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Walter Blair	WB

INT: Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth, please?

WB: My full name is Walter Robert Blair. My place of birth was Philadelphia, 1924.

INT: What was your educational background prior to entering the service?

WB: I graduated the Philadelphia public schools. I attended Temple University on a football scholarship for a short period of time before I went into the service. I came back from the service and I transferred to West Chester State Teachers College [West Chester, PA] at the time when I was interested in preparing myself to be a football and baseball coach and a physical education teacher.

INT: Do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

WB: Yes I do. I don't think anybody my age could forget that. I finished my junior year of football and I was watching a semi-professional game. This was before the NFL; the big thing was to go to the semi-professional league. Some of them were paid—not a lot—and we called it semi-professional because people took pride that they were getting a few bucks to play.

But anyway, I was watching a game and it was a dark afternoon. A good crowd was there and we were very raw because it was obviously December. Philadelphia in December is very damp and cold. A ripple came down through the crowd that somebody bombed somebody and before five minutes had gone by, people were saying the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. People looked at each other and said, "Where's Pearl Harbor?" I

have to say that even though we were well educated in geography, Pearl Harbor didn't come up on the screen.

So that's where we were. The next day going to school—it was a Monday morning—we heard the President speak. Many of the students, at the end of the speech, jumped up on the tables; the group that I was in was in the lunchroom. Our communication system back in the early '40s wasn't very good, but they did have a box so you could hear the radio talk. And the students jumped up and the faculty were at the door trying to hold them back so they didn't do anything foolish. *("You don't know what you're talking about, you don't know what you're doing.")*

Fortunately I was on the football squad and the coach immediately pulled us together and said, "Look—sit down. You're all red-blooded and you all want to do something for your country but you're better off sitting there getting an education." So we calmed down pretty much and in a couple days we were going through our life as it had been before.

One of the interesting parts was that our athletic field was not adjacent to the school in Philadelphia. We went to school in the city and went out to the outskirts for our football field. And that had been immediately designated as a Coastal Artillery installation. They had the Philadelphia Electric Company out there and they put up about twenty-five telegraph poles which were to be used for photos. They figured the Germans would be flying in and looking at Philadelphia as a place to attack.

So my days in both football and baseball were always in a sort of a semi-military situation. You had to wear a tag to get in. After a while the soldiers on the door got to know who we were because we were there every day. They had a small group, I'd say fifteen or twenty, and they did practice drills on a machine gun. I don't think any anti-aircraft gun was ever fired.

That was our first *We're in it! This is real! These are real soldiers!* And we learned quickly that this was a big thing. So that was my early introduction into it. Of course, we continued school. As athletes at a large Philadelphia school we did quite well. Schools were looking for players and we went back and turned into people looking for a college education. That was very big for 90% of us because we came from towns and little villages in Philadelphia where nobody had gone to college before. So that was a big deal.

We went back to that, and we talked and we had dreams. I was also approached by my coach and had an opportunity to go to a very prestigious private school as what they used to call a PG—a post grad—and I got excited about the possibility of playing another year of football at the high school level and maybe earning enough credits to get into a decent college as a football player on scholarship. So that occupied a lot of my time, as well as general thoughts about the war.

INT: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

WB: If you recall, January 1 changed the makeup. Before January 1, you could enlist and pick any service you would like to be in. Starting on January 1, they eliminated that. Everybody had to go through Selective Service. So they called us in and there were about fifteen or twenty of us who were on football or baseball scholarships there, and other scholarships besides, that had intentionally selected Temple because they were going to have this V-12 [Navy College Training] program. Obviously they didn't have it, so in preparing to get it, they said to us at a meeting right after the first of the year, "Go back to your draft board and volunteer, and when your name comes up we'll pull you out." [Laughs] Talk about hocus pocus on that one!

Anyway, we did that, and at that stage of the game we, as a nation, weren't winning the war. We were in Africa and there was a great demand for building up the forces, and here we were: eighteen years old, healthy and ready to go. I recall a whole bunch of us were called down to the armory in Philadelphia and when we got in there, there was a big crowd. One of our fearless leaders turned out to be pretty much of a blowhard, and he said, "We don't want to stand in this long line. Let's go across the street and get a cup of coffee because we're going in the Navy."

When we came back, the Navy was filled and they hadn't heard about Temple University and before the day was out we were in the United States Army. A week later most of us were well on our way.

INT: Where did you go for your basic training?

WB: We made a quick stop through New Cumberland [Pennsylvania], which was sort of an induction center. We did the shots and the basic physical, we got our uniforms and then we were on our way.

Getting back to the day we left, I don't know if I fully understood what was going to happen. I think about this a lot. We got the call to be down at Broad Street Station in Philadelphia. I was to be there at 10 o'clock. We always used trolley cars and I had planned on that. My neighbor's boy was going down there, so he said, "You want to ride down with us?" So I hopped a ride.

My mother was ironing at the time, so I said, "Mom, I'll see you." I got my toothbrush and said, "Don't worry about me." I gave her a kiss on the cheek and out the door I flew. I'm not too sure I had any wild idea what was going to transpire in the next three years, but there I went. I think back now during these present times about parents and people who have children going off to war. I wonder how my mother felt when I bolted out the door like I was going to practice.

When I got down to Broad Street Station in Philadelphia, there was a tremendous mob of people and I said, *Look at this crowd.* There was a big train; I went in and showed my

paper and stood inside the gate. As they said, "All aboard!" people were screaming and yelling and grabbing and not letting their kids go. I said, *Boy, this is something! Maybe this is bigger than I thought it was.*

So off we went. We took a long ride; it took us three or four days in a large troop train loaded to the doors. We didn't have a clue where we were going. Most of us had never been more than a hundred miles from Philadelphia. Fortunately I was a student of geography. I could tell we were in North Carolina by the names on the signs as we went by, or sometimes when we stopped—troop trains in those days were shuttled off to the side. We'd sit for a couple hours wondering *Where are we? We're out in no man's land*. We'd look for people and yell, "Where are we?" Not many could give us any kind of answer but the signs gave it away as we were traveling.

We finally stopped one time and a little black boy was there, and I yelled, "Hey kid! Where are we?" And he said, "Texas." And then the word went out *Hey, we're going to Texas!* We didn't know we were in Texarkana [laughs] and when the train pulled out, we ended up in Louisiana. People said, "How did we get to Louisiana? I thought we were in Texas." So the naivety of the young people in those days, in terms of what the South was like, and where we are, and where it fit in the United States—not many people knew much about that.

We settled in Camp Hope, Louisiana. Camp Hope was made up of two camps: North Camp and South Camp. South Camp had, at the time, the 101st Airborne group, a paratroop gang. The North Camp, which was a new camp, had the Eighth Armored Division, which I was becoming a member of.

In the beginning, because I was in college on a scholarship, they sorted us out and put us into one barrack. There must have been thirty-five or forty of us in there, and we were all into sport of some kind. A lot of them football, a lot of them baseball. So my first reaction was *Well, maybe we're gonna play ball!* You've got to understand there were a lot of sports in the service. So we were feeling pretty good about that. Basic hadn't started—nothing had started—so we were just hanging around, going to the PX, going to the mess hall and eating. This wasn't too bad.

