

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH
CHARLES H. COOLIDGE

FOR THE
VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

INTERVIEW BY
CYNTHIA TINKER

CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE
JUNE 23, 2011

TRANSCRIPT BY
KAITLIN BEAGLE

REVIEWED BY
MIKE MCCONNELL

TINKER: This begins an interview with Charles. H. Coolidge, in Chattanooga at the Chattanooga Printing and Engraving Company, June 23, 2011. This is actually part two of an interview that we conducted in April of last year, 2010. And like I said before, your son Charlie had looked over the transcript for us and I asked him for suggestions on the follow-up. Things that we may have forgotten, or that you'd forgotten since you have so many stories. Oh! I didn't identify myself on tape. This is Cynthia Tinker from UT's Center for the Study of War and Society and also in the room is, will you say your name?

MUCKERHEIDE: Perry Muckerheide of Performance Video Productions.

TINKER: They're here filming a little bit today, I believe, for a documentary. I will start with the first on Charlie's list of follow-ups. Something about "behind the rock wall at Salerno or Anzio?"

COOLIDGE: At Salerno.

TINKER: Where you're talking about you shot him or when your friend Joe DelaGarza was killed?

COOLIDGE: Got killed, yeah. We had come inland ...

TINKER: Was this at Salerno or Anzio?

COOLIDGE: This was at Salerno. That was when we first went into Italy. You know, we were in North Africa and then Patton and Eisenhower and the other generals took their troops into Sicily. As soon as they got through with Sicily we jumped off on September 9th of '43 and invaded Italy. After we were, I guess about two in the afternoon, we'd come up, we were working our way to the railroad track and the main road coming from Rome, which was quite a ways away. We thought we were going to make it pretty quick but it didn't work that way. So, my friend was; we were behind this rock wall and the Germans were out in front of course. They were trying to keep us from getting' to the road and the railroad tracks, but Joe DelaGarza, he sees this German and, I guess the German sees him, I don't know who shot first. He [the German] shot at him and he missed and Joe shot at him and missed. The German shot and missed, Joe shot and missed, and the third time the German hit him right here [points to his head] and killed him. And that's the guy that I'd shared a pup tent with in Africa for about four months before we made the invasion.

TINKER: And you watched that happen?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. It was somethin' else. Well, there's nothin' you could do, guy gets hits in the head.

TINKER: But you were concerned for your own life, so ...

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah!

TINKER: ... you couldn't have an emotional moment, like they show in the movies.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, oh no, you don't have any emotional, everybody's shooting to kill up there then. Particularly on an invasion. There's a lot of them, trigger happy too. I mean, everybody's tryin' to shoot everybody. Just don't get hit basically.

TINKER: But you and Joe were good friends though?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah.

TINKER: Did you ever get in touch with his family afterwards?

COOLIDGE: No, I didn't. They were really probably south of the border, they'd probably—see, the Texas, the 36th Division, you see that “T” patch right there? (Gestures) That's the Texas, the arrowhead is the Oklahoman, Texas-Oklahoma National Guard. But, basically when I got there, 'cause all the people had gotten friends in politics, you know, they were sayin' “can't you get me transferred out to another outfit that's not goin' overseas?” So, you know how that works; they start driftin' out and then they bring in the people that don't have any choice, like me. You go where you're sent. So, Joe, like I say, they were mostly Texans when we got there. And most of 'em were south of the border.

TINKER: The next thing Charlie has here is, after finding the attack had been called off, then you actually received the command “everyman for himself”. Now, is this at the same time?

COOLIDGE: No, no, this is several months later, this is November. We invaded on September 9th of 1943 and this is November of '93 [1943] about two months later. We had climbed, about 4:30 in the afternoon we started climbing the mountain. What we were goin' to do, what they tried to do, was to go up, and climb the mountain and then when they got to the top they'd wait for a signal; might be a flare, it might be anything. We were goin' to come down behind the Germans at the next little town. We got up there at about 5:00 in the morning, we started at 4:30 in the afternoon, got there at 5:00, and ...

TINKER: This is going up toward San Pietro?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, above it. I was a private, but you know you learn to speak up and I told one of these sergeants, I said, “You know it's gettin' on 5:00 in morning and it ain't going be too long, and we're goin' be up here and we're goin' to be surrounded with Germans. We'd better go down.” So I said, “Call back to regimental and find out what they want us to do.” So when he got on his phone and called back, regimental said, whoever he talked to, the commanding officer, says, “What time you want us to jump off and go down behind the Germans.” (Laughs) He said “Where are you?” And we—he said, “We're on top of the mountain. We're ready to go down anytime you give the order.” He said, “No, No! We called that attack off last night at 4:30 in the afternoon.” Well, we'd probably just jumped off see. Anyway we—then's when the guy called back, said, “Everyman for himself. Get off the best way you can.” I had a fifty-one pound tripod.

A tripod's what you put the gun on, you know. It weighs forty pounds. Every one my men were carrying forty pounds or more. And you know, you climb all night, you're pretty well beat up anyway.

TINKER: So, it's just you and your guys?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: It was just you and your guys?

COOLIDGE: Yeah. There were probably supposed to be a rifle company. See, I was probably with K Company.

TINKER: Somehow you all missed the whole calling off of the ...

