

William E. Bramswig  
Narrator

Michael Achey, Interviewer  
William Bramswig's son, John Bramswig, is also present

Interviewed on 14 February, 2001 at Camp Smith, New York

INT: Give us a little background on where you grew up and what you were doing prior to the war.

WB: I was born in New York City, in Manhattan, Harlem, 130th Street. We lived in that neighborhood for about 30 years and we were there when the war started. I have two brothers and two sisters, mother and father, and they were all older than me. My two brothers went in. One of them wound up in Iran, supplying equipment to the Russians. My other brother went into the Navy and was on a troop ship going back and forth to Australia most of the time. He always landed on the West Coast, in San Francisco, and when he used to fly home on leave, he used to borrow money from everybody so he could fly home for a few days. [laughs] At that time, you were supposed to check with your draft board every six months to find out what your status was. Different people in the neighborhood had sons that were in service and when they met me they'd say—they called me Willy—"Willy, when you gonna go in the draft?" One guy was flying a B-25 in Europe, he was home already. That's when it was 25 missions, at the beginning. So anyway, I had a half day off from work for Lincoln's birthday so I went down to the draft board to check on my status. I told the girl my name and she's checking. She said, "I have Harry here, that's your father, Henry, and we have your two brothers, John and Francis. We have no William." She called her bosses over and they told her to make a card up for me. I thought I was going to be a big national hero by doing something like that, I could have not reported and nobody knew I was alive. [laughs] So anyway, two months later I was in the Army and they sent me down to Camp Stewart, Georgia. The President was down there yesterday and they called it Fort Stewart, they changed it around ten years ago.

I was in anti-aircraft for 14 months. In that time we went to the West Coast for desert maneuvers. They put us on big flat cars. We had sleeping accommodations on Pullman trains but they took all of our equipment and tied it on and across the country it went. In every state we stopped, we used to jump out and "We're in Oklahoma." [laughs] We wound up in Yuma, Arizona, that's way down on the border of Mexico. When we saw it we said, "Water, give us water." It was a barren place and you thought you were thirsty but after you were there a couple days, you weren't thirsty. So that was pretty good, it's a dry climate. If you were in Florida, you'd be perspiring all the time, but out there, you didn't perspire that much.

I remember one particular night maneuver with blackout lights and you had to watch the truck in front of you. Dust was flying around. When they made a turn, you were supposed to make a turn. All of a sudden they made a turn and we didn't see them and we're driving for about ten minutes and nothing. We pulled over. We had to stay there all night long because nobody could find us. [laughs] They next day they came out with a Jeep and they found us. But that was it, we lost them with the dust. It was very good out there. After that we went to Fort Bliss, Texas.

INT: You were still in anti-aircraft?

WB: Yes. At one time, Fort Bliss was used for the Mexican War and it was a Cavalry place—all horses, no tanks. I think they put us there until they got an idea where they were going to send us.

INT: What was it like being a New York City boy in the deep South?

WB: I loved it, I loved all the travelling. It was a big thrill because I could never afford to get out of NY.

JB: The food was good, too.

WB: The food in the Army—we were very poor people in the Depression. When we got down to Camp Stewart we go in for breakfast and I see this big tray of sausages, the Army had all of that. Even in combat, they would come up four or five times a week with hot food. Maybe they'd miss one or two when we were doing some action, but they treated us really good. And you still find guys complaining. I would say I wonder what they had in civilian life. In Fort Bliss we had a very good set-up, near El Paso, TX. A notice came down that the Army was looking for infantrymen. I didn't like the anti-aircraft because we didn't do that much and all they kept saying was, "Clean the gun, clean the gun", cosmoline, every time the dust blew. I thought this was a good way to get out and see some action. You know, young guys, 20 years old. So we went to Ft Jackson, South Carolina. That was good, very exciting, a lot of people were coming in; they were making a whole new division. I was a corporal in the gun crew and when I got to Ft Jackson, they had no use for a corporal, they made me a sergeant. We were there maybe three or four months, it was October '44, and we were shipping out. That was after D-Day. D-Day we found out, one morning we woke up, "They invaded Europe." It sounded exciting but it turned out to be hell. [laughs] We went across on the *Queen Elizabeth*.

INT: What was that like?

WB: There were 13,000 and 90 of us were in the library. The funny part about it, I lived around the Hudson River area, I worked there all my life in that neighborhood, I worked on 56th Street and here was this ship on 50th Street. In fact for a couple of years, I used to go down to the harbor and look at all these big ships, the *Normandie*—did you hear the

*Normandie* caught on fire? That was a crime. The night before we were going to leave, we had to meet an officer on 43rd Street and Broadway, it was an Italian restaurant, [Tatonetti's?]. Sure enough we met him at 12 o'clock at night and he said, "I'm sorry to say, but you're not going home no more, we're going to ship out." We got down to the ship. They go so fast, like 35 miles an hour or something, they don't need any convoy, thank God. To feed a crew like that, you went down for breakfast, they'd give you a hard-boiled egg, toast, an orange, and maybe coffee or milk. Nothing fancy and you only ate twice a day. We wound up over in Scotland, beautiful countryside and they put us on some trains down to England.

