

Don't worry about a thing, Sir. I'm in the 82nd Airborne, and...

This is as far as those bastards go

Pete De Vries

82nd Airborne Division, 2nd Ranger Battalion, 10th Special Forces

Wallington, N.J., May 10, 1997

Aaron Elson: How did you come to get into the Special Forces?

Pete De Vries: I started in 1952. I had met Colonel Aaron Banks, and I met Bull Simon when we were in the Rangers. And when they started the Special Forces he got in touch with me. He told me they're starting a new outfit, and they were taking all former Rangers and paratroopers. Also, they were taking a lot of the ex-German soldiers, because they started them in Europe. They weren't even intending to go to Vietnam or the Pacific. They were strictly trained at that time. They had the trouble with the Russians on the German border, so the Tenth Special Forces were going over to help train these different countries around there to fight the Russians. That's how it originally started.

Aaron Elson: What was it like training with the Germans whom you'd been fighting against a few years before?

Pete De Vries: Well, a lot of them were just like we were. They didn't want to fight, but unless you got with the real Nazis, you know.

Now, these are some of the things over here...

Aaron Elson: This is the citation...[reading] "Private Peter De Vries distinguished himself on 19 December, 1944, while assigned to the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment at Werbemont, Belgium. Though wounded and with disregard for his own life he attacked two enemy tanks that were advancing on his company's position, destroying one and disabling the other. This action prevented the enemy from breaking through these positions and saved the lives of many soldiers and civilians. His bravery against such odds was in keeping with the highest tradition of the United States Army and the 82nd Airborne Division."

Is this the citation for the medal that was just upgraded?

Pete De Vries: No. See this? [pointing to a citation on the wall] This was from Canada. See, in World War II I jumped with the Canadians and the British, in England. I trained with them. So it tells you right on the bottom if you can see it.

Aaron Elson: [reading] "... Has successfully completed 16 parachute descents with the British and Canadian airborne forces while training in England with the United States Army Rangers." Now wait a second. If you trained with the Rangers, how is it you went into Normandy with the 82nd Airborne?

Pete De Vries: I got out of the Rangers because I got hurt, and when I was in the hospital they moved out.

Aaron Elson: Otherwise you would have been at Pointe du Hoc?

Pete De Vries: I would have been at Pointe du Hoc.

Aaron Elson: [reading a letter to the Don Lassen, editor of the Static Line, an airborne veterans' publication]. "I just read the story by John E. Fitzgerald, but I still think the best one was told by an officer in the tank corps. It seems he came upon this lone GI with a bazooka and told him he was being pursued by German tanks and wanted to know the way to the American lines. After he told the officer the way, he came to attention and said, 'Don't worry about a thing, Sir. I'm in the 82nd Airborne and this is as far as those bastards go.' I think this shows the pride each trooper had for his unit, and what made him the best soldier in the world. Take care, Don. Peter De Vries, 508.' "

Now, you wrote that letter in response to an article?

Pete De Vries: Yeah, there was an article that some guy from the Marines put in. He was talking about the pride the different units had. So when I read it in one of the Static Lines, I figured I'll write this. I didn't use any names. I don't believe in that.

Aaron Elson: And then what happened?

Pete De Vries: When I wrote that in, nobody said anything for a couple of years. Then all of a sudden we went to a dinner in this place called the Drop Zone. There was this big poster, and it had this guy standing up there with all the equipment, and the caption of, "I'm with the 82nd Airborne. This is as far as those bastards go." Then they had a couple of guys [who claimed to have said it] after that. One guy said it happened in Bastogne.

Aaron Elson: And you were by yourself at this outpost?

Pete De Vries: Well, I'm not saying too much about it. But you've seen this whole thing (DeVries' "Airborne Room"), right?

Aaron Elson: No.

Pete De Vries: I thought you did.

Aaron Elson: I saw it briefly.

Pete De Vries: This here, we took this, I think it was last year. This is Colonel Jones. He was a very outstanding Special Forces, 101st Airborne – one of the heroes of World War II. And this is Roy Benevides and myself. This is on the Real People show.

