

**Leo Lambert
Veteran**

**Adam Ganuy
Interviewer**

**Interviewed on
January 5, 2012**

Q: Today is Thursday, January 5, 2012. I'm here with Mr. Leo Lambert and my name is Adam Ganuy. Where were you on December 7th, 1941?

LL: I have to stop and think, that was the day that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I was at home, I think it was a Sunday. I was right at home listening to the radio, and not believing it.

Q: Were you enlisted at the time, or no?

LL: No. No, I was working.

Q: Where were you working?

LL: AT&T

Q: Okay, is that what you started out doing before you went to war?

LL: Yes, when I got out of high school, I had an RPI scholarship, but with World War II in the offing, I couldn't take advantage of that. But then AT&T came along, and they were looking, I had been at school, and a guy called me up and he said "We've been at the school looking for records, and I wondered if you would be interested in a job with this company, unless you were going on to college" and I said "No I'm not and I would be interested" and I didn't know what AT&T was, so when my father came home, I asked him and he said "You'd better get right down there." So that's how it all started.

Q: When you enlisted, you said you first went to Africa?

LL: Yeah, I already had 18 years under my belt with AT&T and AT&T realized that some of their newer people, they could not hold them. You know from the draft. So what they did, they went to the Army, and said, "We've got some people here who are trained in telephone work, could you use them?" and the Army said yes so they formed some units, Single Corps units, and I enlisted, I had to enlist to get that. And then I found myself and a whole bunch of people who had similar work experiences that I had, and similar time too. They formed us up and we went to Camp Crowder, Missouri, and formed companies and the companies were all made up of AT&T New York tell, New England tell, Illinois bell, all telephone company people, and they formed us up and they put both of us that were in long distance, they put special units, and that's the way it all started, then they set us up with uniforms and everything, and we weren't around the states for very long, they sent us right overseas. They had jobs for us.

Q: So where did you first start out and where did you move to?

LL: In October of 1942, is actually when the Army came and took me away from AT&T, they grouped us up and sent us for unit formation, and we went to Camp Crowder,

Missouri. I was at Camp Crowder for Christmas of 1942, and then we went overseas in March of 1943 which was like 3 or 4 months down the road. And we started out, we were in a big convoy. At night, in the middle of the night, one night there was a big crash and the lights all went out and we thought we were torpedoed, it was a convoy, a big convoy. By the time we got daylight, all the guys scrambled out and not me, I'm Mr. Fussy, I had to put my shoes on and everything and went I jumped down from my bunk and got down on the ground I was ankle deep in water. So I beat it to the stairway and the stairway was just crushed in on the starboard side, actually what happened was that the convoy turned right and the tanker turned left and hit us right in front of the bridge on the starboard side. So we went upstairs and we finally found each other, and we tried to get together in the back of the ship on the port side and they were able to stop the thing from sinking, they closed up the compartments and they figured that we were sinking, but we were kind of hanging low in the water, but they had stopped it so when it got daylight we looked around and our convoy had all gone and we were sitting there on the starboard side crashed in, and the tanker was out there all pushed in, and we had two destroyers that were circling. What bothered us was that every once in a while they dropped some depth charges so we figured they must they must have been hearing something down below. But anyway, we made it to Bermuda and we were held up there for about five weeks, while they sent another ship to take our place to carry us the rest of the way, we thought the war was over for us. But no way, they moved us right over to Africa.

Q: What was your job in Africa?

LL: In Africa, what we did- so just like I was a civilian chap we had set up a C-5 carrier in North Africa and was a regular, it wasn't packaged or anything, it was a regular bowel system C-5 carrier and it was designed to work out coax, no it wasn't, it was designed to work over open wire and so that's one of the things while I was in Africa and now that was in there in 1943. Actually we were in Bermuda for eight weeks before we got over into North Africa. And we just kept that carrier going, there was not much going it was just a routine thing. We'd go to Casablanca for days off and so forth.

Q: Did you ever see any combat or were you behind the whole time.

