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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: Bruno Friesen

INTERVIEWER: J.R. Digger MacDougall

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Bruno Friesen

Interviewed 11 March 2003

By J.R. Digger MacDougall

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program Interview with Bruno Friesen on the 11th of March 2003 at Vimy [House] in Ottawa. Interviewed by J.R. Digger MacDougall. Tape 1, Side 1.

INTERVIEWER: Bruno, thank you very much for participating in this interview process with the Canadian War Museum Oral History Program. I'm speaking today with Bruno Friesen, former Corporal in the German Army, who served from November of 1942 until the end of the war.

FRIESEN: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Bruno, perhaps you could start us off by giving a bit of your background. I understand you were born in Canada. Take us from there, until you enrolled in the German Army.

FRIESEN: Sure enough. I was born in Westbourne, Manitoba, which is a bit of a soggy area, near Portage La Prairie, if you will. I was born there on May 25, 1925. My parents had come to Canada the year before as a young couple. I was the first child in the family. Ultimately, there were six kids altogether—but, anyway, I was first. They had settled, if you like, on one hundred and sixty acres of land that they had bought, sight unseen. The CPR was settling people along the tracks. The CPR was advancing money--well, the German expression for that was *Reiseschuld* [travel debt]. In other words, it almost drove the people batty, because it was like a millstone around their necks. But, most of them paid it off eventually. Anyway, that land wasn't up to much.

So, despite the fact that my parents had stayed in Ontario for several months on their way out west, as it were, before they ever got to Manitoba, they got back to Kitchener-Waterloo, okay, where I started school in 1930. I was just old enough to start school in 1930. Well, we lived in Kitchener-Waterloo then, until 1939. Now, I was taken out of public school--Suddaby Public School, on Frederick Street, in Kitchener — in March of 1939 and sent to Germany--in quite a hurry, I might add. There wasn't much fanfare about getting passports. That wasn't too bad--just more a matter of getting photographs taken, and so forth.

And in March, then, my brother and I—... my brother, Oscar, who was a year and a half younger, at the time (always was)--and five other youngsters sailed for Germany aboard the *EUROPA*, what they called a *Schnelldampfer* [fast steamship]. Oh, I hate to compare it with the *TITANIC*. But as far as Germany was concerned, I guess--not that we hit the iceberg, but--it was quite the vessel at the time. We landed in Bremerhaven, on the North Sea, and were taken to a place called Hohenkirchen. That's a *Kleinstadt* [small city] up in

northwestern Germany, up in Friesland. Now, they put me--and my name is Friesen, of course--and that would indicate, I guess, that my forbears were from that part of Europe.

But I might add, that for centuries--literally for centuries-- my parents, my forebears, rather -- before they ever got to southern Russia, before they got to the Ukraine--they had lived in the Danzig area, the area around Danzig. Because of persecution in Western Europe, they had gone to, well, what you might call Eastern Europe. They had gone to West Prussia, and lived there for decades. ... My mother's side, as well as my Dad's side, had resided there. ... I guess, ultimately they were asked to do military service, and they headed for the Ukraine. And there were several generations of [them]—you know, they had a good life in the Ukraine--until about 19...-- after World War I, when the Bolsheviks and the rest of them took over there. They lost their land, and what could they do? They went to Canada. That's just an aside, by the way.

Back to Germany now. Hohenkirchen. Well, for one year -- now, I might add that my parents arrived in Germany with the four other children in the family. They arrived there in July of 1939, and moved directly to the city of Wilhelmshaven, which, of course, is a large naval base on the North Sea.

INTERVIEWER: Spell that. Wilhelmshaven?

FRIESEN: Wilhelmshaven--Germany's largest naval base. And, for one entire year, I was kept on the farm there. By the way, from Hohenkirchen, the kids—all of them; my brother and I, as well as the five other youngsters that were with us—they were all put on farms, individually. And that lasted, at least as far as my brother and I were concerned, one whole year. It was fairly -- I wouldn't call it... -- enough work for a youngster—fourteen years old kid, you know. However, my Dad pushed to get us into the city. Well, he did with the help of a guy by the name of Meyer -- fellow by the name of Meyer. And then a NSDAP guy--a Nazi official. That's another story though—the whole influence there. The fact is, now, that *Kreisleiter* [District Leader] Meyer, he was a bit of a humanitarian. He said, "Well, we should get the family together." And they put us into Wilhelmshaven. I didn't have much to say. I'd had nothing to say about going to Germany—absolutely nothing. And here, they put me into an apprenticeship as an electrician, in the city of Wilhelmshaven.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you at the time?

FRIESEN: At that time, I was fifteen. ... I was thirteen years and ten months old when I got to Germany, and I stayed on that farm for a year or so. It made me about fourteen years and ten months. So, let's say just about fifteen. At any rate, I started this apprenticeship and after two years—well, the army came along looking for guys. Anybody with a trade like auto mechanic, or electrician, or something like that, they'd like to--well, you wouldn't necessarily get in the infantry. If you didn't have a trade, well, chances are, they might eyeball you for the infantry. However, the fact was now, that they were looking for fellows for the *Panzerwaffe*, as they call it. As a matter of fact, they were looking for drivers.

INTERVIEWER: Sort of a recruiting process?

FRIESEN: Yes. That's right. That's just getting there. Now the first unit I ever went to --in German, the structure is such — in Germany you had a *Panzer-Ersatzabteilung*. You [didn't]

go directly to a regiment—you may these days. But at that time, you went to a *Panzer-Ersatzabteilung*--that doesn't mean that they supply tanks. They supply personnel. *Panzer-Ersatzabteilung*—*Panzer*-[Personal]*Ersatzabteilung*, if you like. Well, the fact is, now, and that's at Gross-Glienicke, just outside Berlin, down Potsdam way. Potsdam isn't far from Berlin, but it's a militaristic district, if ever there was one. And the barracks were overcrowded.

Now, as far as getting in, being recruited, goes, they would--usually it was a bowling alley, adjacent to a pub—a *Kegelbahn*. And they would put about fifty guys in there--stark naked. And they had a one metre white circle drawn on the floor -- this is the truth -- ... and three officers sitting in there—you know *Wehrmacht* [German Defence Forces] officers—army officer, air force, maybe, naval officer. And the candidate—the recruit, as it were, recruit-to-be--he would stand in this circle. And they'd have a good look at him, to see how he looked, you know, if he was all there. And then they would — actually, this is truly archaic, because it takes us right back to the time of the *Alte Fritz*, you know—Frederick the Great. The guy would have to turn around, about face, and he'd have to bend forward, and pull his backside cheeks apart. That was just for fun, as it were, because they couldn't detect a thing. The doctors had looked them over for hemorrhoids, anyway.

So the fact is, then, after all that, they—oh, in a week or so, they got a *Gestellungsbefehl*, which was a written order to get to Potsdam -- to Gross-Glienicke – *Panzer-Ersatzabteilung* 10. And those barracks were overcrowded. They had the guys — the bunks were three high, [that] they had them in. In that particular unit, although it was a *Panzer-Kaserne*—[Panzer barracks], [it] had no tanks. But they put the bunks out there, and the recruits. The most recent recruits slept in the garages. Well, there weren't enough washrooms around, as it were. So, the fact is now, that the guys, every night —there was nobody around to tell them not to do it—they would go outside to relieve themselves. And, by God, the next morning, there was all hell to pay. The guys—they'd willy-nilly. They'd pick out a dozen guys and say, "Okay, you boys. You do your push-ups right here." On the soaked ground, you see. Stuff like that.

INTERVIEWER: So, what sort of training did you go through at this time?

FRIESEN: Well, this was basic training there. It went on for a couple of months. I could have sworn that I was with the infantry. But, at the end of the year—now, that was November the 1st, that I got in there—around the end—after about two months, they sent us to a *Panzerfahrschule*. And they had one at Lyck, L-Y-C-K, in Ostpreussen [East Prussia], up in the Masurian area—the Masurian lakes. Pretty area, actually--untouched by war. But they had this place, and they had the *Panzer I A*—Germany's smallest tank, without the turret -- there. They had these as driving school vehicles. And you know, five forward gears and one reverse gear, and you weren't supposed to clash gears and all the rest. Because anybody using the wrong gears—it, well, would give them a chance to get to know things. But I tell you, some guys were pretty good at it. The automobile mechanics—they had it over the other guys. And they weren't gear grinders. But believe me, if you did grind the gear too often, according to the instructor, and even according to your buddies in the vehicle, they'd let you run in behind the vehicle, carrying the jack. And the jack was one of these big heavy jacks. I tell you one thing, ... you carry that around for, especially, running around after the vehicle--not going too fast, but you really have to move— I'd say that jack -- I don't know,

but for about fifty meters of that, or a hundred meters of that—you wouldn't want to grind gears anymore.

INTERVIEWER: So, what trade were you initially trained in, and what was your first assignment?