Aaron Elson: Roy Benevides was a Medal of Honor winner?

Pete De Vries: Yeah, he was the last one in Vietnam to win the Medal of Honor. So while we were on the show here with him, they didn't want to give him any Social Security money, I guess because he was getting money service-connected. They were

giving him a hard time as far as Social Security goes. So he went and a lot of people got behind him, and he got the Social Security.

Aaron Elson: Who's this here?

Pete De Vries: He was Chaplain Watters. He was killed in Vietnam. He was going to save these guys at Dak To, and he got killed there. He was one of the few chaplains there that got the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Aaron Elson: Who was Frank Funk?

Pete De Vries: You mean Lenny Funk. He was from the 508. He won the Congressional Medal of Honor in Belgium. What happened on that one is he had turned these prisoners over to his men and then he went out scouting again. While he was out scouting, they pulled some shenanigans and the German prisoners took the Americans prisoner. So when he came back, the Germans were all holding the Americans. He had a sub Thompson slung over his shoulder, and when they told him and a couple of guys that he was with to surrender and turn over their weapons, he said okay. While he was unslinging it, he hollered to the other guys to get out of the way and he swung the machine gun and let 'em have it. And by him recapturing the guys he saved a lot of lives, because they were right behind the American lines. These Germans could have really done a lot of damage. He passed away. As a matter of fact, this is his citation right here.

Aaron Elson: Can I just quickly read that? "Sergeant Leonard Funk distinguished himself by gallant intrepid actions against the enemy at Holzheim, Belgium on 29 January, 1945. After advancing 15 miles in a driving snowstorm, the American force prepared to attack through waist-deep drifts. The company executive officer became a casualty, and Sergeant Funk immediately assumed his duties, forming headquarters soldiers into a combat unit for an assault in the face of direct artillery shelling and harassing fire from the right flank. Under his skillful and courageous leadership this miscellaneous group and the third platoon attacked 15 houses, cleared them and took 30 prisoners without suffering a casualty. The fierce drive of Company C quickly overran Holzheim, netting some 80 prisoners who were placed under a four-man guard, all that could be spared while the rest of the under strength unit went about mopping up isolated points of resistance.

"An enemy patrol, by means of a ruse, succeeded in capturing the guards and freeing the prisoners, who had begun preparations to attack Company C from the rear, when Sergeant Funk walked around the building into their midst. He was ordered to surrender by a German officer who pushed a machine pistol into his stomach.

"Although overwhelmingly outnumbered and facing almost certain death, Sergeant Funk, pretending to comply with the order, began slowly to unslung his submachine gun from his shoulder, then with lightning motion brought the muzzle into line and riddled the German officer. He turned upon the other Germans, firing and shouting to the Americans to seize the enemy's weapons. In the ensuing fight, 21 Germans were killed, many wounded and the remainder recaptured. Sergeant Funk's bold action and heroic disregard for his own safety were directly responsible for the recapture of a vastly

superior enemy force, which if allowed to remain free could have taken the widespread units of Company C by surprise and endangered the entire attack plan." – Harry Truman.

Had you trained with Sergeant Funk?

Pete De Vries: No, he was in a different company, but I knew him well. He was quite a guy; we were both in the 508, but in different companies. He just passed away a couple of years ago. And he was the most decorated paratrooper in World War II. He got the Congressional Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, Purple Heart. Then he got the highest award from the Belgian government.

Aaron Elson: Now, this is the citation for the Silver Star that was just upgraded to the Distinguished Service Cross? Can I read it into the tape recorder? "Sergeant Peter S. De Vries, 508 P.I.R., 82nd Airborne Division, United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy at Nijmegen, Holland, on 17 September 1944.

"Though wounded upon landing, Sergeant De Vries advanced forward and single-handedly wiped out two machine gun emplacements, killing approximately six German soldiers. Sergeant De Vries then led his men in clearing snipers from several houses. At one point he attacked a building single-handedly, killing two Germans manning a machine gun, while another group cleared a building across the street.

