A Gunner, Not a Marcher

Interviewer: Well, did you get drafted for the war?

Gustafson: Yeah, I was drafted. Yeah, I went over there to Camp Lewis, and then they wanted a bunch with the Fourth Division, Regular Army. And then a crowd of us went down to North Carolina, Camp Green. There was a Company E down there—that’s the infantry company—then they was lookin’ for big guys for the machine gun company. They had machine guns, see. So they went through all of these various infantry companies, and I went over—I did that on purpose because I watched the machine gunners over there. They didn’t handle machine guns, and the infantry’d go out there, and they’d march back and forth, back and forth all the way along. Well then we’d went and picked up a couple of old Colt machine guns and then we’d go out there and sit down and have lessons on operating machine guns. And the other guys are marchin’ all over the [unintelligible]—I thought that’s a pretty good job [laughs]

Heavy Casualties

Interviewer: Well, did you see much action during the war?

Gustafson: No [unintelligible], I went with the [16th] Irish Division, and I was in the hospital seven months. The division was 28,000 men at that time—I think it’s twelve [thousand] now—we had 19,500 casualties. That must have been some place. And then with 173 of us in the machine company, there was twenty-six of us left. So I was in the hospital about seven months over there.

Coffee, Tea, and Jam

Gustafson: …The French, you heard about dead weight (?), I don’t know about the Blue Devils, but we’d eat with them and they’d have gruel, but better than when the British fed us up there; we’d have mutton, and I used to think they’d never skinned the darn stuff, you could swallow it, you’d hear a splash when you’d drain it. And they’d had the white bread up there, but they’d sliced it so darned thin it’d blow away. Then with the 16th Irish Division: coffee, tea, and jam; jam, tea, and coffee; coffee, tea, and jam—well, that’s about the difference between the meals. With the French we had gruel, and that’s actually pretty good.

How Many Men to a Tent?

Gustafson: We started out with the 16th Irish Division, and up in Caile—they had round tents, instead of big squares like ours, and it was eight men to a tent. And they had all of ‘em sandbagged, twelve feet high, around each tent was—that’s for bombing. They’d come over and bomb the place, but they’d only get one tent or two, see, and that’d break the shrapnel up so it couldn’t go in the other tents. That’s while even all them sight crews are on them (?). And then the Dutchmen’d come over for observation, they’d come over to see how many men England had over there, ‘til you know, they’d sailed back again—to read information. You see what happened there was as soon as we landed in there they put eight of us in there with the other eight Englishmen. Or else—it wasn’t just eight of us, but sixteen of us together—it wasn’t a little tent. Well, with it sized and shaped like it did, we all slept with our feet together—until it got light out (?)—so you’d have your feet on top of the other guy’s feet. But then when the German’s would come over, they’d figure there’s eight men to a tent, but there’s actually sixteen.