

Interviewee Background Information

Address: Ernest Wesley Vincent

Phone Number (s): 205-7631-226 - Malone Pt. Lincoln, Al.

Approximate age or date of birth: 1923

Mother's name: Willie Cresswell Vincent

Father's name: Thomas Wicher Vincent

Places lived and when: Blue Ey Creek Rd. Lincoln, Little Rock Arkansas, while in the Army, in the early 1940's.

Education: high school - got drafted in 10th grade - to fight in WWII.

Religion: Baptist

Business, political and social memberships (past and present): Part owner of Vincent and Son Grocery in Lincoln. Now gone out of business, due to death of father in early 80's.

Present occupation: Retired

Former occupation (s) Anniston Army Depot.

Special skills: mechanics

Major Accomplishments: Fought in WWII.

Local events in which you have participated: while in high school he played football, basketball + baseball. Drove a school bus in high school, worked in local store part-time.

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: WWII.

National events in which you have participated: He was a soldier in the military during WWII.

International events in which you have participated

Natural born U.S. citizen? Yes / No

Naturalized Citizen: Yes / No Date:

Country from which you emigrated:

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession:

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview:

Additional information:

Gift and Release Agreement:

We Ernest W. Vincent and Mindy M. Wills
(Interviewee, print) (Interviewer, print)

do hereby give and grant to Jacksonville State University, all literary and property rights, title, and interest which we may possess to the audio or video recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) conducted at Lincoln Alabama on the date(s) of 9-11-96 for the oral history collection being compiled by the Jacksonville State University Library.

Ernest W. Vincent
(Interviewee's signature)

Address Malone Point

Date 9-11-96

Lincoln AL 35096

Phone 1-205-763-2220

Mindy Wills
(Interviewer's signature)

Address 205 Korreckt Dr.

Date 9-11-96

Lincoln, AL 35096

Phone 763-7802

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Prepared Questions

1. What is your whole name?
2. Where do you live?
3. Have you lived in Alabama all of your life?
4. How long have you lived in Alabama?
5. What year were you born?
6. What was your mother's name?
7. What was your father's name?
8. How far did you go in education?
9. Did you graduate?
10. What religion are you?
11. Did your family own any type of businesses?
12. What kind of jobs did you have growing up?
13. What is your present occupation?
14. Do you have any special skills?
15. Do you have any major accomplishments?
16. Have you ever received any special awards?
17. Did you ever participate in any type of high school sports?
18. What national events have you participated?
19. Are you a natural born citizen?
20. How many children do you have?
21. How did the Depression affect your life?
22. What did you think about intergrating black and white people to vote?
23. What did you think about Prohibiton?
24. How many brothers and sisters do you have?
25. What kind of things good and bad happened during the war?
26. Were you already on the boat that you had to leave on in such a hurry?
27. When your ship was hit, what was it like?
28. Where were you in the boat when it was hit?
29. How many people got killed on that ship that day?
30. How many people were on the ship that was hit?
31. How many people out of your company were on the ship?
32. How many people out of your company were killed?
33. What did you do after the ship was hit?
34. What was the battle like on the front line?

35. Is it anything like the movies show?
36. How long did you stay away from family?
37. Did you get to see new born son before you left for the war?
38. What did your family think about you leaving?
39. When you left did you leave on a bus?
40. Did you get sea sick?
41. Did family give welcome home party?
42. Were things different after the war?
43. Did you keep a diary during the war?
44. What did you think about Temperance?
45. Do you think the war was worth it?
46. Who was President during the war?
47. What did you think about the KKK when you were younger?
48. Did anyone ever get hung due to the KKK?
49. What did you think about the integrating of blacks into sports?
50. Did you or your family ever raise cotton?
51. How did your family make a living?
52. What was the day like you got your drivers license?
53. Did you have to pay a poll tax?
54. Do you think we still should pay poll taxes?
55. What do you think about politics today?

