

Louis J. Harasty
Veteran

Mike Russert
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Interviewers

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Louis J. Harasty LH
Interviewer [Unclear] IV

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

LH: Full name is Louis J. Harasty. Date of birth? August 30th, 1924.

IV: And where were you born?

LH: Punxsatawney, Pennsylvania.

IV: I saw that, I only thought groundhogs lived there. [Laughter]

LH: That's right! [Laughter]

IV: Okay, what was your educational background prior to entering service?

LH: I got as far as 11th grade in High School; and at that time because the war was started, most of my colleagues and I in High School quit school, because we knew we were going to be drafted in another year. So, we all went to work in war plants until that time and then I was inducted into the army in 1943, March 9th, 1943. And the place where we were inducted was Fort Niagara, that's no longer there I don't think ... I think it's there, but it's not Fort Niagara anymore.

IV: Now when you went there; I know they had a P.O.W [Prisoner of War] camp there later on, probably after you were ...

LH: Oh yes, it wasn't there when I was inducted; they got there after. They were also over on Grand Island.

IV: Where did you go for your basic training?

LH: I went to a place called Camp Edwards, Massachusetts. It was the start of a new

battalion; it was an anti-aircraft searchlight battalion. And it was a new outfit, they had a cadre present there and we were all young people, we were just 19 most of us; some 18. The purpose of this unit was to guard the eastern seaboard from the attack by the Germans, of course. I understand there were German submarines on our eastern seaboard; and they sunk a lot of our ships, our Merchant Marine ships. Anyhow, our job was to guard the eastern seaboard from New England down to the coast of Florida. And then, when the Germans went on the defensive and we were on the offensive, this after the D-Day, there was no need for the searchlight battalion any longer so they broke us up and they split us all up into the infantry.

IV: Let's go back to this; could you tell us a little bit about how the battalion worked? I don't think we've ever interviewed anyone in the searchlight battalion. Go into a little detail about your equipment and so on.

LH: What happened was ... the searchlights were synchronized with radars, which were called the 268's; and they would track a plane ... a practice plane would fly over with a big sleeve on the back, and then the searchlights would automatically synchronize in on that plane. Plus the 50 caliber machine guns would also, and they would open fire on that sleeve that was being dragged. A few times some of our boys made the mistake of hitting the plane instead; they were tracking the plane instead of the sleeve [Laughter]. So, we'd go out at about 11 o'clock at night, every night, and it was march order and we gathered all our equipment up; our searchlights, machine guns, and so on. The radar was already there ... and it was a huge operation that 268 it was a big radar. They used this at Pearl Harbor, this particular radar, but they paid no attention to the planes, they thought they were our own planes. Anyhow, we would stay out there until 3 in the morning; and then we'd go back to camp. And then we would have another session the following day, somewhere else along there. The interesting thing about this was that we used to be right where the Kennedy's used to live over on the Cape there. They'd come gallop up on their horses, we didn't know who they were, they didn't know who we were either. But they were very friendly, they were not very famous then. The Kennedy's had their estate over there on the Cape where we used to, you know, put our equipment up and so on. Anyhow, this went on for, let's see, from 1943 up until ... the middle ... of '45. And at that time they broke up the outfit for 359 and transferred us into the infantry; we went to Camp Gordon, Georgia, where we got infantry training there. And then, after that, they sent us overseas to combat; and that was March of '45. The war was still on there, and this was after the Battle of the Balls of course. I think the Battle of the Balls was in December the previous year, in '44. I got shipped over to Camp Gordon and then from there; they split us all up again and then they sent us over on a banana boat there to Le Havre in France. That's where they put us on trucks and expedited us to different units.

I was very fortunate; I got on this truck, and some of the boys that were on the truck with me were transferred into the infantry division, and I was sent to an artillery unit of the 69th infantry division. There was an 80th field artillery unit, Battery B, and I remember;

one of my best friends got sent to the infantry, he was killed in the next day. I heard he had gotten shot the next day. So I was very fortunate, again, just like I was fortunate being in the [United] States all this time. I didn't have to get in on D-Day or any area like that. So, from there ... I went to Le Havre and then, as I said, I got transferred to the 80th field artillery unit ...

IV: What was your job with them?

LH: I was on a 105 outfit, 105 Howitzer, and my job was to load the shells onto the gun.

IV: So you were an ammo handler, then?

