

**Fernando Bonacquisti
Veteran**

**Professor Paul Schulte
History Professor, Genesee Community College, Batavia, N.Y
Interviewer**

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Genesee Community College, Batavia, N.Y**

PS: Professor Paul Schulte

FB: Fernando Bonacquisti

Professor Paul introduces Fernando to his class saying he has asked him to come and talk about his experiences in the 90th Division who fought in World War II at Normandy and beyond. He holds up a cup of the Battles naming “Normandy, Northern France, the Ardennes, Rhineland, and Central Europe. That’s where the 90th fought in World War II. Another gentleman, Fernando’s brother, asks him if he wants to be introduced again. Fernando says “Would you please? and Hi students!”

Fernando’s brother holds up an image of the Texas-Oklahoma 90th Division logo that has a “T” and an “O” which originally represented the states of Texas and Oklahoma”. Then he holds up a patch with the same logo. He explains that Fernando is very active in yearly reunions where they “get drunk and talk about how they won World War II all by themselves. My other brothers here could tell you how they shot the enemy through the head from 256 yards away in the middle of the night.” (laughter)

Some statistics on the Texas-Oklahoma 90th Division: They had more days of combat than any other Division. They had at least one Unit in contact with the enemy every day from D-Day (Battle of Normandy) to VE Day (Victory in Europe). The 90th Division included more than thirty-five thousand men and had casualties of almost twenty-eight thousand men replaced. So they lost almost a whole Division during the course of the War, either through injury, or death, or whatever. Their T-O nickname is “Tough Ombres”. There are less than four thousand members left. As you know, there are about one thousand World War II Veterans dying every day. So the history is dying with them, that is why it is so important to find out what they have to say.

They earned five Battle Stars for Normandy, Northern France, The Ardennes, The Battle of the Bulge, The Rhineland in Central Europe and the Qua De Jur (@ 2:20 spelling?). The 90th took eighty-four thousand, five hundred prisoners for those six Divisions.

They knocked out five hundred and one German tanks, one hundred and ninety-five propelled guns, they must have had a great mathematician. Five thousand five hundred seventy-two other German vehicles, eighty-two locomotives, one hundred thirty-four airplanes, and three steamboats. I did not know they had steamboats in World War II!

They crossed dozens of rivers and liberated hundreds of towns and half a million of people.

They liberated the Flossenberg Concentration Camp and several prisoner of war camps. This Division captured the Merkers Salt Mine intact where the Germans stored their gold and art. This was where the Germans kept all the artifacts they had stolen from the Jewish people. Not you, but the Division to which you were attached. They forced the surrender of a whole German Division and met the Russians in Czechoslovakia. The 90th suffered fifteen thousand battle wounds. The total number of men treated by Medics was over twenty-five thousand. This Division was truly George Patton and the Army's workhorse. And here is one of them.

FB: It was quite a battle, and it's nice to be here. I left the Service in 1945. When I came here to talk with my other brother, it was the first time I opened up and talked about my experiences. So it has been fifty-nine years, and it is an emotional battle, but it is getting better. (Fernando places his hand over his hear) It was a rough go.

I was inducted on my Mother's birthday, November 5th, if you remember (says to his brother). We had a hell of a time at the house, my mother was crying. "Look at this guy, he is going into the Army, he may never come back.. (@4:50 unclear).

Anyway, I was inducted out of Geneseo, New York and went to Old Fort Niagara for shots and whatever we had to have and then went straight to Aberdeen, Texas where I had nineteen months of beautiful training. We could not leave the Base where we were stationed, we were in quarantine for fourteen days. I argued that point, but you might as well talk to the wall. The last word you say to an Officer is either "Yes sir, or no sir". Before I forget, I want to say I am a stutterer and you will have to bear with me because sometimes I lose my composure because my mind is still back there.