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. We missed it. We were all ready set to go and when they said, "Go up. Start." We started at, we probably started five minutes early and we didn't get the order where they called it off. We started climbing the mountain that night. We got up on top of the mountain, it's 5 o'clock in the morning. I said, "Man, it's goin' be getting daylight up here. I don't want to be caught up here on this mountain. I want to be behind the German lines or I want to be back down off this mountain." And they said, "Every man for himself. Get off the best way you can." I've got a fifty-one pound tripod, and you know, your helmet is, the big ones, I guess the same kind they had back then, I don't know. I know they made it a little different. Because, then, that's what I learned that night. I had that tripod, I got over towards the edge of the bluff and I threw that helmet over, I mean the tripod over [the shoulder], and when it does, see, part of it's on one side, and part the other, the legs of it. When it hit coming up, it hit and knocked off my helmet and it went "clankity clank clank." Of course, the Germans heard all that and they probably thought that it must be a whole battalion or division up there on that mountain. They started firing away at us. 'Course we were startin' down; when they started, we started back. We were—when you lose elevation, 'course the bullets are going to fly over your head most of the time. So we went on down. The highest ranking person we had in M Company, was a sergeant. No officers. I got down there and I told that sergeant, "I want to tell you something. If you ever give me an order like that again, don't ever look for me until after the war is over." I said, "I'm going south down there in the toe of Italy, and I goin' to stay there 'til the war's over." (Laughs)

TINKER: You mean that order to go up that mountain, right?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: You mean the order to go up the mountain?

COOLIDGE: No, to come back. To come back and nobody's down there to tell you what to do when you got there.

TINKER: What did you do when you got down there?

COOLIDGE: Oh, we stayed there and just waited 'til people straggled in from wherever they were. (Laughter)

TINKER: There's another story, something we left out at the Rapido River when the truce was called to remove the wounded and dead after, and something about you and your platoon were playing cards on the hill.

COOLIDGE: That's right. (Laughter) We would go up, they'd called a truce and ...

TINKER: This is after, the truce was after you all had tried to cross but couldn't?

COOLIDGE: That's right. That's right, after we—see both sides lost so many. You see, the best way—before we attack across a river, so I'm told, that to cross a river had never been successful in the history of fighting. But we goin' to try to cross the Rapido River, which mind, is a narrow river, but it comes from the mountains which are very high above us, and when it comes by where we were crossing was right down this [points on the map], at the base of, well, it was right near ... Cassino, not Cassino, but a little town there anyway. That water, if you would step your foot in it, shh [Gestures] it'd take you on down. What we did, we took a guy and tied a rope around him and as he was trying to swim across, 'course he'd go down but we'd hold him and pull him back up and try to get him. He finally got across and tied the rope on a tree over on the side, which would mean that we could go across. 'Course, it's January the 22nd, wintertime, and that water coming off the mountain was just like ice water. But we stayed down there at the river and then the next night, or maybe that same night, we got on the road that they were trying to build; our troops were trying to build a road across the river. And they were working along and we got out on that road and I know my sergeant, my platoon sergeant, of course I'm a private. I had a big shovel, because a big shovel we dug in the gun. So, instead of having just that little pack shovel we had the big ones. And the sergeant came by and said, "Coolidge, aren't you goin' to use that shovel?" I said, "No, I'm not goin' to use it." He said, "Well you mind me using it?" I said, "No." I just handed it up to him. I said, "I'm not scared." I think it really floored him. He and another sergeant were there, you know, and they were supposed to be the tough guys and I was supposed to be the recruit, you know, that didn't know anything. But ... [had] sense enough to know, I wasn't going to get off that road because if you stepped off the road, you stepped off into a mine field, and both those sergeants got killed that night.

TINKER: Wow.

COOLIDGE: Yeah. So, I had sense enough to know you don't get off that road. They done drug all the mines over to the side. Engineers are coming through with mine detectors and they pull the mine one way or the other.

TINKER: They just put them to the side.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, just push over the side of road and I knew not to step over there.

TINKER: How did a truce get called? How does that actually happen?

COOLIDGE: How did they what?

TINKER: How did they call the truce?

COOLIDGE: Call the ...

TINKER: Who called it first?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: Who asked for the truce?

COOLIDGE: Oh, the truce? We both did. Because you see a lot of people got across the river.

TINKER: Because there were so many bodies.

COOLIDGE: Oh, a lot of people got across the river. See, with the rope and all we got a lot of people over there. What they did, when daylight came, the Germans came on the ground that we had captured before the city and they just ran those tanks over them, you know. There were a lot of wounded on both sides. And of course, what we did, periodically if you had been trying to do it right, we shot I don't know how many rounds of ammunition. We called one mountain; we called it a million dollar mountain. They shot a million dollars worth of ammunition before we even tried to take it. You know when you drop that many ...

TINKER: Cassino?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: Cassino?

COOLIDGE: Uh, well, it was near Cassino.

TINKER: Oh.

COOLIDGE: Yeah. Cassino. There ain't no telling how much they dropped on it. I imagine the ground is still shaking over there. (Laughter) Yeah, Cassino was a tough one.

TINKER: They called the truce.

COOLIDGE: Well, one of us called a truce and they agreed to it.

TINKER: Yeah, somebody did. Okay.

COOLIDGE: Finally they agreed to it. But, let me see, somebody, I don't think the British would agree to it. I think the British wouldn't agree to it, but the rest of us agreed to it. So, we went out in front of the lines, we knew they could see us. They had the high ground over on the other side of the river. So, they could see us, so we went out about five hundred, maybe not that far, two hundred yards; took a blanket and just displayed it and then sat out there and played poker. (Laughs) That's what he was talking about [Coolidge's son]. We sat out there and played poker ... we kept watching our watch, you know, it started at 1:00, at 4:00 or 5:00 it was going to end. So, we was watching them watches and when fifteen minutes until time, everybody left, but they left going a different direction. One guy would be going that way, and then, of course, he would turn back, but, we were ... We had them all going a different direction. We got back to where our holes were, but we didn't go to the holes right away. We waited until the time was up before we got back to where our guns were.

TINKER: Right, and then when the truce was over?

COOLIDGE: Oh, everybody opened up with everything they had.

TINKER: Just got right back to it?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. We got right back to it. (Laughter)

TINKER: Okay, um, in France, you were supposed to go behind the lines and escort a colonel to the front line. Remember that one?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah.

TINKER: You couldn't get anyone to do it so you did it yourself.