LH: I was an ammo handler, correct. I remember one situation there; now this was in March, so the war was still on and we were chasing the Germans through Belgium and we were attacked by the first jets that the Germans had. We were attacked by four jets. We shot one of them down with our 50 caliber machine gun, and the rest of them just zoom, swooped away. That was the first time jets were being used, and they were being used by the Germans. They adapted the ME-109 to operate with jet engines. And boy, that was something to see. ... Well let me see now ...

IV: What did you think when you saw these aircrafts coming in at you, did you ...

LH: [I] Dove into the foxholes [Laughter]! In fact, we had been sitting around and our sergeant was digging the foxhole and four of us jumped into the foxhole and the sergeant jumped in last, he was on top. And the poor guy; he was swearing at us and saying "What's the matter, you guys? You made me do all this work and you're in there." ...

IV: Were you strafed at all?

LH: Oh yeah, we were strafed. One of our people was wounded, just one, and as I said we shot one of the jets down; and I still have the joystick from that jet. I have it at home. You know, the operational thing there. It has got the little buttons on there for the ...

IV: Did the pilot eject?

LH: I think he was killed. If I'm not mistaken, because this was beyond our range of fire. I think I mentioned how ... we got up to the Remagen Bridge and that was blown down when we got there. The engineers put up a pontoon bridge and we went across that towards Belgium there.

IV: What did you use to tow your guns?

LH: A truck. Prime mover. A big truck. See, we were in back of the infantry, so we were pretty safe there. We were protecting the infantry with our shells, our uppers. We had our forward observer beyond the infantry and they would check to see where the Nazis were and they'd call back on the telephone and then we would zero in on them with our 105s

... well I think I was in three combat engagements while I was there. And needless to say, I was very frightened. I was just a young kid and I wanted to get home [Laughter].

IV: You followed the Germans through ...

LH: We followed the Germans right along, and the Germans got as far as the Russians; the Russians had been attacking Moscow. They were defeated there, the Germans were, and then our division, the 69th infantry division, linked up with the Russians on the Elbe River, and that was more or less the culmination of the war. That was in March 4th of [19]45.

IV: Now did you encounter the Russians at all, yourself?

LH: No, because we were in a 105 outfit that was behind the infantry. It was infantry people that linked up with the Russians. And, as I said, that was the culmination of the war. A few weeks later, that was the end.

IV: Were you aware of the concentration camps at all?

LH: Oh, yeah. The towns we went through, practically every German town, had a concentration camp. It was very sad to see because the Germans had just left real rapidly, because we were on their tail chasing them, our infantry was. The poor people in the concentration camps, they were so overjoyed to see American troops coming in there to save them. They were so happy and it was an awful sight because we saw these bodies of these poor people that were killed by the Germans. They were ready for the Albans; but they never got them in there because they had to get out of there so quickly. That was one of the sad occasions that I encountered while I was there. I think one of the most joyous occasions was when we'd go through a town and the Nazi flags of surrender were pulled down, and they [the residents] threw up white flags of surrender. So that was a very happy occasion, to see that happen. I think I mentioned one of the humorous things was when we moved into this one town where they had a cigar factory and a brewery [Laughter]. We captured that and everybody was smoking cigars and drinking beer. So that was a very happy time.

IV: Now you also mentioned something about hunting chickens?

LH: Oh that was at the Rhine River; we were kind of bored along the Rhine River there, the Remagen Bridge had been blown down and there was a pontoon bridge, and there was chickens across the way. We got out our rifles and were taking potshots at the chickens [to] keep busy [Laughter].

IV: Did you ever have many encounters with the German people themselves?

LH: Yes, we did have encounters with the German civilians, yes. They were very calm and sedated and they were kind of glad to see us too because I think, on the whole, most of the German civilians didn't care for Adolf Hitler and his Nazis. There were two groups there; the Nazis were the bad guys, they were the ones that really worked in the concentration camps. The good guys were the Wehrmacht; they were like us, they were just regular soldiers. And I recall a situation when I went to Belgium to visit my son, Paul, who was working for NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] at the time, he's a commander in the Navy right now. We went to visit Luxembourg, where the Americans are buried, it's a beautiful cemetery there; General Patton is buried in the front and all his men are buried behind him there. That was quite a thing, and then just a couple hundred yards away is the German cemetery where the Wehrmacht soldiers are buried. They have a cemetery there just for them, no Nazis there, just regular German soldiers that were drafted into the war to fight for Hitler. Let's see, what else do we have here ...