Fernando's brother interjects "You can speak to them in Italian, because you don't stutter in Italian! Paul chimes in "He doesn't stutter in English either, so just leave him alone! (laughter)

FB: Well anyway, we went from Camp Kilmer, New Jersey and straight off to Liverpool, England on a troop ship. We landed in Liverpool on Easter Sunday. Fifteen thousand men take up a lot of room. The Infantry went one way, the Artillery went another way, we landed all in a bunch in Camp Davenport. That was about twenty minutes away from London. I had the great opportunity to see Big Ben (famous clock tower). That was a highlight, it was really nice.

The English were good people and treated us very well. They had dances, food and movies for us, whatever we wanted was there. We got there on Easter Sunday and went on maneuvers. Have you heard about the Rolling Greens? (English countryside) They were beautiful, rolling green hills. We had maneuvers there too.

One thing I forgot to mention was before we went overseas, we had to go on maneuvers in the United States. We had desert maneuvers and then to Shreveport, Louisiana for swamp maneuvers. If you people want to see the route we made into Czechoslovakia, I have a map. (Fernando points to his notebook.) General Patton was strict, but he was a nice guy. I never saw him, I heard he smacked some guy in the face, which was not right but what are you going to do? (laughs) If that was me, I would have given him a sock right in the jaw! Other than that, he was a good General, very smart.

Anyway, we were in Camp Davenport and had maneuvers. Sometimes I drove a truck and that night, it was my turn to drive with the guns behind. Here is picture of the M101 (105 mm) Howitzer (light field artillery piece), that gun will shoot seven miles. (Fernando passes around a photo) I would forage(?) the cannon and set it off. It was dangerous, we had sixteen to eighteen trucks. All you could see was a little bit of light in the back of the trucks and in the front. You had to concentrate so you did not go off the road. I asked "what are we doing this for? We aren't Infantry?" Well, its part of your training.

We were there on D-Day, but we could not land due to the unloading of the equipment, food, ammunition. The Infantry was there and our Navy was going in. The enemy had the pill boxes, but there wasn't any room for us to go in. So I landed in D-Day, plus one. That is where Hell started, right there on Utah Beach. Omaha Beach and Utah Beach were the two worst areas on D-Day. Omaha was more of a sandy beach where as Utah was more rocky. So we landed, I think it says in that book what the Invasion Route was.

PS: Can I ask you a question? What was going through your mind when you left the barge and went on that Beach? Can you remember what you were thinking about?

FB: Not really, because we did not get the full jolt. When we came across the English Channel, going East, we were out there about half a day and all of a sudden we felt our ships swing around like so. (Fernando spins a sheet of paper as an example). Nobody had told us where we were going, it was a pretty well-kept secret. We were down in the hull, playing cards, smoking cigarettes, shooting the baloney, you know? Like what we going to do after the War was over. We were shooting dice, not for money but for cigarettes.

Pretty soon we heard a big, big blast and all rushed up the steps. Guess who was right there waiting for us? Our Captain, the Company Commander and said "Where the hell do you guys think you are going?" We wanted to know what was going on. He told us "Boys, we are in the Invasion. You better get down in that hull and stay there if you don't want to get your head shot off!"

In the meantime, our Navy was pounding the Beach. The enemy had four or five pillboxes there, made of concrete and enforced with steel and it was a tough nut to crack. I don't know how many men we lost, but the Navy did a darn good job for us. They eventually knocked them out so we could go over the beach.

So we landed, I don't know why we were laughing or giggling or something. The crane brought in our truck and our big gun and put it on the barge. But we couldn't go any further and had to get into the water about that deep (Fernando's hand is about waist high from the floor) Our trucks were all waterproof, the exhaust pipe wasn't underneath, it was way up to of the cab.

We went into position, our Major, a little guy named Hughes (@16:00 spelling) I'll never forget him. He said "Bonacquisti!" I said "Yes Major Hughes (@16:10 sp)" "There are still a lot of Germans around here, you better dig in. Get your 75mm machine guns." In the meantime we looked up at the trees and saw paratroopers who had their throats slit. Those paratroopers went in before we did and they were just slaughtered. And the enemy did not take and that did not go with me well, but we just did not think about it.

