

Recorded Interview

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I was born in Weston, Lewis County, West Virginia on July 5, 1924. I have a sister and two younger brothers. I am two years older than the next son and ten years older than the last son. In 1941, we were living in Akron, Ohio and I was working for the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. My address at the time was 753 Bulger Street, Akron, Ohio. My father and I were on our way home from church, listening to the car radio, when we heard the news about Pearl Harbor. We were driving on Waterloo Road in Akron. The roads were icy and it was snowing. Like other men my age, Pearl Harbor inspired a patriotic desire to defend our country. As he drove, my dad reflected back to his experience in WWI. He shared what it was like for him during wartime.

I had graduated from high school, was nineteen, and was given an A1 Classification. I figured I would be going to war and I eventually was drafted. I went in on March 7, 1943. I was sent to Fort Hayes in Columbus, Ohio and was given my assignment. We were issued military clothing and I sent my other clothing home. I was sent to Camp Polk, Louisiana to the Eighth Armored Division. It took six days on the troop train. I was chosen to go to radio school and I still have my diploma with the Eighth Armored

logo on it. Radio school taught me to be a radio operator for the military and that is where I learned Morse code. I seemed to have an aptitude for the coursework.

I was sent to the ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program) at the University of Oklahoma where I was in training to be an officer. Eventually, ASTP was abandoned because they needed more soldiers and fewer officers. I was sent to the 103d Signal Company at Camp Howze, Texas where I became familiar with the radio system. The Signal Company numbered around 210 men with various responsibilities: wiremen, construction, etc. I became proficient on the Morse code that received and transmitted coded messages. My job was to transmit and receive coded messages. From Camp Howze, Texas we went to Camp Shanks, New York.

I went overseas on the *Henry T. Gibbons*, a smaller vessel that might have carried 800 men. I was one of the few people who could look back and see the Statue of Liberty as we left New York. We sailed south toward Miami and then proceeded east. Weather forecasting was not as sophisticated as we know it today. We ran into a hurricane and everyone became sick except possibly the sailors on board. The ship rolled and tossed so badly that they thought we were going to sink. In a matter of minutes you dropped fifty feet and the water was above the ship. On the high side you had to look way down to see the water. We really thought we were going to sink. For some reason I would not stay below deck. I found a rope and tied myself on deck. No one knew I was there. I was so scared; I did not want to go below deck. I also wanted to avoid the chaos

below decks. I do not know how I got away with it, but I did. I was very seasick but I remained tied on deck for days, leaving only to go below and use the “facilities.” I was vomiting and everything that goes along with it.

Eventually, I began working with the sergeants to facilitate communication via radio with other ships. The radio men were able to receive and transmit messages worldwide. That is how the military brass and the government received information about the war. The sergeants were located in a “radio” room and transmitted information. I was not a sergeant and could not type at that time. The communications were typed onto mimeo paper and that was the soldiers’ daily paper. The information would be taken below decks to the men.

Pierce-Evans, who was in the radio company, documents the following in his book Papa’s War. He documented the following but it never got published:

“A submarine had attacked a tanker a day or so before we passed through that particular area. It was still burning when we saw it.”

Our ship was at sea for fourteen days from the time we left Camp Shanks to the day we arrived in Marseilles, France. We landed on October 20, 1944 and we were welcomed by the German Air force. That scared the “heck” out of us. When we docked it was chaos. I noticed one of our officers was breaking all the exit lights so that the airplanes could not see any light that they may have given off. We were bombed as we were landing. Once we were off the transport we were not to communicate with the people in the town.

The military seemed to have trouble understanding what was going on. We were told to carry our sixty-pound duffle bag and our gun and meet at a certain location. That never happened. We were told that we had a “slight” march of two or three miles and we would meet altogether. That never happened. I got lost, almost immediately, and the projected two or three miles turned out to be fourteen or fifteen miles up a slope in Marseilles. The surroundings were foreign to me and I could not speak the language. I did make an attempt to meet up with the signal company and somehow I found them. We were sent up to the Ardennes Forest.

I remember my dad telling me about Armistice Day; WWII always reminded me of the date. Many people do not remember the date or the significance. It is the date of my first indoctrination to a firefight. I heard my “first” tank bombardment at approximately eleven o’clock on November 11, 1944. I was so scared I wet my pants. I was nineteen, and had never been away from my mom and family. Families were families back then.