FRIESEN: I was trained as a tank driver. I still have the tank driver's [licence]. The full handle of the thing is *Wehrmacht Führerschein für gepanzerte Vollkettenfahrzeuge* [Driver's Licence for Armoured Full-tracked Vehicles]—in other words, it's a *Wehrmacht* driving licence—doesn't make me a Führer. There was only one of those around, and in Berlin, I guess. ... So, in other words--armoured full tracked vehicles, okay? I still have that thing. And it says on the thing—*Bei der Entlassung abzugeben* [To be surrendered at time of discharge]. Well, at the end of the war, there was nobody to give it to. So, I kept it. Okay?

INTERVIEWER: What did that mean? The armoured full-track vehicles?

FRIESEN: Yes, that's the vehicle. It could be either—you'd have wheeled vehicles, you know—automobiles, *Personenkraftwagen*, but this was, decidedly, for tanks, okay? A tank driver's licence. A lot of the guys that were ... at Lyck were sent to Kursk.

INTERVIEWER: Kursk — in the Soviet Union?

FRIESEN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. A lot of them lost their lives. And I'll tell you, you could always tell where the guys had been. I didn't have to go there because after a while—back in the barracks, in southern Germany—at the *Panzer-Regiment Fünfundzwanzig*, I guess at Erlangen, outside Nuremberg. ... We went back from the tank driving school at Lyck, we went back to Gross-Glienicke, just outside Berlin, okay, down Potsdam way there. But they didn't keep us there. That's where we were sent to the Regiments, to which we belonged, okay.

In other words, in the barracks at Erlangen, they had... well, you could meet all kinds of guys that had been wounded and what not. You know, they'd tell big stories. There was another aspect there—you could learn a lot from those guys. They had savvy, you know. They ... got some experience, ... if they hadn't been killed, you see—bumped off.

So, when I was in the barracks there, I got a case of ... carbuncles—... it was pretty hard to take. I mean this really knocked the living stuffings out of me. I was a young fellow, hail and hardy, otherwise. So they put me into a military hospital in southern Germany—cured that, I guess. I got rid of these carbuncles, and multiple boils. Then, in 1943—at the end of 1943—I first got away from the barracks. They sent us... At that time, in Italy, Marshal Bodoglio, had taken care of the turnabout there. In other words, Italy—they wanted ... to reinforce the occupation forces -- the Germany occupation force. So, they sent us down through the Alps, through Villach and a couple of other places, to Trieste--on the Adriatic, across from Venice, east of it, across the water. And that was for several months. I tell you, it was quite interesting. All the time we were there—now, there was no fighting going on there, okay. There was fighting going on, ...on the other side of the sea.

INTERVIEWER: So, while you were in Trieste, were you part of an occupation—an Army occupation, in Italy?

FRIESEN: Exactly. Exactly. It was armed, but I never heard a shot fired there.

INTERVIEWER: And what exactly did you do during that period of time?

FRIESEN: Oh, just pulled guard. You know, this was interesting. I can tell you stories about some of the characters we had—you see, they'd almost rounded themselves up. We had some Australian guys there. We had quite a few cocky Italian guys there. And I tell you one thing. If these guys got a little too cocky, we had some of these fellows, Alpini there, you know—big hats, and feathers in the hat. And I'll tell you one thing. These guys—they were no friends of the Germans. But in a way they were friendly. Most Italian guys are friendly, one way or another. So these guys, they were masters at, sort of, disguising obscene gestures, you know.

Say, you were pulling guard there. You knew darned well what was going to happen. It was a two-hour stint. You know, you had to be there for two hours out in front of the door. And these guys would give you the finger, and all the rest of it. So, that's that.

But Trieste was an interesting city. It didn't take forever, though. They got things quieted down, and put us back to the barracks in Germany. And I can tell you, as far as I'm concerned, the time in Trieste was easier on me, or easier on all the guys, than anything -- the equivalent time that they would have spent up in the barracks, up in Germany, because things were nitty-gritty there. They were getting pretty tough. Not scraping the bottom of the barrel, but believe me, you'd have to be pretty sick to...

INTERVIEWER: So, you were returned to Germany, after your three months, was it?

FRIESEN: Yes. A couple of months, yes. I'd say about two and a half, but if you want to call it three months—about that.

INTERVIEWER: And what happened when you returned to Germany?

FRIESEN: Ah. Then, the Eastern Front loomed—the German Eastern Front. And after that, it was the Germany Eastern Front for me, believe me. You see, they learned a lot about deep snow and cold weather and so forth, and it even got into the *Panzerwaffe*—in other words, into the barracks—the tank regiment. All of a sudden, they needed about a dozen guys to send them to Oberstdorf. Well, now ... it's well known as a ski area. ... To this day, you know, it's a good place. And for about two weeks—this was a two-week course. And they had German *Gebirgsjäger* [Mountain Troops], NCOs—teaching us to walk around, and ski. In other words, doing some skiing. First in a—I don't know—a quadrangle—you know around a flat land area down, and then...

INTERVIEWER: Was this skiing training designed to get you ready for something?

FRIESEN: Well, as I said.... Not that any guys ever—after that, there was no more skiing. But, I can tell you this much. They had learned in 1940-41, a lot about snow. And I guess they wanted some guys around that—I don't know. There were no snowshoes—it amounted to be able to walk around on snowshoes, you know, move around in the snow a little bit. Now they didn't do this for fun, just out the goodness of their hearts. I don't know how I

ever rated that. Well, okay, I was not a case, as the Americans would say, for Leavenworth, or anything like that. But I mean, I don't know how. The fact was—that was just an interlude there—a two-week interlude at Oberstdorf, okay. And then they started talking *Ostfront* [Eastern Front], okay? That's the German Eastern Front. So, the time I got there was to the southeastern Ukraine. You could almost see the northeastern part of Romania there.

INTERVIEWER: Were you assigned directly to a unit at that time?

FRIESEN: To a Panzer-Regiment?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

FRIESEN: Yes, but not in Oberstdorf. That was just a bunch of guys taken out of various...

INTERVIEWER: At the Eastern Front?

FRIESEN: That would be pre-Eastern Front. That Oberstdorf business was pre-Eastern Front. They took us from our regiments, and they gave us the course, and sent us back to the regiment, okay. Now the Regiment, then, sent us to the German Eastern Front. First time I got there we stopped off at Linz—*Linz an der Donau*-- Linz on the Danube. A lot of industry down there. You know, they were building the Panzer IV there. So we got eight of them. It was quite the achievement to get—no, sorry twelve. This was the *Achte Kompanie*. We got twelve of them—we got a dozen tanks. And I could say, to this day I'm surprised what all they had in there. Okay, so they had an MP-40 in there, a 9 mm machine pistol, and all the rest.

But, they also had what they call a *Kleinempfänger* [small receiver]—that is a cheap radio. Bakelite housing and so forth. And the kind that, if they'd give you one in Germany—I mean the civilian population would get them free of charge. So they'd be able to listen to Josef Goebbels' propaganda. But here with each tank—now these tanks were going into the Ukraine. By God, they didn't even have two hundred and twenty volts there. We're not talking a hundred and ten—we're talking two twenty over there. The fact is, now, that each tank, as I say, had one of these radios. Well, I guess somebody had a contract—but they were there and the guys didn't use them at all. I don't know—maybe got rid of them, when the civilians were there. They were tinny sounding radios to begin with. But, you know, things like that happen.

So then, they put these all onto flat cars—the usual thing. Twelve tanks, and they headed for Chernovitz (Cernauti)--it's quite the crossroads there, you know. East of the That's not mountainous, but there are a lot of mountains west of there. And then, you see the Russians—you got these various rivers—you got the Sereth and the Pruth Rivers, and the Russians had come around there, and they were heading down towards Yassi, and farther down towards the Romanian oil fields. See? So, the thing was to stop them, before they ever got to Yassi, and to stop them up around Chernovitz (Cernauti), okay--the Russians. And this led to quite a few encounters, okay. You know, there were tank battles there. I've got that all written up, actually--you know, the numbers of tanks, and so forth. The fact is then, that when that was over...

INTERVIEWER: Was this the first time that you saw action?

FRIESEN: Yes. That was the first time. Yes. That was the first time.

INTERVIEWER: What were you actually doing in...?

FRIESEN: By that time, I was—somehow or other, I got into the turret. When I say that. ... I'll tell you right now, the best combination you can have, if you have tank driver training--boy, that was well worth it in the turret. But at that time, at first, on the German Eastern Front, I was a loader--so, like an apprenticeship for a gunner.

INTERVIEWER: Did you also operate the radio at that time?

FRIESEN: No, the radio was—see the Panzer IV had, [other than the crew commander], four guys in it. The radio operator [was] down at the bottom. There was a great big transmission in the thing. This thing's got -- well it is large—...When I say great big it's OK to say big, but it's a big one. And, to the left of it was the driver, and to the right of it was the *Funker*--in other words, the radio man. Okay. And the radio set was just on top of the transmission—there was some space there, okay? Now the people loved that Panzer IV. It didn't have the slanted glacis plate, or anything like that. Look, this thing was cuboid, you know...

INTERVIEWER: Vertical -- straight up and down?