COOLIDGE: Yeah. Well, what had happened we had made an attack that morning. We had this town and we had made an attack we went across a big field, through the field, and into this man's farmland and a big house where he was; and the barn.

TINKER: Do you remember where this was in France?

COOLIDGE: Uh ...

TINKER: The town?

COOLIDGE: No, but I could probably take you there. (Laughter)

TINKER: We'll look it up later.

COOLIDGE: I'll try to find that later for you. I don't know where it is or I can't remember the town. I never did try to remember the town, because over in France, you know, the towns are kind of close and ...

TINKER: It's hard to keep track.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, because we never went in the same way twice, (Laughs) if you know what I mean. We didn't want to let them know that that was a place we were trafficking. But anyway, we, uh ...

TINKER: You're going through the field.

COOLIDGE: We came to this creek. Well, we had gone down there, because at that time we were going to notify our artillery to open fire and lay a barrage down on the Germans. They had this, where a man keeps, over there [France] they keep the animals in a barn, right at the house, and the tools and so forth. This particular one, it was half mile up to the highway this way. (Gestures) Of course, it went back into the town, and where the colonel was, was back in the town with my captain. Well, he was commanding officer, he wasn't a captain. He was a first lieutenant, but he would have been a captain if he hadn't gotten killed. You know how it is in war. You lose a few. But anyway, we went down to the creek and when the artillery came in, our artillery that was supposed to be hitting the Germans—they had I guess shot the smoke shells and all the day before, I know they did this time. They were probably hitting the town, but that morning the atmospheric conditions were different and instead of hitting there, they hit behind us. But we were in the creek where we, and I told all of my men get on this side of the creek, while the shells were coming in. Well, immediately when our—they were supposed to be hitting on the Germans, but instead they hit short of us even. And then, when we quit shooting our artillery, they opened up with theirs, so we got it from both sides. What I did, I told my men to crawl over on the other side, and get up against that bank. That way if a shell comes in, if I'm behind this desk and a shell's coming in here, it's not going to hit right here, (Gestures) it's going to go over you. And hopefully, the shell, where they do explode they'll go up in a different direction than where you are, but they don't necessarily have to.

TINKER: What happened with this colonel?

COOLIDGE: Oh, so they had a captain in the rifle company, and I had a—he couldn't of had more than a squad. You know, when you've been in combat a few months you'll, a company's dwindled down, instead of two hundred and twenty men, you've got thirty men in a company. Anyway, whatever it was they were trying to attack across there. They got to the house alright and we got the barn. But when we got to the barn, the Germans had the house, [it was] all attached and we were in the barn part and they were in the house part. So, my colonel, I mean my company commander and the colonel were back in the town. The rifle company captain, got him a call, said to send somebody back to come get the colonel and show him where to come. And they had this little boy, I tell you I don't know how old he was, but he couldn't have been, if he was eighteen he's pushing it. He was probably seventeen and lied about his age ...

TINKER: Probably lied.

COOLIDGE: ... Lied to get in, you know, and it was a big deal until the real crunch comes. The captain was telling him "You got to go get the colonel. Have to go get the colonel." He kept on like that for about thirty minutes. I had a runner and, name was Binder, and I said "That boy ain't gonna go out that door." I said "No way that kid is gonna go out that door." He kept on that kid, kept going at that kid, crying, you know, it'll break your heart.

TINKER: Because there's still artillery coming from both sides.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah.

TINKER: Well, no wonder he's scared to death. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: Well, certainly. Oh yeah. Yeah, that's part of the game. It's all a big game. So, I says to the captain, "Now, where is this colonel that you want me, that you want to send out after." He said "Well, he's back there, if you go up that road that leads from the next town to the back town. He'll meet you there right at the crossroads." I said, "Okay," and Binder started yelling "Oh, you're not going. You're not going. It's not your job to do that. It's not your job." I didn't pay any attention, you know. All I did was went to the door and I waited for the next shell to hit because when the next shell hit, the German shell, I knew that I had about five to eight seconds to get out of range. Well, not out of range of the shell, but out of the range of where they were shooting. So, when that shell hit, boy, when that thing booms, I knew shrapnels, I started out and I didn't run, I just walked like I was out for an afternoon walk.

TINKER: Did you?

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. And I learned that, I never ran in combat. I never ran in combat.

TINKER: You never ran?

COOLIDGE: I never ran in combat. Can't hear as good. I learned that up on that mountain. When you're running, the helmets are shaking on your head and you can't hear.

TINKER: That makes sense.

COOLIDGE: I just walked on, and I walked all the way straight out the man's driveway, which was long way, a half mile and I walked to the crossroads up there. I knew the Germans could see every step I was taking. I walked right out there and I took a left and walked right back up into town. I got back in and there stood the colonel, and my captain, and Hofmeister was in there. He said "Colonel wants you to take him up, he wants to look over the positions." I said "He ain't got a whole lot to look over, but if he want to go. Let's go." And that road was muddy from the German's tanks, when they had retreated in that town, tearing up that road. It was about half mud and half water. We started down the road; I got the people in the house, before we attacked, I got the lady to wash my clothes and I wasn't about to get them wet and ruined, and get mud all over them. We started down the road, we hadn't gone but about, oh, a hundred yards and here came a shell in, and I could tell, you know, I had been in combat so long, over a year. When a shell was

coming, if it wasn't close I wouldn't even bother to stop. I would just keep walking along and the colonel on the first one, he plopped down in that mud. (Laughter) Oh man, and he'd get up and he'd shake, and he kept shaking and wiping that mud off him, you know. The colonel finally got caught up with me and said "Well you didn't even hit the ground" I said "Sir, I don't ever hit the ground if they're not close. I save my energy for better things." (Laughter) I walked along and we went another fifty or seventy five yards, same thing, here comes another shell. He goes down in that mud and, you know, I don't if you ever laid down in a mud pile ...