So we went over and got into position and I will never forget this, the first round that we shot, it wasn't on my gun, it was on the gun next to me. The Sargent in charge (@17:12 named unclear) before he shot his weapon a shell hit and exploded and three guys were gone just like that (Fernando snaps finger). Then we realized what was going on, see?

Then we went on through, we went through Normandy and now we are in France, where the Hedgerows were and it was tough! I was in the Artillery, the Infantry had it tougher than we did. I felt sorry for those guys. We finally got through, we got into Saint Lo. We just blasted the devil out of them. Oh, I think the only thing left standing was a church steeple. I think it is in the book there. That was our break-point, right there. We regrouped, sending this Division here, and this Division there and I landed up in the Third Infantry Division under General Patton.

My Division was the 90th Division, we fought along and were in the Central part of France, we missed Paris. We went into the South of France. In other words, we were the spearhead and just knocked the devil out of them. I was trained well, I had nineteen months of training. I went to Fort Sill Artillery Training in Oklahoma.

I knew what I was doing and I had to be accurate with our equipment. If I made a mistake with the elevation and lowered it, that would mean a shell would hit our troops. We had to be very, very careful and it required a lot of concentration. Our job was to get that gun set and let her go. Like I said, we went through Saint Lo, and traveled twenty or thirty miles a day. The enemy were running and hated the Artillery, and this was our light artillery. They thought we had automatic artillery, we had a lot of prisoners coming back and they wanted to see the automatic artillery.

We had the 915th at A, B, C, and D Batteries and each had four guns, so it was sixteen guns right there. And that was not counting the 343rd Field Artillery Battalion and the 344th Field Artillery Battalion were also Artillery. And then the 345th had the big-job guns which could go fifteen to twenty miles. So when the order came down to fire, of course we all jumped up and would fire thirty-five rounds at will. So if you get twenty-five or thirty guns out there, it does sound like an automatic. That's what the Germans wanted to see.

Next we got up to the Meuse River and took care of Verdun. They decided to give us a three-day pass. By June 7th, I had about one hundred and sixty two days of front-line battles. They finally decided to give us a treat. The Army had everything for us, food, clothing, dancing with a French girl. Oh, that was great! (laughter).

I had a buddy with me, he was a little, short guy who said "Gosh, I don't know any French." We were both Italian, I was born in Rome, by the way. We looked around and I told him "Rudy, I think those guys over there are Italian." Sure enough, I hit the nail on the head and we got to know them and we got invited to stay over their house, man that was great. We had nice, soft beds with great big comforter blankets. They fed us and we had a good time even though it did not last that long. They told us, when you get to Verdun there are coal mines there with hot showers! I never saw a drop of hot water. It was cold and dingy down there, it really had quite an odor to it.

Then I went back to the Front. As far as I got was into the Rhineland and crossed the Moselle River. That was tough, every time we made a bridge for our trucks, the enemy would blow it out. So we pretended to make a bridge over here (Fernando places his hand on one side of the

desk), but we were moving over here (then he places his hand to opposite side of desk). They did not see that.

It was very muddy and cold. We did not have any gloves or overshoes. We had our heavy Army coats that went down to your ankles. This was where I left my group, I did not want to go, but if I didn't I would have lost my feet because they were almost frozen. This condition is called Trench Foot, you may have heard of it. It disturbs the blood vessels that goes into the toes. There is no blood getting in there and it causes damage to the veins. If you did not stop this disease, within two weeks you could lose your toes just like that (Fernando snaps his fingers) because gangrene can set it. I saw a lot of buddies of mine go into the operating room and come back with no feet. That really hurt and that was how far in the war I got.

I did like the Army and my transition from peace time into the Army did not bother me a bit because I used to go hunting and fishing with my dog. My Dad and I would hunt coon, rabbits, pheasant, whatever you could get. We really didn't think too much, we had to be awake and ready all the time.

We could get our "Fire Order" at any time.