LL: Unfortunately. We weren't supposed to be combat units, we were supposed to be telephone people with army uniforms on but not in Africa. Africa was fairly quiet but by then we were on the water, they put us on ships again and put us in the Mediterranean and we went around and during this time is when General Patton did his thing in Sicily. We were over in Sicily, and we were still floating around in the Mediterranean, but when the time was just right, we did land and we landed at Salerno and our goal, as far as we were concerned, we were supposed to be able to just stay out of the way of the infantry, but the Germans were right there waiting for us, the infantry did their thing and then we ultimately broke out of there and then when on to Naples, and that's where we went to work. We went into Naples and the Germans raised havoc with the communication system in Naples now the infantry units, they went right on North, and they went right up and established a frontline in there so near [Monte] Casino, and in World War II that was a famous holding point and so we just went ahead and did our thing in Naples and while we were there I personally was only involved in long-distance but we got to do a lot of things in there. One of the interesting things that we found in Naples is that a lot

of the technicians that worked on the equipment were girls and this was real strange because we had all men in the New York AT&T and that was one of the things we found, but going into Naples.

You asked me about combat, we weren't supposed to be in combat, but naturally the Germans were reluctant to pull out and we did have an occasion where something went off and I wasn't very far away, it blew my elbow off into the guy behind me and I ended up with a cut on my hand and it's still there. But you know what, after the fact, I realized I should have let the medics come take care of it but I used my own first aid kit and patched it up and took care of it but later I discovered a Purple Heart was gone again. Plus, he got here but anyway that was one of the things later on as we got further up North in Italy, there's a captain from Fifth Army Headquarters took me out of my unit. For some reason or other and he had a command car and we had a driver and some equipment and we would go right up with the infantry as close as possible and our job to try to maintain the existing communications. Because there was a buried cable that went up through exactly where it was -- because we had the charts and everything -- and the open wireline also went up through and we were trying to guard that and in the process, we pulled into a place called Leghorn [Livorno], Italy. And we knew this was going to be earmarked for the next Army Headquarters really was that far up North. The Fifth Army Headquarters was up North in Naples and they figured that Leghorn was going to be the next place, where the Headquarters would be so we were scouting around the territory. We thought we would get downtown first and we had a squad of infantry with us and Lieutenant leading the infantry that's in Naples and telephone building. The captain says really that's where we want to go, but a whole bunch of guys ran out the Germans and the building went boom. But we were able to get a lot of equipment out of it and we went back, then we went back a little ways and we found a villa just on the Southside of Leghorn. It must have belonged to some rich person or something because it had nice palm tree islands and a nice building there and the open wire was way and the captain said hey we can just come up the driveway and put some cabling up the driveway and now bring the open wire up. He says we'll set that terminal pole here and he's right in the corner of the building. Well we were moving ahead with the infantry and apparently they saw a command car and they had a gun and they fired a shot at us and hit on the other side of the building. The captain says we'll put the terminal pole here and then it went boom, but he says we won't do it today and we were after the trees, and that was one of the incidences. But that's the only one, I really wasn't in combat, we weren't in a combat unit just there for communications. We ultimately set Leghorn up as a major communication center I thought my headquarters moved up there. We said that was a major communication center.

Q: When you had free time and you were spending time with your friends, what did you guys talk about while you were just hanging around waiting for your next objective?

LL: Well we tried to establish certain working hours and time off and we could go into the city and we could buy stuff by means of hand signals. The Italian people learned to speak English before we could learn to speak Italian. So we had no trouble, there wasn't much to do anyway but Germans had rabbits a lot of the places and people were just trying to get back on their feet. So we split in a lot of hours because there was nothing else to do.

Q: Did you see any of your commanders or officers in the field, did you like know anyone personally?

LL: Oh yeah all of our people were telephone company people so we didn't know them personally we knew them from working over the telephone or something like that. So there were very few strangers around in our whole unit we got very intimate there with the whole unit in no time. That just happened that way.

Q: When it was time to eat, how did you think the food tasted?

LL: It was quite good.

Q: Was it good?

LL: Yeah, we had a lot of times what was called five-in-one rations mostly if we were in a small group if we put a squad aside then we'd have five-in-one rations. If we were in company headquarters we had cooks and the food was made in large quantities and it was quite good when I talk with the captain we had K rations.