TINKER: No.

COOLIDGE: ... where tanks have already churned it all up, (Laughs) but he hits the ground again. I kept walking right along. He come up there again and said "You didn't hit the ground" I said "No, I told you, you don't hit the ground if they're not close." We walked a few feet, and he said, "Where is this place we're going? I think I'm going to make a run for it. You want to go with me?" I said "No, sir. I don't want to go with you. If you're going to run, you're gonna run alone. I don't run up here on the front. I want to hear what's going on." So I said, "If you just go down here to the first right, it'll will be a man's driveway that goes a half a mile up to his garage and house. Turn there, it'll take you right into the barn." And boy, he took out and he was really footin' it up that road and I walked along like nothing ever happened. Well, when I get near the house, I stopped and wait a minute for that shell to come in that I know is coming. The Germans were very systematic of how they shot their shells. If they were shooting them every forty-five seconds, you could set your watch by it. They were shooting them every thirty seconds, there's going to be a shell come in every thirty seconds. So, I already learned this so when that shell, I waited, when that shell hit and I knew I had a clearance period there that I was safe. I walked right on in. The ol' colonel that I'd gone and showed him how to get there, he was in there talking to the captain and they didn't have a dozen men, surely they didn't have more than a dozen. And I thought "Y'all are going to make an attack with twelve men" and you know, they [the Germans] got the other side of the house where we are. They kept talking on. Finally, I got tired of it, you know. I had my squad. I just had probably, may have had two gunmen, probably only one. But I had the gun and the gunner and the six crew. I had mine, my runner, and myself. I yelled over at the colonel, I said "Colonel, y'all are goin' to do anything? Let's do it. If you're not, would it be alright for my men to go on back where we started from?" "Yeah, I think you can go on back. We're not going to attack. We ain't got enough men to attack." I said "I already knew that." (Laughs) So I said to Binder, I said "Now, we're not going to leave here like I did a while ago. We are going to go down to the creek, the way we came. And I said, "What we're goin' to do, we are going to have one man at time leave and get to the creek and when he gets there, he'll go that way. The next guy that goes down, he'll go this way, until the whole squad gets there, our two squads." And I said, "Then, we'll come out at different angles at different times." And they ain't goin' to waste a shell shooting at one person, normally.

TINKER: Right.

COOLIDGE: So, that's what we did. We got down there and we all got safe. I said "Alright, the man on the end." Then we'd pop one off, way down here, fifty yards away, and he'd come out, you know. Then we'd swap back over to that side. Then we'd come to the middle instead of

going all the way. We'd come to the middle man, and let him go across. So we [did this] until we got all twelve of us back. We all got back safely.

TINKER: It worked.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, it worked like a charm.

TINKER: They didn't try to get, like you said, they never tried to shell just one person?

COOLIDGE: Oh no. They're not goin' to shell one person. They didn't want to waste a shell on one person.

TINKER: Can you remember who the colonel was? That you went and got? You don't remember his name? Or if you do you don't want to say?

COOLIDGE: No. No. I don't mind calling names. I would have said it was Charles Owens, but I don't think that was him at that time. Because he was with us when we ended. You know, colonels change over a lot. They get promoted over there pretty fast. When you lose the man above you, you know, when you take a top, five jumps up to a guy and this guy gets wounded or hurt or killed or whatever that means four people automatically goin' to get an advancement. They're going to be upgraded, and so it's hard to remember.

TINKER: Now, speaking of artillery, I remember when we were here last time, and as soon as we walked out one of you sons said, "Did he tell you story about they were sitting there playing cards in a house or a barn or something, and the shell came straight down?" Is this around the same time, or was that a different time?

COOLIDGE: I don't know. We played cards wherever I went. (Laughs)

TINKER: But a shell actually came down through the ceiling, but didn't go off. Is that right?

COOLIDGE: I don't know about that.

TINKER: That's what he said. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: I don't know. I can't remember that one. It not going off, now, I've had them hit the house and not explode.

TINKER: Oh.

COOLIDGE: I've had a lot of times around me and not explode. Oh yeah, those are what we call duds. You know, when the Germans were, uh, they had, they conquered Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and all these countries. Well, they conscripted all those people to work for them. And when they were working in a manufacturing plant, you were supposed to dump

powder in there to make that thing explode; instead of dumping powder in there, the people they had forced to labor, they'd stick mud or something in there ...

TINKER: So it wouldn't go off.

COOLIDGE: ... When it hit, the shell would come alright, but when it hit it never exploded. So, there ain't no telling how many people those people saved.

TINKER: I bet.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah.

TINKER: Well, that's a good story. Okay now, I do remember this, Charlie mentions, remember the real sad story you told me about when you and that forward observer were in that house. He walked out in front of you and got killed. But then Charlie says there's a continuation to that story. Something about a French, I guess when you left and a Frenchman showed you German footprints in the snow or boot prints in the snow.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. Well, yeah. That was the next door neighbor. He had a house full of Germans and we had a house full of Americans. (Laughs)

TINKER: Was this after that observer had gotten killed?

COOLIDGE: Yeah.

TINKER: Really? And you were going to leave?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, this was at—I'm trying to think of the name of the town. But we had the last house in the town. When we'd come in, we had ridden a hundred and twenty, it was during the [Battle of the] Bulge, and we had come a hundred and twenty five miles. We were eating Christmas dinner, but it wasn't Christmas day. No, we ate it when we ate it. We called it Christmas dinner. (Laughs) That was the day you got the turkey, regardless when. We had been on the line a hundred and twenty days when we ate our Christmas dinner. And then, as we were eating we got the call that the Bulge is started, and we were going to have to go up and relieve Patton, who was gonna go in behind the German lines and save Bastogne. So, we started out and we went one hundred and twenty five miles and came to this little town, and that's where we dug in. Actually, where we dug in, there was a railroad track that came in. The Germans were dug in around the railroad track. But for some reason they had taken the second house up. But when we got there we took the end house, where this guy, I had, he was a forward observer for our 81[mm] mortars; I conned him into going back and getting a cup of coffee. I loved it. I lived on coffee. I didn't care about the food, just give me the coffee. I had to get a place to warm it, and the best place was to get in the bottom of a fox hole and start you a little fire. We had gas that you could pump it up and start to bang and it'd flame and have a flame, but you couldn't see it and it wouldn't smoke. So, we'd warm the water and stir a little coffee in there with the grounds, then we'd just sift the grounds out, we just drink it and use our teeth as a sieve.

