Orlando Brigano
Narrator

Laura Giuliano
Interviewer

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Laura Giuliano LG
Orlando Brigano OB
Unknown interviewer INT

LG: Can you tell us where you were born?

OB: I was born in Herkimer, New York.

LG: Can you tell us how you enlisted?

OB: I was drafted. When I turned eighteen years old, I received a citation in the mail: "We need you." In fact the place where I had to go to check in was only a block away from my house. So I left my house and walked right down to armory in Utica. And that was it.

LG: Did you go to basic from there?

OB: Yes. From there, a little while later they put us on a train. It took us four days and five nights because during the war—the war was going on in the Pacific—they would take sidetracks to get down there, to Camp Polk, Louisiana. Now it's Fort Polk, Louisiana. I was with the 8th Armored Division.

After we finished our basic training, Bob Hope came to entertain us. He pretended to be a tank commander and drove in. After that, our general, General Green, said, "We will go overseas as a unit. All together." Two days later they separated us and sent us as replacements overseas.

From there, I went to Camp Upton [New York.] At Camp Upton we got on a ship, which happened to be the *Queen Elizabeth* at the time, and we landed in Glasgow, Scotland. Then we took a train down to Wells, England, near Bath. We were there for a few days and in the meantime the invasion started.

They put us on trucks and brought us down to the harbor. Going to the harbor, our truck driver got lost. So we said, "Great, we'll be the last ones in the convoy." It was dark

when we got there, and foggy, and we got on a ship. When we woke up the next morning, we were the first boat going across the English Channel. There was a big rod across the boat, with chains that rotated the water in case there were any mines. These extensions would the hit the mines, to explode them.

We landed on Utah Beach. We got up to the top—in fact, I had to pull myself up with a big rope, trying to get up the cliff. So I got on top, and that's when I went with the 712th Tank Battalion, from Normandy.

LG: Do you think your training in basic prepared you for what you saw?

OB: You know what they say. I've learned an awful lot, but experience is your best teacher. Anyway, we got there and a sergeant came to get me. His name was Sergeant Leroy Moore. He's still living today, in Michigan. He saw that I was scared to death. There was some shelling going on, some machine guns going on. He was a little older than I was, and he put his arm around me and said, "Lindy, it's the ones you can't hear that you have to be scared of." What that means is, if you hear a gun going *Boom! boom! boom! boom!* you hear it and you're all right. If you hear a shell coming in, you're all right. But it's the ones you don't hear that you have to be scared of.

From there I joined the 712th Tank Battalion. I was with the 712th Tank Battalion from the beginning to the end. We got to a place named Sainte-Mère-Église; that's the town we went through. If you watch the movie *The Longest Day*, that town was mentioned. After we got there, we were looking around and I came to this house. A woman called me over, a little French woman, and she said to me, "Oh, you look just like my son. He's in the army but I don't know where he is. I don't know if he's living or dead." She grabbed hold of me and she hugged me and she kissed me. Believe me, you can correspond with someone—you don't have to know the language, as long as you know hand gestures.

She handed me this scapular. [Displays a small object to the camera] If you're Catholic and made your First Holy Communion, this is what they give you to hang around your neck. She gave me this and she said, "Here. You take this so you'll be protected through the whole thing. May the Lord watch over you and take good care of you. This way, at least I feel as though I'm giving it to my son." Because I resembled her son. I've had this in my pocket for over fifty years, and I don't think a day goes by that I don't think of this woman. If you saw her, you'd know what I mean. I thanked her and I kissed her and I gave her a great big hug. I said, "This is for your son. I know he's all right."

We got as far as St. Lo. There was a standstill there. My goodness, we didn't know what to do. All of a sudden the clouds lifted and there was an air armada—in fact, it was the largest air armada I've even seen. The planes came from England; they also came from Italy, the southern part. They focused on that area. They started dropping shells, bombing that area. The ground actually shook—that's how close they were dropping. In fact, some

of the bombs actually landed on the Americans themselves. We lost many American soldiers through this air armada.

