

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH BENJAMIN LEIB

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview on May 3, 2013, with Benjamin Leib in Pine Brook, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth. Mr. Leib, thank you very much for having me here today. Thank you to your family as well for setting this interview up. To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

Benjamin Leib: I was born in Bergenfield, New Jersey, June 30, 1916.

SI: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your father's family and your father?

BL: Well, my father came from a part of--I guess it was the Soviet Union at one time, it's now Belarus--a small town. [Editor's Note: Belarus was part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union until 1991 when the Republic of Belarus was formed.] He grew up in a very religious family and my grandfather was a grand rabbi. He and his brother were both studying to become rabbis, but my father got impressed by the Cossacks into the cavalry, but he was a smart guy. When the Russians were fighting the Japs in 1903, his troop was supposed to get on the Trans-Siberian train and head east to Vladivostok. He got on his horse and rode west to Hamburg. [laughter] He had some money saved up. He gave the money to what they call a *landsmann*, a neighbor from his hometown who was also kind of a marriage broker, real estate, anything to raise money. There were several hundred people that came about that time, wanted passage to the States. They all gave him the money and he disappeared. So, my father left. He sold his horse there and my father [was] left penniless in Hamburg and he got a job in a coal mine. I think he worked in the coal mine for about two years, until he saved up enough money to come to the States. When he got here, he had friends in the men's clothing industry. He got to be a presser, until he saved up enough money to buy the general store on the corner of Washington and Main in Bergenfield. [Editor's Note: The Russo-Japanese War occurred from 1904 to 1905, ending in a Japanese victory.]

SI: When he was working as a presser, was that in New York City or in New Jersey?

BL: Yes, New York City.

SI: Okay. This town he was from, in what is now Belarus ...

BL: Yes.

SI: Was it a city or was it more like a *shtetl*?

BL: It was a *shtetl* [a small Jewish village in Eastern Europe].

SI: Okay.

BL: It was called Slonin, S-L-O-N-I-N. It got wiped out by the Germans. His whole family, except for a nephew, were all wiped out. The nephew, I don't know if he's still alive, but he came over; we brought him over. We had a tough job finding him, but we did and brought him over. He was a poet and he worked for *The Jewish Daily Forward*, writing poetry. He also had a job in the ladies' garment industry, married, I don't know who, never met his wife. They lived

somewhere in the Bronx, lost touch. [Editor's Note: *The Jewish Daily Forward* was a Yiddish weekly newspaper founded in 1897 in New York City.]

SI: When did your family bring him over?

BL: About 1952, '53.

SI: Okay.

BL: So, he wandered around. He'd been a prisoner of both the Russians and the Germans. He was in Siberia, in Italy, in Germany, all over Europe, in labor camps and everything.

SI: Did your father ever tell you if he had experienced any *pogroms* [violent anti-Semitic attacks] when he was growing up?

BL: Oh, yes, they were regular things in his village. In my mother's case, she grew up in a larger town in what's now the Ukraine. I don't know if you saw the movie *Exodus*, but the hero and everybody came from the same town that my mother came from, a place called Zhitomir. It's near Kiev or Kharkov, like that. [Editor's Note: *Exodus* is a 1960 film about the creation of Israel, based on the 1958 Leon Uris novel of the same name.] She came over about 1905 or something like that, very independent woman, real character. She and my father married through a marriage broker, which was then the custom thing in those days.

SI: How old was your mother when she came to the United States, approximately?

BL: Well, let's see, maybe twenty, twenty-two, something like that.

SI: Okay.

BL: My father was about eight or nine years older than she was.

SI: Did she come over alone or did she come with family?

BL: Well, that's another story. My grandfather's a goldsmith. In those days, he did what a lot of them did--he came to the States, earned some money and brought a couple of the family over. He then had my grandmother and seven children. So, he was bringing them over one at a time. One uncle remained in Russia all this time, my oldest uncle. I never met him. His name was Isaac and that's all I knew. He got married and had a couple of children. The only contact we had with them, his son was a cinematographer and he wanted a special type of zoom camera over here. My mother was the softest touch. All you had to do was ask my mother for money. She thought the cash register in my father's store manufactured money. She would go to the cash register, take money, give it to anybody. So, my cousin wanted this camera. I had friends in the camera business, I asked them about it--that camera cost, like, seven thousand dollars. We didn't have that kind of money. [laughter] So, that was that, and then, never heard from him again after that, anyway.

SI: Your family name changed. Was that done at the time your father came to the States or was that later?