Q: What were those?

LL: Well those were alright, they were a little package like a Crackerjack box and there was a breakfast, a lunch, and a dinner, and we just carry and a little water to keep us going.

Q: Do you find it hard to watch documentaries or war movies today?

LL: No. I don't know whether I'm different, a lot of people don't want to talk about it and I never had a problem but maybe because I never really had any except for maybe one or two of those close calls. But I never minded documentaries but I guess there are some guys in some places that won't talk about it and then why, I don't know, they must have had some very real bad experiences but that didn't happen to me. I don't mind talking about the war at all.

Q: Do you know any guys who didn't want to talk about it- did you become friends with any guys who were in the field, you know, pretty much every day and were in combat all the time?

LL: Oh yeah, surely, our group was pretty much all together, all except during the instances that the captain kidnapped me from the unit and then we didn't know a lot about people. There would be people moving the line, the line would move with the 88th infantry, the 45th division infantry and we just get to know those guys but actually we would really be close to them because we'd be assigned a squad with a lieutenant and about 8 or 10 guys and then those guys we would be close to but then the first thing you know they pull them back off and they send them- they put another division in the line and we have to start all over again.

Q: How often did you write home to your family?

LL: Oh I wrote home as often as I could, which was far different from today, I guess like guys can call home today, but they couldn't and our letters were very closely censored, we had to be very careful what we said in the letters or else our family would get a piece of paper with a whole bunch of slots opened up in it.

Q: How was the mail coming back to you guys?

LL: It was sporadic. Especially if I was out with the captain somewhere so it would be sporadic and we'd get a whole bundle of it, usually what I got.

Q: How often would you say, about every week, like how often?

LL: Oh, it would be about a month. Yeah we'd be gone. You know, it depended on what was happening and how fast we were moving.

Q: How do you feel about the German people or Japanese people today, do you have any harsh feelings against them?

LL: No, no I don't. Actually, one of the jobs I had, we captured a bunch of German carrier equipment, telephone equipment and it was all the instructions were in German. So, we didn't know about it. So we got a couple German prisoners and those guys were pretty sharp, apparently they were telephone guys. And there were a lot of schematic drawings and hand motions, we got the system installed. And I used to give those guys a candy bar once in a while. They were there the same reason I was, except they had a little different job to do.

Q: Do you find when you captured the equipment that their equipment was similar?

LL: Some of it was superior to ours. They had a thing called a 1+3 carrier that the signaling was far superior to what we had and I don't know if that was good, bad, or indifferent but we have a carrier terminal and we had a box for each channel and we'd have to have another box for the ringing equipment, one with these handles. When they rang, it cut the carrier and it went right out of the carrier which was a fantastic idea, as far as electronics was concerned. No, there were a lot of things that were different. I could add a little about some of my adventures with Captain Helmick, he's come into our test room, and we'd tried to keep it like a telephone test room, but he'd sit down and jump on one of the carrier channels and he'd start talking to somebody and he had a very gruff voice and whatever happened it would cause the equipment to burp and they used to get all upset over that. He'd be talking and then the equipment, the ringing equipment, his voice would interfere with it. But that happened several times. Before we were in Naples quite a while, and because Casino was hung up and then when they broke out of Casino, then Helmick picked us up and we did some real serious things and I told you, we set up the new Sixth Army Headquarters and then the plan after Leghorn, we were hung up there at the Arno River for a long while and, but then when the next string came, our objective was to move on farther North and the Fifth Army was going to move along with us and when we were moving through, the long-term plan was that we were going to move from Leghorn to Bologna, Italy and that was where we were going to set up the next Fifth Army Headquarters and then they were going to play leapfrog from down in Naples up into Bologna but when we got to go on, the infantry kept right on going and so we made a lot of plans for Bologna but they never materialized because the infantry moved right up through the valley flushed right through.

Q: When you went downtown what was your typical night like, did you go downtown with your buddies and you know go into some of the shops or whatever?