One night about two o'clock in the morning, they dragged us out of bed and said, "Come on, you're being reassigned." We went into this big room and they had all these initials on the wall. They had AFA, they had AIR, they had AR. All of them stood for some kind of service within a company that would be with the Eight Armored Division.

So I stood in the middle and I wasn't too sure what all those initials meant. I was not in the military at that particular time at all. I knew field artillery—they were big guns—and I didn't know that I'd be interested in that. Then there was the AR. They said it was reconnaissance. I didn't know what reconnaissance was. So finally a fellow said, "Little

soldier, you look like you're having difficulty making a decision." And I said yes. He said, "I can give you a suggestion. See that over there? A-I-R?" I said, "You know, I've never been in an airplane. I don't know anything about that."

I went over and they put a big blue button on me, a great big blue button. I looked around and there were red buttons, yellow buttons, green buttons—but no blue buttons. So we sat on a bench and there was some talking between us, but none of us knew anything. We're naïve. This is a whole, totally new experience. They didn't know much, but one fellow said the red button was field artillery. I liked that; I thought that would be worth it. The tank division wore the yellow and the green. But nobody was blue.

They started calling names out. They said, "All with red buttons go here, all those with a green button, come over here…" And I'm sitting there with a blue button. Nobody else with me. "All right, blue button guy, come on." I get in the thing and travel forever in a truck, by myself. At three o'clock in the morning, or 3:30, they dump me out on the street and said, "Here you are." And I looked at the sign: Armored Infantry Regiment. I know what I'm in now—the infantry. So I picked up the necessaries that I needed and then they said, "Walk down a block, and then make a right and walk all the way down to the end and go in the last orderly room."

I carried my big sack in the pitch black early in the morning, I guess 4 o'clock by then. I went in and rang the bell, because everybody was asleep in there. And a guy got up, "Why are you here? Why are you waking me up? What are you doing?" "They dropped me off." And he gave me a mattress. He put it on my head, and some sheets under my arm and my bag, He said, "Go down to the last barracks, go in the back, upstairs, and take any bed that nobody's sleeping in."

And I did that. By that time, it was about 4:30. I rolled the mattress out and hopped in bed. It didn't seem like I'd even fallen asleep when the lights went on. "Everybody out!" I looked around; I didn't know a soul, I didn't know what they were doing. I noticed they were getting dressed and I noticed the fellows going by had leggings. *Where are my leggings?* So finally I thought, *I better get out there.*

So I went out there without my leggings and I had my first introduction to the army. I stood there at attention and the first sergeant (who later became a very good friend) walked by—he's a big, 240 pound guy. And he walked around tapping each of us and he got to me and said, "Soldier, where are your leggings?" I said, "Leggings? I don't even know if I have leggings." He said, "Ooooh, you don't know if you have leggings… Well you don't have any leggings and you just became a volunteer." And so I volunteered for the kitchen duty. For the next week, before I even met anybody, I spent nearly ten to twelve hours in the kitchen peeling potatoes and washing dishes and the whole bit. That was my real introduction to Company C, as it was later known, as the AAR was finally subdivided into battalions, and it became the 49th AIB [Armored Infantry Battalion.]

So I was in that program and taking basic. Basic was a lot of carrying on, a lot of treating you like you were an imbecile, and a lot of physically beating up on you. Fortunately for me, I was in reasonably good physical shape because a couple weeks ago I was playing football in a championship game. So those kind of things didn't bother me.

I remember one incident. We did a forced march, and at the end of the forced march we go in and take our shoes off and flop on the bed. The sergeant comes along and he checks your feet. When I got there, I was late so I had one in the middle. They filled up all the edges and I'm in the middle. The fellows were saying, "I bet these springs wouldn't even bounce you up so you could catch that rafter." I said, "Let's see."

I had the middle bunk so I got on there and I did two or three bounces and leapt up and caught on to the rafter up there. I'm hanging and in comes the sergeant and he says, "Soldier, what in the so-and-so are you doing up there?" I said, "We're trying to figure out if the beds could spring us up here." He said, "Get down." So I dropped down and he said, "Soldier, are you tired?" "No sir, I'm not tired." "Well, act tired." So I learned my lesson right in the beginning: if you're not tired, act tired. If you're happy, don't look too happy. Play the game. And we learned to do that quickly.

My experience at the beginning was typical. They jumped on my ankles because my ankles wouldn't turn out far enough on the range, things like that. After about the second month I was there, they called for anybody who wanted to try out for the baseball team. They had a lot of people trying out. I said, *That sounds like something I'd be interested in.* So I signed up and went out for the team, and I made the team. I played shortstop in those days even though I'd been a catcher in high school. My regular position was infield, so I was out there playing shortstop for the battalion team.

The colonel was a West Pointer—tough as nails, everybody was scared to death of him. When they saw him coming, everybody shuddered. But his vulnerability was baseball. He would come to practice around four o'clock and sit there, like a typical West Pointer: straight as an arrow. In his sunglasses, and his helmet on, and a crop in his hand ready to bang something—a horse, or a driver, or something. We were all excited when he came, we didn't know what that was going to mean.

One day his driver came over to me and said, "Soldier, the colonel would like to talk to you." I went over and he asked me the things I just repeated, about being at Temple University on scholarship, and I wasn't there too long and here I am…I went out for baseball and I enjoy it. He asked me what my MOS was—in the army, the MOS is what you do. I said, "I think it's ammunition carrier." That startled him. I was listed as an ammunition carrier in a 60 millimeter mortar squad. That was my first assignment. Then he said, "I like the way you play. You're hustling." "Thank you, sir." "Dismissed."

I went back. The next day, after lunch (when we used to sit on our bunk and roll up our mattress and read, smoke a cigarette, or whatever) I was waiting for the one o'clock call.

An orderly came up and said, “You’re wanted in the orderly room.” I went into the orderly room and looked into the other room, and they said, “Come in, soldier.” I went in and saluted and did the whole thing. He said, “Stand at ease.” All these NCOs and officers were all lined up across the room. The colonel was pacing back and forth and he said, “Gentlemen, I want to know why this lad with his ability, physically and mentally, a college lad, is not in a leadership role in this company.”

Obviously there was silence—they didn’t even know my name. They said, “I don’t even know who this guy is. What is this?” At the end of the talk he said, “I want to see this young lad in a leadership position before the sun comes down. Have I made myself perfectly clear?” He walked out, and I walked out, and my life never was the same. It didn’t go down great with the NCOs who were in charge of basic training, but it really changed my situation. I was assigned as a lance corporal immediately. I put the thing on my arm and I was in charge of the mortar squad, as opposed to being the ammunition carrier. When I look back it’s kind of humorous but that’s the way it worked—they didn’t have an idea what these people could do. But as they started to find out, they started to sort.