BL: No, his name was Leibovich. What happened was, during my college days, for instance, when we played ball, they put a box score in the paper. They didn't put Leibovich, they put Leib, L-E-I-B. Later on, I became a bowler and *The Brooklyn Eagle* used to have the biggest bowling leagues in the country at the time. In fact, I got a medal and, first year that I bowled, won the championship. They used to publish the scores every week. They didn't have room for Leibovich, did Leib. I got in the Army, my first non-coms were all "swamp rats" from Mississippi, Louisiana, could barely speak English. They couldn't pronounce Leibovich. They called me Leib. Everybody called me Leib. So, when I came back and everything, I figured, "What the hell? Leib it is." I shortened it, that's all, just for convenience sake. My sister got very angry--I'd tarnished the name and everything. She had a good job. She was secretary to the general merchandising manager of Gimbels. I don't know if you remember Gimbels.

SI: I am familiar.

BL: Big department store.

SI: Yes, big store.

BL: She was angry at me for doing that, but she shortened her name, too, but she didn't call herself Leib. She called herself Lee. Then, I used to tease her about that all the time.

SI: Is your sister older or younger?

BL: She's six years younger. She died two years ago.

SI: Okay.

BL: Yes, she was eighty-four at the time or something, anyway.

SI: How long had your family been living in Bergenfield before you were born?

BL: I think my father had the store. Well, he was there long enough to be able to speak English very well--I think maybe four or five years. I don't know for sure.

SI: Okay.

BL: After that, some wholesalers from Manhattan convinced him to go into business with them. So, he sold the store there. We moved to the Bronx and they flummoxed and took whatever money he invested and they flew. Then, he didn't like the Bronx anymore and there was a stationary store in Brooklyn up for sale and he went there. It looked like a good deal. It also included the house that we lived [in]. It was a store with two six-room railroad flats up above. So, he bought it and that's where I grew up.

SI: Do you have any memories of Bergenfield or the Bronx, or do you only remember Brooklyn?

BL: No, not really. It seems like I remember Bergenfield because we were still there when the United States entered World War I. Camp Merritt used to be in Bergenfield, or around one of the towns there. They tell me that, at one time, I ran away, when I was like two years old or three years old, with the shoemaker's daughter. They found us, like, on a warm spring day with our overcoats open in Ridgefield Park, two or three miles down the road. [Editor's Note: Camp Merritt, established in 1917 in Bergen County, New Jersey, closed in December 1919.]

SI: Wow.

BL: That's about the only memory I have. As far as Brooklyn goes, the memories grew big and fast in Brooklyn.

SI: Tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in, where your father had his store.

BL: Well, it was just--Bergenfield is really still small.

SI: In Brooklyn, when he had the stationary store.

BL: Oh, in Brooklyn. When we got there, our neighborhood, Bay Ridge, at that time, was really more than suburban, it was real country. In fact, on the way to school, we used to pass by a big Italian tomato farm and we used to snatch tomatoes from the fence. The guy used to be there with a big Italian dog, police dog, and a cat-o-nine tails, waiting for us to steal the tomatoes. Finally, he gave up and he planted two rows of tomatoes just for us. [laughter] I grew up on Fort Hamilton Parkway and there was the four blocks, actually, that were settled at that time. The rest of the area was empty lots and fields, truck farms. Well, he [a neighbor?] later became a limousine operator there, but he had horse-drawn horses and carriages that he leased out to people. What happened, baseball was our life as a kid. So, every time we settled in a nice field, the big guys would come along, kick us away, [laughter] but we always had plenty of fields. The main thing with my growing up, until I was like fifteen or so, in the high school, I don't like to pull the anti-Semite card, but the neighborhood, there were four Jewish families on those four blocks and we were the only ones that lived there. The other three had stores there, but they lived somewhere in the other neighborhoods. I always tell everybody that I grew up having eight fights a week, one every day and two on Sunday. When the boys came out of church on Sunday, they came looking for me. Getting beat up, it got to be no big trick for me. I defended myself pretty well, I thought, anyway. Something slipped my mind here--oh, yes, I couldn't go to school on Good Friday. On Good Friday, I was "the Jew killer" and they would pile on me. So, for eight years, I never went to school on Good Friday, [laughter] but, until the Crash, my father's business there was great. You probably don't recall, or never knew, but there was a chain of cigar stores called United Cigars. My father had a United Cigar agency. They gave out coupons. You bought something, you got a coupon. If you spent a dollar, you got a certificate. Saturdays, if you bought something for a dollar, you got an extra certificate. Saturdays were tremendous days, and then came the Crash. [Editor's Note: The stock market crash on October 29, 1929, known as Black Tuesday, signifies the beginning of the Great Depression.] My father was trying