INT: At that point you were in the 87th Division?

WB: Yes, when I left anti-aircraft. And I'll tell you—after all the fighting we did in the cold and whatnot, that anti-aircraft outfit wound up in Hawaii. I kept in touch with them—they wound up in Hawaii. [laughs]

Anyway, we were in England for about a month and we went across the channel on a nice little steamer. They gave us only one bullet, going into combat, we landed in Le Havre and they gave each soldier one bullet. Too many people with guns; it happened to me one time, I had a round in the chamber and didn't know it. So we get to Le Havre and it's all flattened out. When I saw that I said, "That's good, they can make a new city. Instead of having small little roads, they can make boulevards and everything from scratch."

JB: It was all bombed out.

WB: Yes. Europe was bad for transportation, for big tractor trailers. They couldn't manipulate around the towns. I didn't see it, but sometimes they would just tear a house apart so they could go there. So anyway, we got to Le Havre and they put us on trucks and we wound up in some apple orchards, all mud. We had our pup tents there.

INT: What time of year was this?

WB: October. There was so much mud on your feet, the tent was behind you and you just plopped back in and take your shoes off because otherwise the blankets and everything. We were only there two or three days and we got some hay from the farmer's barn and put that in. It was good, warm and a little drier. The next day they told us that the farmer said we stole his hay that he needed for his cattle and so forth. We had to pay, we all had to go like half a buck apiece. You have to go to war with some change in your pocket to pay your way. [laughs] We had to give him 20 dollars or 50 dollars or whatever it came out to be. After that, a couple days, they put us on trucks.

INT: Were you in rifle squad?

WB: Right, I was a squad leader and assistant platoon leader. The lieutenants were never there. They got wounded, they didn't get wounded from being in the foxholes, they were back in the barns or someplace with artillery. They always said that the war was won by sergeants. There were a lot of sergeants and they knew how to use their own noodle. The officers—nobody had any experience at war, even the colonels. Nobody knew anything about war, and nobody knew about front line troops, they didn't know anything like that. You learn by experience. And these people, we correspond with some of them now.

JB: You went to Metz?

INT: You were a part of Third Army? What was it like to be part of Third Army?

WB: Yes, Metz. Very proud. I feel that some of the other armies that were over there didn't get any coverage like [General George S.] Patton did. They did things but I don't think they were in the area where the real action was. So we wound up in Metz and that was a big fortification. Your anti-tank guns hit the walls and nothing, it was built 100 years ago.

JB: That was the baptism by fire.

INT: That was your first time in combat?

WB: Yes, Metz. It was no man-to-man, just shooting at walls. Then we were near Nancy, France and then the Saar, Saarbrücken, and then the word came that they were having trouble up in Belgium, the Germans were trying to break through. We didn't know nothing. All the time, we were just our little squad, maybe another squad, we didn't know what was going on. I read about all these towns, I never knew what towns they were and most of the time we were on the outskirts of towns, flushing out the woods. The Colonel and everybody had their CP (command post) in town. So we had to go 100 miles or more and we're on big flat-bed trucks with wooden sides on them and sandbags. It was all open and it was snowing. Up we went to Belgium somewhere and we had to relieve the 101st Infantry (Airborne).

INT: What was that like?

WB: It was a little funny like. They were in white robes, I don't know if that helped anything. We came up and they'd say "Hey, so-and-so, you're going to be relieved. The 87th is here." And it was just, OK have a nice trip, I'll see you next Christmas, and you were in their holes.

JB: That was Bastogne?

WB: Bastogne. There was no air force because there was so much fog and they couldn't get the airplanes up which would have been very good. Anyway, then we started to move

out, then you could see the guys hanging out of tanks. Wherever they were, the Germans must have massacred them, they were trying to win the war. That's why they say that Malmedy and what the Germans did—what were they supposed to do—capture prisoners? They were trying to go and go and go. We didn't like to capture prisoners ourselves either because, what are you going to do with them? Put them in your pocket? We used to just send them down the road when we knew people were behind us. In a lot of cases, the Germans wanted to get captured. They thought they could go to England. In fact before we left the States, some of the camps we were in had German prisoners already. So they had a great time. They fought the war and they were eating the same food we were.

INT: Were you dressed for the weather?