Historical Chronology

- 1920's- birth
family life
early education
temperance
prohibition
stock market crashed
The Great depression
Rural Alabama Electrified
- 1930's- young adult
high school education
jobs
effects of the depression
schools affected by depression
effects on society
causes and preventions
- 1940's- Ernest got married
had first child
left for war
ship sank that he was on
almost died
sent to front line
sent home
- 1950's- got a job at Anniston Army Depot
had two more children
built home by his father
got religiously involved
held many different church offices
-

1960's- continued to work on farm
children graduated from high school
two sons got jobs at Anniston Army Depot
daughter continued her education
one of the sons continued their education also
KKK

1970's- daughter's education
son's education
retirement for Ernest

This letter was written by Jacquin Sanders. It was written to Ernest Vicent with hopes of getting a response. Ernest never wrote this man back. Over the years Ernest has seemed to have misplaced the rest of the letter.

G · P · PUTNAM'S SONS

210 MADISON AVENUE

NEW YORK 16, N. Y.

42 · GREAT · RUSSELL · STREET · LONDON · W.C.1. · ENGLAND

I am writing a book on the torpedoing of the Belgian troopship, Leopoldville, in the English Channel on Christmas Eve, 1944. The ship was carrying members of the 66th Infantry Division (of which, incidentally, I was a member -- G Company, 264th Regiment) from Southhampton to Cherbourg. The idea of these questions is to get an accurate account of the disaster from the men who survived it -- not necessarily technical or full of text book tactics, but to get a picture of the "way it really was." The book will not be a formal history or an investigation, but simply the true story of what it was like for individual Americans to have participated in one of the great sea disasters of all time.

How did you feel about the embarkation procedure at Southhampton? Was your outfit divided and sent to different compartments or even different ships? If so, did you think that this led to further difficulties after the torpedo hit? Do you know of any snafus during the embarkation? Did British authorities play any part in these mistakes?

Were you given any lifeboat drill? Shown how to use your life jacket?

Where were you when the torpedo struck? What were your first thoughts? What did you do? Where did you go first? Describe your actions until you left the ship.

Ernest Trials and Tribulations

This paper will depict the life and times of Ernest W. Vincent from Lincoln ,Alabama.

In 1923, while William W. Brandon was serving as Governor of the great state of Alabama, Ernest Wesley Vincent was born the sixth child of Thomas Wicker and Willie Cresswell Vincent of Lincoln, Alabama.

Ernest began his formal education in 1929 at Lincoln Consoladated School. According to Ernest he was lucky to go to school nine months out of a year. This was due to not having enough money to pay the teachers' salaries. Ernest remarked "this happened several times".

Mrs. Willie Vincent, Ernest mother, always made sure the children went to church. Mr. Vincent would hitch up the mule to the wagon and take them to church. They didn't actually go every Sunday because services were held on alternating Sunday's when the circuit rider (pastor) made his rounds.

As a young boy of ten, Ernest and his cousin, Cootie, sampled their first and last taste of white lightning when they accidentally uncovered a local still. After drinking their fill, they attempted to ride the family mule, back home. After many attempts to stay on ole Will, they finally made it back home. To their surprise their approach had been observed by Ernest's mother and she immediately called for Mr. Vincent. Mr. Vincent

immediately ran to the rode and screamed at the boys "GET YOUR BUTTS UP TO THAT HOUSE NOW!!!!". You can just imagine what happened next. Temperance and prohibition took on a new meaning at this point in Ernest's life.

By now the family had grown to include ten children. All ten children contributed to the families economic pursuits. Chores included cutting and hauling logs, which were sold in near by towns, running a syrup mill, slaughtering hogs, packaging sausage which was sold to the Purefoy Hotel in Talladega.

The family also grew their own vegetables, raised chickens and other animals, which they used for work on the farm. They were very self-sufficient.

The family was affected by the depression in many ways, but Ernest's stated "we never went hungry and usually had meat to eat every day". They were not a wealthy family but they always had the necessities to live off of.

During the early 1930's rural Alabama was electrified. Due to the depression most Alabamians including the Vincent family was not able to obtain electricity until the 1940's.

In the late 1930's Ernest attended Lincoln High School. While there he drove a school bus and also worked at a service station to earn money for personal use. During this period of social activities were limited, therefore high school sports played an important role in the community.