to improve business in the neighborhood. He consulted with Woolworth's, which was a big five-and-dime chain. They said if he could get four buildings together on any one of those blocks, they would open a store there. So, he managed to get three and the fourth one, he couldn't get. The result was, when the Crash came, he lost the other two, except the house we lived in. That's where the big problem came. When Hoover was still President, we still had to pay principal interest on the mortgage and my father found the business was bad and we were threatened with foreclosure a lot of times. Then, when Roosevelt came in, they passed the moratorium, where they only had to pay interest on the mortgage. You could pay principal, but the main thing was interest. He found it difficult even for that. So, from the time that I started high school, which was 1931, until I got in the Army, my big plan [for] a long time was to help raise money to keep us in the house and keep my father in business. So, I graduated high school. I went to, which was then the largest high school in the United States, New Utrecht High School in Brooklyn. I graduated in three-and-a-half years, and then, I entered Brooklyn College.

SI: What year did you graduate high school?

BL: February 1934.

SI: Okay.

BL: I kept switching between day and nights. If I had a day job, no matter how short the term was, I went to the evening session. Then, my grades were so good, they'd let me do whatever I wanted. That got up to a certain point, but things kept getting rougher and I finally got a crazy job with a fictional character who was supposed to be a press agent. I got to be his assistant. I didn't get paid money, I got paid theater tickets. So, for instance, a big hit show at that time was *Three Men on a Horse*. So, he gave me four tickets to that. So, the night of the show, I'd go to the theater and scalp them. Everybody wanted tickets to the show. So, I managed to raise maybe seventeen, eighteen dollars with the four tickets--not like today, where it costs you 125 bucks. In those days, you could get an orchestra seat for twenty dollars. [Editor's Note: *Three Men on a Horse* by John Cecil Holm and George Abbott premiered on Broadway in 1935.]

SI: What did you do for the press agent? You said you were his assistant. What did that entail?

BL: I distributed brochures, I posted theater posters. In fact, I got arrested one time. Collier Service, in the subways, above the people's heads, they have these ads? Collier Service had an exclusive for that business. He gave me a stack of those posters one time, told me to go on the subway and insert them and everything. When I got to 42nd Street, Times Square, a cop was waiting for me, [laughter] but that was it. So, anyway, my job, my father's business was not so good, but he was open eighteen hours a day. He opened the store at six and he closed it at midnight. He was a strong man and all, but, still, the hours were long. So, when I came home from school, the business was so great in the store that even at fourteen, fifteen, I could handle the store, business. So, he had a very big store and I was able to do my [work]. We had, at that time, a superheterodyne radio that my mother was very superstitious about. She didn't like it in the house, so, we had it in the store. So, I had, like, a niche in the back of the store and I used to do all of my homework on top of that radio, anyway. Anyway, things got a little better. I kept getting jobs. My Uncle Frank, my mother's brother, was a printer and he would get me

temporary jobs. He worked for an outfit called Standard Statistics, which is now Standard and Poor's. He was a compositor. He took the slugs from the linotype and lined it up and everything and, when they needed a copy holder, he would get me a job. I'd work maybe two or three weeks. Unions were terrific at that time. Any job, like, for instance, I worked for a provisions house, I worked from seven-thirty until six-thirty, six days a week--guess for how much? seven-and-a-half dollars.

SI: Wow.

BL: And I had to take a subway to get to the place, but, in the printing plant, I got fourteen dollars and seventy-five cents a week for an eight-hour day, five days a week. I was the richest guy in the neighborhood and, of course, we like to say we had "weekies" in those days. Kids today don't know what weekies are, but we got a pay envelope. We didn't get checks, we got cash in an envelope. My weekie was, soon as I got home on Friday night, the envelope went on the corner of the kitchen table and I got an allowance. The rest of the money was used for food, for a mortgage payment, stuff like that. Anyway, one of the good customers my father had was Fred (Kroplin?). He was a butcher and his son managed a bowling alley and pool hall. So, as things got better, my friends and I, on Sunday night, used to go to a late movie show. We could see a double feature with comedies and everything for a quarter. It got so that the lines every Sunday got to be so long that we decided to give it up. One of the guys said that his cousin was a bowler, "Let's try it." In those days, it cost, on Sunday night, you could bowl at ten cents a line. What do they charge today, about three dollars? Anyway, we got to know some guys down there and we improved slowly. Then, this one guy, he had a team and they weren't doing so good, so, a couple of them quit. So, he asked if we'd fill in. He would pay for us. So, we did. Well, Fred (Kroplin's?) son came in. He said, "I heard you're a bowler." Yes, so, we called him Butch, Ed (Kroplin?) his name was, nice guy. He said, "Why don't you come to my place there? I could use a couple of bowlers." So, I went down there and that, my first year in league bowling, we won the Brooklyn championship.