And I ended up being part of a cadre. Some of them were old soldiers who’d been in the army ten, fifteen, some of them nearly twenty years. I mixed in with them and I got assignments. They sent me to a physical education conference where I learned to get up on a large platform and do exercises early in the morning. I learned to time the forced marches where I would be the pacemaker for the company, and if we didn’t make it in a certain time, we had to come out at night and practice. So I was able to assume a regular role very quickly. This went on and we went through our training. We went out in the field and learned how infantry works with tanks.

I had my first furlough. I went home and when I came back they drove me out in the field. It was two or two thirty in the morning before we got to the field and when I got there, everybody was packing. I said, “What’s going on?” and they said, “We’re moving out.” They all helped me put my stuff together and they said, “Fall in” and we all fell in. They said, “When we call your name take two steps forward.” They called all the names. “Right face.” And they marched off.

I sat there and I said, “Excuse me. I didn’t hear my name called.” He said, “Well, soldier, if you thought about it, that’s why you’re standing there”—some kind of simple talk like that. He didn’t say much to me: “We’ve got a couple of assignments for you.” So I had to fill in some slit trenches. There was one other fellow besides myself so the two of us did all the laboring work for the next day, until we went back into the thing. I realized after we got there that they were gone—they all went to the Anzio Beachhead. So my first “miss” of a high percentage invasion, I made. And now I was part of the cadre, and within a short period of time a new group came in and now I was involved in the basic training and advanced training. So I moved along like that.

During the second group, in the middle of July they decided to have a contest—nationally, I understand—to honor the infantry. Now the infantry had always had a bad name: *You couldn't do anything else, so I put you in the infantry.* So to give them a little boost, I guess, they had Infantry Day on which they would honor the infantry soldiers. And with that, they decided that each battalion would select the most typical, best representative of what an infantryman was like.

So the colonel comes down, and I guess you know who was selected. It was me; I was selected to represent the 49th battalion. They polished me all up and we worked on some things so I was the representative of the 49th Armored Infantry battalion. On the day I was to meet the general in the finals—there were three of us in the finals—the colonel had a tee made on the back seat of the jeep so I could stand and look like a gladiator from the Romans, holding onto this tee. They were ironing my pants while I stood up there. We went through a series of questions, information, interview—different things he thought an infantryman ought to know. At the end of the day I was selected as the Infantryman of Camp Hope.

The next day, or two days later, we had a big parade in Shreveport and I was the marshal. I sat with the general—here I am, a kid from Philadelphia, never been a hero and I'm sitting next to the general. That night we had a military ball. I wasn't even a dancer at that time. I was eighteen years old. You know dancing in the military: the general and his wife lined up and my escort was a Miss Somebody—I think it was Miss Shreveport. Anyway, she was a good looking gal and I didn't mind that.

All of a sudden the music played and the general walked down with his wife, and I walked down behind him with this young lady. I can't even remember her name anymore. Then you go to the right and you spin around and then you get to come down as a foursome, then as an eightsome, and there I am thinking *How did I get into this?* But it was a nice experience and that night during the dance they had the awards ceremony and they introduced me as the Infantry Soldier of the camp. I had to make a speech for all these people. There I was, I'd never given a speech in my life, but I got through that.

So I continued with them, and pretty soon we had another one of those where everybody lined up. My name wasn't called again. Everybody took two steps right and all those fellas made Utah Beach. They filled up the Fourth Division. Some of them jumped with the 82nd and the 101st and had never been in an airplane in their life. There I am, sitting there reading the news, and I said *These are the guys we beat up on. There they are! They're out there!* And I missed that group.

Then we brought in the third group. We worked them over and then somewhere around August we packed. I did have one other opportunity. The colonel called me in and said, "I think you have the makings of a great officer. Would you like to go to OCS instead of going over?" And I thought, *I'd like to go see it.* I'd been working with all these lads so I said no. I was very much interested in being a football coach. My whole life I was into

that. I looked at that and I thought, *You know, I get in there and I have to sign up for a length of time*. So I said no, I would go with the group and I did. We went in August 1944. We shipped over.

Some interesting experiences I had in my platoon: I had a fella who used to say to me, "Sergeant, you're never gonna get me over there!" And I said—his name was Kaiser—"Kaiser, they're gonna take you over no matter what." We went to New York, and I was standing at the gangplank. I was responsible for making sure that the names on the list were the names that got on the boat. All of a sudden Kaiser came along, and I said, "Kaiser, I told you you're gonna make the trip." The next thing I hear is a couple sirens carrying on, because this is all done in the dark. And all of a sudden I hear, *Man overboard! Man overboard!*

He walked up the gangplank and across the ship, which was the SS *Samaria*, which was a tub. On the other side they have a chain, no matter where it's docked. He went right on over, and when they made a left turn to go down to where the billet was going to be, he just jumped right out there, all the way down. It must have been three or four stories high.

They put lights down there and were fishing him out and I went down to see him. They wouldn't let me see him and they said, "All I can tell you, Sergeant: he's going. He's not going off." I don't know what they did with him when he got to England, but I thought that was an interesting experience. And we got over.

INT: Did you go in a convoy?

WB: Yes, we went in a convoy. It took twenty-one days. It was an ugly trip. This was a British ship, run by the British. We went the North Sea route. You couldn't tell how many were in the convoy. You would go down in a swell and you wouldn't see another boat, and when you came up you'd see three or four. And then down again.

Every morning we had to go against the bulkhead. They pushed you four deep, sometimes five deep, and then this captain would come along. Very British. Just when he's coming along, somebody on the back row would feel sick and [vomit sound] all over, right down everybody's back, everybody's neck. It was an everyday occurrence.

The bunks that we were in happened to be on promenade [deck.] The rest of our group was down in the fox, or one of those way down there in the front. We had to put newspapers halfway up because people would be in bed and would throw up on the floor and it would bounce up into your bedroll. So if you were on the lower bunk, which was about three inches off the floor—or the first two bunks—you had to put newspapers, to keep you from everybody throwing up whatever meal they had, which wasn't much.

I remember winding down the stairs in a long line, it was hot, all the way down to where they served breakfast, which was all gruel. Every morning they called it gruel. People

would get on the stairs and they'd look at the gruel and there'd be another catastrophe. [Laughs] So it was a tough twenty-one days.

When we got over, and walked on Southampton, when we landed, we said, *Thank God.* That was one of the toughest parts of the whole deal. We did land, and we went to a place called Tidworth. We lived in pyramidal tents where the Lancasters [British bomber] landed. Every morning we'd wake up with them coming in on a wing and a prayer. Some of them crashed, sometimes you could hear them bounce along and skid. It was war. We'd look at that and say, *Hey, it's tough out there,* because we could see them coming in.

We were there for some time. Then we went into training. We were what they call, "At the ready." We were the build-up. They were building up for what they thought was going to be the final push. We were already into Germany, or near Germany at the line. They hadn't passed the Rhine, but they had made some ground through France and now it looked like maybe Germany might capitulate. So they lined up some divisions in England ready to go.

One night, right after Christmas [1944] I think, we got the call. That's when the Germans had the famous counter-attack and when Bastogne held the line. Unfortunately I think our intelligence made some errors. The holiday season, in this country, there was always celebration. And I think we got the idea that if we held fast, we could line up for the big push after the new year.