FRIESEN: Yes, you look at it. It had its share of hits. But I'll tell you one thing about it. It had, for every guy in the crew, every guy in the crew had his own hatch. It was like an apartment building. ... And this was something. Because, man, you could get in, in a hurry, and get out in a hurry. You see, the worst thing there was that—you've probably heard this—the shooting across, over the corner, you know. If your gun barrel would--and this you had to watch, because you could get the two guys down in the basement there—you could get them mad at you, if you had your gun barrel over either hatch—you see what I'm saying. ... But that was okay. They could understand, because they had this idea—*über Eck schiessen* [shooting over one of the front corners of the Panzer]. In other words, just to give you a little more slant here, see. But don't go any farther; otherwise, you're exposing your side. See what I'm saying? Oh, yes. Well, that was legit. But in doing that, if you went this way, you'd be over the wireless operator's hatch. If you went this way, to the left—you know, traverse to the left--you'd be over the driver's hatch. And they didn't like that. So that's...

INTERVIEWER: So, you had to keep the gun to the front, all the time?

FRIESEN: Well, more or less. You had to at least see to it that you got it back there as soon as possible.

INTERVIEWER: So, let's talk about this first action that you experienced. What were the enemy using, and what equipment were you using?

FRIESEN: Well, a T-34/76. In other words, a standard T-34. That would be before the T-34/85 came along. That's a different kettle of fish. T-34/76—Seventy six-millimetre gun. And they were still—look, we had the T-34 right here at Vimy House. And, I can tell you,

it's not only the width of the track. It's also the length of the footprint—the length of the track on the ground, you know. So, they were good. Look, they've had their experience with wet roads. They're still having their experience with wet roads, from what I hear. The road system hasn't improved that much, I guess.

INTERVIEWER: So, the Russians were using T-34/76. What were you using against them?

FRIESEN: P-IV—Panzer IV—medium tank versus medium tank. Often enough, it was just the question of who in the hell was faster—you know, who was a little slicker. And I can tell you ... that the German—I will say this—the telescopic sights -- the main gun sights -- were excellent, optically. And I've been in this T-34/85. In fact, it's the only tank out here in the military technology gallery that still has, I do believe—at least, last year, it did have—the sight still in it. It hasn't been removed. Often enough they've been, you know, taken out and swiped, and lost—what not.

INTERVIEWER: Were you actually engaged in an action where you were fired against other tanks?

FRIESEN: Oh yes. Oh yes. On that road to Yassi. We lost some. We won some. I think, we got more than we lost. Because you see, by that time--it was early in 1944, by the way--there'd been skirmishes up around Chernovitz, but this was, well, okay, we're talking tank battle now. In fact, that series of things got me the *Panzerkampfabzeichen in Silber*, in other words, [the] Tank Battle Badge in Silver. Okay. Well, the fields were soggy, so if you got off on a side road somewhere, and you know, you knew your stuff. But, you had to be slick enough—you didn't want to meet these guys head on, or anything like that, necessarily. But get them in the side, where the armour is thinner. But you had to know all about how to handle lead, you know.

In other words, you had to be pretty slick with the gun sight. It worked. There were losses on both sides, but I can tell you. ... This can happen only in Germany. This would not have happened to any Canadian soldier, or any Canadian crew. We almost got bumped off. We got a hit, but it was more like a weld. Would you believe it? It welded the turret. It was along the base of the turret, just on the top of the superstructure, and it was like a weld seam in there. Couldn't ...

INTERVIEWER: The heat generated by the round.

FRIESEN: Couldn't traverse, yes. Couldn't traverse the thing, you see. So, we were out of commission. So, what they did there—never mind screwing around. Tanks were, you know--nobody liked to see them blown up, but you didn't have any choice. So, there was what they called a *Kiloladung*, a one-kilogram charge—a demolition charge--fastened to the seat—the upright. It was something like a tractor seat, you know—an old style tractor seat. Fastened to this thing, and give it about sixty seconds, and it would blow the turret right off the thing.

At any rate, before that happened, you'd get rid of your ammo. You'd be nice to the other guys, you know, give them some armour piercing, some high explosive. And then, well, somebody makes up his mind—somebody in authority. You get the okay to blow the beggar, you see. Now, what happened, then was a long march back to the barracks. And believe me,

... a year later, this would not have happened. Because they had, what they called *Soldatenklau*. *Klauen* means to claw; means to hook; means to steal—in other words, to kidnap. They'd have a bunch of guys, and listen, sometimes they were downright dirty--these guys. Because you could still see the black smoke coming. You see, you'd blown your tank up. ... There were all kinds of vehicles burning, and that's where you'd just been. These guys would get you down to a couple of hills, farther down the line, you know—they'd get you...

INTERVIEWER: The Russians?

FRIESEN: No. Germans.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, the Germans.

FRIESEN: And I'll tell you who was great for that. If they ever had any of these *Fallschirmjäger* [paratroopers] around -- they always figured they would—what the hell do I know? The Panzer boys—they had a tie, too--part of the uniform. You see what I'm saying. The black uniform. But these other guys were the *Fallschirmjäger*--the *Luftwaffe* guys—they're okay, basically, you know. If they had something to eat, they'd give you some--something like that. But they were buggers for that. Later on, there was one General—a Field Marshal actually—*Feldmarschall* Schörner—he was known for this, actually. This is another thing. This was farther up around--let's see--up in the Baltic states there. He'd have these guys at practically every intersection—a mile or two behind the lines.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned the Field Marshal. What was the highest officer that you had working with your group?

FRIESEN: Oh, well, we never even got to know the *Abteilungskommandeur* [CO of the battalion]. We never got [to know] the CO of the Battalion. We had our own guys—officers, now. I had one very good one—*Leutnant* Jakob—he died. Unfortunately he was killed as a crew commander. And usually we didn't really go up beyond Captain--*Hauptmann* [Captain]. I mean the ones we were in touch with...

INTERVIEWER: And that's the one who would have commanded the same company?

FRIESEN: Well, yes. He would--*Hauptmann*, he would have a company. And we had some good ones there. I can tell you more about the NCOs than I can tell you about the officers.

INTERVIEWER: So what kind of training would NCOs have received?

FRIESEN: Some of them would go to Gross-Glienicke, to [the] *Panzerersatzabteilung 10*—same as I did. But then they found out they could sign up for twelve years, and they'd be Corporals in no time. That's an exaggeration. No time doesn't exist. But believe me—they were fast tracked. These boys were Corporals in a hurry. And there was a tradition with those guys. Boy, once they had—you see, it's not just a couple of chevrons, here—they got what you call a *Lametta* [rank insignia]—around the collar and all that. Hey, man, that's what makes a man out of them. They'd kind of lean pretty heavily, if they could.

INTERVIEWER: And did a Corporal command a tank at that time?

FRIESEN: Well, often enough—usually a Sergeant. But I'll tell you one thing. There was not necessarily anything like a Corporal driver or a Corporal gunner. Whoever could do the job best, and whoever lived long enough, was the guy that got the job and kept the job, you see. Now, we had Sergeants. I can tell you we had one *Feldwebel*, a Sergeant [of the] lowest rank – [lower than] *Oberfeldwebel*—you got these other guys, you know--the pips piled on. Well, this guy's name was Starke--that's another thing. He was good. ... You know, he had a mind of his own, too. But he had some experience—these guys, you know. But he would never argue with a gunner, you see. That was a little later on. And he'd be okay. So, he miscalculated things one day; [we] bumped off some T-34s, and the smoke from the first one we got blew right over towards the other ones. We got all three of them. But he didn't give anybody--he wasn't critical of anything, because he'd missed that, too, you know. I said, "Well, the heat of the battle, you know--I took the one first." He didn't object. But, he was the kind of guy that wouldn't argue.

You see, if a German non-commissioned officer—they called them *Zwölfender* because they were signed up for twelve years. It was like a capital [trophy]--let's say a twelve point rack, you know what I mean? ... And these guys--they had to be watched. ... For instance, at Schweinfurt—now, oddly enough, this *Panzer-Regiment 25* moved from Erlangen to Schweinfurt and a couple of other places. They didn't always occupy the same barracks. They kept moving them around. I don't know for what purpose. The fact is, though, at Schweinfurt. ... the non-coms were particularly wicked. When I say that, I mean it. They were left—I don't know, if this is the case, here—if Petawawa had a bunch like that here, now. A couple of years ago before they--were there some? Anyway, these guys were downright sadistic if left to their—you know, if not checked, you see.

So, the officers were always gentlemen. I can tell you, a funny thing—a guy would learn something from them. The officer had been places. Like this *Leutnant* Jakob—he could tell you "Wow, there [are] all kinds of sayings." *Fünf Minuten vor der Zeit ist des Soldaten Pünktlichkeit*--five minutes before the time is a soldier's punctuality, and all that. But this guy would have—and this had to do with ammunition—now, I'll tell you one thing because you had to watch that. There was never too much to go around. And he would say—... Jakob ... -he would come out in his wisdom, and say, "*Immer soviel wie notwendig, und nie mehr als genug.*" In other words, as much as necessary but not more than enough—not more than sufficient—to do the job, you know. In other words, if the thing's dead, don't shoot it again. Don't waste ammo on it.