IV: How did you celebrate in your unit? How did you celebrate the end of the war?

LH: I think we sat around a campfire with the shell boxes, we were burning them, made a big fire; and we were just very happy and overjoyed but of course the war was still going on in Japan, that was the sad part. They're the ones that really suffered, those poor people, they were attacked by the suicide bombers. Our boys over on the islands were the same way. These guys were suicidal, these Japanese soldiers. They were informed that they were dying for the Emperor and that they would go to Valhalla, or Heaven, or whatever it is. They had no regard for human life. And that was ...

IV: Was your unit going to be assigned to the invasion?

LH: Not my unit; just myself and whoever were the replacements. The regular units stayed there, in Germany, for I think another year and a half. We were scheduled to go back home for a 30-day furlough, and then we were supposed to go be on the invasion of Japan. Of course Mr. President Truman dropped the atom bomb on Nagasaki; nothing happened, they still didn't surrender. We dropped on Hiroshima, or it [the order of the bombs] was vice versa I don't remember.

And then they did surrender, and that's when I told Mr. Truman when he was here in Canisius College I said; "President Truman, you saved my life" and he said "How so?" and I said "Well, I was on my way home from the ETO for the invasion of Japan. And while we were on the high seas, I was on the Montclair Victory with all these other guys that were scheduled to go to Japan for the invasion, you passed us in the cruiser Augusta. It was like we were standing still; your ship just zoomed right by us and you were aboard the ship at 0600 and you were waving to us. Our ships recognized [you] and blew the whistle from the ship as an acknowledgement that we were saying 'Hello Mr. Truman'.

Then I didn't get home until August for a 30-day furlough and then you dropped the atom bomb, I think it was sometime in August, you dropped the atom bomb and the Japanese surrendered. I got discharged. So that was a very happy thing; I'm sure if I had been in on the invasion of Japan, I would not be here talking to you Mr. Truman." He was very happy about that, and he told me how he hated to drop that bomb. But, he said he had no recourse but to do that because he warned the Emperor and his staff that if they didn't stop these suicidal bombings against our ships and our men in the islands, we owned most of the islands at the time, he would do something terrible. He dropped the first bomb, they didn't do anything, he dropped the second bomb; they surrendered. The war was over. So that's how you saved my life Mr. Truman. He had a big smile on his face, and he signed my press pass. At the time we had five children, so he put their names on the press pass and I was so happy. So ...

IV: Could you show us the photographs of yourself?

LH: Well this one here is when I was a PFC branch of service, US Army, this is when I was in the anti-aircraft, the 359th. I had this picture taken when I came home. This is the World War II memorial back here, this is a replica from the picture they have on view there, on file.

IV: That was probably taken somewhere around [19]43 then?

LH: This was taken in '43. The first furlough I had. I think it was in maybe in January of '44, somewhere around there. And then down below here it says "SERVED IN RHINELAND, CENTRAL EUROPE, AMERICAN CAMPAIGN RIBBON WITH 2 BRONZE STARS". That denotes battles, two bronze stars. "VICTORY RIBBON", that's from the war being over "WITH 1 SERVICE STRIPE", that's the little stripe that you got down here for three months of service. Every time you'd served three months, you'd get a little service stripe.

IV: How about the photograph on the other side?

LH: Oh the other side? This is when I was in Le Havre, France. I was on my way home to the United States when I was being sent over for the invasion of Japan. So they sent me home for a 30-day furlough; and then after that 30-day furlough I was to be part of the invasion there, [the] forces going against Japan. But of course the atom bomb was dropped, I didn't have to go. That's me with my combat boots on, and my fatigues and so on. And this is the picture of President Truman that I took here in the residence hall. I

don't know whether that's called Loyola Hall or what; where the Jesuits lived. But this is when he was sitting up there relaxing between sessions.

IV: What year was that?

LH: This was in '62. He was here to receive an honorary degree from Canisus College. He was here for a couple days. This is where he held up the newspaper that said "Dewey defeats Truman", and it was just the other way around [Laughter]. So he was happy about that. He was such a nice man; I took a lot of photographs of him and most of them are on the negatives the college has in their archives. He was such a pleasant person, he was so nice. But, as I said, he signed my little press pass here to Mary Joan, Joseph, Barbara, Peter, and John Harasty. At that time we only had five out of the eight. So I'm going to give this to my son, Peter, he wants it. He's a photographer, commercial photographer. He's very well-known in Las Vegas, that's where he does all his photography work. He wants this picture for himself, so I'm giving it to him.

