

**John J. O'Brien
Veteran**

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Interviewers**

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

JO: John j O'Brien. Place of birth New York City 9-23-29.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

JO: High school and some college.

Q: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

JO: I enlisted.

Q: Why did you enlist?

JO: I was of draft age and most of my friends were either drafted or enlisted so I enlisted.

Q: And you selected the army?

JO: Yes. Well initially I joined the navy, well I didn't join the navy I went down to join the navy and I was rejected because of a minor medical problem and I didn't want to wait any longer, so I joined the army.

Q: When did you join?

JO: January of 1949.

Q: Where did you go for your basic training?

JO: Well initially I went to Fort Dix New Jersey and was immediately sent down to Fort Bliss Texas because the 68th AA gun battalion was being reformed. I took my basic training at Fort Dix New Jersey.

Q: Okay so you were immediately assigned to an anti-aircraft battery?

JO: Correct.

Q: Could you tell us about your weapons and your training?

JO: Well the initial training was basic infantry training and as soon as that was completed after approximately 2 months, we started training with the gun battalion. The gun battalion consisted of 90 mm. guns which are approximately I

think equivalent to a four to five-inch gun. There were 4 batteries in the headquarters that comprised the 68th and we went through training in 1949 right up until the fall of 1949 and the unit transferred to Fort Lewis Washington and the rest of my time until August 1950 was in Fort Lewis Washington.

Q: Okay, now in an anti-aircraft battery how many guns in a battery?

JO: In a battery there were four guns and I believe each gun if I recall correctly had two quad 50 turret guns. And of-course the unit was also included radar, computer and various generating equipment to operate the various pieces of equipment.

Q: How were the guns moved from place to place?

JO: The guns were moved from place to place by an M4 which a supposedly high-speed tractor-tank like vehicle which was a combination of a personnel carrier and a mobile gun tractor.

Q: How did you spend most of your time in Fort Lewis?

JO: Well I was not assigned to the guns in any form or fashion. I was in communications. I was responsible for wiring to the gun's equipment headquarters and to the command post of each battery.

Q: So, you were connected by telephone wires?

JO: Telephone wires right, that was the only form of communication that was used, radios were not used. We strictly used hardwired communication.

Q: Now how were they wired? Were they on poles, or lay on the ground or how did you they do it?

JO: A combination of both but predominately on the ground. Because when we moved into a location of course we couldn't erect poles and if there were poles available which were rarely used. Although we did have pole climbing training it was predominately ground level wiring.

Q: So, you had the old crank type land phones?

JO: Crank type telephones right. I don't recall the nomenclature.

Q: Do you find you had many problems with the equipment at all?

JO: Well at the time I wasn't aware of some of the problems, I did know some of the problems relative to communication but subsequent to my service I read material that indicated that the tractors or the M-4's did have problems working in sand which we had quite a bit of at Fort Bliss and when we went out to Yakima Valley that was a sandy area and there were problems with the tractors.

Q: Now your electronics equipment was most of it up to date or was its pre-World War two or world war two?

JO: World War two equipment, all world war two equipment. I don't recall any or the introduction of any equipment whatsoever.

Q: Now when you mentioned the use of computers, they must've been a very... Primitive. (John says ancient at the same time as primitive) I mean at the time they were modern.

JO: Right- The computer was a fairly large trailer, not as big as a radar trailer but uh by comparison today it certainly didn't fit in your laptop.

Q: Now who was assigned to that? Were you assigned to that at all?

JO: No, that was strictly a tracking group. They had the radar group, there was also a tracking head it was connected to the computer in some form or fashion that did the tracking of the equipment to be fired on. I had nothing to do with radar or the computer equipment, I was strictly a lineman type – I had approximately – eventually I was a battery communications sergeant in charge of about approximately six to eight men.

Q: Now what were your jobs then basically?

JO: Wiring the complete unit for the communication operation, which was somewhat antiquated. And I say that only because upon my discharge I started working for the telephone company. Some of the work was similar to military work but of course the equipment and operation was a little more sophisticated.