TINKER: Oh!

COOLIDGE: Well, it's the truth. (Laughs)

TINKER: That's rough coffee. (Laughs)

COOLIDGE: Yeah, but it had a kick to it. (Laughter) Anyway, I took this guy, and I got him, finally, he was a forward observer for the 81 mortars. You see, we had 81 in our company; we had .81 mortars. So he was up there at front whereas we were always right on the front line. So he, I talked to him. All day I'd worked on that guy to get him to go back and get a cup of coffee with me. And finally, about two in the afternoon, I finally broke him down, and I got him to go back and we fixed our coffee. For some unknown reason, I had never in all the time I'd been overseas, I'd never let anybody go out the door before me. I always wanted to be the first out. If we got shot, it'd be me, and if I got shot at, I'd know quickly how to get to a safe spot if I could. So, anyway, but that day, when we got ready to leave he had already had ants in his pants all day wanting to get back. He was waiting of relief to come so he could go back to the back. Where, the 81 mortars are, you know mortars are about a half mile, three quarters of a mile behind the line, so he just couldn't wait to get back there. Well, he goes out the door and there were two steps, one, two, on the ground. He started out that door and I'm starting right behind him and that shell, he stepped on that first step just like he set it off. He didn't, but that shell hit and it just blasted him back in my arms, and I dragged him over to the middle of the room and laid him down. I guess he was dead, I don't know. We let the medics determine that back, a mile behind the line. We didn't fool with, I mean, if they were struggling for breath or something we might beat on their chest or might, if they were badly wounded, where an artery was cut, we'd tape it off and take some kind of ...

TINKER: A tourniquet.

COOLIDGE: ... a tourniquet, and cut the flow of blood out. But I don't even remember doing anything to him. I think he was just plain dead. That's the only man I guess in the army, that it really hurt me when he died, because I felt like, well, I'd talked him into it. I should of never talked him into going back. I didn't mind taking chances, but I hated to see somebody, because of my stupidity get killed.

TINKER: Right. Then when you went on out was you run into the Frenchman?

COOLIDGE: Yeah. Well, that wasn't at that particular moment, but an hour or two later at night we have to go back and get rations; And I got a runner alright, all I had to do was say "Pete go back and get the rations," a half mile. Well, he's an eighteen year old kid and I knew he didn't want to go back and do it. Well that's the reason I got him for a runner. I had him up in France and we were on a hill, and he came over to my foxhole and I wasn't much for digging ...

TINKER: Oh, you wanted somebody to help you with the digging? (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: I didn't wanna, I ... wasn't much for digging. I wasn't much of a digger and so I'd tell Pete to do it.

TINKER: Pete? That was the runner's name?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, Pete Beno. He came to see me three times, all the way from California.

TINKER: Really? What was his last name again?

COOLIDGE: Beno.

TINKER: Beno, like a bean?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, B-E-N-O, Beno. He died not too long, well I guess that was several years ago now. I went to see him once or twice in California. When I was out there for something else. Yeah, he was a nice boy. But yeah, he turned out to be a pretty good soldier as long as I was there.

TINKER: I bet. But you didn't send him back for the rations that night?

COOLIDGE: Oh no. I said "I'll go back and get 'em." Well, as I started out the next door neighbor who was housing the Germans, he was smoking a cigarette on his porch. He saw me and he only had ten feet from his porch to the road. And I saw him start easing out that way and I just stopped and waited on him. I says, he says "You sure have got a lot of nerve." Spoke perfect English. I said "What are you talking about?" He said "Don't you know? There's more Germans in this town than there are Americans." I said "Yeah, and a whole bunch of 'ems in your house." (Laughs) He just turned around and walked on back. And that's right, he was housing Germans.

TINKER: He was housing them voluntarily?

COOLIDGE: Yeah. Well, he had well, what else? They'd killed him if he wouldn't.

TINKER: Well, that's true.

COOLIDGE: Well, you know, self preservation, the first law of life.

TINKER: Well at least he came at and told ya. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: Yeah. He wanted me to know. I said "What do you want me to do? Are you want me to shoot up your house?" I said, "You say the word and I'll have my squad come out. We'll go down and get two machine guns. We'll turn it on the front and the back and let 'em run."

TINKER: So, it was really just a matter of they needed a warm place to stay?

COOLIDGE: That's all. They were sleeping in the snow and we were sleeping in the snow. Snow was up to your knees and it was cold. It was ...

TINKER: Yeah, the worst winter in however long in European history. (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: We're out there, and they'd come out to me and said, civilians would you know, and they'd say "How do guys stand it? How do you Americans stand it in this cold weather?" I said "What do you mean cold weather?" I said, "We never go in. We don't know there's any other way. We're acclimated to it, our bodies have adjusted." I said what's more, and I would peel my shirt back a little, and I'd say "I got five undershirts on." (Laughter)

TINKER: Oh yeah. Now, I remember you telling that one. That was smart.

COOLIDGE: I've got five undershirts on.

TINKER: Layered.

COOLIDGE: Oh layers, that's the way to get warm. Every time ... they'd send us back to take a shower.

TINKER: Yeah, you kept your dirty shirts.