But the Germans counter-attacked and we were called, because we were ready with the tanks. In half a day we went from sitting there enjoying England, and by that night we were on a ship that took us close to France and we disembarked in what I thought was the middle of the Channel. It was an experience: in the dark, full pack, rifles, the whole deal. We climb over the edge on a rope ladder and the LST [landing ship] is bouncing, coming up about ten or twenty feet on every swell. And they would just slice us right off the rope ladder. Then you'd have to climb way down, and all of a sudden you'd come all the way up. When you were down in there, bodies kept flying in the middle of your lap, on top of you with their bags and the whole bit.

We landed somewhere close to Le Havre. We immediately went up to Calais, which was our rendezvous spot. Once we got up there, there were two or three days of getting all the tanks over and getting all the half-tracks and getting us back the full complement. And then we went, and we just kept on going. All of a sudden, I'm standing on the half-track in charge of my platoon. We could hear them. The Seventh Battalion was in the fray. I thought, *Oh my gosh, here it goes.*

The first day or so, we would listen to it on the radio, like it was an event. Then we were put on the south shoulder of the Bulge, in the reduction of the Bulge, and we dug in. In fact, we were able to find some holds, because it was so awfully cold.

INT: Did you have winter equipment?

WB: We had some, but not as much as we needed. We wore everything we had, as I recall. That came later, when they gave us weight things when we were in the Ardennes, but not that I recall. Every heavy thing we had, we had on. And it was awfully cold. We were in a town called Lavigne [?] along what they called the southern shoulder. We were there and we put out a perimeter guard about a thousand yards, two thousand yards. It took us a while to get out there. We would put people out there for twelve hour stretches in the foxholes and then we'd bring them in and warm them up.

A couple incidents. There had been a battle in that land before and the snow was heavy. I was coming in with a group—I went out with a group—and was bringing part of my group back. We had this cook from New York City, like Jamaica [Queens.] And he was a bartender, so they made him a cook. That shows you how they made those assignments. [Laughs] And he was scared to death. They finally brought the truck with the food in; before that, we were on rations. They finally got him up and they put him in an old store in Lavigne, and they were serving hot meals for the first time.

So typically infantry soldiers, some of whom had a wild sense of humor, saw a lot of humps [in the snow] and they said, "These are bodies in here. Germans." So they said, "Let's get a German that's frozen. And we'll bring him in and we'll tie a mess kit in his hand." And they did. They lugged this German in, and we were coming in and going through the [mess] line, and they're holding this German in there with the helmet on, the whole deal. Frozen stiff and tied with the mess kit on. Even in a war, people have a sense of humor. Well, when Laraco [the cook] saw that he threw the things up and screamed. [Laughs] We had more fun with those kinds of activity. So it isn't all horror stories. But there were all these bodies out there.

We lived in a barn. The top was gone, so we all slept around the edges, and in the middle were all these big humps with snow. We were waiting; the big wait was waiting for the clearing of the weather so the bombers could come over and bomb, and then we were going to attack. Counter-attack. That was the big deal. We'd say *Get ready, get ready* and it would be a snowy day. Then all of a sudden the sun came out. The sun came out and the snow melted. And what did we have? We had all these cows in there, frozen cows that started to melt. So we had to have a clean-up, because we're living in there and all these dead cows are in the middle.

So we start pulling these cows out. The gang would tie ropes around and put them on a jeep or truck or van and pull them along. Right in front of where we were eating mess, a head came off and it came apart. [Laughs] Activities like that kept you from getting too carried away with what war's all about. But they had a lot of fun with that. "All you guys that drove the truck, you guys that had the idea—clean it up." And we got them cleaning it up. But their kinds of spirits were fun.

From there, we pulled out and we were with Patton. Patton was our leader. We never saw Patton but we were in with Patton. And we were transferred to the Ninth Army, which was in Holland at the time. Holland's a province of the Netherlands—a nice area, all agriculture. And we went up to Holland and got ready for the push to the northern side.

We billeted in a little farm community. And while we were in that farm community for a day or two, we had a meeting. I was in charge of a platoon at the time because all the lieutenants had been either transferred, or whatever. So we were selected. When you have all lieutenants and one little twenty year old sergeant, you know who got the dirty work. When they gave the straws, I think they already had the small one for me. [Laughs] Anyway, we were asked—and when I say "asked" I use the term lightly and loosely—to provide a platoon and that was us. That was my platoon, the first platoon.

We went out there and practiced crossing the river; I think it was the Moselle, if I'm not mistaken. It had a German name, W-A-L, something like that. It was a fast-moving creek. Of course, this was now March and we're getting some thawing in that area, so the water was pretty heavy. We went out there and practiced on this. Our objective was to paddle across this river and then set up a beachhead. On one side the machine guns and mortars would fire into the Siegfried line, would fire these shells to keep the fellows in those things with the windows down, where they fired out of. We were to get over there and build a beachhead and they would keep the fire going. We were to run up and place a satchel charge. They were hand-made, about five or six quarter-pounds of TNT wrapped together with duct tape and then a thing that you slap against a wall, with a hinge. We were supposed to run up and slap that against those windows, to blow out those things and then eventually the rest of the group would come behind us.

Fortunately for us, just as we were about ready to pull this off the Germans blew up the Schwammenauel Dam, which held the water back on the Moselle River and it flooded the whole area. So that was aborted, and there was a great celebration. Where we were living was the little town of Eisen (?), and they didn't have paved streets. Just one platoon was in there. They walked the cows in at night and the mud was nearly knee-deep in February. I lived with two other fellas in a house owned by a fellow who made wooden shoes. They had nothing. Those people there in Holland had nothing, absolutely nothing. Food was hard to come by; things like cigarettes were non-existent.

After the abortion of that activity, we were ready to leave. [In that house] there was a father and a mother and a young girl, about ten or eleven years old. Things were tough in that little farming village. He wanted to make me a pair of wooden shoes, and I said, "I have nowhere to put a pair of wooden shoes." So he made me a small pair of wooden shoes; one of my daughters has them somewhere on her bureau. He made them for me and he made a presentation of the wooden shoes.

We were saying goodbye and they were hugging, and all those kind of good things that happen, a good part of war. So I'm sitting there and I'm thinking, *We used to get these USO rations.* I didn't smoke, I was not a smoker, so I would trade. All the fellas needed so many cigarettes, they'd want to give me their wristwatch for cigarettes. [Laughs] I said, "I'll trade you for cigars." Not that I smoked cigars, but I traded for them. So I put them in an ammunition box, and I'd fill that up. I had four or five ammunition boxes full of cigars. Now in early 1945, cigars in the Netherlands, and in Belgium, and in any of those countries—there weren't any. Maybe a little on the black market in Paris.

I didn't know what I was going to do with these, but I just kept them because I had them. So I came out and I dumped all these cigars on the table. And it was a pile; it was a big table and those people sat there and they just cried. They cried and he said to me in his little bit of English that I could understand, "This is worth more than my whole house and shop together." In cigars that he could sell.

