

2015-07-03 SIDE A

Irving R. Smith

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Lael Morgan, interviewer

Series: Lael Morgan Collection interviews

Irving Smith talks about his personal background. He was born on February 16, 1919 in Darlington, Maryland. He was raised by his aunt. He attended Central High School in north Philadelphia. It was one of the top ten high schools in the country. He graduated from high school in June of 1938. He had always wanted to be a master mechanic. He had letters from Ford in Michigan, but he did not have any place to stay so he didn't pursue it. He got a job in Philadelphia and worked in a hotel until he was drafted in April 1941. He had basic training in Virginia. He was with the 95th Engineers. They traveled to Fort Bragg for maneuvers. When they returned to Virginia Pearl Harbor was bombed. They had more training at Fort Bragg and were then shipped to Canada to work on the Alaska Highway. His job was looking after supplies. He was based out of Dawson Creek to begin with. They lived in tents that had been winterized. The tents were OK as long as the stove was on. He arrived in May. He talked about the summer sun in the north when there is no total darkness. He said they weren't bothered by mosquitoes.

Break in recording.

Irving Smith talks about the clothing they had while working on the highway. He said they had what they needed in their unit. They later had huts. He mentioned Captain Welsh. He talked about working as far as Fort Nelson. It was right next to a lake and a little seaplane would come in periodically. He was granted leave in January and came back in February. He could get a ride to Edmonton on civilian trucks. He never had any bad experiences with the town's people. They did get frostbitten on their feet and hands. Some of the troops had a small stove in the backs of their trucks. He said when it really got cold the gas lines would freeze up. They had to shut down for a while when that happened. Smith said morale was fair. He tried to make himself satisfied. Ben Smith organized a band and Smith said he participated. They went over to the Red Cross hut for entertainment, too. They didn't meet too many of the locals. He said mail would come in about three times a week. He said they had some college students in their group. When the road was completed they were sent back to Louisiana. They went into basic training again. He said they came back in late April. It was flooding in Arkansas and they went up there for a while. Their regiment was split up into two shifts. On the highway they worked about a ten hour day. A lot of people would get stuck out on the highway. He said after they left Arkansas they went for basic training for a week. They had a dress parade on the Fourth of July. It was so hot that people were dropping. The next day they moved to a camp in New York for two weeks and then moved out to go to Europe. They traveled on a ship that had 10,000 people on it. The alarms would go off. One night they sank a couple of German submarines. They landed in south Wales. They moved around England and set up camps. They went over to Normandy a month after the invasion. He talked about seeing the sky light up the night of the invasion. When they were in

Normandy they were working with supplies and setting up camps for the troops. He stayed there until November of 1945. They returned into Virginia. They received orientation. There were about 200 men in their group and only one person volunteered for the National Guard. He got a job working for the Post Office. He retired from the Post Office and then got into teaching. He wanted to work part time. He was always good at math. When he was in high school he always worked part time. He enjoyed the time he spent in the service. He talked about his sergeant who also played in the band with him. He said Jimmy Campbell was in their band and became a professional musician. He said he has kept in touch with some of his fellow soldiers. He talked about taking out bonds when he worked for the Post Office. He didn't feel any discrimination while he was in the service. They had separate units then and the troops weren't integrated until the late 1940s.