Our steel helmets were used for everything. They were our bathtubs, used for cooking and brushing your teeth and shaving, but we never got sick. You would think that after using it for washing, then for cooking that you would get sick, but it did not bother us at all. You could only cook in the afternoon because we could not light a fire at night, not even make a spark. So we had to eat before it got dark.

Once in a while, the kitchen would give us a hot meal, but they were so far behind us.

But we had a sense of humor. All the while there were airplanes going overhead shooting, but we didn't care. We would walk around without our helmets with the attitude like "you can't touch me!" The milk we had was powdered milk and powdered eggs. They were horrible, but we had to eat them. We only had a little can of it.

One day, we were in this farmer's field and we saw a cow. A lot of my friends were from the big city of Rochester, New York and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and they had never seen a cow. I said "Do you guys want milk?" I told them don't worry, I used to work on a farm and know what to do. So we went out there with one of our helmets and I milked the cow. We brought it back to the cook who said we had to sterilize it first. I don't know how the word got out, but the Officers found out about it and when we went back the next morning, the milk was all gone. Somebody squealed.

So I said, let's get some more milk. So we wanted to play a joke on a couple of good buddies and I said "Mike you hold the cow by the horns, Joe you get in back of the cow, and I will start milking."

I said, "Joe when I start milking, you start pumping." So here he was in the back of the cow pumping her tail up and down. (Fernando uses his arm to demonstrate – laughter ensues) That was a lot of fun! Then we explained to them what the joke was. I had a lot of good times. We were treated well, especially by the French people.

Then we got to the Moselle River and that was another story. We got up to the town of Metz in France. That was where we got stalled for about six weeks. We did not have any ammunition. You have probably heard about this story that General Patton made the order that they would

make a “Red Ball Express” made up of African-Americans. They did a good job bringing up food, ammunition, what we needed.

I really enjoyed the Army. In fact when I was discharged, I wanted to join the National Guard in Geneseo. But they would not take me because I had a disability. At one time, I was one hundred percent disability. I finally did get down to fifty percent disability, which is what I am at now with my speech and my hearing.

PS: Tell us about the explosion of the gun.

FB: Oh, the explosion of the gun, well, it was before the Battle of Metz. There are so many names in that book I brought, I can't even think of them all. Anyway, we were moving through this deep, muddy field. An order came down that they spotted a Division of enemy Germans. Everybody jumped into their positions. The order was to fire forty-eight rounds of ammunition at will. So here we go, blowing them up. I put cotton in my ears, but at the first blow, the cotton flies out. Forget that!

We did not go half-way through those rounds when I noticed that the paint on the cannon barrel was melting! I could hear the recoil, it was really loud. I told my Sargent we shouldn't shoot it. He asked “What's the matter Bonacquisti?” I told him the paint was melting! So he called Headquarters and they were just stubborn and said “Keep it going!”

Anyway, I don't think I got off fifteen or sixteen rounds when the barrel exploded and we lost ten men. We lost ten men (Fernando says solemnly) In the front of my gun I had a shield like this one here. (@33:15 He holds up a black and white photograph of an artillery gun) The shield protects the Gunner and the Number One Man from any flack that comes their way. We lost ten men, they were the best friends I ever had. Fernando is emotionally shaken as he says I can still see them. He takes a deep breath and says - But war is war.

Now I used to argue with my Mother, (Fernando turns to his brother and says you remember that). She would say, “Suppose you saw your uncle shooting at you, what would you do?” I told her I would shoot him before he would get me. “But he is your uncle!” I responded with “How the hell would I know he was my uncle?” And then my Mother would start crying. I told her don't worry, I don't worry about it. Our Division ended up in Czechoslovakia and that was where we were discharged.

Let me tell you about the one night we got corned beef. It was in a can and to me it looked like it was horse meat. It was really red, but we ate it of course. We heated it up in our helmets. The next morning I woke up and had an awful stomach ache. My God, I could not stand it, I told my Sargent and he said “You better go and see Dick.” William Dick was our Medic. He was from Rochester, New York. So I went to the Field Hospital and told him I did not feel good. He said “What's the matter Bonny? “ - they called me Bonny – I told him I had an awful stomach ache.