And so we left, obviously on a high note. We went into combat and we moved along. The first time we were relieved from combat situations, we would pull back to reorganize. In combat they send you out for a while and then you have to come back because you don't have any ammunition. You have nothing. So they pull you back and they revitalize you. They put you in a town somewhere, and you wash and shave. We were in combat for nearly two weeks, doing something, and you didn't shave, you didn't eat. You just ate a chocolate bar that they gave you, or sometimes if we found a nice house while the shuttles were coming in, we'd cook up a meal or something.

There was food in all these basements in Germany and Holland. These people kept storage, they kept a cellar with potatoes, which was generally the only thing these people had left. We had a coal bin at home and it had a ton of coal in it. They had a ton of potatoes in these houses, so we used to cook up potatoes and stuff like that.

We went back to Venlo and we stayed in a regular house, a house that I billeted with two other fellas. The house had no back—no kitchen, no back room, the children's back room was totally gone. You opened the door to the kitchen and there was no kitchen. There was nothing. They lived in one room and we slept in the living room.

In Holland, a lot of them did speak some English so you could have some communication. So we were in there, and he asked if I could get him permission to line up at the garbage; that was a big thing, because they hadn't eaten. The family together, there wasn't one that was over a hundred pounds. They were just skin and bones. Of course we felt bad about that. So I said no. I would go down with two mess kits, and the other two fellas would bring food back. They could hardly eat it. They would eat very slowly because their stomach was so used to being starved.

While we were in there, there were still kids in town, tykes running around. The male adults were gone—the Germans had taken them for work camp. We got a call about the

bridge going into Germany from Venlo; intelligence said there was some concern they might try to blow the bridge up. So the first platoon got selected. I kept saying, *How do we get that all the time? How do I get that bad straw?* Anyway, we went out there with the platoon, and the platoon's about thirty-five guys. We went out and set up a place where we could protect it. Across on the German side was a farm with all these turkeys. So the guys said, "Hey, let's go and see if we can get one of those turkeys."

We sent three or four guys out there on a mission and they were running around getting these turkeys. There were a lot of burlap sacks that they use, I guess when they move them to market. So we loaded up four or five burlap sacks full of turkeys. We drove back on the street where we were all billeted, my platoon was all housed there. "Get everybody out in the street. We're gonna have a contest. We're gonna have Catch Yourself a Turkey." [Laughs] I have to laugh because it's still funny.

And we emptied these turkeys. Kids, parents, women diving for turkeys and getting them to take on home. That was the biggest thing. No wonder we had a good reputation in there, because we were constantly doing little things like that, which gave all the other, uglier aspects of war another facet.

So we did that and then we were off. We were in the Battle of the Rhine. We got pinned down trying to…I have to say this delicately. Among military people there's a lot of ego. Being the first to get to the Rhine, the first to get over the Rhine, the first to do all that—that meant a lot to them even though they as individuals were probably not at the front line doing that. But they were at the board saying, *We've got to break through, we'll be the first…*

And so the outfit we were with was anxious to be the first to get to the Rhine. We got to a town called Rheinbach and we got pinned down pretty bad. We were able to get most of our group into a house. It was a decent looking house when we went in; when we came out there was no top and half of the first floor was gone. We were down there and it was just coming in. We were down there and the dirt and the dust were blowing. It was a remembrance. We finally got out and made our way, and of course we were able to make our contribution to the Rhine. The big thing was that one of the groups got across the Remagen bridge and built a bridgehead across the Rhine, which was going to be the next big battle.

From there we crossed the Rhine at Wesel, W-E-S-E-L. I think they pronounce it wee-sul. We all pronounced it wess-ul, but the Germans I think pronounce it wee-sul. In fact not too long ago, before I came up here, we did that Danube Rhine cruise. Unfortunately it was dark and we went right by. There's a monument there where we made the crossing.

We made the crossing on pontoon bridges. If you ever drive a track on a pontoon, first of all you think they're going to sink [laughs] and you bounce along over there. The Rhine up there was fairly wide, so it was a long trip over. Everybody was figuring out whether

it was better to swim back to shore or across. We had a discussion all the way. “Hey, if this goes over, if this thing goes down, where are you going to swim to?” It was a big movement, to come across with tanks and trucks. The engineers did some job to string that thing over there, and everybody got over. We got on the other side and reassembled. We worked the Lippe canal.

[break in tape at 60 minute mark]

INT: When you were crossing the Rhine were you ever under fire?

WB: When we crossed the Rhine, no. They had established a bridgehead at Remagen. And the Germans, I have to say, made strategic withdrawals. We were fortunate in catching them near the end. They had what I call ‘pre-arranged fire data.’ We found out as we lost lieutenants that you can’t go into a town and stand at the crossroads, because they have that all figured out. Some little lady up in a church tower or a high building is going to say, “There they are” and then call in the fire. So we learned that. We lost four or five lieutenants before we got through this thing, learning *You can’t do that. You can’t bunch up.* We learned to live by ourselves because that’s when we were safe. They don’t shoot individuals most of the time; they let the big stuff come in when there’s a crowd.

You learn those lessons as you go along. We didn’t learn that in the beginning and we lost a couple good lieutenants. They were in there with their map, figuring out where we’re going, what road we’re supposed to be on, where we fit in the whole plan. Next thing you know, two or three shells come in and they’re gone. But you learn. That’s what they call learning the hard way.

So we worked the Lippe canal. If you know your history, the Ninth Army under Simpson and the Third Army under Patton made that big envelopment. Patton particularly liked to move. He’d just go, and it left behind a whole load of Germans. So we had this big pocket. When we got out towards Paderborn we were reorganized into task forces. The task force consisted of a tank company, and that would be six or seven tanks, depending on how many they had available and working; and then an infantry company. An infantry company would be about two hundred fifty of the ones who were combat people. The rest were support staff. There were about three hundred in a company.

What we would do was work backwards. Instead of going east, we started going west. It took us a while to figure out what that was. When you’re in this kind of business, you don’t get a lot of information. You’ve got to figure it out yourself. We started to go back through the towns where Patton and Simpson had encapsulated all these Germans. We had to work the pocket. So in the morning we would get up, early in the morning before daybreak. The tanks in the German villages were all in little swales, with high ground around them where they’d go out and farm or whatever they were doing. But the towns and the little villages—the Germans were in there. A lot of them didn’t know what to do but they were still not going to be shot. They were still hostile.

So we would move the tanks to the top of the hill and put the guns over the top. Then we'd have an announcement on a speaker: "We're coming in. If you want to surrender, surrender. If you don't, we're coming in." Sometimes we'd get a white flag, most of the time they just huddled in the cellar and figured we'd go by them. So while we would do the infantry, my platoon and other platoons, we would walk and they would fire into the first row of houses. I mean, just blast the living daylights out of them. And we would walk underneath the fire. That was an experience because every once in a while, one would be a low round and we'd have to go *Hey!* And we'd have an expletive about how to keep that up. And we would walk in, and as we kept walking in they kept moving the guns up. Right in front of us there were these shells going in.