Ernest was a three-sport letterman, excelling in football, baseball, and basketball. He recalled being "tough" and never missing a play in football. During this time period, athletes were not allowed to drink water during practice or athletic events, due to the

fact "coach said it would give us cramps".

In 1943, a teacher at Lincoln High School falsely reported that Ernest and a friend were no longer students, which resulted in Ernest being drafted into the army. His friend that was drafted along with him, shot his own big toe off, so he wouldn't have to go off to war. Ernest was sworn in on April 1, 1943, which he jokingly said was not an April Fool's joke!

On April 2, 1943, Ernest married his sweetheart Mildred Malone and immediately left for Fort Benning, Georgia for basic training. Preparing for the war, Ernest's travels took him next to Florida and then to Little Rock Arkansas. While here he sent for Mildred to come and join him. They lived several months in Arkansas where Mildred became pregnant and returned home to have the baby. Ernest could not obtain a pass to go back to Alabama when his son was to be born. He stated his sergeant was unable to help him so

he went to the Red Cross, they also refused to help. He called home and his brother-in-law came and picked him up, took him home to see his new baby, and then took him back to Arkansas. Ernest had to sneak back into the barracks, because no one knew he had been gone.

Ernest was now ready to board his ship to England. The trip took thirteen days at sea where Ernest had his first encounter with sea-sickness! He stated he had never been so sick before in his life except the episode of the moonshine!

After reaching London, twenty year old private Ernest Vincent, belonging to the Sixty-Sixth Panther Division, was ordered to go to France to lend support to the Battle of the Bulge.

Ernest and half his company boarded the ship, the Leopoldville, and headed across the English Channel. The ship was designed to carry three hundred and sixty passengers but on that day two-thousand two hundred and twenty-three men were on board!

The ship left England about 9:00 A.M. on Christmas Eve, 1944. Ernest and the rest of his company were sleeping in the belly of the ship, others were preparing a Christmas dinner for everyone. At about 5:54 P.M. a torpedo hit the Leopoldville. Ernest states he doesn't remember what happened next, he just remembers being on top of the ship. Witnesses stated Ernest was the last person to come out of the hole to safety. Everyone in his company except Ernest and seven others, were killed in the belly of the ship.

Ernest said other soldier were jumping into the icy waters, escaping the sinking ship. Lifeboats were in the water, when some men jumped they landed between the ship and were crushed to death. Those wearing helmets broke their necks because the waters were so rough. Some did not have their life rest adjusted correctly resulting in losing them and drowning.

Ernest decided to jump into the icy waters because the ship was going down. He was in the water long enough for both feet to freeze. A helicopter soon came and rescued him and the others from the water. He soon realized that his eardrums were ruptured from the blast of the torpedo. Altogether eight-hundred-three soldiers died on the Leopoldville that day.

All the soldiers who were able, including Ernest, were then sent straight to the front lines in France to battle as a foot soldier. Ernest was in the machine gun outfit.

He had to set up a thirty caliber, water cooled machine gun weighing ninety pounds, onto a tripod. He responded that this war was not glorified like they show in the movies. He said "it was bad, real bad" He also referred to the war as "unexplainable". He also stated that France was the filthiest place he had ever been and that the French women were "wild". His battles took him from France through Germany and Belgium. These battles took place over a period of two years. Ernest was now ready to return back home.

In January, 1946, they sailed for New York. In February, 1946, they were sent by train to Atlanta, Georgia. From here they were sent by bus to their homes. When Ernest got off the bus at 9:00 P.M., a man by the name of Marshall Allred took him the final two miles home. No one at home was expecting him because he beat the telegram home. When he walked in his wife and his parents, who happened to be there, greeted him with open arms, shouts of joy and kisses. They were just thankful he was still alive. Ernest did not recognize his now two year old son because he had not seen him since he was born. His sister who also was there, had a two year old son. He hadn't seen either one in so long he didn't know which was his own son. Fortunately, his wife had kept a picture of Ernest close to their son at all times, including in his play pin. Always reminding their son that, that was "daddy". As soon as the small child saw Ernest he immediately ran to him calling out "daddy".

After Earnest returned home, he had difficulty finding a job. He farmed his fathers land until two years later when he found a job at Anniston Army Depot, where he worked as a mechanic.