WB: No. I can't believe in Desert Storm, these guys were going to war and they were taking a [Boeing] 747. They had the big transport plane, flying these guys over the ocean, all dressed with these beautiful uniforms. We had galoshes. They weren't prepared, the government. They didn't think they'd have a war or something. So we had galoshes, we had just regular dress pants, two pairs on, but the galoshes. They had combat boots, the kind that strap over, but we found out right away that they froze and your feet was in there. That's how come trench foot, we had lots of the trench foot. With the galoshes, you could move your feet around. You had socks on your feet and if you could stuff straw in there, even better. At times your feet would sweat. We used to have at least three pair of socks, and the routine was you took them off your feet and you put them in your helmet liner and then from your helmet liner, you put them down around the stomach to heat, and then from there back to your feet. You might have had another pair but that was the routine. That's why in pictures, you see guys with their socks hanging out of their belt. And some guys, I read after the war, actually did it on purpose to go back to have their feet treated. Some of them really had it bad, they just cut off their toes. The toes turned black, no circulation. We lost a lot of people, as many people, I think, as got shot. In fact there was a couple of cases of guys shooting themselves, looking for that million dollar wound. There was one guy in our platoon and they said he did a lousy job, splintered his bone and everything like that. And they knew; they took those guys right out.

JB: Is that when you came across the 106th? The guys you went overseas with?

WB: Yes, the 106th Infantry Division. They went across with us on the *Queen Elizabeth*. Sometimes it took three ships back and forth, it wasn't always the *Queen Elizabeth*, but there were different regiments and battalions going, guys with their artillery would go on another ship. So the 106th was with us and they put them, as a new outfit, they spread them out in the Ardennes over maybe 12 miles, because they didn't think the Germans [trails off]. And that could have been us. They got captured, a lot of them did. I think one regiment got away because they were on the outskirts of the Bulge. But nobody ever knew, we got there, we saw the name—we used to say Bastogne [pronounces hard "G"] or something. The weather started to clear up, we started to get supplies in, we started to

get more reinforcements and then we started to pound the hell out of the Germans. They were tough but at the end, they wanted to quit. All the glory years they had, they could see that was the end. We were in foxholes and you only stayed there two or three days and every day you stayed there, you dug it a little bit deeper, tried to make it a little more comfortable. We threw pine needles and leaves in the hole to keep your feet off the mud that was in there and then you'd get the branches from the trees, the fatter ones [breaks off] when you dug—I think Con Edison does it now, they throw the dirt on the side—then we could put the wood across it, put the branches up and then after you did that pretty good, then you threw some mud on top. It helped you a bit, it kept the weather off you. You'd have two guys in a foxhole. There was a joke—two guys, you're supposed to stay awake for a couple hours while the other guy would sleep but it was never like that. It was always, "Hey Willy, you awake?" You always thought the other guy was going to fall asleep. About four times like that—at night you couldn't get out of your hole—if you had to take a crap, you just did it somehow but you couldn't walk around. Sometimes the Germans didn't even know we were there and the patrol would walk in on us. We had like a wagon train for the cowboys and Indians with all of us kind of around. They'd walk right in the middle of us and then somebody would spot them and "Halt" and then shooting all over the place. But the Germans were the only ones running around. That would last maybe five minutes and you'd stay like that all night long, nobody would get up to see what's what. The next day, beside rigor mortis, they were frozen, whatever position they were in. You never got to the point where it frightened you and that part about getting replacements—we used to get a lot of replacements—and before you even knew their name, they had to go back because they got injured, or they got killed.

INT: So how were the replacements treated?

WM: Very good. It was the movies that said you didn't get to be friendly with them because they might get killed and make you sad. But you didn't know their names. Let me jump to about two years ago—I got a couple of letters from these guys' sons, their fathers were in the service and they were in my outfit, the 345th, Company F. They said, "My father never talked about the war, did you know my father?" They'd give me the names and you never knew them. You would know about ten guys that came overseas with you but anybody else you'd say 'Hi ya Joe' or maybe, 'Hey Burns' but you never got friendly with them and they'd get injured and they're gone. Most of the time they'd never come back. "Would you write to me and let me know?" That was another thing about the war. Most people didn't have any education and they didn't know how to write. They could maybe put their name but they didn't know how to write, nobody knew how to write before the war. They never wrote a letter but when you got in the Army, to get a letter you gotta write a letter. I don't think the Army took that into consideration—they weren't stupid, it was just that they never had an education. So where was I? I said I'll call this fellow up, the son. I'm thinking to myself the soldier's son [holds hand at child's height] but he was a man about 40 years old. One guy was a professor and I thought I was going to speak to a young son, his father had died in 1980 or something. I called him and