Then we'd get into town. After we were in the first or second row in there, then we'd go house to house. That was interesting because we'd find all kinds of things. Sometimes you'd run down into a basement and there would be twenty Germans down there, huddled. I remember one day, at the end of the day, we were looking to maybe find some hams hanging. I said, *Let me go down in this basement and look.* I went down and said, *Boy, something smells down in here. Phew!* I went further down and said, "Hey! Come down here and look at this!" There were twenty of them sitting against the wall, ready to surrender. So you had some of those kinds of experiences.

They didn't know what to do. And so we would get these people, and we didn't know what to do with them. There was no instruction on what to do with them. Obviously they'd put their arms down and we'd take them out to the main drag out of town, going west. We'd take a rifle and smack the first guy, and he'd start to run. "Put your hands up!" They would run with their hands up. "*Hande hoch! Hande hoch!"* And they'd put their hands up. We'd smack the first couple and then they'd all run. "You run!" we'd say. "*Mach schnell! Mach schnell!"* Every once in a while we'd smack another one across the back with the front of the gun and they'd run. A couple times we'd say, "I wonder where they end up." We didn't have a clue! [Laughs] We'd just sent them back; someone would pick them up. We were rooting them out and sending them. They weren't escaping; they were happy to be captured by United States soldiers, because if they get into Berlin the Russians were coming the other way. They didn't want that at all.

So they would run. Scared to death, of course, because occasionally one of them would get shot for whatever reason, sometimes to make a point. So we did some of those things, and they were interesting. Because at the end of the day, when we finished a town, we'd go down in a basement and we'd bring up eggs and a ham and slice it and cook some eggs. Two or three people would cook, and we'd have two or three houses with food in them, and we'd have our meal. Then we'd sleep in those featherbeds that the Germans had, those big, thick beds. And the guys would go in with their boots on and do a one and a half flip right in. Sometimes I'd think about how when they got back to see that their house may be there, but the condition, after guys with muddy boots had flopped all over the place… And then the next morning we'd move on.

We did that for a while. Then we turned around and we ended up going out to the Harz Mountains. We were starting to get less resistance all the time. We got to the Harz Mountains and we were ready for the next big push, which was the Elbe River. We were right there, not far from the Elbe River. We were getting pretty anxious now to move to Berlin. We thought that would be good.

We would have these meetings early in the morning. All the leaders would gather and tell us what we're going to do today. Here's our instructions; here's where we're going to go; here's what we have to accomplish; here's what we have to take; this is what we have to do; these are the hills, these are the places we have to insure. Whatever we had to do. So we were all ready to do that. We met and the word came down that we were to stay fast. Our day in combat was about done.

We went immediately into the Harz Mountains villages. We were divided out. Each platoon had a small village. A beautiful place—just a vacation valley in there. We took over and controlled the place. Our assignment was to scour the area to make sure every military German was accounted for. We set up somewhere in town and everybody was under curfew. More than curfew—they weren't allowed out. Anyone with physical health problems could come, and we'd give them a pass to allow them to go to a doctor.

We were there two or three days. One of the things we were asked to do was join with other towns, like a network. So we picked guys, and we had horses. We had some Kentucky guys. "We're going to do this on horseback!" So I went along with one of them. When we got to the top of the hill, the poor old horses rolled over. They were poorly fed. Rolled over! There I am with the horse on my leg, the other guy trying to get this horse up. That was the end of the horse riding for me. That was my last time. "Hey Sarge, where'd you get that nag?!" [Laughs] We had some fun.

Another assignment was that we had to go and pick up vehicles that had been abandoned. They got out and ran, they got out and hid. Guys would go out and come back driving all kinds of German vehicles. They would go out on patrol in this direction, that direction. They'd come in and they'd be driving a truck. Somehow they got them started. We put them in a big lot, all parked there. They'd just keep putting them in there and then go out and find some more. They loved to do that. That was fun.

One of the things in the Harz Mountains I learned to do was how to fish when you're from Kentucky. One time the fellas said, "We're gonna have fish tonight." "Where did you get the fish?" "We got them in the trout stream." I said, "How did you fish them?" "We fished them easy. We went down there and we put a net across the bottom. We got a pound of TNT and we heaved it in there. And the fish came out." Good old Americans. I said, "You can't do that. That's not sport." "But it's good fish." [Laughs]

INT: Did you ever liberate any concentration camps?

WB: Yes we did. One of the jobs we had when we got into Germany was work camps.

INT: Not the death camps?

WB: No. I got into Buchenwald about two weeks, maybe two and a half weeks after it was liberated. They took us in to show us. But anyway, work camps. All of these people from Greece, many of the Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, people like that who were captured in the early days, they were taken and they made equipment for the German army. Because everybody in Germany was in the army.

These small factories were hidden. We'd get wind of one, and we'd put four or five of us on the back of a tank. The factories had fencing, and a big gate so that trucks could go in. We'd just run right through the gate. It was kind of fun. The tank would go up and then flop right through. A couple times we ran the gun right into the office. [Laughs] You have to understand, we were young, immature guys and now it's in our favor. We're scoring heavily.

So we'd go in there and they'd put their hands up and say, "Nichts. No prisoners. Nichts. Nichts." Everything was no no no. And we'd say, "No, we know you've got them. Where are you hiding them?" Eventually we roughed a couple of them up, and somebody's going to give. "Come on, show us." One of the real experiences of my life was digging up bodies. Here I am, a young kid, and I'm looking at them, saying *I'm digging up bodies.* They're digging them up and I'm standing there and they're all in shallow graves. They did it in a hurry. As we got closer, they kept burying the evidence.

We did four or five of those. And they were all, "No, nichts, no, no. We wouldn't do that. No no no no."

INT: Did they kill the prisoners or did they starve to death?

WB: They killed them. Killed most of them. Getting rid of the evidence. They probably didn't starve them because they needed them to work. You can't get a lot out of somebody who's physically not fit.

The other thing, in answer to your question about liberation. In towns we would get unbelievable amounts of these prisoners, men and women that were working in these camps. They were escaping. They got rid of them before the evidence…if they were alive, they moved them. We would catch up to them and there would be thirty-five, forty, a hundred.

I remember going into these towns I was talking about. We went into a haberdashery. A group of our guys went into a haberdashery. They took the clothes off the racks on the second floor and threw them out the window. All these people didn't have any shoes,

they didn't have any clothes. And they scrambled. It was an unbelievable scene. But you have to understand—these people, that's the first piece of clothing they've seen. So they'd grab anything. They'd grab a white shirt, a tux shirt, and they'd put it on top of baggy pants that were ripped. Burlap bags on their feet and a tux coat. Or a high hat. I mean it was comical. And they would start walking. We'd say, "I wonder where they're going to end up." They didn't know where to walk.

It was pretty chaotic. You had all these people, and now the war was coming to a close and the Germans were trying to divest themselves of any kind of…Because they figured, "We're liable to get the worst part of it now." And so they tried to chase their people out. Other ones, they quickly shot and buried. It was either shoot them or they may get shot themselves. And some of them did. Sometimes you'd have to wound one of them to make sure they understand this is business. We're not playing around with it.

