into the war. And so that's why a German Corporal who was able to speak Italian asked me the same question — He asked me "What are you doing over here fighting?" And I told him all about what Hitler had done and so forth and so on, and when I got through, he said "Now Why ARE you here?" And I said because I got drafted and sent here.

MD: Well, you are a U.S. citizen and the U.S. had to protect its interest in these countries.

RS: That's what I said and he said "now why are you here," and I said because I got drafted and sent here. And he said "I am the same way" and he had been there five years and he was 22 years old. He had been on the Russian front for a while and he said "I'm here because I was drafted".

MD: I could imagine they were not many volunteers in those days, men volunteering that rapidly to go into the Army of any branch, but you probably would not have volunteered. You were drafted because it was a pretty mean old world and it still is today, and you have these countries fighting against each other Jealousy, envy, strikes are going on today in many of the countries, and the Germans were really after the United States. Right?

RS: Right.

MD: And so you were sent to Southern Italy you say? Where were some of the other men sent? Other men who were drafted?

RS: A lot of them went to the South Pacific. Very few blacks did, but they were fighting in the South Pacific. They were fighting in what you call China, Burma, India.

MD: During the same time you were in Southern Italy, there was fighting going on in these other parts of the Country.

RS: They had first started fighting in North Africa and then they had begun fighting in Europe on D-day.

MD: Are you talking about the Germans were battling?

RS: No, The Americans and British were battling in North Africa. And then they went over to Italy and finally on June 6, 1944 they invaded France. That was D-Day when they invaded France, and then the war in Europe started. That involved American troops. They decided after August they could let black troops fight. Before that we were in Railway companies, quartermaster companies to unload ships and so forth, but not into actual combat. It was at the same time that the Tuskegee Airmen were making them recognize they could fly planes to fight. And they finally had the reputation in Southern Italy of being the best bomber escorts that existed. What they did was to — when the bombers would be flying at a very high altitude and they came to flack fields where the anti aircraft shells would be bursting the fighter pilots would go around the flack and pick the bombers up on the other side. The Black pilots went through the flack with the bombers. And so they never lost a bomber due to enemy fighter action because they were right there soon as they came out of the flack to keep the German fighter pilots from getting to the bombers. And I was able to visit their field, in fact one of the detachments of my regiment guarded their fields. And so I had 2 times that I visited their landing strip.

MD: And where was this field located?

RS: It's in a place called Ramitelly, Southern Italy.

MD: OK. You were with the 366th Infantry Regiment, and you actually witnessed these Tuskegee Black Airmen.....

RS: I didn't witness them in combat, but I was on their field — for instance, one day I saw them come in formation, they had had a successful day with the bombers and had some gas and ammunition left, and they said "Let's go downstairs to see what we can find." So they descended from a high altitude and found a German train chugging along the tracks. So they shot up the train, and they said the engine finally derailed but they could see steam jets coming out of the sides of the engine from the shots that had gone through the boiler. So when they came back I watched a flight of 4 planes, because they flew in a formation of 4 planes, and the 4 all came down to the single landing strip, like all 4 were going to land. Two of them put their wheels down and landed, the other 2 went on around the field and they came back and landed in formation.

MD: They were well trained men, weren't they?

RS: They were. I was watching a white P51 pilot who flew the same kind of plane. He was standing there watching them and his mouth was hanging open.

MD: The Tuskegee Airmen have been on display. An exhibit has been on display of the work they performed over at A and M Museum and Archives at the A and M University campus, and I intend to go over there and look at it.

RS: Well, the thing of it is, my son who wasn't even born then, later on was in a hobby shop. He was talking to someone about planes, and he started asking this man about a plane and then my son said "My father was a prisoner of war", the man said "I was too". He was one of the original Tuskegee Airmen who was shot down, and he ended up in the same prison camp that I was in. I didn't know it at the time, because there were 160,000 prisoners in that camp. But he invited my son to come to their meetings, and he joined. And later on he became the President of the Detroit Chapter and now he is the immediate past president of the National Tuskegee Airmen.