LL: Yeah, we had to be careful going into the shops because we had a language barrier obviously but we made out fairly well. I even, down in Casablanca, I used to speak French a little bit and I thought I'd make out fine and Casablanca but the girls in the shop just laughed at me. The Roosevelt died and it was kind of a sad day and I was in Italy at the time but we didn't fall apart or anything we just figured the gap would be filled and it was.

Q: Did you ever encounter General Patton in any instances?

LL: I did, General Patton, I did. We were early in the game, we were in North Africa, we had a nice set up there, and the fact is we set up our equipment there in the Chamber of Commerce building and we drove right in and we found a nice villa there and it was nice, handy, it was comfortable and suddenly we got very soon evicted so we started looking around and here's a two stars on a cheap General Patton in town and he decided he was going to set up his headquarters there so we had to move out.

Q: So he was a two star general at the time?

LL: He was a two-star, yeah. We went down to Italy with Mark Clark-

Q: And Mark Clark was who?

LL: He was the general, that's a Fifth Army. Patton I think was Third Army.

Q: Do you have any- can you share any examples of when the war ended, what did you do, how did you feel?

LL: Well we were in the process of moving up through Italy when the war ended. We'd stopped everything we had going and there weren't celebrations or anything, but the guys got happy about it. Some people were a little on the conservative side, and neither one that was interesting. I never went wild over it. But after that, we just stopped, we were in Bologna, and we were ready to move equipment in there and everything happened very quickly. Suddenly we weren't in a line anywhere, we were in the back because the infantry was way up through the Po Valley. Everything came to a halt, we started packing our stuff up and ultimately I got a week off and went to Rome for a while, and I went to Venice that was a nice trip. And we were there for several days and that was partially a business trip because we had business there in Bologna. So we just hopped over to Venice and that was nice, that was a different place.

Q: What year did you come home, did you come back to the States in 1945?

LL: 1945, yup. I got home the day after Thanksgiving in 1945.

Q: You took a boat, right? You took one of those ships back?

LL: Oh yeah, that was interesting. They pulled us back to Naples and then they put us on the ship but we knew we were, we thought we were going home, but we weren't sure because at that point we thought we might get shipped right through the Pacific. Oh, it was hard to believe because we had already seen enough action, but anyway, as we were coming home, there was a ship in the Strait of Gibraltar, there was a ship coming the other way, and our ship signaled to him in code with the lights and we asked what ship and he said, I don't know what ship it was, but he said it was bound Naples, and then he said what ship, and we turned around to our bridge, and being in the Signal Corps, that

was one of our requirements, we had to read code, and he said it was bound New York and it was our little group that started yelling first and then we passed the word along. And then we came back to New York and we went out to Fort Dix and of the interesting things in Fort Dix at that point was my buddy and I were walking around, just you know, killing time because we have to wait for paperwork and we have to wait for this or that, and somehow or other we ended up in a part of Fort Dix, well apparently there were all the recruits and they were just dumbstruck when they saw battle stars, hitch marks citations and I came home with three campaign ribbons and four battle stars.

Q: What medals were those?

LL: Atlantic campaign, African, Italian.

Q: What were the conditions like on the ship? Were they crowded?

LL: Oh yeah. We were piled five high if the decks allowed it.

Q: Bunks?

LL: Yeah. But there was no real organization on the ship we had pretty much time to ourselves. At one point I went back and they chased us all below decks because we were in a storm off the Atlantic coast just as we were pulling up to the States. We had a terrific storm, they sent us below decks and amongst other a big pulley dropped off a vast and made a giant crash on the deck.

Q: What did you do to pass time on the ship?

LL: A lot of the guys played cards, or just watched the horizon

Q: I bet you were anxious to get home- did you get bored after being in Africa and Italy for all that time?

LL: No, no I didn't. They kept us busy, we had all of our stuff we had to handle and take care of and once the ship was secured, they moved us right along and then we got on a train or a bus or something to go to camp. Then they started the processing and we did have some time then, like I said, my buddy and I were just walking around just to kill time.

Q: Thank you Mr. Lambert for sharing your experiences with us and we are happy we are able to sit down and have a conversation with you.