Another time we were being fired upon from tanks and the shells would cut off the tops of the trees. We were bivouacked with a buddy but on this occasion I do not remember his name. One of the shells landed on top of the tent. Earlier that morning I had headed for the mess tent to get something to eat. That is why I was not killed. God has been with me ever since.

I had the privilege to meet General McAuliffe. I responded to his request for someone to repair the AC cord to his radio. His radio was more equipped than our radios. This occurred during the Battle of the Bulge.

Captain Beck was my commanding officer. Boitus was the first sergeant, the highest ranked non-commissioned officer. The men called him the "Buddha." The "Buddha" was cocky. He was a great map reader but he got people lost. He has passed away. I was assigned to be a jeep driver. I transported the Captain or the Sergeants to predetermined destinations.

(Anecdotes of incidents which occurred during the time period of the Battle of the Bulge.)

I could not understand why at one point we had to retreat. I was with the forward echelon and we were told to retreat to a farmhouse. I dropped off the Captain at a designated area and was told to go back to the echelon. He gave me instructions to return the next day. When I returned, I noticed that a ¾ ton radio vehicle had apparently driven over a land mine in the driveway, destroying the front end. I had my jeep in that same area the night before!

On another driving assignment, I encountered a German tank. I was able to clear out before he was able to engage me. I left the road and bounced through a field so hard that I knocked the radio out of the jeep. The German had his gun up at about a forty-five degree angle. When he saw me he started to bring the gun down. I was very lucky to see a rise that I could get behind for protection and still drive through the field.

I captured two Germans and took their weapons. I did not have a weapon. They yelled, "Americanish, Americanish," and put up their hands. The German soldier, as a rule, did not want to fight the war. They were not the people that were behind the atrocities that we have heard about. I put

my prisoners' guns in the back of the jeep. I put one man on the right front of the jeep and the other man on the left front of the jeep. I drove them into the encampment where the officers were. One of the men turned out to be a German major. Once they were handed over I left.

At another point in the war, I picked up a bullet in my right rear tire. I heard a noise and became aware of a problem when the tire started to lose air. I took the jeep into the motor pool and asked them to look at the tire. When they removed the tire we saw a fifty caliber bullet that had caused the leak. I suspect that when it was fired the bullet did not reach the firing cap. It did wear it off at some angle before it got to the firing cap. I wondered what would have happened if I had exploded that firing cap. Landsberg Concentration Camp (Landsberg am Lech).

The Germans abandoned the camp when they learned we were coming. I was involved in the release of the people in the Landsberg Concentration Camp (Landsberg am Lech). I saw the fence and the guys in tattered clothing. They were physically skin and bones. They were calling, "Americanish! Americanish!" In hindsight, I should not have given them anything to eat. I did give them some chocolate that I had in my pocket. I can remember the release of those prisoners at Landsberg. Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* while he was jailed at Landsberg (1923 to 1924). We saw ditches where bodies of the deceased prisoners were piled on top of each other. Up until the time that I arrived at Landsberg I did not know anything about the camps. I could not believe that anyone could be so cruel to the people in the camp. The world did not believe the atrocities back then.

There are people, as we are speaking, in 2010 that still do not believe that these camps existed.

After Landsberg we headed to Innsbruck, Austria. The Germans were defeated there and gave up. The war ended while in Innsbruck in September of '45. I heard about the dropping of the Atomic Bomb when I got back into the States. The 103d was dissolved at Innsbruck and I was put into the Fifth Division, (Diamond Division) and sent back to Pennsylvania. We were going to be shipped out to the Pacific Theater but because of the dropping of the Atomic Bomb, that did not happen.

I wrote home as often as I could. My daughter was born on December 20, 1944 but I never heard about it until January of 1945. Every letter that we wrote was censored. Our letters were photographed, reduced in size, sent back to the United States, reconstituted and then sent to the mailing address. The military called the mail "V" mail.

I had my own camera overseas and developed and printed the pictures myself. When we came back to the United States, the Quarter Master organized a place for us to stay. Unfortunately, at some point our duffle bags were cut open and personal property was stolen. A couple of Luger pistols that I got from Germans were missing. They also took a picture I had taken of the first Messersmit.

I was shot in the back possibly from shrapnel, but I never told anyone. Towards the end of the war I received a message from the 5th Division Headquarters Company that was coming north out of Austria through the Brenner Pass. It said, "We have captured and contained

Brenner Pass and are proceeding north.” It was sent from one headquarters to my headquarters and of course in five letter codes. (Radio operators had cipher machines. Letters were put in the machine and the machine would decipher the information. Even as a radio operator I had no idea what was being transmitted or received.