COOLIDGE: I kept the dirty one and laid it outside and the clean one I put on next to me. Then one, two, three, four, 'til I got to five. They were all dirty, but I didn't care.

TINKER: That was smart. That was smart.

COOLIDGE: Well, you learn.

TINKER: And then, I don't think we talked about this at all before. Um, when When you were in **Limbourg**, Belgium and you're in a house sleeping in a bed upstairs, above ground level, and the artillery got intense, Charlie wrote here in these notes. Then you—let me flip this tape over.

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

TINKER: Anyway, in Belgium and you were. You were uh, you were ...

COOLIDGE: I never was in Belgium. Let's correct the area. I will correct that. I never went into Belgium.

TINKER: Well, this must have been in France, then.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, it was in France. Go ahead.

TINKER: Uh, sleeping upstairs in a bed and the artillery gets intense, he says [Coolidge's son], and then you just ...

COOLIDGE: That's right. Well, that was at Limbourg, the town I've been trying to think of Limbourg.

TINKER: That's where this other story came from ...

COOLIDGE: Other story came from. That's where the guy got killed in Limbourg.

TINKER: Okay.

COOLIDGE: What we had done, we'd gone completely through it, going out about, uh, did I mess that up? Going out about two hundred yards passed the end house and dug in our four machine guns. This was where, yeah.

TINKER: Well, I'm glad that came up then.

COOLIDGE: Yeah. Yeah.

TINKER: Now was this the same, now this was a different house though, where you're sleeping upstairs? The same house?

COOLIDGE: We were sleeping on the main floor and everybody else was sleeping in the downstairs, which was about ten feet below the level of the ground. Everybody—all the civilians and all were down there, but we were sleeping up in the big bed. But Pete Beno and I, we just laid out in the bed and were sleeping. Well, it got pretty intense one night and the Germans, I'm sure the next door Germans were directing their fire at us, and they were trying to hit our house. That night or one night, I guess that night, they got one and they had an animal feeding thing where you could pump water and, you know, animals could get ...

TINKER: Like a trough?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, a trough, and they could drink the water. And it hit the trough, the shell come in, hit the trough, knocked off the kitchen part of the house, just knocked it out. But we still stayed in it.

TINKER: Because you were actually sleeping in a bed, right?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: Because you were happy to be in the bed.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, well I happened to be, that's the only time I, at that time, that was the first time, and only time, I'd ever gone into the cellar. I was always worried about going in the

cellar, 'cause if somebody comes in, and throws a grenade down there, I'm down there with a grenade; dark, might not be able to cover a helmet or something over it.

TINKER: So, you thought your chances were better on the upper floors?

COOLIDGE: That's right. So, I wasn't going down the stairs.

TINKER: At least you might get blowed out if you're upstairs. (Laughter) You can't get blowed out if you downstairs.

COOLIDGE: If you're downstairs, you're just gonna get up against a wall. (Laughter)

TINKER: Well, that's all he's got here. Is there anything that you thought of while we were talking that you might want to add?

COOLIDGE: No.

TINKER: Well, I was gonna ask, I don't think I asked this the first time we talked. Was there anything—have you ever thought, like in your civilian life, since war, that you felt like, something you learned, either in combat or in training, that helped you the most to be successful in civilian life? I mean something that you applied in civilian life that you learned in the military?

COOLIDGE: Well, a life is all a learning experience and anything that you can learn, if you learn how to apply it in life, it helps along the way. I mean that's true today. I might learn something today, that if I didn't know, I wouldn't know how to accomplish what I wanted. But if you know about it then you know what, you know how to attack the problem. I don't think there any ...

TINKER: Was there something, you know, like sometimes you're just going through life like you say, and then—I guess what I'm asking for is an application point. Like, somewhere in your civilian life where, in your mind, you end up doing something, but in your mind, you're drawing upon your military experience.

COOLIDGE: Right. Well, I think a lot of times, I don't know whether I could apply it in say right now and give you an example. But certainly, I learned a lot in the military. I mean, that'd be completely insane if I didn't learn something. (Laughter) I mean you got pick up everything you do, you've got to learn.

TINKER: 'Cause, well part of the reason I asked, and I've heard this a couple of times recently, cause you know there's people getting out of the service now, and the military unemployment rate is higher than the national rate. I heard them saying that, there's skills in the military that don't apply in real life. And see, I sort of disagreed with that, I thought well, yeah, maybe a rifleman may not, that does not translate technically to the civilian life ...

COOLIDGE: Well, he might go hunting. (Laughter)

TINKER: ... but there's so many other aspects of the military that do apply.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah, laying out in the snow on a good cold night. It's just so wonderful, you know. (Laughter)

TINKER: I mean, I guess I'm talking, I mean like the motivation, but I guess it doesn't work for everybody.

COOLIDGE: Uh, no. It don't work if you don't want it to work. A man that comes out of the military, he's got more to draw on than anybody in civilian life about certain things of life. If he really wants a job, he's gonna go get one. I, you know, I'm never, I used to have some people that took issue with me on that subject. I used to work for the Veterans' Administration when I first got out of the service.

TINKER: Right, I remember that.