he said “Mr. Bramswig, I didn’t think you’d call, I thought you’d write a letter. Did you know my father?” I said “No, it was hard to get to know anybody, they’d come and go and you’re moving, moving, moving.” He said “It’s so nice of you to call. My father was a forward observer. The other guy, his father got wounded and he was laying out in the field for a couple of hours and when he did get rescued, they told him it was good that he was out in the field with the snow because the cold weather healed up the wound a little bit.” I was reading his mind and I knew he wanted me to tell him something about his father so I said, “I want you to know that your father laying out in that field, the conditions, and besides that he was wounded—he was a hero.” The guy wrote to me and said, “I told my mother what you said about my father, that he was a hero.” This guy was a professor or something and he wanted to write a story about his father so he wanted to know every little detail. He sent me a copy of it, it was about ten pages, and in the article he doesn’t mention my name but he says, “One of the soldiers from my father’s outfit called me,” and the way he said it made me [chokes up]. “He wanted me to know that my father was a hero. I couldn’t speak. That meant so much to me.”

JB: He was in your company, too.

WB: Yes, but I didn’t know him. We got in touch with the lieutenant that was censoring my letters, his name was Prather, and his name was on the list or something. And this Lieutenant Prather had scratch notes and he had squad leaders and squads and then he had Sgt Bramswig.

JB: It was a list of his squads from that day during the Bulge. He picked it up in some French hotel and wrote on it.

WB: A piece of scratch paper. So we do a lot of correspondence now, John enjoys it. But that was 1943 and I didn’t do anything until two or three years ago. I didn’t get in touch with anybody. I’ve never had to go to the hospital or ask the Army for anything, lucky. All the guys that got killed, they got wounded, they got captured, they got their feet cut off, they did so much, and I didn’t get anything. There must have been a lot of other guys, too, where the stuff was here and there and you weren’t.

JB: One guy was hit right next to you?

WB: That happened a few times. I always say it’s like being a deer, I can feel how a deer is but a deer doesn’t know what’s going on. We used to have to walk down roads at night, maybe by yourself even. One time I had to take a prisoner, somebody could have sniped me and the prisoner could have escaped. Most of the time the prisoners didn’t want to. But a lot of people got killed like that, just from one shot. We were in this town on a hill and we looked down and there was this German soldier two or three blocks away, it must have been a couple hundred yards away. So I said, “Maybe we could hit that guy.” So two of us knelt down, it was a two-storey house, and two of us knelt down with our rifles and two of them were over our shoulders with their rifles, so four rifles. I said, “When I

count to three, we'll shoot." This guy was walking on the other side of a little stream, like a roadway, and I counted to three and we shot. In the States I couldn't hit anything on the rifle range—this guy was walking and he didn't fall down, he just was hit and I think that surprised the hell out of us. He must have been dead because he didn't move but it was surprising that we hit him from that distance.

INT: So you come up support the Bulge, how long does it take to clear out?

WB: I was only in combat four months. I got three battle stars, it was 150 days. I tell John that every day they get reports from 2nd Platoon, 2nd Squad or something, two men wounded or killed and we'd have to get replacements for them as soon as we can, might take a week. But Sgt Bramswig was there, Sgt Bramswig was there. Nobody said anything about taking Sgt Bramswig and sending him to Paris or anything. You weren't a guinea pig but they were happy that you didn't get killed. Other guys that I went over with, one guy got wounded three times, Sgt Wild, I correspond with him. John called him up a couple of months ago and he's in Florida. [turns to John] Tell the story.

JB: His wife picked up the phone and I was trying to explain my name's Bramswig, and she mentions across the room and I could hear him just jump up—they hadn't talked since the war—and he picks up the phone and says, "Bramswig, you son of a gun." I had to tell him I'm the son and eventually they got in touch.

WB: Well, he got wounded three times but they weren't enough to keep you out, two weeks or something, and he got a Silver Star. But the thing was, a lot of those guys were living in the hospitals, getting treatment during the day and a good night's sleep but guys like myself and a lot of them were in the holes every night. [Tape change]

INT: The first town taken by the 345th was Mundelsheim, by the German border? Can you tell us about that?

WB: I never knew the names. I knew Metz and Coblenz but all these little small towns of 500 or 1000 people, most of the time we didn't stay there that we could look at the signs. We were always on the outside. What would happen is the battalions and different companies would come in with their Jeeps and trucks and cooks and the first thing they'd say was to get the troops out on the high ground. Protect the high ground so nobody would sneak up on you. You could never make a fire, in fact, I didn't smoke at the time but if you wanted to smoke, you had to get down in your holes. They used to say that we didn't do it that much but even shooting tracer bullets. If you wanted to tell where you thought the enemy was, you'd say "Watch my tracer" and you'd shoot them. But at the same time, they found out where you were shooting from so you didn't do it that much.