"After the company had advanced further into the city, at least two German machine guns began firing into the column, pinning down the entire company. Sergeant De Vries maneuvered his point from the line of enemy fire to establish a base to cover the German positions, and without other assistance assaulted one position with a submachine gun and grenades, destroying the position. He succeeded in diverting fire of the enemy upon himself and permitted his company to neutralize the position.

"The outstanding bravery of Sergeant De Vries and his willingness to close with the enemy contributed in large measure to the success of his company's attack and rendered a distinguished service in the accomplishment of his company and battalion's mission were in keeping with the highest tradition of the military service and reflect the utmost credit upon himself, the 82nd Airborne Division and the United States Army." Signed, Robert L. Meisenheimer, chief records reconstruction branch.

Now, were you evacuated after that, or did you serve further in Holland?

Pete De Vries: No, I was put in a field hospital. And then we went back to France. That's when the Bulge broke out.

Aaron Elson: You were in the field hospital when the Bulge broke out?

Pete De Vries: Yeah. What happened is they were getting everybody ready, the trucks and everything, and there were a few of us that were in the hospital. When we heard everybody was moving out, we got dressed and we went AWOL from the hospital. We wanted to be with our outfit.

Aaron Elson: You didn't leave the hospital officially?

Pete De Vries: No, we just went. We put on whatever we had, and it was fortunate enough that we were able to get some winter clothes, because as you know, it was a hell of a cold winter there. Both the 82nd and the 101st were supposed to go to Bastogne. But what happened is, I think his name is Feiffer.

Aaron Elson: Peiper.

Pete De Vries: Peiper. His unit was gonna try to go into Belgium; they were headed for Antwerp. So when the word came, General Ridgeway was supposed to be in charge, and he was pissed off that the two units weren't together. But when this happened, they just cut us off at a fork in the road. Then the 101st went into Bastogne and we headed towards Werbemont.

Aaron Elson: Were you wounded in Normandy as well?

Pete De Vries: Yeah, I was wounded all over. Everyplace I went. It's like a friend of ours that was with the unit in France, Holland, and also in Belgium he was taken prisoner. But each time he got away. I think he was captured twice in Holland, and he got away both times. I remember we met up with him when we were going into Belgium, and we asked him, "Who the hell are you gonna be with today?"

Aaron Elson: Was that like a jinx?

Pete De Vries: No. But you know, the thing is, he never was sent to any POW camp. He always got away.

Aaron Elson: What's this picture here?

Pete De Vries: This is at the Wall. And if you notice, on these different things, that the leg is light, part of the weapon is missing. Each one of these things means something. And this is when we were in Cherry Hill. We had a big service there for the MIAs, so they put our pictures in the paper.

Aaron Elson: How long were you in Vietnam?

Pete De Vries: I can't talk about that.

Aaron Elson: I noticed that the incident in the Battle of the Bulge took place on December 19. How did you spend Christmas?

Pete De Vries: Freezing my ass off. What we did is we took hand grenades and hung them on trees for Christmas balls. As a matter of fact I think it was on the 25th if I'm not mistaken. I think that's when Patton's units raced into Belgium, and like I say, we already had got rid of what we had to do. And that was it for me. I went back to England, and I stayed in the hospital there for a while.

Aaron Elson: What part of your body were you wounded on there?

Pete De Vries: I was hit in my leg. And we went back to England. Then when they were getting ready for the units to come home, I was in the hospital yet, and the 508 stayed in Germany as America's guard of honor. So instead of going home, I went back to Germany with my unit, while the rest of the division came home to march down Fifth Avenue. Well, that was all right, because I wanted to be with the unit, although some of the guys from the 508 did come home. And as far as it goes with points, even if I wanted to come out at that time, even with as many points as I may have had, I couldn't have gotten out anyway because I enlisted for the duration of the war plus six months. So the six months was up in September 1946. In other words they told you when the six months was up. I enjoyed myself. I stayed over there for a while.