Q: Now was there one computer trailer and one radar trailer for a whole battery?

JO: Each battery had their own computer and radar.

Q: Were there any civilians involved or was it just strictly military?

JO: No, strictly military. No civilians involved to my knowledge.

Q: What was daily life like at Fort Bliss?

JO: Routine. Daily training, maintenance of equipment, periodic movement to firing range, having firing exercises and setting up the unit for combat related operations.

Q: How many men in a battery approximately?

JO: Approximately I'd say eighty or so. Again, I'm not positive but approximately.

Q: Okay, now who commanded a battery?

JO: A battery was commanded by a captain.

Q: Okay, and your whole unit then, your whole gun battalion was?

JO: Commanded by a lieutenant colonel.

Q: Okay, and do you know how many approximately were in that?

JO: The total unit, about 800 – well it varied over the period of time that I was in,

but I think the most amount any one time was in the eight-hundreds. The least amount was probably in the four (hundreds). And I say that because I forget the exact time but in Fort Bliss many of the draftees were released short of their full commitment. I think 20 months, and that reduced the unit by a considerable amount. To the extent we were under manned on everything. And until the Korean War breakout we weren't re-manned so to speak.

Q: So, when did you leave Bliss?

JO: I left bliss in the fall of 1949.

Q: Where did you go from there?

JO: To fort Bliss, excuse me to Fort Lewis Washington.

Q: Okay and how long were you at Fort Lewis?

JO: Fort Lewis from November, October, November I think of 1949 until August of 1950 when we shipped out to Korea.

Q: Your whole unit went together?

JO: Yes.

Q: What kind of ship did you go on?

JO: We went on the infamous General Black and I say infamous for the simple reason that it took us approximately 26 to 28 days to go to Yokohama Japan it should've taken approximately 12 days because we were caught in two storms. And the General Black on one occasion lost its engines and we listed almost 42 degrees. It had a few incidents of injuries. Some of the equipment shifted and unfortunately but not due to the storm we had an individual that was killed aboard ship.

Q: What happened?

JO: During the course of our trip which we did not stop at any location, we did firing exercises off the fantail and in one incident an individual accidentally, or someone, we don't know who, didn't clear a weapon and it was hanging from the top of a bunk and somebody went by and went bang bang and two rounds killed an individual. And I remember him well. His name was Enoch DeJesus from New York City.

Q: When you reached Japan what happened?

JO: We reached Japan and prior to that an advance ship had sailed from Fort Lewis to Sasebo Japan. We landed in Yokohama and transferred to another ship and went on to Sasebo. I can't recall how long we stayed there, and then shortly thereafter we boarded LST's to Pusan Korea.

Q: When did you arrive in Korea?

JO: We arrived in Korea Approximately 1 September, I guess. Early part of September.

Q: 1950?

JO: 1950.

Q: And you went into Pusan?

JO: Into Pusan, yes.

Q: What were your impressions when you landed?

JO: Well, of course I didn't know it at the time, but since being discharged I've gone to about 14 years of reunions and I learned quite a bit more. When we went into Pusan we were supposedly went in as an anti-aircraft unit guarding Pusan harbor, however we shortly learned after that all of the equipment relative to anti-aircraft – Radar, computer, generators etc. quad 50's were left behind and we assumed the role of a field artillery unit.

Q: What kind of weapons were you issued with that?

JO: Same 90 mm. guns.

Q: Did your roll change at all once you became a quote artillery unit?

JO: No, we were still responsible for wiring to the guns, wiring to the command post of the battery and wiring to the headquarters for firing missions. And we had some personnel that acted as forward observers. We did some patrols. Even though I was in the communication I was part of these patrols. We were searching out I guess the enemy so to speak. Aside from that my primary duties were wiring the units.

Q: Did you carry a weapon?

JO: Yes.

Q: What did you carry?

JO: .30 caliber Garand.

Q: Okay. Did you face any problems with the enemy cutting lines or wires or anything like that?