After the armada, we started to go. If anybody remembers George Patton, to me he was the greatest thing alive. “Let’s go!” And off we went. The next place we went was called the Falaise Gap. We had the Germans surrounded, and naturally they didn’t give up that easily. There was shelling going back and forth both ways, but finally we caught them and they surrendered. When we went in there, they even had horse-driven vehicles pulling wagons, carrying ammunition, pulling a car. There were bodies all over the place, and even the animals were bloated because they were dead so long.

We went from the Falaise Gap to Reims. [Holds up map and points] We came down and went to Reims, France. I think you remember that after the war, they signed the peace treaty in Reims. Then we went to Verdun, which is a medieval city. In the olden days, they put a fort around the city. From Verdun, Patton had us keep going, and we went to Metz. Metz is another fortified medieval city. We were trying to take it over. Eventually we did.

Then General Patton got word that he had to go to Bastogne. We left Metz and went all the way up to Bastogne. In cold, terrible weather we traveled about eighty miles that day. We finally got there the next day and the word was, “OK, let’s go. Let’s take this place.” So that’s what we did. We helped break the line so the Fourth Armored Division could go through. It was so cold that I froze my ears. My earlobes are frozen—you can squeeze them or do anything you want to them. They’re always warm. I froze my ears there because the hats used to cover this much [holds hand above ears] but this [holds hand below ears] was exposed.

I don’t know if you remember a place called Merkers Salt Mine. That’s a town that, when I say we liberated, it wasn’t just us alone. There were a lot of divisions, and a lot of units that were involved. So we went to Merkers, which we helped liberate. In Merkers there were two young women, in the night time, who were looking for a doctor or somebody who could help. Their girlfriend was pregnant. So we got someone who helped this girl, who was pregnant, have the baby.

Since we were so good to them, they in turn told us about the Merkers Salt Mine. In the salt mine were all of Hitler’s treasures. There was gold; there was money; there were statues by famous people; paintings by van Gogh and Rembrandt—all these famous artists. God knows what else was down there. Then, so nobody would take anything—not that we would—they closed it off. That’s how they found the Merkers treasures. So they refer to the Merkers Salt Mine, but in the salt mine were Hitler’s treasures. There was anything imaginable that was worth a lot of money; even American money and gold.

From that point we went through the Maginot Line. The Maginot Line was in the Alsace—Lorraine area. The reason why they put it there was that at one time the area

belonged to France; then it belonged to Germany. So the French built the Maginot Line there. They didn't know who it belonged to, and they were fighting over it for all these years.

Then we went to Koblenz, and from Koblenz, St. Vith. Coming down to St. Vith we came across a concentration camp called Flossenburg. Hitler had what they called the "death march." They took all the people who were able to walk out of there, to bring them someplace else before we got there. I went in there and there were a lot of sick people there. The crematorium was down here [holds hand low to the ground] and the camps were up here [holds hand at chest height.] It was a stone quarry. And when a person would die, they would put the body in a coal car and push the coal car down to where the crematorium was. The car would flip, and the bodies would go into the building. Then there were the prisoners there. There were the shoes—I'm sure you've seen movies where the shoes were piled up to the ceiling; well, this was the same. Then they would take them and cremate them.

While I was up above, I saw this young fellow. He was holding onto his hand like this [grasps right wrist with left hand.] He was my age, and he had a prison uniform on. I said to him, "Can I help you?" And he said, "No no no no." "All right." I had to run an errand and I took care of what I had to do. When I came back, this fellow was still holding onto his wrist. I said, "Are you sure I can't help you?" "No no no no." "How about a cigarette?" He said yes, so I gave him a cigarette and lit it for him. And that was the end.

Then we went out from Flossenburg, which was terrible. It's hard to explain; you had to see it. And the stench from the cremation was terrible. We went down to Czechoslovakia, to Sušice—that's twenty miles southwest of Prague—where the 11th Panzer Division surrendered to the 90th Infantry Division and us. Then the fighting ended where we were, in Sušice, Czechoslovakia. So they took us and they sent us back to Germany after a period of time. We went to a little town called Auberg.

You were sent home according to the points you had. I had eighty-six or eighty-nine points, so they made me eligible to be one of the first ones to go back. So I was discharged, and I came home. In fact, I was discharged and came home on my mother's and father's anniversary, December 5. How could I forget that?