SI: Wow.

BL: I got a nice little gold medal there. They didn't even have trophies in those days, anyhow.

SI: You also played baseball. Was that in a league?

BL: Well, in summertime, about six-thirty, once school was over, the gang of kids was out in the street. We all had taped up tire-tape balls and broken bats and old mitts and all we did all day long was play ball, except when it got too hot. Then, we'd hide under trees and stuff. Later on, sandlot ball came along. In fact, I played with a team that sort of became semi-pro. They travelled all over, called the McKinley Triangles. We're at 69th and Fort Hamilton Parkway; it's only seven blocks away from McKinley Park. In fact, Joan went to McKinley Park Junior High School, right across from that park, but that came much later. Anyway, we played ball and we were saving money for uniforms. The following season, when they bought the uniforms, we had an old guy, was the manager. He managed the gas company semi-pro baseball team. He had so many sons, they were all good ballplayers and two of them played on the McKinley [team]--they were young enough to play on the Triangles. When they issued the uniform, he didn't have one

for me. His name's (Pop Drescher?). I said, "Hey, Pop, where's mine?" He says, "Oh, we took a pitcher from the Saxons and we gave him that uniform." He says, "We added him to the team." So, I said, "What about mine? All those dimes and quarters that I was chipping in and everything like that and, now, I'm left without a uniform?" So, they chipped in and they gave me, like, three dollars. The whole team chipped in. I was done with them, but I played against them a few times. Then, I went out for the team in Brooklyn College, when I was in day session. I wasn't a pitcher, but I made it as a pitcher. I think I pitched about four innings. I never earned a letter.

SI: Earlier, you said your father's family was pretty religious.

BL: Very religious.

SI: Growing up, were you exposed to religion? Did it play a big part in your life?

BL: Yes, I'll tell you about that. After having gone through *pogroms* and military training and a rough beginning in coming to the States and all, my father sort of lost his interest in religion. On the other side, on my mother's side of the family, they were radicals, agnostics or nihilists or whatever, atheists, whatever you want to call them. My grandmother was a real religious--you could call her a fanatic. I would not have been *bar mitzvah*-ed if it wasn't for her. She insisted. All that meant to me was that I had to go to another school to get ready for it, but, from the time that I had my *bar mitzvah* until I got married, I don't think I was ever in a temple.

SI: Did your family keep up with any traditions? Did they keep their household kosher?

BL: Oh, yes. For years and years, my grandparents lived in the same building with us. That's a funny story. My sister came along, she was born in 1922. When she got to the street--candy store kids wandered around. They were free. Everybody was busy taking care of the store. She had to have a taste of everything, didn't matter, dog doo, cat or whatever, everything. She developed trench mouth. So, we called the doctor. The doctor said that she had a danger of losing her teeth. We had to paint her mouth with mercurochrome and, anyway, that part was okay. So, after about two months of treatment like that, doctor said that she needs something with more protein in it than anything, to help her grow and everything like that. He recommended Jell-O. Well, Jell-O, at that time, the gelatin came from the hooves of pigs. So, that's not kosher. So, my grandmother used to cook in our kitchen for the family. She moved to the kitchen upstairs, so that she wouldn't have to be in the house with the non-kosher gelatin. Later on, as she improved, he recommended something even firmer, like crisp bacon, very nutritious, and it's easy, because you bite it, it goes to powder right away. She heard bacon--well, my grandfather had opened a gold shop in Philadelphia--when she heard bacon in the house, she packed up her pots and pans, moved to Philadelphia. [laughter]

SI: Wow.

BL: Later on, he came back to New York. My grandfather always liked the cigar/candy store business. He opened a little store not far away from us, out toward Fort Hamilton, and she came to live with him and he died there. We got her a room--I don't know if you even know of Sea