INTERVIEWER: Don't waste the ammo. Hit the tank once, knock it out.

FRIESEN: Yes, do what you can, and then leave it at that, you know. Go to something else, you see. ... There [are] all kinds of things like that—that kind of, what I would call ... *Turmweisheit* [lore picked up while serving in the turret of a Panzer]--kind of knowledge, lore, that a guy—a young guy, you know, ... is on receiving end--he's learning. He would pick that up in the turret, you see. The driver... Listen, a good driver was worth his weight in gold. You know, he'd put you on track and keep you there, too.

INTERVIEWER: Now, you were wounded?

FRIESEN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: You were wounded.

FRIESEN: In March [of 1945].

INTERVIEWER: What was the occasion in which you were wounded?

FRIESEN: Yes, by that time, we had no tanks. ... We'd done our last tank battle near Graudenz, and that's a city on the Vistula. ... There were a couple of big bridges at Graudenz and the Russians were on their way to Frankfurt an der Oder—not Frankfurt am Main, but Frankfurt an der Oder. Once [they] get to Frankfurt an der Oder, all they've got to do is go another eighty kilometers and they're in Berlin, you see. So this was quite the *Rollbahn*—in other words, this was quite the main road. We'd lost our last three Panzer IV—*Jagdpanzer* by that time. They were the ... kind of thing that you've got out here--the turretless [tank killers].

INTERVIEWER: No turret on it.

FRIESEN: Yes, that thing's only got twenty degrees [traverse]. Very good vehicle. But, you know, when you're used to three hundred and sixty degree traverse, and you've got only twenty—ten either way--you'd had better have had a good driver there. Anyway, we had lost our last *Jagdpanzer*, just outside Graudenz, which was on the Vistula. It's an old city.

INTERVIEWER: This was your last tank battle?

FRIESEN: Yes. That last tank battle. That's right. ... We're smart enough to know -- In fact, some Polish regiments were involved with this. From there, you'd go a little bit ... northwest, and you'd get to Pomerania. That's along the Baltic coast, okay? Now the fact is then, that the Russians were going down there, and they were going northward then, to the Baltic coast. But, everybody was hoping to get aboard a ship--one way or another. Well, I did get aboard, but I was wounded. And get out of Gdenia--in other words, Gotenhafen--they called it at the time—and survive.

INTERVIEWER: What were you doing at the time you were wounded? What action were you involved in, and what happened subsequent to that?

FRIESEN: From Graudenz, we had made our way essentially northward along the Vistula along the western shore of the Vistula, to the naval base at Gotenhafen--Gdenia is the Polish name for it. It's at the top end of the Polish Corridor, and the Poles always wanted access to the Baltic, and they had a wonderful harbor there, too, at this Naval base. Anyway, we ended up just outside Gdenia. And there were eight of us in the yard. One guy had found some cigars, and he was handing them around like a big shot. Some of these other guys were joking. *Herr Direktor* [the boss]. In other words, you know, "How's business? How are the shares these days?"

So, all of a sudden, it must have been a mortar round—one mortar round hit the gang, and a couple of us got it. I got in the right shoulder, right hip, left shin. Well, I didn't get it in the face or anything like that. But, I'll tell you, it threw me. It was something like getting a

shotgun blast. It knocked me over. That's another thing, too. One of the first things you do there, is smell your own blood. But, one guy sat there. Well, sat there -- he was blown over. But the guy that had had the cigars, he had had a stogie in his mouth. ... But they were having fun. Great deal of jollity. He just fell over forward, and this stogie kind of got out of shape. His face right over onto the cigar, you see. Now he was dead. *Unteroffizier* [Corporal] Fehler—not a bad guy.

So, then they took us. That was on a main road, from Gdenia, into Danzig, okay? Now, there were all kinds of people walking down that particular road. And they had a *Panje* wagon—little Polish wagons—actually, Russians had the same kind of wagon. There was one there. We got aboard that thing. Well, nobody felt like walking. I certainly didn't. We got aboard that wagon, heading into town, as it were. And there was a very good-looking German Red Cross nurse--*Deutsches Rotes Kreuz* who said, "Well, I can't do any much for you. But my advice is ... get down to the dockyards."

INTERVIEWER: So, you were responsible for your own evacuation, basically, when you were wounded?

FRIESEN: To get in to where there was medical help. Got into the dockyards there, and [the] *Kriegsmarine* ... was in charge—they were in charge--the German Navy. And I can tell, you they were organized. First of all, they cut the uniform all to blazes--in other words, cut off the sleeve, you know, and get at the stuff. And another thing was--every guy in there, they sized him up in a hurry. There's this matter of triage, you know, sort 'em out.

Okay, well I can tell you. There were three ways of being transported henceforth. One was *stehend* [standing]—well, that didn't rate much—you'd get some iodine on it, and out you'd go. And *sitzend* [seated]—that's seated, and *liegend* [lying]. Well, they gave me *liegend*--lying, with a stretcher. And everybody that got in there—well, they had a lot of surprise yet. Everybody got a blanket, compliments of the *Kriegsmarine*. It was worth something, you know. I mean, the uniform you might as well say, was in shreds. It kind of hurts to see your uniform being cut up because that's the only thing you've got with you.

INTERVIEWER: So you got a blanket from the Navy?

FRIESEN: Yes, you got a blanket from the Navy, you know. Then, that wasn't the only time they sized the guy up. Another three officers -- there were usually three of them--would come around, as kind of a commission, you know, and make sure that the guy that was to be lying there, was supposed to be lying there, you know. So, and then, in a matter of—the following day, I suppose it was, we were put aboard a hospital ship. Now, I don't know the name of the hospital ship, but it was a hospital ship for sure. There was a lot of hollering going on in there. There were some, from what I hear from some of the people that were aboard there, there were some amputations going on. So, ... that particular vessel took us to Denmark, and from Denmark, we went to Altenburg, by hospital train. Boy, there was a lot of misery aboard that thing. One guy got — oh, he'd been hit in the lower parts, and he was complaining like hell. [tape gap] "Good thing about it is. I got two kids already, so..."

INTERVIEWER: So, you were evacuated by hospital train, now. To where?

FRIESEN: To Altenburg, in Thuringia, which just happens to be southeastern Germany. That's getting kind of close to the [Russian] guys. And they're pouring in, by that time. They're across the Oder River. ... And you may as well say, they're getting into Germany — the Russians. So this was on March 12, by the way, 1945, that I was wounded just up, northwest of Danzig, there. So, we got into this *Reserve-Lazarett*, or in other words, a military hospital. And boy, my wounds weren't even healed. Well, young guys--kind of tough — twenty years old at the time. Nineteen years old, actually, because I turned twenty on May 20, 1945. Okay? But, then the fact is that I got out of that hospital. Obviously, I checked myself out. While I was there, I got the Wounded Badge in Black—[the] *Verwundetenabzeichen in Schwarz* ... And I headed westward. The trains were overcrowded. No more *liegend* there, I tell you. It was a strap hanger, and I was standing all the way.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have to rejoin a unit at this time? Were you...

FRIESEN: No. No.

INTERVIEWER: ...sent? What was the situation? Did you have papers?

FRIESEN: ... Oh, papers. Yes. Ah—that's an interesting thing. I had papers—they used to do this—that were sealed, okay, for the unit. But, by the time I got far enough westward, the unit was already in [the] American zone, you see. So, I headed for the British zone. That's a good thing I did because there they were gentlemanly about it.

INTERVIEWER: How were you able to do that? You were wounded?

FRIESEN: Yes. Wounded--things weren't even healing yet.

INTERVIEWER: And you were moving to your

FRIESEN: Yes, well. "Get out of Altenburg. Get out of Thuringia." Because that is the first place, you may as well say--the first province of Germany proper, that the Russians would hit.

INTERVIEWER: And, how did you know they were going to hit there first?

FRIESEN: [Oh], jeez, they were up and down the line, anywhere from—it was a broad front. You know what I mean? I mean, look at the Russians, believe me, they'd come across the Oder farther north at Frankfurt—I mentioned Frankfurt am Oder. It was a straight road to Berlin.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you know, or how did you know that it was important to get away from the Russians?

FRIESEN: Well, I'll tell you this much. Our family — I knew what the Russians could do. Sometimes they're okay, if they're not incited, or excited. But our family, in 1924, came to Canada. And the Russians — a lot of the Soviets and the Bolsheviks, at the time--they were incorporated into the Soviet system, okay. And actually, they had a bad reputation--some of them. They would, you know, commissars and the like, even at that time. That was before

my parents ever got to Canada, you see. Okay. It took a while for them to get a passport, too, but they made it to Canada. They should have stayed there, actually, but they didn't.

So, anybody, that had been on the German Eastern Front, knew enough to head west instead of east, if he could, you know. Because there was nothing to be expected from those guys.

INTERVIEWER: So, at this stage of the game, then, you were heading east? And you knew that you would be running into British.

FRIESEN: Well, they—heading west.