COOLIDGE: And I worked for three years and three months, and I finally just quit. Of course, they didn't want me to quit, but I wanted to, you know. Anytime you do anything you pick up knowledge. If you had a flat tire when you went out here some people'd call up here to the service station to have them come change the tire. That's the best way to do it really, 'cause they've got the equipment and they're not going to charge you an arm and a leg to come down there, because they've got competition, so therefore you have your tire changed. But if I'm out on the highway, I gotta get out and change my tire. Well, since I've had MS [Multiple Sclerosis] I haven't had but one flat tire on the highway and I was going a long distance, but I had only gone less than thirty miles when I had the tire that blew out. I remember pulling off the road and my wife saying "What are you goin' to do?" I said "I'm goin' to get out and change the tire, unless somebody's nice enough to help me." (Laughs) I was, you know, I already started suffering with MS, so I say suffering, I had MS, I don't fluctuate like I should. But anyway, so I got out and, well right away a couple of guys stopped and they said "You need help?" I said "I sure do. I don't want to make excuses, but I'd do it if I had to, but I've got you here now and I sure would appreciate it if you would." And they changed the tire for me. I offered to pay them and they wouldn't take any money. You know, I found, what goes around, comes around. After the war I couldn't stand, see, particularly it seemed like back then, we had more, back in the '30s, we had more snows than we do now, I don't know whether the weather's warmin' or what. But anyway, we used to have a lot of people get stranded, going up and down the Signal Mountain. Of course, you know, there's a lot of ways to go about it. The first way is you want to go at an even gait, not try to shower down on the gas, if you do you start the wheels spinnin', that's the worst thing you. But you can just a little primary, a few pointers, can [help] most people can go up and down the mountain. Now, I'm not goin' to say occasionally there might be water that goes over the road that gets ice. You're not going to get much traction on ice, regardless of what you got, unless you got chains. And I've never put a pair of chains on my car, and I've never failed to get home.

TINKER: You never had to put chains on to get up that mountain?

COOLIDGE: Never put chains on.

TINKER: I'm impressed. (Laughs)

COOLIDGE: I've never, and I mean back in the '30s you had snow ...

TINKER: I'm impressed. (Laughs)

COOLIDGE: ... but I've never put chains on.

TINKER: But you're saying that you've probably helped a lot of people with their cars, didn't you?

COOLIDGE: Oh, I have, I have. I've got out—particularly women. I had one the other day, well, I guess a month or so ago; last cold spell we had and she was up on the side where you're comin' up the mountain, she'd done spun her car. She was up in that lane, blocking two lanes, and it looked like she was heading down the mountain, which she really was, but she'd just lost control and started skiddin' and got turned around; scared to death. Well, I got her straightened out, you know. I didn't, I had my son get out and tell her how to get over, get the car out of the road. But, you know, you learn in life, you have to learn. If you don't learn you're never gonna to go anywhere.

TINKER: There is one last thing that I almost forgot. Your battlefield presentation of the Medal of Honor. Now was that the only one over there? or one of the few?

COOLIDGE: Was it the only one of ...?

TINKER: Was it the only Medal of Honor battlefield presentation?

COOLIDGE: There was probably, I'll say a dozen that were presented overseas. Very few, very few. I'll tell you, they presented mine because the war got over. Roosevelt died. And they were really goin' to send me home before, but they didn't get it done, so therefore I had to stay a little extra time, and good or bad.

TINKER: And this took place in Germany?

COOLIDGE: Right, Ulm, Germany.

TINKER: Where?

COOLIDGE: Ulm, U-L-M, Germany. I think that general right up here is a picture of him, that presented it. (Gestures) See nobody less than a 7th Army, uh, an Army Commander can present the Medal of Honor. [Major General Haislip, Commander, VII Army]

TINKER: Oh, really?

COOLIDGE: That's the lowest they'll go down to let 'em present it.

TINKER: And did they have a huge ...

COOLIDGE: Oh, oh yeah, they had the whole regiment. In fact, that morning I'd gone out to the airfield just to take a ride. I had a jeep—see after the war is over, I had four jeeps, but after the war, I was kind of hard to control.

TINKER: I can imagine.

COOLIDGE: Because I had nothing to do but have a good time. And a lot of people didn't like it and a lot of people enjoyed it. Anyway, I went out to the airport, the airfield, which had been an airfield but during the war the Americans had bombed this airfield, bomb crater after bomb hole, bombed all the whole field. So we went out to look it over, and we knew we were going to have a parade there that afternoon. While we were there they had a couple of bulldozers goin' across that great, big airport field, filling up all these, leveling out the ground so when the troops walked it'd be level ground. And so we were out there ridin' and the general that was comin' up to present the medal, his plane came up. And I had my driver out there and we'd gotten out of the jeep and were sittin' on the ground. He walked over to us and we asked him how things were going and all that chit-chat, you know, and my driver said to him "So how about givin' me a ride?" and the guy said "Sure, come on, jump in, we'll take a little spin up here." So he took him up and about fifteen minutes they flew all around and miles away and came back and landed. When he got back I said "How about givin' me a ride?" He said "You know, I'm running a little short on gas." I said "That's all I need to know. I don't want to ride in no plane that's runnin' outta gas." But that afternoon, after the ceremony, and everybody was comin' up and shaking hands, congratulating me and all that stuff, you know. All the big shots were still siftin' through the crowd leavin', you know. And this guy walked up to me, and the first thing he said "I apologize for not takin' you up for a ride this morning." I said "You don't have to apologize to me." I said, "Buddy, anytime somebody's man enough to tell me he ain't gas in the plane." I said "If he wants to fly like that, he ain't gonna have me in there if I know it." He didn't say a word. I mean it just backed him right off, because he'd told that he was nearly out of gas. Well, that's the worst thing a man can do is get up in a plane when it ain't got no gas. (Laughs)

TINKER: And he didn't know who you were at the time?

COOLIDGE: No, that's why he said "Well I didn't know it was you that was going to be presented the Medal."

TINKER: He didn't know that you were the reason they were flying in, in the first place?
(Laughter)

COOLIDGE: Yeah, that's what he said. He went on and said "If I'd known it was you." I said "No, you wouldn't have gotten me in that plane"

TINKER: That's a good story. So, was there a big celebration that night too, after the ceremony?

COOLIDGE: Well, we went to the officer's quarters and they all had a little booze, you know, and all that kind of stuff. But since I wasn't an officer, they made me feel at home, but I let them have their party and I had mine, if you know what I mean. (Laughs) The kinda party I'm havin', they ain't.

TINKER: How did your ... I don't think I asked you this the first one. How did your parents first find out you were getting the Medal?