Then I went in business with my brothers, a store business. One day about eight or nine years later, this fellow came to clean the windows. It just happened that I stood there, looking at the fellow that's cleaning the windows. All of a sudden this fellow put the brush down and said to me, "Weren't you the fellow who wanted to help me with my wrist?" I said, "Yes! You were in Flossenburg!" He said yes.

The reason he recognized me, and that I recognized him, was that over there we had enough time to look at one another. So when he told me that, he came in; he embraced me and hugged me. I'm very emotional, as you can tell, and he started crying, and I

started to cry. My brother came up and said, “What’s going on?” “You won’t believe this, how small the world is. I’ll explain it to you later.”

They never did fix his wrist. His name was Mike. The last name was Morovsky, or something like that. I never worried about that as long as I knew his first name. And we were friends from that day on. If I asked him to do something, he’d drop everything and take good care of me.

Mike used to help in the church—Saint Vladimir’s Church—like at bingo, or whatever he could do. He had his own business, by the way. He started his own business and Mike took care of our place. At one point we had to go away, to Ohio. And while we were gone it was a hot summer day, and that night the rain was coming down terrible. So he said to the priest, “Father Michael, I have to go home and close the windows at my apartment because the rain will be coming in.” “Go right ahead.” So Mike left there in his little truck and went down the road and turned to get onto the arterial. And as he turned to get onto the arterial, a tractor trailer came on and hit him. And killed him. Instantly. That was the end of Mike, my great buddy. He had no one. His mother and father and a sister all died at Flossenburg. He was the only one left. He came over here and he met me. We were like brothers.

In fact, just the other day I got a call from a doctor, Jack Terry from New York, from Manhattan. He lives on 58th Street in New York City. He said, “Are you so-and so?” And I said, “Yes I am.” He said, “I was in the Flossenburg concentration camp. I was one of the youngest ones there. I was only fourteen years old. When Hitler was taking all the men out to go on their death march, I hid in the boiler room so they couldn’t find me.” That’s how he escaped. As time progressed he came to the United States and became a very prosperous doctor. And he said to me, “You know, there’s another fellow in your area that’s from Flossenburg.” I said, “There is?” “Yes. His name is Julian Noga. He has a Polish hour on Sundays, on WIBX radio. I think it’s from ten o’clock to twelve o’clock.”

So he gave me his number and said, “Please call him, because he’s a friend of mine.” “All right.” I had a very lengthy talk with Dr. Terry. After that, I called Julian. We started talking, and he started to reminisce. He said, “You know what I’m talking about.” I said, “How well I do know what you’re talking about.” Then he said, “What do you remember most about the place?” I said, “To tell you the truth, it was the stench, the smell.” Because it was all over the place. He said, “I’m glad you told me that, because I can still smell that.” So now I’ve got another friend from Flossenburg concentration camp. And we keep in touch. Here I thought there was nobody who’d even heard of Flossenburg, but they really did. I can’t believe it. There was Mike, my buddy who died, and I’m picking up where he left off.

Was there anything else you wanted to ask me?

LG: Yes. You sat in Hitler's chair, I heard?

OB: Yes. I certainly did. During the war we got down to Berchtesgaden. To get to the chair, you had to climb—I was fortunate that I got up in an elevator. There was a huge tunnel and you had to drive quite a distance to get to the elevator. When we got the elevator, I said, "What the heck. If he can come up this elevator, so can I." So we went up there. As a matter of fact I have a picture in my scrapbook. There was a long, beautiful mahogany table. There was a fireplace that I could stand in, it was so huge. I looked like a log, that's how big it was. So I sat in Hitler's chair, and I said, "This is something I'll always remember."

Then we went out on the veranda. The reason Hitler built what was called the Eagle's Nest, was that Hitler was from Austria. This way, he could see Austria on this side [lifts his right hand] and he could see Germany on this side [lifts his left hand.] And that's why he built there. Believe me, it was very luxurious. Beautiful place. And I made it my business to go back there.