War—I don't want to give the impression it's a fun game. No, no way. No way. The consequences are ugly.

Anyway, we got through that. We were moved then to Uslar, Germany and while we moved in we celebrated VE Day there, in Uslar, Germany, because we had been pulled off the line to do anything, and then moved down. On VE Day, I guess it was around VE Day, they selected people to go view Buchenwald, which was down the road. When I got to Buchenwald, most of those who could have been moved, had been moved. But the ones who couldn't be moved were still in the racks. They were still cleaning the furnaces and the whole bit. I have to say, I stood there with my chin hanging down.

We never had any information about that. I never can remember once knowing anything about that. We understood that Jewish people were not part of the whole Nazi concept of what their world was to be about. But I have to say, I was totally taken…as were most of the people there. We looked at them, we looked at the place. It showed the scratches on the walls where they gassed them. Not a nice scene.

So then we left there and the Eighth Armored Division was sent to Czechoslovakia. We went out there and were located in Pilsen. That's the home of Pilsner beer. Everybody said, *Hey, we're going to drink Pilsner!* [Laughs] You take guys from Kentucky and all those places like that—this is a world that they never even conjured up. They thought, *Pilsner beer, I've heard of that.* That's where the formula was. So they thought, *We'll just lay on the Pilsner beer.*

We went out there. We were in a small community called Stary Plzenec. We lived in a school, they call them gymnasiums. That was fairly comfortable. We were right below Lidice. I don't know if you're familiar with Lidice. Lidice was the town that the Germans had totally buried. They destroyed it, moved everything out and filled it over with dirt, as a symbol of "Be on your good behavior or take the consequences."

We were there when Masaryk and Beneš, who were the President of Czechoslovakia and the Foreign Minister, fell off the train. We were there in time. I remember sitting in the center of town—all these little towns have a center of town, with a monument or something—and I remember there were some kids from Pittsburgh who spoke what we called "Hunky," like a Hungarian accent. They were eastern European kids from Pittsburgh. They could interpret the Czechs.

I can remember a little Czech man pointing up to the flag. We had a lot of boisterous guys, *We got rid of those Nazis for you. Got rid of the Germans. Got them out of here.* Americans can be kind of ugly when they know they're safe. [Laughs] When they're safe, they get nasty. Anyway, there was this little Czech guy, who was probably sixty-five years old but looked about ninety. The Czechs took every male, so when we got into town there were no men from about fourteen years to sixty. Every morning they went out to exercise, so they were a hardy bunch. I was impressed with the Czechs over there.

Anyway I can still see this fella putting his finger up [wags finger] and saying, "Nazi, no. Nichts. Nichts Nazi. Russian worse." But what did we know? We were young bucks, we didn't know. We thought the Russians were on our team. [wags finger again] "Russian worse. Russian worse than Nazi." We were learning. Right there. They were teaching us.

INT: Did you ever meet with the Russians?

WB: Yes. Yes we did.

INT: At the Elbe River?

WB: No, we didn't meet them there. But we met them at this assignment. There was a division immediately between Russia and what we called the Allied Forces. We didn't know much about that. On this road there was a gate that came down—just a gate on the road. And about a hundred yards down there was another gate, and in that other gate were Mongolians who were in the Russian army. They were assigned there to keep us from going over. They lived in a haystack. They buried a hole in a haystack and lived in there. That's how primitive they were. They were out there. And our guys were over here and they started communicating with them.

I used to come out and visit them. Our guys would come out and they showed me all this Russian money. They sold rings…American soldiers were not against taking a ring off a dead German. That didn't bother them at all. So they had a lot of this kind of jewelry. These Mongolians were attracted to this. The Russians had this money; I don't know, it looked like it had been mimeographed. They had bill currency and had given this to the people, but they had nothing to buy. So they bought trinkets, they bought wristwatches.

And I said to these fellas, "You guys are crazy. The United States government will never make them good." Wrong! They made every one of those dollars good. And I said, *Missed a chance again, Blair.* [Laughs] But there was that kind of activity.

It was the original concept of what later became the Iron Curtain. It hadn't yet. It was still militarily being observed. They hadn't come to where the actual curtain, where the Russians would develop the communist state. We hadn't yet given it away. We had given it away, probably, but none of us knew that yet; at Yalta, they'd already divided up the spoils. And the Americans got a small share.

I was asked to come to the battalion headquarter to help put together an athletic program. Now that the war was over, we were going to have all these people; you gotta give them something to do, so let's get them into sport. And so I did that. I was young, I was twenty years old and battalion headquarters had a lot of older fellas. We used to talk at the table. I'd be sitting there and they'd be talking about war and history, all kinds of things. It was a real learning experience for me. They'd talk about things, and most of them were college graduates. Some of them were in their own right pretty successful. So they weren't a bunch of guys like we had in the infantry. [Laughs] These were captains, mostly, and first lieutenants.

We used to eat there at this table. I was there for about a week or so and one day they discussed that they were looking for people with anti-tank experience. And that was me! Armored infantry is designed to protect the tank—if they're attacked by another tank, we're supposed to go out and attack that tank. That's the theory. We guided them, we parked them, we put perimeter defenses all over for them. That's what the armored infantry did. And they were asking for people with that kind of experience. And I sat there and I said, *That's me! I did this.*

They would talk about the whole deal—about the Suez Canal, and all these things that I had studied when I was in school. And I was saying to myself, *Here I am, a little guy from Philadelphia, never been a hundred miles from home. Here I am in Czechoslovakia* (and I was a good student of geography, I'll give myself credit for that.) *I could be the first kid in my neighborhood to go around the world.*

Now, this is immaturity speaking. Wild thinking. And I'm thinking, *I got this far. Who knows what's gonna happen? I'll give it a go.* So everybody talked about, *That would be a nice trip, to go to this and that* and I'm sitting there, and I'm thinking, *Yeah, that would be nice.* So I go in and I sign up. In the whole battalion one person volunteered. You're looking at him!

They thought I was out of my mind. And I probably was, but I didn't know that. When I went back to my company to pack up, and I left, I can remember: they all gathered around. I'm in the truck. I can still see myself in the truck, holding on, and they kept

yelling, “Blair! Go get the Nip! Go get the Nip!” [Laughs] And down the road we went. And I was the only one from my battalion that did that.

It was some crazy idea that I would go through the Mediterranean, through the Suez Canal, get over into the Pacific theater, and then who knows what’s gonna happen? Maybe I’ll land on the beach and won’t make it. But I thought it was a worthwhile try.

I did have opportunity presented to me to get a battlefield commission if I reenlisted for two years. But I wanted to be a football coach since the day I was born. And I wanted to go into physical education—that was my objective. Every time I got these decisions I thought, *I like the military. I can see myself being an officer in the United States Army. But I also want to play college football. And that probably would be the end.* I’d probably go to school eventually but not to play football and be a coach.