In the 1950's Ernest and his wife had two more children, a son and a daughter.

Ernest built a house on his father's farm. He and his family attended Blue Eye Baptist Church. He was ordained a deacon in May, 1958. He held many church offices throughout the next seven years. He did not believe in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, which was very active in the 1950's. He said the men running the Klan were worse off than the men they were supposed to be after. Ernest said he knew of several people in his area that joined for ten dollars a year, which paid for their robe and hood. But he never joined nor wanted anything to do with them.

In the 1960's, Ernest continued to work, farm, hunt, fish and enjoy his family. Both of his sons graduated from Lincoln High School and one graduated from business college in Birmingham. They both got jobs at Anniston Army Depot. His daughter graduated in 1970 from Lincoln High School. She went on to attend the University of Alabama where she received a degree in education. She went on to receive her masters degree in Special Education. His daughter is also a gifted pianist. Ernest is very proud to say he paid for her education as she went along and when she graduated he didn't owe a penny on it!

In 1974 Ernest retired with 30 years service from the Anniston Army Depot. He and his wife moved to the lake to he could fish and just relax.

In 1993, Ernest and his wife went to Boston, Massachusetts to a reunion of the survivors from his company. This was the first time these eight men had seen each other since the Leopoldville sank in the English Channel. Ernest shared his awards, which included, the Battle Star , the Good Conduct Medal, and the Medal of Bravery. They recalled not being able to keep a diary while in service because the army feared the enemy would learn too much about what they were doing. He said they really enjoyed their visit.

Since then, Ernest has been interviewed by the Anniston Star Newspaper, and has contributed information that has since been put together in a book, written by one of the survivors, Jacquin Sanders.

At the present time Ernest is a widower, his wife died in 1995. He has five grandchildren, one great grandchild, and another on the way.

He plans to continue living on the lake and enjoying his family. Also, plans to fish until he can't fish anymore!

1943 -
1995

1943

1995

The children and grandchildren
of Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Vincent
request the pleasure of your company
at a reception in celebration
of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the
marriage of their parents and grandparents
Sunday, April fourth
nineteen hundred ninety-three
at two o'clock in the afternoon
Blue Eye Baptist Church
Fellowship Hall
Lincoln, Alabama

Ernest Vincent and
former deceased wife
Mildred Vincent.





Ernest Vincent in France



Ernest and two Army friends share a smile headed for Normandi.



HIS BIRTHDAY — Thomas W. Vincent celebrated his 80th birthday on Sept. 14. He lacks one year being a life long resident of the Lincoln area; his family moved there when he was one year old. He has operated a store on Highway 78 for 26 years.

Vincent has 10 children, 31 grandchildren and 27 great-grandchildren. His sons are: Arthur and Ernest of Lincoln, Julian of Cedartown, Ga., and Ray of Birmingham. The daughters are: Mrs. Grace Lackey in picture and Mrs. Margie Malone of Lincoln, Mrs. Evelyn McGee of Redding, Calif., Mrs. Bernice Wier of Birmingham, Mrs. Elizabeth Mathine of Susanville, Calif., and Mrs. Bill Blake of Nashville, Tenn. (Mary C. Henderson Photo)

Ernest's father and one of his sisters, Grace.



Ernest and a friend

OUR BOYS IN THE SERVICE

ERNEST W W II



Pfc. Ernest Vincent



Herman C. Smith



Pfc. Ernest (Son) Vincent, son of Mr. and Mrs. Tom W. Vincent of Lincoln, was one of the eight saved on the Leopoldville, British controlled Belgian ship that was sunk off Cherbourg on Dec. 24, 1944. This catastrophe was described by an overseas newspaper sent home by Private Vincent as "one of the worst troopship disasters of this war, 764 Americans being lost."



Private Vincent is in the Motor Pool with the 86th Division and is now in France. He has been in service 28 months, including his training at Camp Eustling, Fla., Camp Robertson, Ark., and Camp Rucker, Ala.

His wife and small son are residing at Lincoln with his sister, Mrs. J. L. Malone.



August 21, 1994

Big war blunder is not forgotten

By Eric Larson
Star Military Writer

LINCOLN — This year, as nations around the globe commemorate their different World War II golden anniversaries, one historical event will likely escape ceremony.