As the years progressed we educated our children, and I said, "I want to go back to Berchtesgaden and see the Eagle's Nest." So we went there, and I took the elevator up. We got there, and they had made a tea room out of it—little round tables, little chairs and everything. So I asked one of the people working there, "What happened to the big table where Adolf Hitler sat?" He ignored me and made believe he didn't know a thing. *That's all right,* I said to myself, *I know—I sat there. I have a picture of it*.

That was quite an experience. It was the fall of the year, in October, that we were driving up. As we got into the clouds there was snow and it was absolutely beautiful. In fact, I had a snowball fight with my wife. That was quite an experience and Berchtesgaden is a beautiful, beautiful little place. The houses had all these flower boxes when I was there during the war. The men used to wear those little leather pants—I don't know what they call them. Just fabulous, just a beautiful place. I could understand why he went there. Not only him going up there—there was Goering's home, all the big wheels were living nearby.

LG: Where else did you go after the war?

OB: After the war we went to Luxembourg. Now, Luxembourg is where the Battle of the Ardennes was. We were in Luxembourg City and my wife and I took a train—I wanted to go to a place called Lieler. Now, Lieler was a place that we liberated and we erected a monument there to the 90th Infantry Division and the 712th Tank Battalion. So we took the train and we got off at a place called Clervaux. I asked a woman, "How do we get to Lieler?" She said, "There's a bus right over there." So we took it.

The bus was packed: it was my wife and me, and another lady. That's all there was on this big bus. And I told the driver, "I want to go to Lieler." "OK." So he drove the bus

and let the lady off, and we kept going and finally got to Lieler. He parked the bus on the side of the road, and I said to him, “There’s supposed to be a monument erected here to the outfit I was in. Where is it?” He said, “Right there.” [points behind himself] The bus was hiding it. So we went there and I saw that, which was a thrill.

We walked around, and when it was time to go back it started to rain. So I said, “Now what are we going to do?” I saw a house across the street where a fellow was putting things in his car. My wife said, “Where are you going?” and I said, “I’m going to speak to that man over there.” So I asked him, “Do you speak English?” “No, I don’t.” I said, “I was here during the war and that’s our monument there. We donated it.” First thing you know, he spoke better English than I did. I told him the situation and said, “Now we have to go back to Clervaux to catch the train to go back to Luxembourg City.” “I’ll take you.”

So he put us in his car and drove us all the way back to Clervaux. While we were driving down to Clervaux, the bus came up. They both tooted their horn at one another. One waved, and the other one waved. And he said, “Now you’ve met my whole family. That’s my cousin.” So we went to Clervaux and we had lunch there at a beautiful restaurant. We got back on the train and went back to Luxembourg City.

There was one other place in Luxembourg I wanted to see. Now, when we owned the store there was a gentleman who always came into the store. His name was Adolph. And I once said to him, “Where are you from?” He said, “I’m from Luxembourg.” “Oh my God, I was in Luxembourg!” “You were?” “Yes. In fact, I’ve got a picture.” He said, “You do? I paint. I’d like to paint it. Would you bring it in?” So I brought it in and I gave it to him. “Adolph,” I said, “When you paint the picture, leave the three of us off.”

It became Christmas time and he handed me a package. “What’s this?” I asked him. I had completely forgotten about it. And he said, “Open it up.” And when I opened it up, it was this picture here. [points to picture he holds] This is the Petrusse Valley in Luxembourg. I was thrilled to pieces. So my wife and I decided that when we got to Luxembourg, I would go and see the same bridge where I sat in this picture.

Wouldn’t you know it, this is the only bridge in the Petrusse Valley in Luxembourg. So I had no trouble finding it. My wife said, “Hop up on it.” I said, “You’ve got to be kidding. I can barely walk. You want me to jump up on top of this?” Anyway, we took another picture. This is the same bridge [holds up second picture] and this is my wife and me in Luxembourg, in the Petrusse Valley, going back over fifty years. It’s hard to tell but the foliage has grown since then.

Then we had to walk back up out of the valley. I thought I was going to have a heart attack, but we got up to the top. The next day I said, “I want to go to the American cemetery.” So we had to take the bus, which took us to the airport. At the airport, we got on another bus to take us to the cemetery.