So I bounced on those. And I said, *If I go over there and make it through, maybe I’ll get a chance to get back and do that. And I’ll build up some points.* And all these other things you think about. And so I did. We were the first group to go from Czechoslovakia through Germany—we picked the train up somewhere in Germany, I’m not sure what the town was—all the way into Frankfurt. Because it had been bombed, how many times, by Americans. So we were on those forty-and-eight [railroad] cars and we’d sit on the top. The thing would go slow because the tracks were wobbly, and they’d have to repair them as we went along. It was nice. They would bring us food—box lunches and stuff like that. It took us about a week to make that trip.

Then we went into a place called Lucky Strike. Now, Lucky Strike was outside of Paris. It’s what they called a Repo Depo—a replacement depot. I went in there with all kinds of people who were being garnered to be sent to Japan, sent to the Pacific. And I’m one of them. I didn’t know a soul. You’re sitting there, living in a pyramidal tent and you meet some guys that you play cards with—I played a lot of pinochle, as I remember.

And I took some trips. I took a trip one day to Paris. I’d been there a couple times. I went in there with my bag full of goodies. [Laughs] Guys said, “Take all those goodies, all those cigarettes. You don’t smoke. Take them into to Paris. You’ll have a big day!” So I did that. And we got off at a street and went around the corner, and they had cash for you…you did that.

And that day was the day the bomb dropped in Japan. People were screaming in the streets. And then we went back. Obviously everybody was wondering, *Well what happens now?* Nobody had a clue. *Will we go back?* I said, “If I go back I’ll be a laughingstock. ‘Here he comes. He didn’t get the job after all.’” I thought, *That would be ugly.* We were going to go anyway. They were still going to move us.

For some reason, all of a sudden I got a notice that said *Prepare to go to London.* I went back to where I was before, at Tidworth, in England. Only this time I was inside, rather

than out in a tent. I stayed there for a couple weeks, and we made trips. We did all the things I had read about. We went to London, we did all the visits. We went to Stonehenge and all those nice places. I was with a lot of officers that had much more knowledge of many of these things, so *Hey, let's go. I'm with you.*

And then one day I got a notice that said *Get ready to go. You're going to Southampton. The Queen Mary is loading.* They shipped us down there on the *Queen Mary*. I wasn't the only one; a couple truckloads of us went down. We got on the *Queen Mary* and I thought, *Oh, baby, the Queen Mary!* I was excited! I got on there and they gave me two badges. One was an 'even,' and one was a color. I think it was orange. 'Even' meant you got a bunk—on nights of even days, you got a bunk. Odd days, you just were out there. Find yourself a corner and flop. So you always carried your bag with you.

The first night I'm on board, and I'm an even. This was September. It was a nice day and we stayed out; they gave you blankets and bedrolls and stuff like that. We were out on the front of the ship. There were hundreds of guys all over the place. I thought, *This thing will cross in four days.* I woke up and we were still in Southampton. [Laughs] I got my bunk the next night; I woke up, we're still in Southampton. Fifteen thousand, one by one, maybe two or three openings. Everyone had to be checked in. So by the time they got fifteen thousand of us on there, three days had transpired. I had already slept two nights out and one in. And we went over. It didn't take us too long to get over. And we land in New York with all the excitement. Martha Raye was singing and different orchestras were coming, and we said, "We're here. Let's get off." No! Three days to get off. We got off as slow as we went on.

We went down to what is now Rutgers—Camp Kilmer, which is now Rutgers University. I was shipped to Camp Breckenridge [Kentucky] and there I was a first sergeant for a group of fellas; most of them were from the Aleutians. They had been out there five years. Boy, they were a salty group! And here I am in charge of them.

They were different. They had been five years, a lot of them had five years, with high points. They had been shipped all the way from Alaska, all the way here. They would just hold them there and then each day I'd get a sheet and I'd call the names in the morning. They'd prepare and take a truck to Fort Knox, and out. That's the way they were discharged. This was October of '45. We got into November. I did some other things too. I was at Breckenridge for three or four months.

All of a sudden my name came up on the sheet. *Go to Fort Knox.* I got there and they said, "You're out." I got out so fast they hadn't even done the GI Bill, they hadn't even done the insurance. Nothing. *Here, here's a ticket. Go home.* They took us to the Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, and then they gave me money. I took a bus ride into Harrisburg and jumped a train, came home, got off at Broad Street Station and my parents didn't even know where I was. They didn't even know I was at Breckenridge. Every day we said we weren't going to be there, but I was there for about four months.

Thanksgiving Day, I walked in. They're eating lunch. *Who's coming in? Here he comes!* My mother was totally surprised.

All told, when I look back on it, it was a fantastic experience. I enjoyed most every minute. Not every minute, but I enjoyed most of them.

INT: How do you think it had an effect on your life?

WB: Best education I ever had. I have a master's degree plus seventy hours above that, toward a doctorate, and that's the best education I ever had. I learned sociology, I learned history, I learned mathematics, I learned just about everything I needed. I don't want to say I came out of there a man, but I came out a lot better than when I went in. I am a strong believer that we missed the boat. I think every American lad, and even lass, would be due with at least a year in some kind of military experience of that type, instead of just bouncing around, going to college and spending a lot of money and trying your own maturing.

It's a maturing experience. Get away from home and get some discipline. Fortunately, that was never a problem with me. I was not a rabble-rouser. Whatever I do, I try to enjoy doing it. That's it. This is what it is.

And the answer to your question: I went to college and I learned…

INT: Did you use the GI Bill for college?

WB: Yes, that's why I transferred. Once the GI Bill came in, I didn't need to go to Temple. My high school coach, who was a great influence on me, said, "If you want to be a coach, the guy you have to play for is Glenn Killinger in West Chester. So he took me out there and that was a match made in heaven for me. I can remember sitting there and as we finished our initial conversation, he said to my coach, "If this guy is as good as you say he is, we'll take good care of him."

I've had five jobs. Never applied for a job—every one, I was recommended through him. He's a 1921 All American football player from Penn State. Walter Camp All American, 1921. He had a great reputation. He was a manager, was up with the Yankees for a trial. So I was with somebody that could really do something. Not only I, but the people who were in that program profited.

So I was able to do what I wanted to do, and I was able to have that experience. I'm not big for war—I think war is so stupid. If I learned anything, most of the stuff was stupid. Why are we doing this? Who's it gaining anything? Nobody gained anything from it. But it's because people can't negotiate, they can't trust each other. And a lot of people got killed. A lot of people were wounded. I was fortunate.

I had some close calls. I had a situation where my platoon was pinned down. I was looking up over a hill. I kept looking up over to see where we could fill the mortars in. They were in some kind of a house. There was someone there and every time I went up *bing! bing! bing! bing! bing!*, they were dancing all around. My buddy who was a machine gun guy crawled up and said, "Walt, let me take a look." He stuck his head out and *Whoom!* Right there. [puts his index finger to his lower temple] Right between the eyes. That's an experience you don't have every day. That's all part of what I am today, whatever I am. [Laughs] That's all part of it. It said, *Hey, this is not a game.* You learn to look out for your hide. And the lessons are well taken.

INT: Thank you very much.