Gate on Coney Island. Sea Gate is a private community at the western end of Coney Island. It's gated. You need to talk to a cop to get in, get permission. She had a nice room there in a house with five others, three on each floor. Each floor had one bathroom and they shared it. My grandmother was a great believer in bowel movement. If you didn't move it once a day, you weren't healthy and she was constipated. So, she had an idea that if you squatted over a steaming bucket of water, it would help her. So, she would go into the bathroom and squat and one of the young ladies there, a woman about thirty-five or thirty-six, had to get to work and she needed the bathroom. It was a constant argument between the two of them. So, one day, they had a fight. My grandmother was ninety-seven years old, fighting this fat thirty-six-year-old young woman, and, accidentally, she slipped down the stairs, broke her hip and died of pneumonia in the hospital. Longevity is on my mother's side. She was the youngest to die. She died at eighty-four. Her next sister was ninety-eight. Her youngest sister was ninety-five and my Uncle Frank, he was about ninety-two. The youngest one, (Avi?), was seven years old and he caught something, an infection, killed him when he was like seventy-seven. It was pretty bad. What happened, anyway, one day, Ed (Kroplin?) came into the store and he said, "Is this what you're doing for a living, Ben?" I said, "I've got to help out. My sister is old enough now, also, to help in the store. My mother helps when she can, but she's got terrible verrucous veins and standing in the store was very hard for her, but she would be all right for an hour or two a day." He said, "How would you like a job?" I said, "I could kill it for a job." He said, "Well, I'm going into partnership with another guy in a bigger bowling alley." Ed said, "I spoke to my boss, I recommended you. You could take over my job." I said, "Oh, that's terrific. What is it?" He said, "Well, we've got eight alleys and nine pool tables, eight pool tables and one billiard table, and we have a soda fountain, no beer or anything. We sell ice cream sodas and stuff like that. My boss didn't like alcohol in the bowling alley." So, I said, "So, what's the pay?" He said, "Twenty dollars a week and all you can steal." I said, "Twenty dollars a week, that's a fortune." [laughter] I jumped at the job. "And all you could steal," it was a joke. It's like bartenders. Everybody knows bartenders steal a certain amount. It goes with the business. In the pool hall, you have a clock with two handles. When a guy goes to rent a table, you take an index card, you put it in the clock and you punch the entry. When he's through, you punch out. Then, you can figure out how much he owes for the [game]. It was fifty cents an hour in those days. So, if four guys played, so, for a dime or so, if they played a half hour and all, a nickel a piece, that's the way it went. So, I took over. I worked from five-thirty until closing. In those days, closing was early. Nobody had money. By nine-thirty, ten o'clock, maybe there would be a pool shooter or something, but I would chase them out and close the place.

SI: Was that while you were going to Brooklyn College or at a different time?

BL: At that point, when I took that job, I quit Brooklyn.

SI: Okay.

BL: I had a lot of credits. In fact, I had more than the required credits, but that's another story. The dean said that I had a couple more required courses and I was sick and tired of college by that time, anyway. I found out, in elementary school, one thing I've got to brag about myself and that's that I do it proudly, I'm very self-aware. I know what I can do. I try to do more, but I know my limitations. In elementary school, I thought I was the smartest guy in the school, but,

when we graduated PS 176, I was not the valedictorian. I was salutatorian, number two. (Lee Napizi?) had better marks than I did. New Utrecht, at that time, was one of the top high schools in the country scholastically. In track, we won, New Utrecht won, indoor and outdoor track fourteen consecutive years. The glee clubs, which I joined in, and their orchestras and bands won prizes all over the country. In fact, on Fridays, there was a German conductor, Walter Damrosch--have you ever heard of him? He also conducted the Philharmonic. He had a program for schoolchildren. Fridays, we had an assembly and we listened. In the assembly hall, they played classical music. Music appreciation was one of the things we had in school. I forget where I was leading to.

SI: I wanted to ask you about what you thought of your schools, particularly your high school. What were your favorite subjects?

BL: I'll tell you, I hated my high school. You know why?

SI: Why?