Aaron Elson: Now, you enlisted because of your cousin, Peter De Vries...

Pete De Vries: Yeah, he was killed in Pearl Harbor.

Aaron Elson: Had he been a role model for you?

Pete De Vries: Not really. I didn't see that much of him, just once in a while when the family got together. He and my brother both went into the service in peacetime. So he was in Hawaii. He was here and there, and my brother was the same way. When my cousin got killed in Pearl Harbor, my brother was on Hickam Field. He got hit and he lost a couple of fingers. Then he went with some Air Force unit; he went hopping along the Pacific.

Aaron Elson: Even though he'd lost a couple of fingers?

Pete De Vries: He stayed in. I guess that's all he knew. As soon as he got out of school he went into the service. Then I had other cousins; as a matter of fact I had an uncle that served with Chesty Puller. He was with Chesty Puller in Nicaragua when he got one of his Navy crosses; he was with the Marine Corps. But they decided to stay in. That's all they knew, what the heck.

Aaron Elson: And your brother was killed in Guadalcanal?

Pete De Vries: Well, he was more like a stepbrother. He wasn't really a brother, but he was still considered like a brother. That's why I always say my brother.

Aaron Elson: How far back does your family go here? Have you been in this area a long time?

Pete De Vries: Oh yeah, a lot of my family was here. They lived in Lodi. As a matter of fact, my father was born in Lodi. It was his parents who came from the other side.

Aaron Elson: They came from Holland?

Pete De Vries: Yeah.

Aaron Elson: How did you learn to sing Irish tenor?

Pete De Vries: My mother was Irish. Matter of fact, she was related to Chancy Olcott, the great Irish tenor. I think he was from the 1800s. I think he may have even been before John McCormick. So that's why I always liked the Irish songs. When we had family get-togethers, most of my family played western music, because I had an uncle who was a Texas Ranger. After he got out of there he went doing rope tricks and all with the rodeos, so I guess we got in the habit of that with the western music. We had a band in the family. Even though we did that most of the time I would do all the Irish songs.

Aaron Elson: And what are these pistols here?

Pete De Vries: These are like the old .45s. This is what they just sent us, over here, because part of the 5th Special Forces, they were the first Special Forces regiment. And this is when I retired, that plaque there. They sent me that, or gave that to me.

Aaron Elson: So you were 82nd Airborne...

Pete De Vries: Second Ranger Battalion, and Special Forces, and then for a couple of days in France I was in the 101st.

Aaron Elson: Really?

Pete De Vries: Yeah, well, we didn't hit our drop zone, and we wound up with guys from the 101st Airborne. That's when I ran into these guys from the 101st, and one of the officers ...I still can't say his name right, Miklis, he was a colonel ... he says to me, "What unit are you with?"

I said, "Company B, 508 Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne."

So he says, "Like hell you are. You're with the 502nd, 101st Airborne Division." So I was with them I think for about three days.

Aaron Elson: Those must have been some three days.

Pete De Vries: Yeah, well, like I say, they were great guys.

Aaron Elson: Now these are. ...You don't have a chest big enough for all these medals.

Pete De Vries: No, well, that's because there's a couple, you know, like the Silver Star here, all these, the Legion of Merit.

Aaron Elson: The ones you said you wear, you said for a long time you didn't wear any except...

Pete De Vries: I don't wear nothing. The only thing I ever wore was my jump wings and the combat infantry badge. That's all I ever wore. But then one time I was on the Rutherford VFW, and I knew Eddie Smith from the Ranger battalions in World War II, and he happened to be the commander down there. He asked me about joining the color guard. I was unsure from the beginning. Then I said, ahh, what the hell. Matter of fact, I was the only man ever to get on the color guard that was not a member of the post. That

was an honor, because they had a very outstanding color guard. And that was the time, well, Eddie, he told the guys this and that. As matter of fact, Bill DePugh took over as head of the color guard unit. So they had a dinner, and at the dinner they were announcing the guys from the color guard. When he called for me, I stood up, and then he mentioned my name and everything. And he says, "When the United States ran out of medals to give him he was decorated by three foreign countries."