INT: Did you know what German units you were up against?

WB: No.



INT: Principally infantry units?

WB: Oh yeah. We had a couple instances with German tanks, maybe in Schoenberg. The town was down and then there were hills with Christmas trees I call them, pine trees. They had come to this German tank down the dirt road over there, half a mile away. "Wow" we said, "he doesn't know that we're here. Get a tank destroyer." They weren't too far away but they were never in front of the Infantry, they were always in back of the Infantry. Sure enough the tank destroyer came up and they shot about nine times and they missed. The Germans were coming down the hill and there was a road and he cut into the woods and got away. They told us that he was out of our range. I guess nowadays with the rockets we have, they would have got him with the first shot.

JB: Was the first guy hit the Mickey Mantle guy, the calisthenics?

WB: Yeah, the first time we got overseas, you see Joe Lewis or somebody [built] like that you say, "Wow, he'll never get killed, that guy." And he got killed the first one, the physical education guy. And the little skinny guys like Audie Murphy, I don't know how he got all those medals. I don't know how he was in those spots all the time to get a medal. There wasn't that many situations where you could stick out as one person. The thing was, they came out one day and said we weren't using enough ammunition. And it was true; in the States they were always telling us to conserve, don't be wasting. But as we found out later on, the more you shot, the Germans kept going away. At the end they didn't have the stuff to come back with. You have to shoot more ammunition so our colonel can tell the division, [MG Frank L.] Cullen, and he could tell the Third Army that the 87th, F Company, is using ammunition, boy they're good. Then they said a couple of days later on, we're not giving out enough medals. We're going to give out medals? I always thought they came from Washington or something. What? We're going to give out medals? And that's the way it was. You had to tell the colonels and those people a story. Bill Bramswig, he went out there where that tank was and this and that and he drew fire—you got a Silver Star or something. Even the officers, well most of them were never around because they were wounded or something. We used to have to make up stories: Oh, yeah, you crawled out there and the bullets were flying. Not using enough ammunition and you have to make up stories for the medals so the division or the battalion can have [trails off]. I only told John a short while ago that there was a Japanese regiment, when they were interned in California when the war started they put the civilians there, I remember that, I was 20 years old at the time. They didn't mistreat them or anything like that but you couldn't trust them because their allegiance was with the country where they were born, it wasn't with the American flag. We didn't put them in a concentration camp, they got three meals a day, a nice place to sleep and so forth. Anyway, when they made an outfit and they sent them over, what do you think they did when they said we're not giving out enough medals? They said we're going to have the best outfit in the world and they gave away 50 Silver Stars and 200 Bronze Stars and two Congressional medals and that's how they got all those medals, because they were

writing them up as much as they wanted to. I'm sure a lot of them were brave soldiers but to cheer them up and make them feel [trails off]. I'm sure a lot of them were brave soldiers.

JB: You had the time in the house when the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) went off?

WB: Yeah, we were downstairs with the lieutenant, the sergeants and squad leaders, and a lot of the troops were sleeping on the floor upstairs. So the BAR man comes down and said he was having trouble with the BAR: when he pulled the bolt back, it jammed. Sure enough he had one in the chamber and it went [makes shot noise], shocked the hell out of us. It went through the ceiling and before we knew it, they were flying down the stairs. One of our guys was shot dead upstairs. The guy who did it with the BAR, they had to take him out. It was bad enough that we were killing Germans, and here we are killing our own people. I know that happened to me in the States. We were on guard duty at an ammunition depot. It was just a formality but you had a clip with bullets and they'd take you by truck out to the ammunition depot, and you walked around, maybe a squad, 12 guys. After a couple of hours they'd take you back and the truck would come with another 12 guys. And you'd go back to the barracks where they were keeping you and you'd put your rifle in the rifle rack. About 20 minutes later a messenger comes in and says that one of the guys minding the ammunition depot is missing a bullet. When you put the clip in, there were eight bullets, and one goes into the chamber, and when you finished, you'd pull the bolt back and the clip would come out but that one stayed in the chamber. I put that in the rack, I didn't notice. Then four hours later or whenever I went on duty again, I said, "Everybody, the bullet's in here." [laughs] I had to take the bullet out and get rid of it. I never told anybody. But it can happen so that story about don't let anybody point a gun at you that's not loaded. It can be loaded and I'm sorry.

INT: As a combat infantryman what was your most concern about the Germans?

WB: I wouldn't have wanted to fight them at the beginning because they were trained and proud. That's another thing, I had all that pride, you could play the Star Spangled Banner and I'd [mimes tears running down his face]. I knew all about "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes", "We have not yet begun to fight" and a lot of people don't have that. Now it would be worse because there are too many nationalities and their allegiance goes to their nationalities. Yeah, they're American now, but [trails off]. At that time there wasn't too many different nationalities. Where was I?