INTERVIEWER: Heading west, rather.

FRIESEN: Oh, yes. For sure. ... You see, the war was over, early in May. Depends where you were. Up around Wilhelmshaven, it was over on May the 7th. And so, the Americans had their zone. It would have been okay to head for the American zone, too, I guess. You know, just get the heck away from the Russian zone. That's the main thing. The Russian zone, of course, became the German Democratic Republic, you know.

INTERVIEWER: So, what was your meeting with the British, then? How did you...?

FRIESEN: Well, I got into Wilhelmshaven, and I [was] still in uniform, despite the fact the war was over. And, I got this job with the Senior German Naval Officer in Wilhelmshaven. I had never served in the Navy. But a young guy, with a couple of languages--they could use, you know. And I had a good time there, for several months, until I was discharged, in the British zone. They had their own discharge centers, by the way, and they took a good look at guys. Now, if a guy had been in certain SS units, or something like that....

INTERVIEWER: Interview with Bruno Friesen. End of Side 1.

[Canadian War Museum Oral History Program Interview with Bruno Friesen. Tape 1, Side 2]

INTERVIEWER: So, you're on the train. How did you meet the British? And you were in uniform--how did this encounter happen?

FRIESEN: Okay. I had no buddies along with me. I was on my own—just as an individual. I kept going. I couldn't go any farther than the Channel or the North Sea. I mean that was it, you see. And if you wanted to do any occupying -- and the word was, that the American zone already, more or less, had been established, and the British zone above that, you see. So, the place to go, if you can make it, is the British zone.

INTERVIEWER: Who told you this?

FRIESEN: Oh well, the word gets around fast. You see, by that time, things had taken shape in southern Germany, more than they had in northern Germany. You know, the Allies coming across the Rhine, this kind of thing. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program Interview with Bruno Friesen. Tape 1, Side 2

INTERVIEWER: So, you were saying that you had got the word that it was important to meet the British, and you were on your way there. What happened when you met up with British troops?

FRIESEN: No problem at all. No problem at all. I tell you, ... certainly, what was compared with what was going on in the east, this was a gentlemanly crowd. I mean, they were looking to de-Nazify people and all, but if a guy didn't fall in that category at all, they didn't bother him. In fact, they were good for a job or two. As a matter of fact, I had the job with the Senior German Naval Officer, [and] lived aboard a scuttled--one of those *Afrikadampfer* [steamship for service to and from Africa]--kind of a plush vessel, actually.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get that job?

FRIESEN: Well, I just let it be known--got in touch with, what you call the Limies up there, you know what I mean. "Hey, this is okay. We need a young guy that gets around." In other words, accompany these guys--some of them got off the vessel, now and then, you know, and that was okay.

Now, another interesting one. There [is] another city that's a *Kreisstadt* [district capital]--in other words, not Wilhelmshaven--that's a *Grosstadt*--it's a large city. But there's just west of that--Wilhelmshaven. There's an old city by the name of Jever. ... Now, the Americans had a graves registration command there. And that was also started in May--well, it was during the hot season of the year. And then, they were disinterring bodies that--you know, well, these little country churches and churchyards. And I got a job with them--that was several months. There was a Captain Labuzz in charge of it. He was okay. ... [The bodies were transferred to Liege, Belgium, for reburial.]

INTERVIEWER: So you were you digging up bodies to ship back to the United States?

FRIESEN: Yes, they were. They'd got a hold of a meat processing plant, or something, they'd cleaned out. And they were using that as a morgue. You know, the white tiles on the wall, and all that. So, they were a good bunch. Actually, after that, the longest job I had there, was at Varel, Germany. Wilhelmshaven is on a bay, on the west side of a bay--the Jade Bay--*Jadebusen*. Well, down at the [southern end] of the *Jadebusen*, you've got this city by the name of Varel, and they had a *Kreis* Headquarters there -- British military government. Okay. And that was part of the Control Commission for Germany. Jeez, I had a job there as a mail courier. I used to go and pick up the mail at the Army post office in Oldenburg. I had a driver there--mostly Volkswagen. But, I got around you know, and then distribute the mail. Go down to the Army post office in the morning, and distributed the mail after that. Every workday of the week. Well, that wasn't a bad job for a young fellow.

INTERVIEWER: And how did you manage to get back to Canada?

FRIESEN: I got in touch, at the time, with the Canadian Military Mission. I tried Ottawa, but they had their representatives over there -- Canadian Military Mission in Berlin. They

were polite about it. “Hey, Canadian citizen by birth. That’s just fine. Young fellow, you know.” And I can tell you, I’ve got letters that tell me that my Canadian citizenship — now, I always was regarded as a Canadian citizen. I was a Canadian citizen by birth. But the fact that I had served, in what they called the Enemy Armed Forces, they let me wait until 1950, for a passport. Then, they issued a one-way passport, and I crossed at Fort Erie. And the guy — the Customs Officer--asked, “How long have you been out of the country?” And I said, “Eleven years.” He kind of looked, you know. Well, I was — from 1939 to 1950. Well, you know, but I can tell you this much. That was a one-way passport. They grabbed it. But, the fact is, I’ve had a valid passport ever since. Take my word for that.

INTERVIEWER: So, you got back into Canada?

FRIESEN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And, was there any sort of special treatment that you got, as an individual who was coming to Canada at that time?

FRIESEN: Not really. There was the odd one that said, “They should have thrown the book at you, you bastard, because you served over there.” You know what I mean. But, that was more like friends of people who knew me. There were no repercussions. Once I was back here, it’s okay, you know. As a matter of fact, if I didn’t tell them, most of them ... didn’t know, you see. There was one old guy — well, he was the personnel boss at B.F. Goodrich. Young guy needed a job, you know, at the tire plant in Kitchener. And he said, “Don’t tell people your troubles because half of them don’t care. And the other half, are glad of them.” You know what I mean? What the heck? There was no sense in blurting it all over the place, so, I would say there were quite a few people down in Kitchener, that, to this day, they have no idea that I served in the German Army. What’s the sense? I didn’t want to get them wild or anything like that.

INTERVIEWER: Wasn’t important to them, then?

FRIESEN: No, it wasn’t important to them. They themselves, hadn’t necessarily, you know, families that — some of them knew nothing about military life, anyway, so what the hell, you know?

INTERVIEWER: So, if we go back now and we look at the training -- after your experience, you look back at the training. What is your impression of how you were prepared for the battles that you got into?

FRIESEN: As far as tank driver training is concerned, it was very good. Very detailed, with good instructors. However, I have heard that there wasn’t enough ammo to go around for a guy to do any practice shooting. In other words, if a guy got into the turret, not as a crew commander—nobody got that right away. Well, even the *Gefreiter* [Lance Corporal]--in other words, a single chevron—he wouldn’t have much to do with it. He’d be a loader, forever--you see what I’m saying. But a guy with a couple of chevrons—*Obergefreiter* [Corporal]. Okay.” They really were handicapped, I’m telling you.

The best place for them to learn their trade was on the German Eastern Front. The first thing they ever did, hoping it would work, was take one of these Panzer IV--the 75 mm gun -- and

zero in on a window or, a door of a house about a thousand metres away, and see if they could hit it. Now, they could, if the thing was—well, the hired help at the factories had done their work, you see. By God, often enough it worked, you see. Make sure, of course, that there was nobody in the house, you know. But learn the hard way.

Being a tank driver, well, you were more or less instructed exactly what to do. But being a loader and then after that, a gunner, it was ... almost like self-taught, often enough. Because there was one place — I forget the name of it—famous actually, a firing range, up along the Baltic. [Its name was Putlos; it is now a suburb of the city of Oldenburg in Holstein, and not of Oldenburg in Oldenburg.] In fact, well, it's something like Connaught here—that's the river, here. You know if you hold her up at thirty degrees—I know darned well, that a 303, or whatever you've got, is going to shoot across the river. But, they don't want to hear that, here. But there, it was all tank. And everybody said, if you get a chance to go there, do that, because it can really teach you a trick or two. Mostly, it was in connection with the gun sight though—how to use the reticle in there.

INTERVIEWER: So, most of the training that you did was actually done on the job, at the front?

FRIESEN: Well, ... even a tank driver doesn't learn everything from the ... driving school instructors. But, I'll put it this way, a loader, and especially a gunner, would learn quite a bit at the front lines. He had to, if he wanted to survive. If he took to it. Some guys that weren't particular enough, you know, "So, what's another mil, or so. You know, what the heck?" I don't know. Those guys— maybe they didn't make it.

INTERVIEWER: Bruno, when we look at your entire history—your actual experience in the field, during wartime, in the Germany Army--what would you describe as the salient memory that you have of your time in action?

FRIESEN: Well, I'd have to lump a lot of things. There were skirmishes, and then, there were the major tank battles. But I will say this. The well known German poet, Friedrich Schiller has the lines, "*Und setzet Ihr nicht das Leben ein, / Nie wird Euch das Leben gewonnen sein,*" which means, and this is a translation that I've provided for myself, "And if your life, you will not bet, never will you your life, as winnings get." In other words, it all adds up to the point, probably you're a better man for it, by virtue of your experience. But there is this joy of having walked away from it. And it is a powerful feeling—you know, one can reflect on these instances--but in total, it is, well, it's almost as if you had to bet your life, and you won it. I mean frequently. But at the end of the war, for instance, it is quite the winning.