BL: All the times that I was there, they didn't have a baseball team. I went out for the track team and I beat the assistant coach's favorite 220 runner in a race, so, he threw me off the team. He didn't like somebody beating Manny (Craft?). [laughter] Manny was a nice guy, but I could run faster than him. Anyway, at Brooklyn, I didn't like Brooklyn College. I thought Brooklyn College was nothing but a continuation of high school. You went to class, they took attendance, they assigned homework, yes. They didn't encourage going to the library and studying. They assigned things and it was not my idea of college. When I got out of the Army, I had a tough job getting a job. That's it, now, I remember. I got out of the Army, I formed--Bay Ridge had a lot of Scandinavians. We sold a lot of foreign newspapers. The biggest was the *Nordisk Tidende*, a Norwegian newspaper. It was printed in Bay Ridge and I think we sold twenty-five or thirty of those a week. They were a nickel a piece, very profitable. All other newspapers, you were lucky to make a half a cent, the Swedish paper, *The North Star* [*Nordstjernen*], and two different Italian papers, *Irish Echo*, the German *Staats-Zeitung*, one Jewish newspaper, two Spanish papers, a lot of foreign papers. It was interesting. So, a bunch of Swedes came down. They wanted to form a Scandinavian league. So, I formed it for them and Mr. Olsen, around the corner, was a heavy pipe smoker, a good customer, smoked cigars and a pipe. He didn't like the idea that I was working in a pool hall, said I'm too nice a guy to work there. I said, "So, what do you suggest?" He said, "Come work with me." He worked in a big machine shop. I said, "But, you're not my grandfather or uncle. To get into that, as an apprenticeship, you have to be family related." He said, "I can get you a job, don't worry." Two weeks later, he said, "Can you come with me tonight?" I said, "What time?" He said, "Twelve o'clock." I said, "Sure." I gave the keys to my janitor. My janitor was having trouble with his wife, so, he lived in the bowling alley, in the tool room in the back. He had a mattress and closet and everything, Joe (Pissy?), his name. He was a nice guy. He'd do anything for me. I was good to him, too, but he would clean up the place and, if there was any customers around, he would take care of them. In the afternoons, he opened the place for the day man, cleaned up and everything. So, I went to the machine shop and I was introduced to the superintendent and he said, "If Olsen says you're good, you're good." He says, "You're not an apprentice. We've got a title for you, but it doesn't mean you're going to get into the union. You've got a job. You're an assistant machinist," what it

actually was, a gopher. We manufactured there, or turned out, whatever, lots of precision brass parts, all for torpedoes. My job was to go with a cart, collect the finished pieces, deliver them to where they told me, to the next machine, and everything went by steps. A deliverer hauled stock to the new machine, like that. One day in the bowling alley, this character comes in there. He thought he was Scarface, wore a pearl hat with the brim down and a coat with a velvet collar turned up and everything. He said, "I hear you work for (Armor?) Engineering." I said, "Yes." He said, "I've got something for you." I said, "I don't want anything from you. Please, leave." He says, "No, it means a lot of money. You can make a lot of money." I heard money--I said, "What's that?" He said, "I've got nylons." I said, "What the hell are nylons?" He says, "You don't know what nylons are? Nylons are ladies' stockings." "So? What about ladies' stockings?" "Well, Japan and China produce silk and they make silk stockings, but, with the wars on and everything over there, there's no silk anymore. So, they make imitation stockings for ladies out of nylon, which feels like silk, and everybody wants them." He says, "If you give me twenty-five dollars, then, I'll give you fifty pairs of stockings." I said, "I don't have twenty-five dollars to give. I'll tell you what--you give me twenty-five pairs and, when I sell them, I'll pay you." He says, "You work here steady?" I said, "Steady." He said, "Okay." He gave me the things. So, that night, when I went into the machine shop, I said to Olsen, "I want to ask the super for a favor." So, he says, "Okay." Coffee break time, took me to the office, I tell Mr. (Swartz?), I said, "Can I ask you a favor?" He said, "What?" I said, "Some gangster gave me nylons to sell here." He says, "You've got nylons? How many pairs?" He bought ten right then. In five minutes, I didn't have a nylon left.

SI: Wow.

BL: I was making, I was averaging, like, fifteen, twenty dollars a week, just selling nylons at the factory. [laughter]

SI: Wow.

BL: Anyway, along came the draft in '39. So, we had a draft chairman there, also a crook. He wanted a thousand dollars, he said he could get me a commission as an ensign and I would never have to leave the States in case of war. Number one, I didn't want to do that in the first place and, number two, I didn't have a thousand dollars to spare. All my extra money was going to my father. Thank God, now, he was able to catch up with principal and mortgage and business was getting a little better as time went by. Finally, the day came where I was classified 1-A and, on February 7, 1942, I had to report to the draft board at six o'clock in the morning. (Perry Clark?), the chairman, gave me a big, fat envelope and sixteen guys. He said, "You're in charge." I said, "I'm in charge of what? I'm the guy that you hate most, because I wouldn't give you any money, and you put me in charge of these guys?" He says, "Yes. You take them to Penn Station, to the Long Island Railroad, and there'll be an Army officer or two waiting for you there. You give him the envelope and he'll take attendance." So, these guys, they rode with me on the BMT all the way to 34th Street, but, when we got out on 34th, they scattered like cockroaches. There were a lot of police--it was shift time and everything--and I started yelling, "Draft dodgers, they're all running. Grab them all, hey." They caught them all and we got on the train.

SI: Can I go back a little bit?

BL: Sure.

SI: You grew up in this neighborhood where there were a lot of different ethnic communities.