JB: So the Germans were strong?

WB: Yeah, they were real regimented. That was one fault they had, they would do anything that they were told, but if the officer got killed "What are we going to do?" They said the sergeants won the war for us and it's true. A sergeant would just take over the situation, they'd say "Take the lieutenant back" or something like that and then things would keep going on. But they said the Germans didn't do those things.

INT: What did you think of the German equipment?

WB: People always talk about the German 88mm cannon being the best for accuracy. Their tanks—they were prepared for this—their tanks had really had good armor on them. Ours were like tin cans and the cannons weren't [trails off]. I remember the 50 caliber machine guns from anti-aircraft, that's some bullet, that is. They said that they can go in through a tree, powerful. We had four 50's on the half-track, they had them in the Infantry somewhere, and you would look down the barrel through the glass thing and you could see a tree or a flagpole and you'd get this one gun [sighted] and twist it and lock it on, right on the top of that flagpole and you'd do it with the four guns and if you fired and those four hit that spot with those 50 caliber bullets, that was a powerful enemy, that would scare the Germans. They knew the 50 caliber was a tough enemy to fight.

JB: Was the 88 like that? Was that four?

WB: No, that was a cannon.

INT: What did you think of the German machine gun?

WB: They had those burp guns and stuff like that. I personally never got overpowered by something like that. There was times that I threw hand grenades. You know how the roofs of houses would go? [Makes peaked roof with hands.] Everything was houses or barns and you'd go down and maybe there's nobody there—you never saw the civilian population, I don't know where they went, I mean sometimes you would on the small farms. When you would come down the side of a house or a barn, and we'd pull a hand grenade—people think you throw it like a baseball but you couldn't, you'd be throwing your elbow out, you had to push them. I pushed it [Mimes throwing hand grenade.] and do you know that thing went over the top by that much [Holds hands several inches apart.] and it was like this, the roof. [peaked] It just as well could have come down into my lap or where some of our soldiers were. So you didn't do that too much. That was without thinking—you just thought you could throw it over and it would go over. And then a barn has that big opening in it to let the gas out from the animals. We were going down and I saw a barn and I thought I'd throw a grenade in there in case anybody is in there. I stepped back and the opening is pretty big [Holds hands approximately 18 inches apart.], they took the bricks out. I stepped back and as soon as I threw it, I said to myself, suppose it doesn't go in? I should have been next to the hole, you'd think I'm bowling or something. That was a scary thing. I'm sure people got killed by doing stupid things without thinking.

We got into the Siegfried Line and I think we were there in the morning, at night we were working our way there. They protected all those forts from the outside, they don't want somebody to come up and put a big demolition. We slept in one, one night, there was a big cement wall, you walked in and you stopped, you had to go this way [motions left]

and then another one to get inside so you couldn't shoot [straight]. They were really well built because they were building them for 20 years.

Another time we were on patrol at night and we came down to a barn and this was like two o'clock in the morning and you can hear them moving around. The Germans had those boots that were made out of wood, they put nails in them so they wouldn't wear out.

INT: Hobnail boots.

WB: Yeah. We could hear some shuffling going on, we didn't know what to do. It turns out they were cows. But in our imaginations, scared, they were Germans. [laughs]

JB: What about you found that one company area the Germans had built and you guys all went in the hole?

WB: We were always in German territory at the end. They didn't build foxholes, they had this one hole in the ground [as big as] this room and it must have dug down about five feet and then they put like an umbrella over it, the only purpose was to keep the snow from going in the hole. The place could hold twenty guys. Any time you could sleep indoors was Christmas. So we're in there and Sgt Riley, he was my assistant, there was an opening and he could stand there and look around so I told him to stand there and listen. We were in there and fairly comfortable and all of a sudden Sgt Riley said, "Halt, halt." The next words out of his mouth, "My gun is jammed." I handed him up a grenade to throw and he threw the grenade. Ourselves, we had to get out of there because all the German had to do was throw a grenade down there and we were all confined, our eardrums would have [trails off]. So we all got out and a couple of us ran down, one guy was laying there on the dirt road. As a sergeant you couldn't tell somebody else to go and see if he was alive, so I went out to see if he was alive. Wishing I was a private at the time. I go out there and hit him with my rifle. He moved, I thought he was dead, I jumped back [laughs]. We made a prisoner out of him and then I had to take him, during the night, five or six blocks down in the woods. You didn't know how to get rid of the prisoners. That Malmedy—we had the same thing ourselves. We were going to go into a town, and this must have happened lots of times, we were going to go into a town in the afternoon, about four o'clock. They used to use the bazookas with the big knob on the end.

INT: Panzerfaust.