COOLIDGE: They're the ones...

TINKER: Did you tell 'em or did the military tell them?

COOLIDGE: They were the ones that told me.

TINKER: Oh, they told you. So, they found out before you did? You're gonna ... (Laughter)

COOLIDGE: No, I knew I had been put in for it.

TINKER: Oh, okay.

COOLIDGE: See, I knew a long time, I knew immediately that they had put me in for the Medal. But you don't understand how getting' a Medal, being put in for the medal and getting the Medal is a long, hard procedure.

TINKER: It's a big difference.

COOLIDGE: I'd been put in, in October of '44 and of course the days go by and people would say to me, you know, the officers themselves, "Well, we outta be hearin' something back any day. We outta be hearing." And I said "Yeah, well yeah Christmas'll be comin' in another few months" (Laughs) I mean ...

TINKER: Right, then months go by.

COOLIDGE: ... I said, that's always my answer. But you know, the strange part of mine was that when you put in for the Medal of Honor, and I know this doesn't always happen, but when you are put in for the Medal of Honor they're supposed to take you off the front line.

TINKER: Oh, just being put in for it.

COOLIDGE: Oh, absolutely.

TINKER: Well, they didn't take you off.

COOLIDGE: Well, that's what I said. You know how I got off? Now, this is October, the last of October. April 1st we're going to try and go through the Siegfried Line. You've heard of that all your life. That was World War I, II, and on. We were goin' to try and crack the Siegfried Line and we, uh, April the 1st came, we attacked at night. We didn't get too far and I heard this rambling of troops walking, you know. Well, I know immediately it's American, the Germans don't make no noise like that. (Laughter) You can't hear a mouse around them, but the Americans you can hear them a hundred miles away. And so, I said to the captain I was with that night, I was with K company captain. I said "I think I'll get over there and find out where they're going and what's the story tonight." And so I eased over toward 'em and I caught the tail end, think it happened to be a lieutenant, I said, "Lieutenant" I said, "Where y'all goin' tonight?" "Well, we're cracking, don't bother me, we're cracking the Siegfried Line." I said, "Thank you, sir." I turned back around to my ol' captain and I said, "Captain, you hear what he said?" I said, "Wish him well. We'll just keep our troops back here. We'll find out how far they get." They hadn't gone a hundred yards, Germans opened up on 'em, you know. And I said, "Yeah, he's goin' to crack the Siegfried Line." (Laughs) I said, "He's in a dream world." So, we got on back and went down to where the roads cut through banks instead of going over, they'd go through 'em so that the German shells can't hit them. And so, we got our troops in there, stayed the next, from dark to daylight and back to dark, so we could get out of there and then we went on back. And—I don't know. It's a nice life. I've enjoyed it.

TINKER: But how did your parents know that before you did?

COOLIDGE: Oh, that's your question. Um ...

TINKER: Did they right you a letter or send you a telegram? How did you find out from them?

COOLIDGE: Telegram, we didn't send telegrams.

TINKER: I thought they might've sent you one.

COOLIDGE: No, they didn't send one. I don't remember how I found out. Oh, I knew that I had been put in, but I didn't know when. I didn't know I was goin' to get it, see. Even though you put in, that don't mean anything. You know, you can get put in for a lot of things, but that's the end of it. You don't hear anymore about it.

TINKER: When you finally got to see your parents when you got home, what did they say to you? I bet they were proud.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. They were proud 'til they died.

TINKER: Do you remember anything they said?

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: Do you remember anything they said to you?

COOLIDGE: Not particularly. You see, they flew me home. I think I told you all earlier that they flew me home that night from Camp Atterbury, Indiana. We flew out up there, and I done ticked the officer off before he ever got off the ground. When we got here, 'course I double timed up to thank the guy and he gave me a surly remark about "I had instructions to fly you to Chattanooga and return, and that's what I intend to do." I said "I hope you have a nice flight, sir." By that time I was a write up in the newspaper, and my mother and dad, of course I ...

TINKER: Everybody already knew.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, and they of course. Everybody knew it by then. But it was a long time. I hadn't been home in twenty-seven months, I think. You know, these people talk about going and serving a year, that's fine. More power to 'em. I'm glad they get to go home in a year. We had no idea when we were going home, if ever.

TINKER: Right. Yeah, today it's very different.

COOLIDGE: Oh, yeah.

TINKER: I've had a lot of conversation with people about that.

COOLIDGE: Huh?

TINKER: I mean, sometimes they're even gone less than a year. Sometimes it can be a little more, but sometimes they only go for like nine months.

COOLIDGE: Oh yeah. I understand, and I'm thankful for it. I'd have like to gotten to come home in a year. I'd have lived a different life had I done that.

TINKER: I sort of think they might be a little better off if they had some down time. You know the trips home are so much more fast now. They don't have that decompression time that you all had.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, you don't have that getting' on a train up in Camp Atterbury and no, not Camp Atterbury, I was up at **Camp Bedford, Massachusetts**. I had to ride, I had to get to Boston, and had to get to New York, and had to get to Washington and then I had to get home. You know, you was all—and most of the trains at that time were traveling full because they had troops on those trains. They had a train here, and taken off a train up in Roanoke and all that kind of stuff, you know.

TINKER: So, you all had a lot more time to I guess just decompress. Like I said, to relax before you actually had to start trying to live life again. Now they, in twenty-four or forty-eight hours they can be from a combat zone back home and trying to live life.

COOLIDGE: Adjust to life.

TINKER: It can be hard.

COOLIDGE: It is hard. I mean I know there's transitioning, but we had to transition because we were sitting on that old smoke filled train, which they don't allow now. (Laughter)

TINKER: They don't. Alright, well I guess we'll end this here and I thank you again for your time.

COOLIDGE: Okay. Yeah, you're quite welcome.

TINKER: And this concludes our interview, part two with Charles Coolidge.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----