He told me to take my shoes off. I asked why the Hell he wanted me to take my shoes off for – the pain was here, not in my feet. He said again “You take your shoes off or I will get somebody to take them off for you!” So I said fine and he took a needle and started poking the bottom of my foot asking if I felt that. I told him I did not feel anything. Then he said “Okay buddy, you are done. You have what is called Trench Feet. Your feet are almost frozen.” I told him No! I want to go back, but he said “No” and put me on a stretcher and away I went.

I spent from right after Armistice Day (November 11 commemorates the armistice signed between the Allies of WWI and Germany, renamed Veterans Day in 1954) and was discharged from Camp Butner in North Carolina after nine months in a hospital for rehabilitation.

That was serious, I could have lost my feet. I saw a lot of my friends in the hospital. Your toes turned black, gangrene set in, some guys went into surgery with two feet and came out with zero feet. It took me that long to get back on my feet.

When I was discharged I got a CDD, do you know what that is? It is a Certificate of Disability Discharge so I am a Disabled Veteran. But the whole war is right there folks (Fernando holds up his commemorative mug listing the Battles he was in).

We discovered some Concentration Camps, it was terrible. I don't see how the enemy could do that to all those people. Whether they were Jewish, Polish, whatever. There were some people who were my size, but you could see their bones and their ribs were sticking right out. A lot did recover, our Medics took care of them right away.

After I got discharged, I came home and I got in the Twenty-twenty Club. Veterans received twenty dollars a week for twenty weeks. In those days, of course, it was worth more than it is today. I went to Geneseo, where the headquarters was where you received food stamps and gasoline ration cards. You don't know what that is, the gas was rationed by categories. "A" meant you could get as much as you want. "B" allowed you four gallons, and "C" well, you were lucky if you got two gallons.

So I went over to Geneseo to get some stamps, and they would not give me any! I said "What are you talking about, I'm discharged as a Disabled Veteran, and my mother has to feed another mouth." but they said "No." I said "Okay, fine" and I walked out of there. I said to myself just wait until I go back next time.

Well, I got back there, and they wished they never saw me. I just ripped them apart from head to toe.

I said "Look, I almost gave up my life to end all the wars, and you are denying me? I want four new tires, I want two new pairs of shoes, clothing, sugar, bread and butter because my Mom has to feed another mouth." I will tell you, they were glad to see me leave because I practically ripped the whole place over. But I got what I wanted. That was tough. Here it is, a man comes out of the Service and

is half-nuts anyway. I had Battle Fatigue and my ears were still ringing from 1945. They can't do anything about it, it was due from the cannon blast.

Fernando holds up a black and white photo of three soldier-buddies (@41:15). This is a picture of me taken at Camp (@41:15 unclear) in 1942. I went to school with these kids. The red braid on our uniforms is for the Artillery Division, Blue is for Infantry and the Red Insignia is for the Signal Corp. We all went in together. I saw them once, and then I never saw them again until I saw them come home in a casket. Another thing, as we were crossing the Atlantic Ocean we had a fire drill. I looked over my shoulder and there was one of my buddies from home, we played football together! His name was Ernest Johnson (@42:12 spelling?) He was a beautiful painter and when he got on the beach I told him to stay right there, I'll back.

So we were buddies for four or five days. I found out he was on the same ship that I was on when we landed. I never saw him again either. There was a fella, we played ball and bowled together, and boom-boom, he was gone. The last time I saw him was in his casket. It doesn't ease the pain. My next door neighbor (@43:06 name unclear) was shot in Africa. We used to go hunting, fishing, and trapping together.

But as a whole, my philosophy was that I never thought I would die anyway. I told my Mom "Don't worry, I'll be back." In fact, they came down to North Carolina to see me (Fernando looks over to his brother). We had about four or five feet of snow, and here came my Mom and Dad in a great, big overcoat. They were surprised. They thought I had lost both my legs, my arm, and everything else. They were really excited to see me.