WB: So then they made some shooting and that was the end of it, we couldn't go into those houses that night so we were mad that we had to start digging little trenches because sometimes you didn't. We had a lieutenant and I guess his messenger, they dug a foxhole. We just grabbed a little indentation in the ground. The first thing that happened, they threw the bazookas around and the lieutenant and this other guy got killed, [points to

ears] got punctured, concussion. Then they started to do some shooting, then two or three at a time, they came out surrendering. In the meantime, they killed a few tankers that were back 100 yards or whatever. They took them back there and they killed them, they killed 23. I went back maybe 15 minutes later and a Jewish fellow asked if he could go back and look. I said don't do anything, just look because you've had these things on you mind your whole life. One German got up and ran away, we had to chase him and kill him otherwise he would have run up ahead. It was 23. As I found out a couple of days later, they just threw them into two-and-a-half ton trucks and when our general heard about it, "Never happened" he says. That was it.

One guy, a month or two ago, says, "So and so says you were responsible for that." I started to tell him the whole story, I had nothing to do with that.

INT: Where did you cross the Rhine?

WB: Boppard.

INT: What was that like?

WB: We went across at night. The Remagen Bridge, that they captured whole, was only a couple of miles upstream. They told us we were going to cross the river, we crossed the Moselle, too. They said we're going to cross at night, send a scouting party over because you can't all go at once, you don't know if they have machine guns waiting for you. So we're going to go over at night and try not to make any noise banging the boat. This happened and a week later we went across in small motor boats, we're hauling eight guys, anyway we had to get on the other side very fast, sometimes we went slow and they'd be taking pot shots. But this was at night time. We got in there and the place was on the outskirts—I've seen movies of steamships going on vacation and it's a big Coney Island down below, but we were up in Yonkers someplace. We had no problem. We got over there and the first thing you do is go through some houses, no Germans are there, and then the next thing, the rest of them came over. The same way with D-Day, I don't know how many thousands of guys were in D-Day. What they did when they came over a week later, they were in D-Day. The original bunch that went over, I think a couple thousand got killed but after that, it all quieted down. D-Day would be the first 12 hours, you wouldn't want to be there.

JB: Did O'Leary tell you to take the point, somewhere on the Rhine?

WB: Oh yeah, he was a sergeant, a very nice guy. In fact we used to be together all the time and he'd become our platoon leader, and he was only a private when he went over. He became a squad leader, a staff sergeant and after about two or three weeks, he says to me, "Hey Bramswig, why don't you take the lead sometimes?" [laughs] You don't want to be scouts out, two more scouts out. I said, "I understand they're thinking of making

you a lieutenant for the platoon. That's your job." That was all there was to it, we still were good friends.

JB: You told him to take the point.

WB: Yeah, you take it.

JB: You think he sent you home?

WB: Yeah, when the president died, [Franklin D.] Roosevelt. That morning they came up with breakfast and whoever was in charge said, "Hey Bramswig, they want you to go back to the company CP (command post). They're going to send you home." You talk about winning the lottery? That was really something. If you knew about it a week or two ahead, it was something you could think about, you're going back with the kitchen, you're going home. I went back with the kitchen. They had these tents where they were cooking so I knew them from just seeing them around. He said, "Don't write any letters home, you'll get killed." That was unbelievable. I was the third one they picked to go home, every month they picked about 50 guys out of the division.

INT: You had the points to go?

WB: No, I had been overseas for six months, come back after four months. My brother was in Iran for three and a half years. So the first guy was a small older guy—you know when you're 20 years old, a guy that's 32 is an old man. Anyway, they needed somebody to go down and see if this little wooden bridge going across the stream was OK or if there was a problem. "Anybody want to go?" He said, "I'll go," so they let him go. A week later they put him in for a Silver Star, it was a dangerous assignment, nobody wanted to do it. He found out it was OK. A month or so later, another guy was going out. What we'd do, we'd take a collection. This first guy, that got the Silver Star, I gave him 150 dollars. There was no place to spend money, you wound up with 500 dollars, but he was supposed to come back. He was supposed to be here 45 days, not 30 days, 45 days, and then he's supposed to come back to the outfit. A month later, another guy was going home. I gave him 50 or something. He walked off with three or four hundred dollars. Then when it came my turn—it wasn't my turn because a lot of people wanted to go—I wound up with like 200 dollars, maybe a little more. A couple of guys gave me their German Lugers and they said to see if I could get it home and they'll get in touch with me. I didn't want to get too monkeyed around with them, trying to smuggle a gun. I sold both of them for 100 dollars apiece. So that went with my 200 that I had in cash and sure enough, when I got home, six months, five months later, I got letters in the mail, "What happened with the guns?" I didn't even answer them. One guy was from Wisconsin.  
[laughs]

JB: I spoke to O'Leary's wife a few months ago and she said he had approval power as a new platoon leader. He threw names in a hat, he picked it out, [you were] lucky enough to go home.