MD: Now, that is interesting. Your particular experience there as an injured military soldier is fascinating to me and certainly it's kind of bewildering too that you were able to accomplish so much even as an injured soldier yourself as you attended to the physical and medical needs of your co-soldier friend I guess. I'm just concerned about the attitude that the Military had towards Black soldiers — you mentioned it earlier in your comments that the United States did not know what to do with the Black soldiers after they got into the service — did not allow them the privilege or opportunity that they deserved to have in the military, so they just gave them miscellaneous chores to do. Is that correct?

RS: And they did give the 92nd Division — they actually fought the Germans. They refused to give them the Congressional Medal of Honor until 50 years later.

MD: The Blacks didn't get the Congressional Medal of Honor until 50 years after the war was over?

RS: And one other interesting thing — The one piece of metal that went into my back — it came out 10 years later to the week, when I was teaching at Oakwood College, and I had it taken out at Christmas Break in 1954. Because what would happen, if I moved my shoulder a certain way, a lump appeared, so I was tying my shoe one day with my shirt off and my wife said "What's that lump I see in your back", so I said I'll go check it out, so I had to go down to the VA Hospital in Tuskegee, and when I got on the operating table the man said "Now I have an X-ray but I still don't know where to cut", so I had to move my shoulder. He said, "OK I see it now". I told him to save it for me.

MD: And he saved it for you?

RS: I still have it.

MD: You still have that metal. How large a metal was it?

RS: About as big as my little finger.

MD: And it never gave you any trouble prior to that time?

RS: The only thing, I used to do a lot of work in gardens and so forth. So if I would bend over at 7 o'clock in the morning and straighten up at noon, I would get an aching in certain parts of my neck. And after I had that metal out it never happened again.

MD: Yes, it had its effect then. When were you discharged?

RS: The 4th of November 1945. I only spent 32 months, but God really gave me a rich amount of experience.

MD: Oh I'm sure he did. Those 32 months actually were probably filled with treacherous times, difficult times, dangerous times in your life.

RS: Especially the 4 months of German prison camp.

MD: Oh yes.

RS: And during that time, I was one time in a house next door to a house that was hit with a 500 pound bomb. The next day I was in a house and the same house got hit, the room whose corner touched the room that I was in. That time the other room was the German headquarters — and a bomb hit on top of it and killed a German officer and wounded somebody else.

MD: Tell me about these houses you're speaking of. The house where you were in, tell me what was that house all about, what went on in the house.

RS: The houses in these towns of Somacollona were all made of stone. The walls were all about 18 inches thick. The Germans could only hit us with mortar shells because of the hilly terrain. They let it down in a tube and a charger went off and goes up and falls on the target. But after the town was taken by the Germans then the American Air Force bombed it with P47s, which are single engine planes. They would strap 1 500 pound bomb underneath. The town was so situated the plane could fly below the town in the valley and sweep up and down on us. So the first thing we would hear would be the bullets cause they had 850 caliber machine guns 7 in the wings of the plane. We would hear the bullets ricocheting in the streets. Then we would hear the roaring of planes and the bombs would go off about 20 seconds later. So I was next door to one, and in the same house with one.

MD: So these bombs were actually directed to this German town that the Germans had taken over, the United States was actually trying to move them out of the way, and you just happened to be a captive in the German town, right?

RS: Right, well it was an Italian town, but occupied by the Germans.

MD: And you were there as a captive just for 3 days. That 3 days of course, the United States did not know that you were there.

RS: True.

MD: But they were only concerned about getting the Germans out, right?

RS: They had evacuated the civilians, because the town normally had a population of about 250 or so, and about 150 people were still living there. They started the attack early in the morning after Christmas, and they killed most of the black soldiers, about 40 some black soldiers holding the town. Most of them were killed, but 10 of us were captured, and then that night they moved the civilians out and the bodies of the Germans killed when John Fox called artillery fire on his own position he actually killed about 40 some Germans with those shells. They made the Italian civilians take their bodies out of the town because the next day they had me go through the town and holler to see if there were any more black Americans there and to tell them to surrender, that they would not be killed if they surrender. I only saw 2 German bodies, but the record says that 46 were killed around that tower where John Fox was. I went round that tower the next day and I did not see any bodies. It took me 50 years before I got all that straight.