BL: Oh, yes.

SI: Germans, Italians.

BL: Yes.

SI: Did you know a lot about what was happening in the world?

BL: Oh, yes.

SI: Did you follow the news about Hitler and Mussolini?

BL: Yes, we had better news then than they have today. Today, you watch a news broadcast on television, you want to get the full story, you have to go to the computer to get it. You can't just learn. In those days, you had Lowell Thomas, H. V. Kaltenborn, Ed Murrow, what's his name, Uncle Walter?

SI: Walter Winchell.

BL: Yes, news was on all the time. You had stations, radio stations, that had nothing but news all day. Then, they came out with magazines. Well, *Time Magazine* came out during the '20s, and then, *Newsweek* followed, and then, imitator *US News*. During the '30s, the big one came out, that was the thing there, *LIFE Magazine*. When that first issue came out, we got five in the store and my father says, "A ten-cent magazine? How we going to sell it? Most of these pulp magazines sell for a nickel, once a month for a dime. *The Saturday Evening Post* was a nickel a week, *Collier's Magazine*, two great fiction magazine articles and everything, a nickel a week. Here, you've got a ten cents a week--never sell." Those five disappeared. They vanished. The following week, a hundred people must've asked for *LIFE*. I think we wound up selling like fifty a week. That's all they would give us.

SI: Wow.

BL: Then, *Look Magazine* came out, imitate, then, other imitators, of course, but, as far as war news, we knew all about [the] Japanese invasion of China and Indochina, the islands. We knew about the Nazis, and then, war in Europe and North Africa and all that. Everybody was up-to-date and, every night, if I could tell Wendy, when we first got to Bay Ridge, we didn't even have a radio. Sound movies didn't come until 1928, 1929. Radios, my father had a big business. My father was a clever man business-wise. He was ahead of the game all the time. When the publishers started to come out with little [radio publications], like *QST*, was a radio magazine, he made sure we had it. So, he sold radio parts and plans and half the neighborhood built crystal sets, that's what they called it, a little radio. You had to have an earphone and you flipped with a

pointer to locate the station. Then, later on, when they came out with loudspeakers, he built a beautiful radio and everything. On Friday nights, the store was crowded in the worst of times, because every Friday night, you had the prizefights from Madison Square Garden and everybody came. During the week, if nobody was working, they'd be in the store either listening to the baseball games or else on the corner, our corner, a bookie used to be there. We had a pretty good business in scratch sheets. Scratch sheets came to the racing program. We had three telephone booths in the store and I had to tell the bookie which phones to use, because, if one coin box got too full, the police would be notified. So, we had to do it like that.

SI: Were numbers involved?

BL: Yes, there was a guy.

SI: Yes.

BL: There were guys selling it, but a thousand-to-one, people didn't like the odds, were too long. You played a nickel anyway. For a nickel, if you picked the three numbers, you won twenty-five bucks and you had to give five to the bookie. So, people didn't care for that too much, but it was [there]. Once I got to the bowling alley, the machine shop, I actually had three jobs. I closed, I left the bowling alley at, like, eleven-thirty, quarter to twelve, and then, I worked until seven-thirty in the morning. I grabbed a few hours' sleep and breakfast, and then, in the afternoon, I would let my father take a nap, have his dinner, then, go to work in the bowling alley.

SI: Wow.

BL: It was a tough job. So, actually, for the first couple of days in the Army, I had it easier than when I was working.

SI: Wow, it seems that way.

BL: Yes.

SI: You said that the store was a center where the neighborhood came together.

BL: Oh, yes.

SI: Do you remember the Schmeling versus Louis fight? [Editor's Note: In their June 19, 1936 match, German boxer Max Schmeling knocked American heavyweight Joe Louis out in the twelfth round. On June 22, 1938, they met again, at Yankee Stadium, in a bout heard by millions around the globe. Louis defeated Schmeling by technical knockout just over two minutes into the first round.]