INTERVIEWER: You seem to have spent a lot of time walking away from damaged tanks, moving back on your own.

FRIESEN: By the way, I should mention that nobody ever blew up a tank [on his own]. Nobody ever used that *Kiloladung*—in other words, that one-kilogram demolition charge, without authority. Now, some officers were rather reticent about saying, "Yes, blow it." You know what I mean? They'd let you wait.

INTERVIEWER: And the purpose for blowing the turret [the entire tank] was so it wouldn't fall into...

FRIESEN: Exactly.

INTERVIEWER: ...enemy hands?

FRIESEN: Exactly. That's the last thing they wanted. In fact, in 1944, and I still have a copy of this. And it's so rare that, even the history of the Seventh Panzer Division, which was written by, or okayed by [old] General von Manteufel, who was a Division Commander at the time. There is the *Frontbekenntnis der Soldaten der 7. Panzer-Division* [Front-Line Avowal of Soldiers of the 7th Panzer Division], and one of the things it stresses is the destruction of inoperative Panzers. In other words, don't let it get into the hands of the enemy. Simply, destroy it--meaning blow it up. And that's [fine], you see, if it's okayed. Now, if you do that on your own, hey, they might think, Jeez, you're a bit, you know, rash, or....

INTERVIEWER: How did you get back to...? Were you always with the same unit? How did you move between units?

FRIESEN: Well, sometimes you'd wonder how you ever got back to the same unit. ... Now [at first] that was the *Panzer-Ersatzabteilung 10*, and, as I said, that [was] not for replacement tanks. ... It [was] a personnel replacement pool. ... Later, you'd get to the *Panzer-Regiment 25*. I'll tell you what it was—always was—and I can even give you the Field Post number that the *8. Kompanie*—[the] 8th Company, Panzer Regiment 25. As I said, in [the] notes ... I gave Angus, there was Rommel's [7th Panzer Division]. Anyway, *8. Kompanie, II. Abteilung* [Second Battalion], *Panzer-Regiment 25 Siebente Panzer-Division*. That's the way it's pronounced. ... [The Division was also known, since 1940, as *Die Gespenster-Division* [(the Phantom Division)]].

INTERVIEWER: So, you went to the replacement pool?

FRIESEN: Yes. Before I got to the Regiment, but after that, it was always, one way or another—it was always, *8. kompanie Panzer Regiment 25, 7. Panzer Division*, and the Field Post number was what they called *vierundzwanzig, fünfundzwanzig, eins, E*, [meaning] 24251E.

INTERVIEWER: So, no matter how you went through the process, you always got back to the same place?

FRIESEN: Yes, right to the end of the war.

INTERVIEWER: Right to the end of the war.

FRIESEN: And, if I had been able to deliver those letters that I got in Altenburg... A lot of these people were kind of innocent, in military hospitals. They'd give you a letter like that...yes, but, okay. *Trupparzt*. You take it to your own MO at the Regiment--wherever the hell that is in southern Germany—that's American zone, by then. ... In other words, ...

they assumed that I would be going back to the Regiment, but I couldn't. Germany was a shambles.

INTERVIEWER: Bruno, after the war, you were living under the Armies of the Occupation. Would you describe that experience now?

FRIESEN: Well, that was okay. These people were gentlemen—ladies, among them, too. And certainly at the *Kreis* Headquarters at Varel, I had a good time with them, although they knew that I was marking time there. I couldn't head back for Canada. The thing is, it's a joke—you can have twenty copies of your birth certificate, but if you haven't got the travel document, you're not going anywhere. You're just not going anywhere. So, some guys would have said, "Well, look it. I'll just go by way of, what they call the *grüne Grenze* [cross the border in a rural area]. Jump the fence someplace, and maybe head for the States, and then get into Canada—what have you." Well, I don't know. I preferred to do it legitimately, because I had a feeling that their promises were such that ... I trusted them, but it took five years after [the] war, [for me] to ...[get] a passport.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that there was rationing.

FRIESEN: Oh, yes, that was kind of tight for anybody. Well, I had a couple of guys. Oh, yes, here's where some experience paid off—not on my part, necessarily. But, I had a couple of mail drivers---German boys on the mail run, out of the Headquarters there, you know. And it was quite a long mail run, to get to the Army post office at Oldenburg, in the morning, and then to places like Brake and Wilhelmshaven. Probably ended up that it amounted to a couple of hundred kilometres a day. So, we had two of them—Willy Reebosch and another guy. Anyway, these were seasoned guys. These were discharged German soldiers. And I can tell you--they were smart enough to get the odd jerry can of gas, so they'd look to me. See, I was like a kind of *Panzer-Kommandant*—a crew commander for these guys.

INTERVIEWER: You were their leader?

FRIESEN: Yes. Yes. And they'd kind of look around [and say], "What are we going to do with this now?" I'd say, "Boys, I'll tell you one thing you've got to do this out of town." So, we had an old bakery, an old baker—a very good bakery, too. *Diekmannshausen*. Just east of Varel, not too far from the high dyke there, along the North Sea coast. Oh man, this guy needed gasoline. ...

INTERVIEWER: You were able to trade it for other things?

FRIESEN: Oh yes, sure. Once in a while. He loved us guys—or, he loved Willy and the boys. They'd lug it in there. You know what I mean? And treat them right—all smiles and everything else. Now, these were genuine Germans. They could feel these guys the way you and I can feel a pulse. But, the old boy, once in a while, he'd figure, "Jeez, today's the day I've got to give you guys a bonus." And he'd throw in, what the Germans would call *ein Pfund gute Butter*. In other words, well, like a half a kilogram or something. But the term *gute Butter*—it's just butter. *Gute Butter* is ... a hundred percent butter. But it's an expression they use, and this guy—he was good for that once in a while. Not all the time.

INTERVIEWER: So, you were able to get a few extras then with...?

FRIESEN: Well, these boys, I couldn't help it. I didn't even have to go to the guy. That's from the motor pool. I didn't have to go down there, you see. These guys took care of all that. But you see, since they were conveying this in the mail courier's vehicle—the Volkswagen, you know—well, they better ask the guy about that, you know. They didn't want any contraband in there. They were good guys. I don't know where they are now — probably all dead. But they learned a few tricks. Well, I'm telling you--discharged soldiers, you know.

INTERVIEWER: What was the discharge process that you actually went through?

FRIESEN: Well, let me tell you something. In Wittmundhafen, this was ...still in Friesland. There was a place called Wittmundhafen, all in one word. There was an English Captain—a British Captain—in charge of the place. Now, from the large collection center in Wilhelmshaven, they had several trucks full of guys going down there. You had to make sure [that] you had your pay book. You had to have it along with you.

INTERVIEWER: That's your Germany Army pay book?

FRIESEN: German Army pay book. Damn it, that's one thing I lost. Couldn't hold on to it any longer. Couldn't even make any photocopies, at the time. There were no photocopiers around. Anyway, they had all kinds of guys on there. Well, they had guys on there--what they called *Beutedeutsche*, okay? ... *Beute* means booty, you know. And there were all kinds of guys that had ended up in the German Army, as soldiers. Now, on the German Eastern Front, they always had the *Hiwis* [pronounced Hee-wees], the *Hilfswilligen* [or collaborators]. Well, they got a uniform, too, but they didn't have any eagle on it or anything like that, you know.

INTERVIEWER: But, you had yours?

FRIESEN: Yes, so they put these guys on the truck, and I can tell you right now, some of them—there were all kinds of countries that contributed to the German *Wehrmacht*. They got down to Wittmundhafen and ... nobody put them in a pen down there, you know. Just the barracks down there--they were there. And you know, some of the guys, figured--they got second thoughts. They just couldn't see themselves, not among the rabble there, but the atmosphere there, was such that, you know—these guys were due for a discharge alright, but you know, despite the fact that you drove down with them, you could also drive back to Wilhelmshaven. Maybe wait for a more decent truckload full of guys, as it were.

INTERVIEWER: So, how would you describe the administrative procedure that you went through?

FRIESEN: Well, that was simple. There was a very low ranking Medical Officer—a *Fähnrich* [Ensign]--in other words, a Doctor alright, but a fairly young—Hensel [was his name], as a matter of fact. I know it from the discharge certificate I have. And he certified that you [had] no VD, etcetera, you know what I mean. Hey, if they weren't looking for you specifically--and they could tell what unit you were with, looking at the *Soldbuch*--[the] pay book--you were out of there in a day. They didn't hang onto you.

INTERVIEWER: So, it was just a straight process. You were released from the German Army, by the British?