MD: If you were a captive, a German captive, and you were taken by them from this town, I don't pronounce it right — Somacollona. And the little town only had 150 more people in it. Then there were other blacks that were also soldiers, United States soldiers in the same town with you there?

RS: They were in the town. We occupied people's houses and lived in them.

MD: Yes, but you were injured on the battlefield.

RS: I was injured in the house. The town became the battlefield.

MD: OK, and you were taking care of this soldier that you were trying to help.

RS: I had been put with the forward machine gun squad, and we were stationed in a house right on the edge of the town, and this shell hit a window but it had a wooden shutter on the outside, and we had nailed a raincoat on the inside so no light would get inside. The shell hit that, it took the window out, the glass shutter and even some of the stone around the window out when it exploded. And of course I was in a room about big as this room and I was against that wall. I didn't realize it until later that my father was praying for me and something (The Holy Spirit) told me to go put your aid kit on and so I told the sergeant that I'm going to put my aid kit on because with all this stuff falling, somebody is going to get hurt. I went and got in a position that saved my life. Because I was in a crouching position kinda turned sideways, because if I had been standing up straight I would not be here now, so I tell people that when people pray for other people that God answers those prayers and my Father's prayers saved my life. I got in that position just when the shell exploded.

MD: I notice you said you had a hole in your hip and a hole in your shoulder, shrapnel was in your eyes, and

RS: No, there was a piece of glass from the window that landed right under this eye, something cut the lobe of my ear — and a piece went into my cheek. Now, it had nothing, no stitches or anything, and you can barely see a little spot if you look hard. I put my left finger over there and I thought my finger went into my mouth.

MD: Well, tell me how and who gave you the medical treatment you needed?

RS: Nobody.

MD: So, you were just there for 3 days and then you were moving out of there?

RS: No, a German Medic — he put a bandage over this hole in my shoulder and I don't think he did anything to my elbow. This place in my side just below my hip bone, I could put these 4 fingers in like that without touching. At that time there was a little pieces of metal sticking out and my clothes had gotten coagulated in the blood, and so he was having me to take my clothes off and trying to pull it out, and It was hurting. That's when the first plane went over, and the plane went roaring by and so he dropped everything and went downstairs in the house we were in, and he told me to follow him. I put my clothes back together and went downstairs and he told me to lie down in the middle of the floor, and about then was when that bomb hit next door. It was like a story and a half house, that became reduced to about 3 or 4 feet. A German soldier came rushing downstairs and went over to a comer and on the way he just stepped right in the middle of my back. Between us and the house next door was an oak door, like a 2 inch thick solid oak door, and that door just caved in like somebody just hit it with their fist and splintered it and you could see the results of the explosion next door.

MD: How long did it take for you to recover from that injury, and where did you get the recovery — Where did you go?

RS: I had to walk and sleep on the ground and all. Because the worst ordeal was 2 nights later I had to walk out with the Germans. They took the 10 of us and they started marching. At first we were in the mountains single file and so they would stop like every 20 or 30 minutes and rest a little bit.

MD: So the Germans were leading you out of there?

RS: Yes, I got to a POW hospital about 20 days later.

MD: About 10 of you, you say?

RS: Right. So there were 3 German squads, and so a whole squad in front, and a whole squad behind, the middle squad was split in half, So we were in the middle of the middle squad. We finally got to a road, I don't know whether it was 10 o'clock at night, or 1 o'clock or what, I don't know but when we got to the road they let us rest again. Then I went to sleep and when we woke up we formed up in ranks of 2 and the German Lieutenant said "Merish" and so we started walking. Now the American Army walks 50 minutes and rest 10. Now they have to go 30, 40, or 50 miles for 50 minutes and rest for 10 minutes. The German Army — they walked until they get there. And so at first I would be with one of the other guys who would not want to be with one of the other buffaloes. They would let me lean on them because I was numb from my waist down.