When we were going through France I lived for a couple of days with a French family. They wrote me a letter many years later but I could not read it. I remember that they had electricity and they had light from a 25 watt bulb hanging down over the table.

I have memories of the mess kitchen out in the field. The kitchen staff would fill up your plate and after you ate you took your plate over to 50 gallon drums and dumped your plate. The local people would dig in these garbage cans and take any meat and bread scraps they could find. That was how they ate. In many instance there was no other way for food to get to them.

I kept going because I felt I wanted to beat the hell out of the Germans. This motivation came after I got into the “business” of fighting a war and after seeing the atrocities of war.

I drove a truck and a 500 gallon gasoline trailer from Innsbruck, Austria to LeHarve where I boarded a ship. I was sent to Fort Knox for a few days and then I hitchhiked home. It probably took six to eight hours to get from Fort Knox to Northern, Ohio. I went to my parent’s home in Akron.

I had married when I was going to school in Oklahoma City going through the ASTP. I was assigned to the 8th armored division. I went

through basic training and radio school. Then I was selected for the ASTP and I went to the University of Oklahoma. I met my wife, Louise, at a corner drug store in Norman, Oklahoma while attending the University of Oklahoma. I was nineteen years old and Louise was twenty-three.

When we decided to get married we went to Ardmore, Oklahoma to the First Baptist Church to make arrangements. They would not marry us because I was not twenty-one. I had to write to my parents to get a notarized statement from them giving me permission to get married. I still have that document. I had been sent from Norman Oklahoma University to Camp Howze during this period of time. So, I had to come from Camp Howze to Ardmore and she rode the trolley from Norman where she worked and lived to come to see me. She was a Navy Corpsman and worked as a dental hygienist at the hospital in Norman. She was a graduate of Temple University in Philadelphia. We got married in Ardmore, Oklahoma on April 2, 1944. She went back to stay with her mother at her home in Reading, PA. She had been living with her mother and grandparents when I went into the military. I saw our daughter for the first time when she was six months old.

Pottstown, Pennsylvania was thirty miles east of where I had previously worked. I was hired at a tire plant there. Later, I got a job at the Goodyear Aircraft in Akron, Ohio and I received an Associates Degree in electronics. I have experience in "lighter than air" blimps. I was involved in the electrical phase in the draft stages for the Navy blimps.

I went to Ohio and worked for the Goodyear Aircraft "lighter than air" as an engineer in the drafting department. When they lost the Navy

contract, North American Aviation in Columbus, Ohio was looking for people and they hired me as a training representative. I trained people in the use of one of the better known uses of communication in the A3J, the Navy's North American Vigilante. The Navy suggested I go to the University and get my Baccalaureate Degree. I went to Ohio State University and got my Baccalaureate degree in electronics and training. I was laid off by the North American.

I went into teaching. The state of Ohio just started vocational education and I got a job as a teacher at Heath High School teaching electronics. I taught there for one year and the people in Columbus decided they wanted to hire me. I taught there for the next thirty years. During that time I got my Master's Degree in Education. I am an Amateur Radio Operator Licensed by the FCC. My radio call is W8FJD. I have great-grandchildren who live in Columbus. Both of my sons went into the military. James Junior was sent to school by the military. He went to Iceland and received an Icelandic Amateur Radio Call. Carl, my second son, went from a buck private to a Lieutenant Colonel. He is a "hot shot" helicopter pilot and an airline pilot. He is working for the FAA training other pilots.

There were instances in my WWII service that make me wonder why I was not killed: when the tree fell, or when I was spotted by the tank in the field; when a Lieutenant and I drove around a corner and a tank was looking right at us; when we jumped from the jeep and the tank blew the jeep to smithereens.

Once I saw a field, at least a quarter of an acre in size, of nothing but dead Germans. I wondered why I was still alive. It is important to remember that other people are not as fortunate as I am and to always be true to my country.

[Background information: Radio had advanced very rapidly since I had been in high school. Communications in the military today are so advanced that radio communications back during the war are unknown. The maximum frequencies used by the military were approximately 14 megahertz. In today's world 14 megahertz is "antique." In the early days of WWII it was the most advanced communication known. We used Morris Code almost exclusively. FM was not heard of but it was drawing some interest for tanks in very short communications.

The amplitude modulation used by the military in the 1940's was the only method of long range communication at those frequencies. We used the frequencies and Morse code was transmitted by the use of a hand key. Teletype was just beginning to be used. It was also an unknown medium of communication and teletype as we know it today is no longer used.]