FRIESEN: Yes, because they knew darned well what they were looking for. That's right. Discharged by the British, at a discharge centre. I still have the thing, you see. And the thing is, after that that's where the fun started. I mean, you couldn't go back to the barracks at Wilhelmshaven, so you had to be on your own. And that's where the Senior German Naval Officer came in, or the Graves Registration Command, or the *Kreis* Headquarters, with the mail run there, you know. A guy had to get around, you see.

INTERVIEWER: Now you mentioned that many countries contributed to the *Wehrmacht*?

FRIESEN: Oh, you want to believe it.

INTERVIEWER: In your own unit—what would you say you had in your own unit?

FRIESEN: I don't ever say I was with an elite unit, but I'll tell you this much. They were very leery about putting anybody—even guys from Alsace-Lorraine, they were leery about putting them into the tanks. I can tell you this. I've seen a pay book, right here at Vimy House—up in the archives. The bearer of that thing—a pay book, okay—was an Air Force guy—*Luftwaffe* guy, had *deutsch / österreichisch*--...[German / Austrian] citizenship. In other words, they differentiated between anybody that got German citizenship by way of annexation, or the guy that got German citizenship by way of his birth, you know. By birth. And I can tell you, that we had some guys from the Saarland—down towards France there, you know. But, I'll tell you one thing. ... Hardly enough to make one or two crews, and they were dispersed.

INTERVIEWER: Were they treated any differently?

FRIESEN: No. ... Well, you'd laugh at their accent. Because the guys down in Saarland, there—they sound like [the] French—they have a French lilt to their talk, you see. And they were harmless—these guys. But never too many of them, you see. ... Now, I'm told that Infantry Regiments had more guys, together like that, you know, from one area.

INTERVIEWER: So, when you returned to Canada, you got back with your family? Was that what happened?

FRIESEN: No, [my] family stayed. I mean, my parents stayed in Germany. My parents died over there. ... My Dad was eighty-seven, I think, and my mother was eighty-five. They were well into their eighties. Hey, look, I'll tell you one thing. Contrary to what—they never treated them that kindly. They revoked my Dad's—well, their—Canadian citizenship, and left him high and dry. They could have, I suppose, with a lot of fanfare—I guess they could have gotten back into Canada, but it would have been to start all over again. I never had that trouble.

INTERVIEWER: Bruno, one of the things that I know is that when veterans returned to Canada, who had served with the Canadian Forces—Canadian Army—in the war, [they] were entitled to certain benefits on discharge. You got nothing?

FRIESEN: Absolutely nothing. In fact, they owe me ten months pay.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what happened and how did you get to where you are now, with respect to your education? And your success in life?

FRIESEN: Okay. In 1956—that's roughly six years after I got back to Canada—I started taking what they called -- the Ontario Government was offering these course—the advanced technical evening courses (ATEC courses). I used to call them advanced evening technical courses, because they were always in the evening. So, the ATEC courses—there were three certificates available, and each took about three years to get. So, I got all three of them. And I can tell you honestly, I was one of the very few people in Ontario—I have that in writing--that ever succeeded. It took me ten years. Now from 1956 to 1966, I did that. And that ended up—not that I made use of it professionally—but I ended up with a designation—a Certified Engineering Technologist (CET).

In 1966, I said to my wife, and I was 41 at the time, “I said, jeez, if I don't do any more than this, I never will.” So, I quit BF Goodrich, and I started attending the University fulltime—the University of Waterloo. So, I got three degrees, inside of five and a half years. From 1966 to 1971, I graduated three times, in that time. I got a Bachelor of Arts—that was a straight Bachelor of Arts—not honours. But then I got a Master of Arts in English Literature, and following that -- and that's my last graduate degree, my second one—... a Master of Philosophy in English Literature.

Then, I looked about for a job to make use of that. So, I didn't have any trouble getting a job here in Ottawa, at Algonquin College, where I taught for twenty years. I retired in 1990 at the age of sixty-five. A lot of guys try to retire a little earlier, but, well, it took me that long. For the last six years now—of course, I've not been making any money here—but I've been a volunteer. As a matter of fact, my anniversary was just last month, in February. I've been a volunteer here, at the Canadian War Museum.

But it was a rough thing. Actually somebody comes back. Okay, so. There was no assistance or anything. University fees and all the rest of that was always out of my pocket.

INTERVIEWER: What is the greatest lesson that you learned from your wartime experience?

FRIESEN: The greatest...?

INTERVIEWER: Lesson.

FRIESEN: Well, I can tell you it takes us back to one thing—do unto others, as you would have others do unto you. Because it doesn't matter where you go, you could get into the wildest part of Romania. You didn't have to walk around, being smiley all day long, or try to bribe anybody, or anything like that, but if you treat them right. Treat somebody right. As a rule, it's reciprocal. The Golden Rule.

INTERVIEWER: And that's what you tried to do?

FRIESEN: Well, I had no reason not to. Now there were some guys I disliked intensely—some non-coms, in my time. But I wasn't the only one. I can tell you this much. Fragging--that's the American expression for, you know, the latrine business. If that had been in vogue, some of those guys would have got it. But it wasn't in vogue. By God, some of those guys were asking for it. There's a German expression, *Sauhund*. Well, it's supposedly, historical, a dog that is used for chasing wild boar. But if you want to ask a German--one of the boys that suffered under these guys--it's probably a cross to him. It means a cross between a bad type of dog and a real sow. *Schweinehund*. And there were a lot of *Schweinehunde* around. God know where they are now.

INTERVIEWER: You ever have any reminiscing that you do about your service in the German Army? Do you ever think about that?

FRIESEN: Well, yes. To the extent that, in 1994, that's almost ten years ago--well, it was eight years anyway—I began to write my—more than just my—I have a manuscript. Okay? And Dan Glenney here, on the premises, has read it. The thing is going to go to print. All I have to do is make sure that the photographs you get in there—the illustrations—are, you know, identified, and get the captions in there. And that constitutes my reminiscences. It's all laid down there.

INTERVIEWER: This is something you're going to leave as your legacy, then?

FRIESEN: I think so. ... Well, one can turn downright philosophical. I have it here, and it doesn't take the Royal Canadian Legion Hall of Honour to tell me that. But the guy you see, and this is universal. This goes for vets. You know, look at the old *Jagdpanzer* wasn't shot up, or anything like that. Some guys—Jeez, there was a crew in there, and who knows what happened to them, and so forth. It's just the premises here can get a man to do some serious thinking if he does more than just look at the, you know, “Hey man, the size of that wheel--look at that.” You know what I mean? More to it than that.

The War Museum, actually, and I don't ... have to blow this around. But apparently, they're trying to get more of that into the Royal Canadian Legion Hall of Honour there. That might do the trick, see? Serge was saying something about a place—this was a couple of years ago, before I even heard that the Royal Canadian Legion was spending money on their corner. Well, it's not a corner—it's actually central. But Serge was on the committee here—Serge Durlinger. And I said, “Why don't we try to get something together here?” [He said,] “We don't necessarily want coloured glass windows in there, or anything like that. But some of the guys can reflect a little bit”. And I'm all for that. I said, “Man, I'll back you up on that one, for sure.”

INTERVIEWER: So, you've at least had an opportunity to ... write down your reminiscences...

FRIESEN: It's in English, by the way.

INTERVIEWER: It is?

FRIESEN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's excellent.

You were talking about your reminiscences of the German Army. What was the state of discipline among the soldiers that you served with? Were most of them married or single? Was there a lot of crime? What sort of crimes were committed?

FRIESEN: Well, the worst those guys would ever get was about seven days. In fact, that happened in Trieste. They'd get drunk or something like that. ... [The vino would flow freely], and they tried to smuggle the stuff into the barracks. So they'd get seven days detention—*Sieben* [seven days'] arrest and that was enough, you know, bread and water, to smarten them up. But we never had anything to do with, oh, anybody pulling a knife or anything like that, you know. ...

All I'll say is those non-coms--some of them were kind of wild. But, on the whole, it was pretty well disciplined. I can tell you—that's a good thing, too. Because if a young guy survives all that, and he's been subjected to all that, I'm telling you, it stays with him for life. And some of the younger guys these days—they would well do with a shot of that. Not necessarily German, but some good Army discipline, or some good Air Force discipline or Navy discipline. You know, just Armed Forces discipline.

INTERVIEWER: So, you were with a, basically, pretty good group of guys, then.

FRIESEN: Not too bad. I don't think there were any—I think so, and they kept them that way too. In fact, there are exceptions. There was this one *Obergefreiter* [Lance Corporal]. Well, up in Lithuania one time—you see if your ... tank had been bumped off or something like that. In other words, they'd get you back a few kilometres behind the front. And there was an old *Stabsfeldwebel* [Sergeant] Stenger; he was a good enough guy. He looked after these crews that didn't get back to the homeland, you know, the barracks. But he looked after these guys because there might be ... a new shipment of tanks, or something like that coming up. So Stenger, he had ... Kunisch and he'd line the boys up. He'd have about two or three crews there—what was left of them—you know, tank crews, maybe a dozen guys—something like that.