MD: I don't see how you survived that.

RS: I don't either. So what happened was — The German officer Lieutenant came and told The Corporal who was Italian to tell me that If I couldn't hold myself up they would shoot me and leave me alongside the road and then go on. So then I had to march on my own. I would count 2 telephone poles and I decided that when I got to the second telephone pole I would decide if I would let them shoot me or whether I go on. So I would just strain to get to that second pole, then after while I said I can't make it to the second pole I only going to the first one. After while I said I just can't go that far, I just going 15 steps, I cut it down to 10, then to 5, so every 5 steps I decided that I'm going to live just 5 more steps that's all I can do is just 5 more steps. That's the way I made it for the 50 miles.

MD: That's how you made the 50 miles, just 5 more steps.

RS: I don't know what it was.

MD: But it was a long way for an injured man.

RS: We didn't stop until way after sunup the next day.

MD: So, when you got to the town what was the purpose for going there? What was there?

RS: We went to an empty building, and it was still winter time. When I got captured it was a quarter inch of snow on the ground and I saw a baby blanket that someone had been using under their car to fix it. It was all black and full of soil, but I just laid my head on that blanket and went sound asleep. Then they put 9 more prisoners they had gotten from somewhere else, and that made 19 of us.

MD: Listen, I know that you were prisoners, but I'm trying to think how long did you stay before you were discharged. Your discharge date.

RS: It took me about 20 some days to get to a Prisoner of War hospital.

MD: That's what I'm looking for.

RS: That's when I healed up.

MD: 20 days to get to a hospital. Was it an American hospital?

RS: Oh no, it was an Italian hospital. There were Italian doctors .and nurses. Of course there were German guards, but they had prisoners who acted as orderlies. Kinda of like trustees. The head one was South African. So when I go there, it was like 20 some days since I had been hit, but I found 2 packets of sulfanilamide in my shirt and I dusted those into the wounds because at time it had turned white inside and it started to heal. It was warm there, and we had food and when I went in the door, over the doorway it said CAMERA OBSCURA which meant darkness. And I said, Oh they are going to X-ray me. When I went in there it was 3 round faced folk and their hair was straight up on their heads all full of bed lint and there was an Italian Nun reciting the Lord's prayer, and they were repeating it after her. But they were butchering the Italian so badly I said these guys must be from Brazil or somewhere, and so when she got through she said "Ho Fame?", which means 'Are you hungry?', and I said "See" and when she went the three of us just looked at each other. I still had little flecks of blood in my beard. I hadn't shaved for 20 some days. I was bent over, they said they thought I was about 45 years old.

MD: Bless your heart, you were only in your 20's right?

RS: Right. In fact, I was 21. And so, when she came back with a bowl of soup, I took the bowl and tipped it up like that, and when I brought it down it was empty.

MD: My, you were hungry.

RS: Yes, I was hungry. There were 3 Black buffaloes and the head trustee was South Africans apartheid. That's why we were in the dark room.

MD: I see. Practicing apartheid. That's an amazing story, and I'm just sitting here just marveling at your ability to tell it and the Lord has guided and protected you to this point in your life where you can sit and tell this story. These are stories that our young people need to hear and they are not aware and neither am I of all the ramifications and involvements of military happenings and activities when the World War I, II, III or whatever existed. Because there's not been enough information passed on through the school systems about military activities and for you being a person who really relates to the history of the College and bringing us this information, it's a first time for us, and we're glad to have it. I am going to go ahead and fill this out, and hopefully in the future you will be able to speak to some of our students in different meetings that we have throughout the year, Especially Black History Month. I have considered doing some interviewing of other military Adventist men. There is an Elder Mims who brought this to my attention several years ago, and he too has such an interesting story. I haven't recorded his story — Cleophus Mims. He was going to give us one of his uniforms to display in the Museum room, so we're going to ask you to do something similar to that. If you would write your full biography — we have only inquired about your military activities and your military experience.