IV: After you left the service, did you make any use of the [Unclear]?

LH: Oh absolutely. First; I always wanted to be a photographer, and of course I couldn't do that while I was in the army, you know? Because they didn't have any experience. So I went to one of the best photography schools in the country, it was called the Progressive School of Photography. It was at Yale University in Connecticut, and I graduated from there in various commercial black-and-white [and] color photography. Then I came home and I opened up a studio, and then suddenly I realized I need more education. So I enrolled here at Canisus College in '52 or '51. I got my bachelor's degree here and, while I was here, I did all the photography for the yearbook, and the PR work, everything. And I continued to do this work from '52 up until '67. A good number of years. Needless to say, I didn't make out too well academically. The director would call me up in the classroom and say "we need you down here to take [a] picture" so they took advantage of me all the time, which I was grateful for. Then after, of course, I decided while I was running the studio; this opening came up for an instructor in photography. Prior to that, I worked for the Buffalo Evening News and I worked for the Bishop's Buffalo; I covered three Bishops while they were here in Buffalo for their newspaper. I took all the portraits of the Bishops and so on.

Then I worked for the news as a summer replacement, and then there was this opening for a teacher at McKinley High School; one of my good friends Jim Harmon, who is also a graduate of Canisus College, was the principal. He said "Lou, we got a job for you here. This guy who's teaching photography here, he's not certified. Now I'm going to get you in there and then you got to go get your certification.", and so I did. He gave me the job, and I was there for twenty-two years. I got my certification, I also got my master's degree, because the more credentials you had, the more pay. I stayed a long time, and I just retired in 1996 from McKinley High School. I'm kind of retired now; I do mostly digital photography because the wet process is on its way out and I don't know whether

people realize it, but I think in another couple years you won't be able to buy film anymore. It's all going to be digital. It's an exciting field; digital photography, and I do a lot of that and I really enjoy it. It's amazing what can be done with a photograph in the digital area.

IV: Just in your time in photography, you've seen a lot of change ...

LH: Oh yes. I started off using flash bulbs; they were called "Press Twenty-Twos", it was like a big 100 watt bulb and whenever you took a picture you stuck one of those into your flash gun. It was a four-by-five format camera, and then from there it went to reflex camera 120, and now it's finally gone to everybody using thirty-five millimeter film. But now it's gone onto the digital stage, so everything is digital now. My son Peter, who is a commercial photographer in Las Vegas, he says that his clients now demand a disc of all the work that he does for them. And he gets paid the same amount! He hands them this the same day and he gets a check for the full amount that he would ordinarily charge for a regular two-and-a-quarter, three-and-a-quarter transparencies. So we've come a long way in photography, boy.

IV: Did you ever join any Veterans organizations at all?

LH: Oh boy. I belong to a Veterans organization off of Genesee Street but unfortunately I haven't been a very good member, I haven't been. I pay my dues and everything, I really should go back there and get involved.

IV: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone that was in service with you?

LH: Oh yeah. We have. The 359th, that was my original outfit, we have a reunion every year and I've been going to that. This year it's going to be in August again, or right after Labor Day, that's when it is. And in one year it's in New York, and in the following year it's in Pennsylvania somewhere because the original outfit; half of the people were from New York State and the other half were from Pennsylvania. This battalion that was formed, the 359th. I enjoy them but there's fewer and fewer people showing up for the reunions now, there's not many of us left. I'm so fortunate, I thank God for my lifespan. I'm 83 right now and I can't believe it, I'm still around [Laughter].

IV: You look great too!

LH: Yeah, thank you.

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

LH: Oh I think it had effect on my life.

IV: In what ways?

LH: Morally, every way. I think the worst thing that the country did here was to eliminate the draft. I think every person that has lived in this country should be inducted into the

army and served some time. My son, Paul, I have this in writing, he said; “Dad, I really love the Navy. I think I owe the Navy something, I owe my country some time”. And, you know, he was fighting over in Iraq and he’s been all over. Right now he’s stationed in Washington and he’s going to be [Unclear] in Paris. Him and his wife and a little child. He always told me that he owes a lot to his country, for the good life he has enjoyed here, so that’s why he joined the Navy.

IV: Well, thank you very much for your interview.

LH: Okay!