And he'd say--and he was very--Bavarian, "*Sie gehna und hole Wurzle* [You go and fetch carrots]." In other words, *Wurzle* is a dialect word for carrots. But, if you went scrounging there, there was a rule, "You never would deprive the locals of their sustenance." You wouldn't do that. If they had something that they could give you—you know, if they got a few carrots or something, you know. And this was all agricultural area—out in the country. Well, they'd get it for you. Well, this guy—he'd pull his P-38 on the guy, and scare the living hell out of a family man. He walked up to the house, and here's a nice—beautiful little girl, with a book—a German *Fibel*, in other words, [with] a German primary reader--sitting there.

And well, "Want to talk with your Poppa." So, Pop came around—he's a friendly guy—didn't want any trouble." Well, Kunisch, that bastard, put his P-38 to this guy and he said, and he was after--it didn't matter if they didn't speak German—well that was *maslov*, or *Speck* or *Schinken* [bacon or ham], or something, but if he figured these people knew Russian, it was ... [a] kind of grease. ... So, gee! Well, he scared the living hell out of this guy. He scared the living hell out of me, too. But this guy was enraged. Crazy bugger.

He'd been around the front lines too long. You know, he was almost out of control. He wasn't going to bump the guy off anyway, but he put the...you know.

INTERVIEWER: But it scared him, probably, as well?

FRIESEN: Well, I mean, yes. I'd never seen him like that. See, the tunic—you didn't have to have the holster for a pistol—that was just on the road. Because that could get caught in--there was a big pocket in front of the tunic, you see. It had this thing. Better not have one up the spout, because you'd have the pistol in there—the 9 mm. So it would have been inverted with--you know. And this guy headed for the hayloft. He got him a ham, all right.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned he had a P-38.

FRIESEN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What were the personal weapons of tank crew members in your unit?

FRIESEN: A lot of different. First of all, the Luger—the *Pistole 08*. The P-38. The Belgian Browning—the one with the staggered magazine. The others all had eight-[round] magazines. And a very good one—somewhat the shape of the Polish Radom—[a] good one. Good solid tank—built for pistol whipping. Not that we ever used it for that. Heavy bugger—more like a 45. You know what I'm saying? Well, if you're used to the rather skinny barrel—the four-inch barrel roughly—of a P-38 or the old Luger there. Well, the others—they all look kind of big—kind of front-heavy. But those were the ones. And I'll tell you one thing. You didn't keep those ... all week long or for a whole month or anything like that. Next gang got a tank, they needed pistols, [so let's see] your pay book, man. You had this pistol. Somebody else gets it—for the next crew.

INTERVIEWER: It was recorded in your pay book....

FRIESEN: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: ...that you received the pistol?

FRIESEN: Oh, yes. Oh, inoculations. The pay book would have been... I'm telling you. Well, couldn't keep it. At the discharge centre there at Wittmundhafen--that was one of the ways of getting through that discharge centre fast.

INTERVIEWER: Hand in your pay book?

FRIESEN: Hand in your pay book. All kinds of stamps in there. They were so meticulous. They even had these de-lousing stations that you'd go and hit once in a while.

INTERVIEWER: How confident were you in the equipment that you used? Medium tank?

FRIESEN: Well, seventy-five millimeter—that's a Panther gun there. This one has no muzzle brake—the Panther did—this one's rather low, compared to the firing height of ... [the Panther].

INTERVIEWER: The one at Vimy here?

FRIESEN: Yes. This one. But this was a pretty good gun. You see. There's a history to it. This is an L-70. In other words, this one is 5.25 metres long. Well, they had an L-60, but it wasn't quite doing the job. It was supposed to cut through about a dozen--about twelve--centimeters of steel. Well, it wasn't quite doing it. So what they did--they didn't change the ammo. They changed the length of the barrel.

INTERVIEWER: How much maintenance were you required to do to keep your vehicle on the road?

FRIESEN: Well, the driver had—of course, he never had to pull any guard, you know. In other words, he'd have to get the grease gun out now and then. He's the guy that had to do a lot of maintenance. The other guys—I'll tell you—this sounds funny. You seldom had a tank long enough to do a lot of maintenance on it.

INTERVIEWER: Was it knocked out?

FRIESEN: Yeah, right from underneath you. Oh, yeah. And not that you blew it up every time--that's just the way it goes. But never would you blow it up, without an okay. Oh no, you've got to cover your backside on that one.

INTERVIEWER: Bruno, what were some of the things that you celebrated when you were in the Army?

FRIESEN: Well. Celebrated, okay. You could celebrate Christmas—they made much of that. There was another thing. A guy could celebrate his own birthday. Fact is, on his own birthday, he didn't have to pull guard. He was off. He didn't have to -- well, it was a special day for him. But, celebrations—well...

INTERVIEWER: Were there parades?

FRIESEN: Yes. One parade—the notable thing was Adolf Hitler's birthday. ... The whole garrison was marched into town on that one. It was a rainy day. This all happened at the center of Schweinfurt -- Schweinfurt am Main -- southern Germany. And the regiment was there at the time. And they had ordered *Auf der Stelle treten* [mark time], because nobody was really marching anywhere. The streets were all plugged up. Units in their finery, you know. And the fact is, now, if a guy...

INTERVIEWER: When was that?

FRIESEN: That was about 1943, I guess. Yes, 1943—April. Yes. As far, as I'm concerned, they call it marking time, because it leads nowhere. I can tell you I'd still be doing that, if, like the rest of the boys, I hadn't just quit doing it. This is a senseless thing to have a guy stamping his feet there, you know, as it were, and not getting anywhere.

INTERVIEWER: What was celebrating Christmas like at the front?

FRIESEN: Well, celebrating Christmas—you could end up with a little gift, meaning about

two razorblades. You see, the German soldier was quite adept at keeping razorblades going, and the best way to do that, was—if you could get it—[was] get a water glass, a dry water glass. Yes, sir, and just strop the [blade by rubbing it on the inside of the glass]. I guess that's universal. But believe me. Maybe a little bit of shaving soap, at the time. Look, I can tell you. Everything helped. I never did smoke. But if a guy got cigarettes—a few cigarettes, maybe a fat pack of cigarettes or something—make the boys happy.

INTERVIEWER: That was the way you celebrated Christmas?

FRIESEN: Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: How did you keep clean?

FRIESEN: Well, this is another thing. ... You had these creeks. And it was in the summer. You'd go down to the creek and do a little skinny-dipping. You know? But, yes, keep clean is a good question. Some of the guys had lice too. And that was another thing. This one guy in particular. They called him—his name was Zenner—they called him L.Z.—*Laeuse-Zenner*—they put the word *Laeuse*, which is a plural of lice, or louse I should say, [behind his last name]. Well, it's the equivalent of lice. They called him L.Z., because this guy was the first guy and the last guy to have lice. I've got to tell you. I don't know what [the lice] liked about him.

But, yes. Hygiene—that's one of those things. Well, one way or another. And brush your teeth—well, you would have a toothbrush, I can tell you that. And as far as the kit goes here, the German Army had a saying, and that's not being irreverent either. I'm just saying it the way it was. *Jesus sprach zu seinen Jüngern, "Wer keinen Löffel hat, der esse mit den Fingern."* In other words, Jesus spoke to his disciples, 'If you don't have a spoon, well, you eat with your fingers.' You know what I'm saying. So, the one thing that was important to have—far more important than a fork or a knife—was a spoon.

INTERVIEWER: To eat with?

FRIESEN: Yes, and Kunisch. That guy—once he'd latched onto a set of silver.

INTERVIEWER: Speaking of eating, what were your rations like?

FRIESEN: Well, they had to be supplemented. You got them all right, but they weren't... Thank goodness, there were people like *Stabsfeldwebel* Stenger around. The guy was a natural. He'd look after his boys. And I can tell you, the hard times a man—you'd see, you'd been in his care for a while, and you'd kind of build up your reserves, you know. And without him, I don't know. He was like a steward, you know. He did something for the guys.

INTERVIEWER: He scrounged a lot?

FRIESEN: Well, no. He sent the guys out scrounging, but he made something of it.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

FRIESEN: But you know, one time they had *Schwimmwagen*. The officers got a—the non-coms drove this thing around in Lithuania, and they did a little fishing there, by means of hand grenades you see. So, they got these carp out of a... Well, I'll tell you one thing. Nobody even thought of taking any of those coarse fish. You know—carp—from the lake to old Stenger ... Oh yes. This business of shooting pigs. You see, you could shoot a pig all right if it was in--and don't forget, the front line would fluctuate, but up to fifty kilometres behind the front line. *Feldgendarmarie*, in other words, the Military police were always watching us. They knew that line better than you did. So the fact is, you could...

INTERVIEWER: This is Digger MacDougall and I've been interviewing Bruno Friesen on the 11th of March 2003. Bruno, thank you very much for your comments—your candid comments—and I appreciate your thoughts and efforts into making this interview a success. You've provided a lot of personal touches to the information that we covered, and I'm sure that this transcript will benefit many people.

Interview with Bruno Friesen on the 11th of March 2003. Interview ends.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you, Bruno

FRIESEN: Oh, you're welcome.

TRANSCRIPT ENDS