So everybody looked around and all they saw was a pair of wings and a combat infantry badge. So they said how come you don't have any ribbons or anything?

I said, "I just don't wear them."

Then they all got together and said, "From now on you're gonna be wearing them." So after that, I started wearing them.

Aaron Elson: Which are these here?

Pete De Vries: This is the New Jersey Distinguished Service. That's the one that we just got. These are from Korea. And this was the medal that I got from New York. I belong to the American members of the Croix de Guerre.

Aaron Elson: What are the two from Korea if you were wounded before you ever got to the front?

Pete De Vries: Well, this is the UN medal for the Korea service, and then, you know, the service. ...

Aaron Elson: How long were you in Korea?

Pete De Vries: I was there maybe a month. I just got there, and I came right home.

Aaron Elson: With the 82nd?

Pete De Vries: No, I was going in as a replacement with the 8th Ranger Company. But the funny part about it was, they were reading on the service record, the 2nd Ranger Battalion. At that time in Korea they were companies, and they were assigned to different units. So they had the 2nd Ranger Company, which they were gonna send me up to for the jump in Monsiny, but they never realized that the 2nd Ranger Company was the black Ranger company. They did Monsiny and then Sakto, and they did the combat jump with the 187th in Korea. But they were going to send me in with the 2nd Ranger Company because they saw 2nd Rangers [on my service record], but I was supposed to get assigned to the 8th Ranger Company. They were going to send me in for the Monsiny jump. And when I got in the jeep to go there, the goddamn jeep got hit. Threw me out of the jeep; I hurt my back. They grabbed a stretcher and put me inside of one of these small ambulances. I guess the ambulance must have went a half a block and that got hit, and I flew right out of the back. So they packed me up and sent me home. They said that's enough for this little bastard. You know, I could have come out and said to people, "Oh, I did this over there, I did that," but I didn't do it.

Aaron Elson: From what I understand, the Rangers really took an awful pounding in Korea.

Pete De Vries: Well, see, the Ranger companies were sent out to do all the scouting. I'd say one Ranger company was attached, say, to the 24th Division. So they would go out and do all the scouting, for artillery fire, whatever. In other words, it's like in Vietnam later on; they called them the Lerps, the Long Range Reconnaissance. This is basically the same thing. They would go out and find the different positions, or get behind the enemy and silence them. And this is what the Rangers were supposed to do. And that's why, when they used the Rangers in the Casserine Pass, they used them as regular infantry; that's how the First Ranger Battalion got wiped out. They didn't use them for what they were supposed to be used for; for reconnaissance, to get behind the enemy lines.

Aaron Elson: Who's this boxer here?

Pete De Vries: That's me.

Aaron Elson: You boxed, too? Was that after you were in the service, or before?

Pete De Vries: Well, this picture here was taken in 1946, because I went over to Ohio, and I went to see a buddy of mine, we were in the service together when I first came out. I was on the boxing team in the service. So I went over and I said what the hell, I need a couple of extra bucks because I stayed for a while, so I started fighting over there.

Aaron Elson: How did you do? Did you win?

Pete De Vries: Yeah, I won 11 out of 13.

Aaron Elson: What class?

Pete De Vries: Welterweight.

Aaron Elson: What do you weigh?

Pete De Vries: Well, at that time I weighed about 147. ... This is in 1943.

Aaron Elson: And at what point did you make sergeant major?

Pete De Vries: This was late, because I went back in the service again. I came out in '46, and I went to Ohio for a while. Then I said, hell, this is not for me, because I had a year to [go back in].

Aaron Elson: So you first enlisted...

Pete De Vries: In 1943.

Aaron Elson: And you were 17?

Pete De Vries: Yeah.

Aaron Elson: And your first combat was in Normandy?