WB: He [John] called a lot of them and one guy died a couple of months ago, had cancer.

INT: What did you think in general of your experience?

WB: It was fantastic, unbelievable. I try to write a little bit and I said the people that saw [*Saving*] *Private Ryan* which was nice and everything, but the guys who were actually there have an Academy Award [in their head]. See, *Private Ryan* and all that, they add a lot of baloney to it. It doesn't really happen that way with bullets and everything exploding around. If a thing like that happened it only happened around five times, not with me, in the whole [trails off]. I always thought the guys in Vietnam had a rougher time, especially with the weather and the fanatics, or even the Japanese.

INT: What did you do when you got back?

WB: I took about ten days off and then I went back to work.

INT: You resumed your old job?

WB: No, we came back in May. I got put on a hospital ship, the *Washington* or something because there was some rooms, and that was a big ship in a convoy. You could see the small ships, how their propellers would come up out of the water. When my brother went to Iran, it took him 40 days or something. He had to go down to South America, across the Atlantic, and then [trails off]. So when you're on a big luxury ship like the *Queen Elizabeth*, I've gone on vacation cruises and it's a pleasure.

INT: So you came back and went back to work.

WB: Yeah, I came back home for 45 days and I had to go back to Ft Benning, there were a couple others, Camp Rucker, but I wound up back in Ft Benning because that was an Infantry school. We used to run problems like you run down this path and there would be explosions. And they had the OCS (Officer Candidate School), [General Dwight D.] Eisenhower's son was there even. We used to run through these problems and a funny thing they told us, "You're in war and your best friend gets shot and he's wounded. Don't four guys pick him up and take him back." Everybody wants to go back. So leave him there and somebody will come along and take him. One thing you did instantaneously when somebody got shot next to you or wounded, you didn't try to put a bandage on because you knew you could get killed too. You had to go and secure the area in front of you and then when you did that, you could go back. I never knew who the details were to pick up bodies and so forth. A lot of times it wasn't just GIs. I remember reading about Eisenhower when he was speaking to a Russian general, the Russian were hard on

prisoners. The Germans knew that. Eisenhower said, "We give them this food and that food." The German general says, "You give them the food that you eat? We give them nothing like that. Why do you do that?" Eisenhower says, "We feel that if we give them the food that we eat or pretty close to it, they'll appreciate that. That somehow or another that will get back to the people feeding our troops," and it was true. That wasn't the reason but they respected the American soldier more than the Russians, they should have because they killed all the Russian people, 15 million people, civilians and everything, very harsh. But even if he would have stopped going, Hitler, when they got to Belgium or something like that, willing to have peace but everything stays as it is, we would have made some kind of a treaty with him and he could have kept Czechoslovakia, but he wanted everything. Did you know Russia had 11 time zones? We have four. They have languages they can't even speak. They have languages that they never put those people in the Army. In 1911 or something, they had this big explosion, I don't know what it was, they couldn't get there to find out what it was. When they got there 40 years later in World War Two, the trees and everything were all knocked over. I think it was a big meteorite.

JB: It was a meteorite.

WB: But Russia is so vast they speak Chinese and all kinds of languages. They have all kinds of oil but a railroad, but they don't have the [mimes sidetracks] going here and there, and they can't get to these big forests.

INT: Do you have any final thoughts?

WB: No, but I think we're not patriotic enough. Soldiers are going into the Army for a livelihood or something. I would have stayed in the Army if I didn't have a mother and a father. I wasn't married, didn't have any girlfriends. I would have stayed in the Army because it was really good, they treated you good, the living conditions. It needs a war to get them. Now they're talking about spending money on the people in service, which they should.

It was a pleasure.

INT: Thank you very much.

JB: [Hands photos to WB.]

WB: [Holds up photo] This is NYC. Different communities would put up neighborhood banners and they would collect a lot of money because that stuff costs a lot of money to have made. This one was in Harlem on 127<sup>th</sup> Street between Park and Lexington Avenue. The Metro North goes right by but it's not there no more.



[Shows group photo] This was the platoon and it was taken in the States. I'm not there. This guy had two rifles and one of them is mine because I took the picture. This is O'Leary, he was the one they were going to make an officer. A lot of guys got killed and wounded. This was that Sgt Weil, he got three Purple Hearts. Very good guys. There were bad stories about this fellow right here, Sgt Leech. He got busted to private, he was Regular Army and he didn't want to take orders. He told the lieutenant one time, "Don't you tell me what to do, you little" and he pointed his gun at the officer.

[Shows photo in dress uniform] Here's a picture after I came home.