It was Christmas Eve, 1944. Ernest Vincent still recalls the events of that night, much as he would like to forget.

"A lot of it you want to block out," says Vincent, reclining a bit uneasily inside his trailer at Lincoln. "There were some awful good men lost."

The calm waters of the Blue Eye Creek which lap the banks behind Vincent's home belie his memory of almost 50 years ago, when a German U-Boat sank the Belgian ship Leopoldville in a choppy and frigid English Channel. A 21-year-old private first class, Vincent belonged to the 66th "Panther" Division, which had been ordered to France to lend support in the Battle of the Bulge.

The Leopoldville, built in 1929, was being operated by the British navy as a troop ship. It was designed to carry 360 passengers; that fateful day it was carrying 2,223, plus a mixed crew of 237 Belgians, Congolese and Britons. Vincent was one of 1,421 soldiers who survived; 802 American GIs did not.

Vincent doesn't remember the details of how he ended up on a destroyer's deck, but he knows he was in the minority — about half of Vincent's company was lost, 71 men out of an original 140.

THE SHIP left England at about 9 a.m., says Vincent, who was in the ship's belly with other soldiers, trying to get some much needed shut-eye which would probably prove rare in the coming weeks.

From the Leopoldville's deck could be seen the lights of Cherbourg Harbor, but few people on the French coast were paying attention to the ship. None could anticipate the chaos about to unfold.

"They were making preparations for the big Christmas dinner," says Vincent.

"We didn't get it," he adds with understatement.

The torpedo hit about 5:54 p.m. Destroyers in the ship's convoy had picked up signs of a U-Boat more than two hours earlier and dropped some charges, but the German craft had somehow avoided them.

After the blast, which rocked the boat, "the first thing I knew I was out on top," Vincent says. Most knew immediately that the ship was going down, he says. After a while, soldiers who survived the blast began jumping 30 feet into the icy waters or onto destroyers that had responded to the Leopoldville's distress call.



Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star

Ernest Vincent of Lincoln remembers getting dumped into the icy English Channel after a German U-Boat sank the Leopoldville.

THE CREW had already abandoned ship, taking many of the largest lifeboats with them. An abandon ship order either was not given or was misunderstood.

"(The crew) seemed interested only in themselves," reads a report by the U.S. Inspector General, declassified in 1959. Belgian authorities have denied their crew did anything wrong.

But according to accounts, the crew had neglected even to perform a safety drill. When the soldiers leaped, some made the mistake of wearing their helmets. The upward

force of the water hitting the insides of the helmets broke their necks.

Others did not have their life vests adjusted correctly, so when the 48-degree waters rendered them unconscious, their heads fell below the waterline, drowning them as they floated.

Others were crushed between boats thrown around in the rough water.

THE TRAGEDY had its heroes. Many men risked their lives trying

See Blunder/15A

Blunder

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to save soldiers from water rushing into ruptured compartments of the ship, says Bill Everhard of Phoenix, a survivor and a member of the 66th Panthers Veterans Organization, which has helped tell families about how their loved ones died.

The sad underscoring of the event was the fact that the boat drifted within three miles of Cherbourg Harbor, where rescue crews sat unaltered to the nearby disaster.

In the context of the war, it was one of the Allies' largest SNAFUs, and the U.S. military did its best to keep the details quiet, says Everhard.

Everhard says he was one of the officers who censored mail from soldiers and was ordered never to tell the families of his unit what really transpired that night. All a family received was a telegram saying their relative had been "killed in action."

"I had parents write to me and ask me what happened. I had to write back and tell them I'm sorry, I couldn't give them any information."

Two years ago, Everhard's conscience drove him to look for records. For \$250, the National Archives' Atlanta office sent him a box of photocopies which included lists of the dead, wounded and missing. The records had name, rank and serial number, but not hometown.

"There are still literally hundreds of people who have no idea what happened to their husbands and brothers and sons," says the former platoon leader.

EVENTUALLY details of that night did get out, through scattered articles and a book "A Night Before Christmas" by Jacquin Sanders, published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in 1963. The book is now out of print, but another edition is planned.