I still have my "Ditty Bag" (personal drawstring canvas bag) that I carried my socks, shoes, food, whatever you needed. Dad said "Look, there is still mud on here from France!" Dad and I talked a lot, he was in World War I. He was with the famous 42nd Rainbow Division. He was in the Calvary. Actually, we took just about the same route as he did in World War I.

I did make the history book on Page 80, you probably saw it. That was a Russian gun, captured by the Germans we took care of it. Fernando holds up b/w photo and talks about the Battle of Falaise Gap in France. You probably heard of that. Everything had a name, the high the low of the battles. General Patton was really a smart man, very intelligent.

We had lost track of the enemy, I think there were five or six German Divisions, I was surprised they had a horse-drawn Artillery. General Patton said we had to send out a Patrol and try to find them. After two days, the Patrol came back, they had found them. Fernando draws a diagram on the blackboard of a circle with only one entrance/exit gap. He said there was no way they could go except through here.

At about two o'clock in the morning, about five miles away so the enemy could not hear us. We were way over here (Fernando points to an area outside of the video screen but seems to be around the Gap perimeter.) Now we got forty or fifty guns in there and when daybreak came, we got the order "Let's blast them! There is no other way for them to get out."

We knocked off about five of their Divisions, and I think that was the turning point. We had guns all over here (Fernando points to the off-camera diagram which I presume circled the Gap enclosure) and I was one of them. The only way to get out was here (He points to the single exit opening of the Gap). We had a dead-center target and we fired every time they tried to get out. I don't think there was one man left, and that was what the Battle of the Falaise Gap was about.

Remember I said before "Why are we driving these trucks at night?" Well I think that helped in this situation. I had already trained to drive in the dark and we were able to zero in on them at night. Our Infantry was right there outside the Gap perimeter (Fernando points to his diagram).

PS: The book gives a breakdown of what happened at the Battle of the Falaise Gap, and what exactly the enemy had inside there. Do you want to read it?

Audience member reads: (@49:08 unclear at start) had become the motivating force of closing the vital Gap. It had withstood the fiercest assault of what the crack German units were capable of and drove them back. In a period of four days, it had taken more than thirteen thousand prisoners, killed or wounded and estimated eight thousand of the enemy, but itself suffered less than six hundred casualties.

More than three hundred enemy tanks, two hundred and fifty self-propelled guns, one hundred and sixty-four artillery pieces, thirty-two hundred and seventy vehicles and a variety of other types of equipment and weapons were destroyed.

PS: That gives us a little bit of an idea how they pounded them.

FB: Oh, we really did pound them, for at least twelve hours! And that was why they thought we had automatic artillery. When you get about forty-six guns blowing, you might get a hesitation for about a second, the time it takes to take a shell off and another goes back in there, it sounded continuous. And boy, they were surprised that we did not have any automatic artillery.

As a whole, in one way I enjoyed it, I had no fear. If I had to go, I would go. And if anybody tells you, be it Vietnam or World War II, that they were not scared, they are lying. More than once I shook in my pant legs, it was so extreme. You just don't know what was going to happen from one hour to the next.

My brother did not know this until I told him this morning, when we opened up speaking together last November, and he was amazed. He said "You mean to tell me you kept it inside all these years?" I had all that stuff inside me for fifty-nine years and it is finally coming out and I feel much better. There are times like when you are watching tv, or reading a book or something and you begin thinking and your mind goes back to "I wonder where Jim is, if he is alright. I wonder where Bob is" and it makes you start crying, really.

Now every year we go to a reunion. Last year we were in Charlotte, North Carolina. These T-O reunions, including Veterans from World War I, have been going on for eighty-two years. We are losing about one hundred and eight men a day. We started out with six or seven thousand people and if there are four hundred left of us, that's very lucky. Of course, a lot of them can't come anymore due to their health. Some don't have the finances, or their wives are sick or whatever. But like I said, I really enjoy attending. The first reunion was in 1919, and as they said at last year's reunion, there was only one left from that original gathering. Other than that...

TAPE CUTS OFF AT THIS STATEMENT AT 54:04