JO: Yes, there were incidents, but I can't say they were cut by the enemy but on occasion I did have to take a couple of men out in the darkness of night to search down breaks in the wire. My one incident I recall clearly, went out at night with an officer, Lieutenant Jim Bloom, again you don't forget names when you... And we were wiring head wires running to the British 27th brigade and we lost contact and we went out to make the necessary repairs. There were one or two other occasions of similar incidents but no more than two or three.

Q: Were there any times that you were under fire yourself?

JO: Not small arms fire, we did have a couple of men that were under small arms fire but basically it was just a counter battery firing that we encountered.

Q: Now did you stay in the Pusan area or did you move around?

JO: Oh no no, the whole unit moved from the Pusan perimeter and after the breakout which I believe was the first cav. After the breakout we traveled the length of Korea to within about 15-18 miles the Yellow River. And in that time, we supported the 24th division, the fifth regimental combat team, the first cav., the ROK, the British 27th brigade and a few other units that I don't recall.

Q: Did you ever have much contact with the Korean ROK army or the Korean people themselves?

JO: Well, we had interpreters. One specifically and again for some reason you only remember certain names, but his name was Kim Jin Suk. I wouldn't forget that. And he was with us most of the time. When we did have some captured North Koreans and he did the Interpreting.

Q: Were you in the fallback from that area also?

JO: Yes, we were. When the Chinese entered, we were involved in what was called at the time the strategic withdrawal.

Q: What was that like?

JO: Cold. Wet.

Q: What kind of equipment? Did you have good equipment?

JO: Well as I said it was all world war two equipment. We had some incidents I recall, and I don't think it happened in Korea, I think it happened in Washington. The state of Washington, at Fort Lewis when I did witness the forward piece, I can't recall that they called it on a carbine flew off. There was a wooden piece from the top. There were incidents of misfiring. Probably the most ineffective weapon that I was aware of was the old, I think it was a 3.2 bazooka that just bounced off, although I didn't witness it, bounced off the North Korean tanks. It was very ineffective. Most of the rations that we had were all ww2. The old C and I think there was a K ration. And of-course when we were in what might be considered semi-permanent locations, we had class A, or A rations.

Q: You said they were ww2 rations, did they have the ww2 dates on them or the same type?

JO: I believe so. And they were the old green hardtack and the gum was stale but most of it to my knowledge was ww2. You're gonna hold me to the nomenclature again but I believe the K ration was the can, and the C ration was a little better, but I believe it was all ww2 stored supplies.

Q: Now how did you keep warm in the strategic withdrawal?

JO: Uh, it was difficult keeping warm obviously when it was cold because again most of the equipment, we had was ww2, and the worst thing were the boots. We had the old... I think they're called muck-racks and it was the rubber bottom with the leather top. And you had insoles that you inserted. And what would happen is you would perspire and then you would perspire, and those things would freeze, and the rubber used to freeze. I recall one incident just arriving in Pusan and we had to dig in. We well, it wasn't a foxhole it was just a shallow trench and I had on the wet weather gear because we had this old black wet weather gear and that night it froze. And we had mist. A little rain, mist and sleet. When I got up in the morning I thought. I was like – felt like I was in cement. I couldn't move because I was frozen, and it happened to many other guys. During the period from September to, I think into December as we got into the cold weather it was severe cold. Real cold. You bundled up as best you could, of course we just had sleeping bags. And I can't say they were ww2 sleeping bags, but I believe they were. I'm not positive. I don't recall being told that here we have a new piece of wearing garment or equipment that was a new innovation of any kind. To the best of my knowledge everything was ww2.

Q: Did you ever suffer from frostbite?

JO: No. we had some, but I didn't personally.

Q: How'd you keep your feet dry? Did you keep changing socks?

JO: Keep changing socks and changing those insoles, drying them out over fire, drying them the best way you could.

Q: Now what did you stay in. Did you stay in tents? Or did you dig bunkers?

JO: Yeah, bunkers, holes, pup tents, and then when we were back to the aircraft operation we were in tents. Squad tents. We did winterize to some extent with wooden sides. We did winterize our ¾ ton trucks with plywood paneling and kept as warm as you could. But it was cold, I have to emphasize. Cold was an enemy so to speak.