So we got to the cemetery. A friend of mine was buried there; his name was Louie Allinger. If you're a person like myself, who went through what I had gone through, and you see all these white crosses—my goodness gracious, I couldn't control myself. Finally a gentleman came over. He said to me, "Are you looking for the General?" "Yes, I am." He said, "There he is, right behind you." This was General Patton. Then he took his arm [sweeps right arm in a grand left-to-right gesture] and said, "And these are all his heroes."

Well, that's all he had to do to me. And the way he did it was really unbelievable. To go through that, you have to witness it yourself. So he said, to me, "What are you doing after you're done visiting here?" "We're going back to our hotel in Luxembourg City." He said, "No. How would you like to see the German cemetery?" I said, "I'd love to see the German cemetery." "Don't rush," he said. "When you get through, meet me at the gate."

So I walked around but I couldn't find my friend's grave—there were so many of them. So we got through and walked to the gate and a fellow drives up in this big Mercedes Benz. "OK," he said. "Hop in." There was another gentleman with him, and a lady. So my wife and I sat in the back, and he took us to the German cemetery. There are two soldiers buried in each grave. And their crosses are grayish looking. It was a beautiful place, but it's sad. Mothers and fathers lose their kids, I don't care who you are. It's all the same.

He said, "Where are you staying?" "Hotel Moris." "How are you going to get there?" I said, "I have to take a bus back to the airport." "Nah," he said. "I'll take you." So we were lucky there. He said, "What are you doing Thursday night?" "Nothing that I know of." "How would you like to go to the opera?" I said, "I'd love to go to the opera. How about you, Lois?" "Sure." So he said, "I'll leave two tickets at the opera for you to pick up in your name." In fact, as he was taking us back to the hotel he said, "There's the opera right over there."

The next day, which happened to be Thursday, was the day I went to the Petrusse Valley. When we got through there, I said to my wife, "You know, I'd like to know if there are going to be tickets there." Not that I didn't believe him, or didn't trust him. She said, "Let's take a bus ride." So we got on the bus and I told the driver we wanted to get off at the opera. He said, "You sit right next to me and I'll take you." So we went down, and he said, "There's the opera," and he let us off. So we got off and we started to walk to the opera house. This was the late afternoon.

As we were walking up, this car drove up and the driver said, "Are you going to the opera tonight?" "I hope to." "Well, look. I have two tickets here. I'll let you have them for $100 each." That's how expensive the tickets are. I said, "Thank you for asking, but no thank you. We have our tickets already." I looked at my wife and had my fingers crossed. So we went to the desk and I said, "Do you have two tickets for tonight's opera for Mr. and Mrs. Brigano?" He said, "I don't understand you." He went to the back and called this

other gentleman out. “Can I help you?” “Yes. Michael Davis left two tickets for Mr. and Mrs. Brigano.” He said, “Did you say Michael Davis?” “Yes, I did.” [pretends to type on a keyboard] Two tickets came out and he handed them to me. I said, “Thank you very much.” We took them and we left.

We went home and we had supper. Everything starts later there; it’s not like around here. We dressed up to go to the theater. When I got on the bus, I said to the driver, “I want to go to the opera.” “Yes, sir!” And he gave us a smile because we were all dressed up. And he took us to the opera. I said to my wife, “Can you imagine where the seats are?” When you go there, you have to present your tickets to the lady there, the receptionist. She would take you and guide you to where you’re sitting. Well, when she took us in there, we were in the center, four seats from the front, in leather seats! I said, “Oh my God! I don’t believe this!”

After a while, the opera started. And guess who was the star of the show? Michael Davis was the head star. *Don Carlos* was the name of the opera—it was an Italian opera, and they had the translations right above, so in case you didn’t understand it you would know what they were talking about…

INT: With all your experiences throughout the war, and all the many things you saw, the many things you did, and all these memories that you have: any final thoughts that you would like to close with?

OB: I’d like to say one thing. I wouldn’t want anybody to go through the experience that I went through at my early age. There are no words that can express it. I just hope that we never have another war. Let there be peace.

[Interview ends with Brigano showing the medals he earned.]