Pete De Vries: Yeah, it was a couple of months into my 18th birthday.

Aaron Elson: You trained with the Rangers in England?

Pete De Vries: Yeah.

Aaron Elson: And you got hurt there?

Pete De Vries: I got hurt. I went into the hospital. In the meantime, they were getting trained for certain things that they were supposed to do. While I was in the hospital, I met one of the guys [who was in the 82nd Airborne]. He had gone on one of the jumps. I don't know if it was Sicily, I don't remember, it's been so many years ago. We happened to be talking, and I told him, "Before I went to the Rangers, I went through jump school and everything."

Then he says to me, "We just came over with the 508th. We went into Nottingham."

Then they told me my outfit moved out, because they went over to Scotland. So I told him, check it out for me. He talked to his C.O., and the C.O. says, "Yeah, he can transfer over." So I transferred over to the 82nd. At that time, when we were going over for the invasion, when we were flying over, as a matter of fact, I was thinking of the other guys. I said, they're making Pointe du Hoc and all. But with the injury I got – as a matter of fact I'd hurt my back a couple of times – it would have been rough to do the climbing. I'm not sorry.

Aaron Elson: You hurt your back during a jump?

Pete De Vries: I hurt my back three times on the jumps. As a matter of fact, on my fourth jump in training at Fort Benning, we did a night jump, and I landed in a hole. One leg was on the top of the hole and the other one went in the hole, so I got all the pressure on my one leg. My knee swelled up, and we were supposed to make the next jump which would be the qualifying jump. When I went to the dispensary, they said, "You aren't gonna be able to jump." The knee started swelling. So I had all my buddies there. They grabbed ahold of me and they put me in a whirlpool. I thought my leg was gonna shrink. They had me in there almost all night, with the treatment there. They were rubbing it and everything. And they put a tight bandage on it, and I made my fifth jump, and finished. Otherwise I would have had to wait till the next school came. But any airborne guy is bound to get trouble with the back, because of the way you land. Even though you're relaxing your legs, it's a shock when you jump, you feel it up here. Every airborne guy who's made enough jumps, they all have got back trouble.

Aaron Elson: And where did you make your combat jumps?

Pete De Vries: France, Holland. That's it. Because there were no jumps in Belgium. The only ones were a few paratroopers who came in when they dropped the supplies.

Pete De Vries: When I worked with the Grand Union in Carlstadt, they had a guy there who served in the German army, and they were always talking about the war and all. I overheard him one time telling these guys how he shot the American paratroopers as they were coming down in their chutes. And I got a little peed off at him, and I just told him where to get off at. You get a lot of these guys. We had a guy when I was with the county; he was with the Italian army, and he's another guy, talking about the war, the war, the war. He happened to be in the same area I was in. And he was serving as part of the German army. Well, it was a stupid statement to start off with, but he says to me, "How come I never seen you over there?" You know, it's stupid. You're not gonna meet and start talking. But as soon as he said that I said, "Well, let's put it this way. If you met me over there, you wouldn't be here now." And he just shut his mouth, he didn't know what to say. But it was a stupid statement, "How come I didn't see you over there?" What the hell. What do we say, Hiya, buddy?

Aaron Elson: What did you do for Grand Union?

Pete De Vries: I worked recouping. In other words if there were broken packages I salvaged what was inside. When the supplies came in, we ripped them up and put them on the shelves. But the old back injury came back to haunt me, and they had to terminate my job because I couldn't do it. So I was there only for a couple of years.

Aaron Elson: Did you work for the borough?

Pete De Vries: I worked in town here under the CETA program for a couple of years. Then I worked for the Bergen County Road Department for ten years. Then I retired in 1991 or '92.

Aaron Elson: What led you to retire from the Special Forces?

Pete De Vries: The injuries came back to haunt me. I went out in '70.

Aaron Elson: Why is it that you don't tell war stories?

Pete De Vries: Because I don't believe in it. Too many men lost their lives and they're the ones that you should tell stories about.

- - - -