Q: Did you ever see any USO shows while you were there?

JO: No but there were some, but I personally see them. I believe Marilyn Monroe was in one. Bob Hope may have been in another but I'm not sure I never went to one.

Q: What were your officers like?

JO: Effective. I was not that close. I've learned something in going to my reunions that an awful lot of the officers were not familiar with communications. As a matter of fact, a deceased officer, deceased since the war, wrote a report that again I read at a reunion. That he said that one of the recommendations were; had to be improvement number one in the M4's that I referred to before, also in the communication and radar. For instance, we never used radios and I don't

understand why. I had radio equipment that just was not used. One of the reasons that I believe was the ineffectiveness over mountains and we had FM radios, but FM radios are supposed to be more effective than FM as far as the straight-line communication. But we never used, or rarely used radios. The enemy used to use their radios and they used to voice Morse code. De da da da da da. We never had anybody that was trained in Morse code. However, I did learn again going to my reunions that when the unit returned to anti-aircraft status things improved immensely. Newer equipment, radio communication. Improvements on the guns. I think the gun was an A1-A2 as opposed to an A1-A1. I don't know if there's any improvement in the mobile pulling equipment I wasn't, I'm not aware of that.

Q: Was your unit integrated at all?

JO: Yes. We were one of the first units that were integrated. I don't recall when that happened, but it had to be in the spring of 1950.

Q: So, it happened before you went overseas.

JO: Excuse me I said I went over in August of '50, it was in the spring of '51.

Q: Were there any problems or tensions or anything like that or did everyone work together and get along?

JO: Not to my knowledge. I don't know of any incidents, but again I don't know what may have happened in other batteries but as far as I know.

Q: Did you ever have any WACS integrated in your small unit?

JO: In the battery? Yes.

Q: But in your group that you worked with communications

JO: No, I didn't have any, no.

Q: Did you ever have much interaction with the Korean people?

JO: Limited. No, I didn't, and aside from some of the, later on some of the Koreans that did the laundry and stuff like that and maybe did some menial work I was not in contact with the Koreans much.

Q: In your withdraw from the Yellow what were the conditions like? You must've been on the move constantly.

JO: Yes. On the move constantly and ran into other UN troops, specifically ran into a Turkish unit and a Greek unit. When I say ran into, we met them on the way. And again, I recall one incident. Don't ask me what, I don't think we were on patrol, but I do recall coming across I think they were Turkish troops and they were opening cans of peaches with their uh... a machete or some type of long blade. And I remember the turbans. Oh we came across an Australia unit. Again, I don't recall the unit name, but we came across uh... that's about it.

Q: How long were you in Korea?

JO: One year, well one year and four months. The seven days I'm not sure of. That may have been during the period of going to a rebel depot and that was another experience. Not to jump around but, I think I left Kimpo air force base and then we were in an anti-aircraft unit. And then we had to be deloused. All our clothing was taken away from us completely and we had to walk through a tent, in the nude and sprayed all over and we were given uniforms. One set of O.D.s. Well one set of everything. And we had that one set through the rebel depot, replacement depot in Japan, and set off on a naval transport ship to California.

Q: Did you get much time off in Japan at all?

JO: I was out over an R&R yes, right after. I think, I can't recall if it was, I think it was after our return from up north. Again, flew on a C-47 I don't recall where we landed in Japan, I believe it was in Tokyo, around Tokyo / Yokohama area. And after, again I don't know how many days flew back on a C-47 either went into the airfield at Tay Gu or Kingpo.

Q: After you left Japan to go home how long were you in the service?

JO: A full three years.

Q: Okay so you left in?

JO: January of 1952. Almost to the day.

Q: When you left Japan where did you go in the states?

JO: Pittsburg California. Landed in the Presidio and transferred to a ferry of some type up the or down the river and left from, flew from camp Stone, which I believe is closed today. To McGuire in 'Jersey and was discharge from camp Kilmer.

Q: When were you discharged? You just told me I know but...