Everhard has mailed his own version of the events of that fateful night to newspapers around the country, as well as to TV news programs. He's hoping for some recognition for those who died and for peace of mind for the families who have been in the dark all these years.

Peace of mind comes slowly. In 1961, Vincent received a letter from Sanders who was gathering data for his book.

Two weeks ago, Mildred Vincent pulled the same form letter — unanswered after 33 years — from the bottom of a cedar chest. "Talking about it doesn't help," Vincent explains.

A hard cover reprinting of "A Night Before Christmas" is expected to be released in eight to 12 weeks by Buccaneer Book Publishers. If you are interested in the book, write to the publisher at PO Box 168, Cutchogue, N.Y. 11935, or call (516) 734-5724.

Written by:
The Anniston Star

Back at Rucker, WWII GIs recall tragic night their ship torpedoed

By James H. Kennedy
News staff writer

It was Christmas Eve 1944, and World War II was raging.

Members of the Alabama-based 66th Infantry Division were rushed from England to France in an effort to reinforce Allied troops at the critical Battle of the Bulge.

Some 802 of the 2,250 men never made it across the English Channel.

A torpedo from a German submarine blew a fatal hole into the rear left side of their troopship, the *USS Leopoldville*, just five miles short of the French coast. About 300 men were killed immediately.

Most of the others, though, died needlessly, say military historians, contending it was one of the worst blunders in World War II.

They say the tragedy was mishandled from the moment the torpedo hit the *Leopoldville*, a Belgian ocean liner converted to a troopship.

The loss of life made it the United States' second largest single maritime disaster in World War II, said Warren McEachern, military historian of the Alabama State Defense Force.

At least eight of the dead were from

Alabama, and others, many from surrounding states, had married Alabama women while stationed at Fort Rucker.

Robert Hesse of Linden, N.J., a survivor of the tragedy, was expected to return to Fort Rucker today. As president of the 66th Infantry Division Pan-ther Veterans Organization, his mission is to get the 66th the recognition he feels it deserves.

He, McEachern and others want a presidential citation and monument at Fort Rucker honoring those of the 66th who died in the war. McEachern, a second lieutenant in the ASDF, is assisting him. The ASDF is composed of former National Guardsmen.

Hesse, a young sergeant at the time of the tragedy, said, "There was so much individual heroism the night the ship was hit — people risking their own lives to help others all over the place — that the unit deserves a presidential citation. We were promised a presidential citation, but never received it. So I'm presently going after President Reagan through my congressman to get it."

He also will meet Thursday in Montgomery with Gov. Guy Hunt, who has issued a proclamation in honor of the 66th's war dead.

Hesse was so busy helping get his men off the sinking ship that night that he wound up being one of the last to leave before it slipped beneath the stormy waters of the English Channel.

Something he remembers best, was that one of his own men had two life jackets but refused to give Hesse one.

"We weren't assigned life jackets and just had to look around and grab for one," he said. "This guy had two, and I asked him for one, but he refused to give it to me. He was one of those who drowned."

Many more apparently died from broken necks in the leap from the ship to the water below because they'd never been taught proper use of the "Mae West" life jacket.

Others died trying to jump onto smaller British ships as they attempted to pull alongside the foundering troopship. "The sea was rough, and many missed when jumping for rescue ships," Hesse recalled. "They landed in the freezing water, and some of them were crushed between ships."

He said, "Four or five of my men and I were among the last to leave. Two of them couldn't swim — both from Mississippi — and they latched on to my ammunition belt around my



Military historian Warren McEachern holds picture of doomed troop transport USS Leopoldville

waist. If we'd missed and gone into the water, I guess all three of us would have drowned."

They jumped onto a small rescue ship.

The *Leopoldville's* foreign crew abandoned ship, taking all life boats

that were fit for use. And the captain apparently left the engine running too long after the blast, causing the ship to take on more water.

Also, rescue ships were delayed about two hours because of a mixup in communications.

The ship was hit about 5 p.m. and went down between two and three hours later.

Jacquie Sanders called it "one of the most tragic and mysterious blunders of World War II" in his book *A Night Before Christmas: The Sinking of The Troopship Leopoldville*.