JO: Well I was, the exact date I don't know. We were. We arrived in camp Kilmer just prior to Christmas of 1951, and I have to say I remember that vividly because we were put into unheated barracks, we were issued a mattress and whatever, a blanket. No additional clothing, the same clothing we came from in Japan and we couldn't find out if we were gonna be allowed to go home for the Christmas holiday. And so, there was a little finagling going on and we actually went AWOL. Nobody said a word, nobody said anything, and we came back, and we were all discharged.

Q: How long were you gone?

JO: I think just for the week, just 'til after Christmas, because after Christmas I was discharged on January 5th, I think. So, it was from whatever date in December until my discharge in January.

Q: How did you get home?

JO: From?

Q: When you went AWOL where did you go then?

JO: By train, we went by train. I don't recall how we got from New York to jersey, but it was by train and then when I got discharged from Kilmer by train again.

Q: After you left the service did you make use of the GI bill at all?

JO: Yes, I went to college, back to college. I never completed but I did take some.

Q: Did you join a veteran's organization?

JO: No, I've never joined a veteran's organization. The only connection I had with the military was in 1994 I was sitting in a barber shop right here in Saratoga springs and was reading a VFW magazine and saw my outfit was having a reunion, so I wrote away to then, as I knew him lieutenant Ritz, and I asked him if there would be any people I would know being in the service in Korea from 50-51 and he said yes I'm sure you'll meet a couple and not knowing, I didn't recall at the time, he was in the outfit when I was in the outfit. So, I went there, and I did meet I'd say a handful of fellas I knew.

Q: How many reunions have you been to?

JO: This year will be my fourteenth.

Q: And there's still a large, a number that?

JO: A good number, it's starting to as many in the ww2 know they're starting to peter out but we still get a I think, I know we were in Oklahoma city but I think we had about 90 the last go around including spouses and whatever. I really enjoy it. I had met a few new people over the years. By new I mean reacquainted. And of course, everybody remembers incidents you'd forgotten, and they rehash them but sometimes they multiply them 6, or 10.

Q: Do you stay in contact with anyone outside of the reunions?

JO: Yes, I stay in contact with a very good friend of mine, Vincent Ferraro who was originally a radar operator who ended up becoming a battery commander. He stayed in the service for five years. He still lives in Westchester County. And I keep in touch with another fellow by the name of, a good friend, Sal Pepea, and he was in the computer group and he lives on long island. And we've gone to, and well, Ferraro has been going to the reunions I think since 1989 and Sal Pepea has gone to the last two or three. So, I keep in touch with them. And we try to contact, we do have a couple of very active people who try to keep addresses and names and update and a lot of the material that I'm referring to, my line right here came from a chief wiring officer by the name of frank baker who was in the 68th, not during my time but has gone to many of the last reunions, and he spent a good, considerable. He spent 36 years in the service and ended up being in personnel in Washington dc and he has gone through the archives, the anti-aircraft artillery and the army journals to find out a lot of the information that I had forgotten about

completely. And he's still with us, and he still comes up with new material all the time. And another Lieutenant, who was a lieutenant of D battery I met on a few occasions at the reunion who ended up becoming a general, a lieutenant general, Dick Fisacaly. And he retired, he's blind today so he doesn't come to the reunions anymore, but I remember him well. One of the best soldiers, and officers that I'd ever met. I keep contact, although I haven't in the last two years a lieutenant Jim Bloom who ended up in Korea and he retired as Lieutenant Colonel and he was in charge of communications in the battery. Communications radar, the whole range group. I haven't contacted him in the last year or two. He hasn't come to the reunions, but he went to four or five

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed or had an effect on your life?

JO: I would say the discipline; the regimentation certainly helps. I was not familiar with communications of any kind at the time, upon my discharge, as I mentioned I was with the telephone company for a total of 25 years actually it was 18, and the rest of my time was with the communication workers of America. So, I totaled 35 years and I retired as the upstate New York / New England director for the communication workers. So, I've been surrounded by communications most of my life.

Q: Okay well thank you very much for your interview.

JO: Thank you.