BL: Oh, sure. We followed Joe Louis. Prizefighting was a big thing. At Fort Hamilton, they had an arena, so, they had prizefights every week. After the war, Thursday night fight, half my bowling teams, and golfers and all, we used to go to watch the fights there. Across the street from the arena was a big Italian restaurant, so, we'd get hoagies and all and get in the stands there

about an hour or so before the fights and we knew everybody. Every week, it was the same crowd. It was fun. The neighborhood, it kept getting developed. For instance, I told you, our particular neighborhood began at the corner of 68th Street, it ran to 72nd Street. So, on each block, before repeal, you had a German delicatessen. On our block, 69th to 70th Street, we had two. We had a German deli on both sides of the street. We had shoemakers, shoe stores, dry good stores, all variety of stores, but all in those four blocks. Then, the neighborhood started to get developed. For instance, across from McKinley Park, the Catholic Church owned the whole solid block. So, they built a school there, Saint Ephrem's. It was an elementary school, but there was no church. On the corner, there was a big, old Victorian mansion on the hilltop and, during the summer, they put benches out on the lawn and conducted outdoor Mass. Father (Folly?) was a good friend of my grandfather's. Every night, he used to come buy a cigar and sit and argue with my grandfather. They had a lot of fun. He was accused of philandering; finally, they sent him somewhere. He was a good-looking guy, but I don't think he philandered. Anyway, finally, they built a church, and then, next-door to it, opposite 74th Street, there was a couple of big Victorians, they tore them down and they built McKinley Jewish High School there--junior high, McKinley Junior High. That's where Joan went when she was a girl.

SI: Do you have any memories from Prohibition days? [Editor's Note: The era of Prohibition began on January 17, 1920, with the enactment of the Eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, set in motion by the Volstead Act. It ended with the ratification of the Twenty-First Amendment to the US Constitution on December 5, 1933.]

BL: Oh, yes.

SI: Was there a speakeasy in your neighborhood?

BL: Let me tell you, next-door--we were the second, our block was the 6900, our address, 6903--next-door was (Duffy's?) Ice Cream Parlor. He sold (Reeve's?) ice cream. That was a factory that produced ice cream. At night, venetian blinds came down over the window, candles went on the soda fountain and the booze started to flow, [laughter] but he had to get rid of ice cream. So, once a week, for a dime, you could get, like, a cup of maybe almost a quart of ice cream. The neighborhood was sloppy, the sidewalks were covered with milk. Kids would go in there like crazy.

SI: Wow.

BL: They finally closed him up. Later on, after repeal, Pete (Frasca?) opened a bar and a restaurant next-door, very good food, very nice guys and everything. Our block, we had four taverns, two on each side of the street. The barber across the way took the corner store away from Rosenberg's Notions, opened a bar there. In the middle of the block, a connected guy, (Santa Marco?), opened a big saloon with a German partner, (Schumacher?). Then, Maloney, on our side of the street, Maloney had two sons. They paid (Perry?) a thousand dollars each and they were both ensigns and never left the States during the war.

SI: Wow.

BL: I, on the other hand, on the day that President Roosevelt died, April 25, 1945, mail call, we were in Germany, somewhere between the towns of Braunschweig and Halle, I got a little pink card from the War Manpower Commission, exempting me from military service because of my defense job. [Editor's Note: The War Manpower Commission, established in 1941 by Executive Order 9139, was created to oversee employment in war industries during World War II. Franklin Delano Roosevelt died in his fourth term in office on April 12, 1945.]

SI: Wow.

BL: By that time, I was overseas almost two years. [laughter]

SI: Wow.

BL: In fact, it was over two years.

SI: Going back to your neighborhood, you had Germans, you had Italians--did you ever get a sense that there was any strong support for either Hitler or Mussolini in those neighborhoods?

BL: Yes, very strong support for Hitler. In fact, a guy that I used to bowl with, he had a delicatessen store down Bay Ridge Avenue on Sixth Avenue. Henry (Gherkin?), his name was. We didn't know, I didn't know at the time, but, when we came back, they published a list of white papers, they called it. They listed all the Nazis and what they were going to do. So, one of the guys we bowled against, a guy by the name of Karl Nicolai, he was going to be the *gauleiter* [regional Nazi Party leader] for Brooklyn and Henry (Gherkin?) was going to be the *gauleiter* for Bay Ridge. So, when we bowled, they bowled on the same team. So, who would bowl against them? The minute they got up to bowl, we all went, "I'll--okay."

SI: That was after the war that you found out.

BL: Yes.

SI: They were not arrested.

BL: They were detained for a while and turned loose.

SI: Were they in the *Bund*? [Editor's Note: The German-American *Bund*, a pro-Nazi group based on the earlier Friends of New Germany, operated from 1936 until December 1941, when it was outlawed.]

BL: Oh, yes. In fact, most of the Germans in the neighborhood were Nazis. They liked the idea that Germany was prospering while the rest of the world was in the doldrums.

SI: Did you see the Nazi flag displayed in your neighborhood?

BL: No, we never saw that.

SI: Okay.

BL: Although, the Italians had a Fascist club where they showed the Fascist symbol, the fasces with the ax on top, but they were--Italians were different. They were lovers, not fighters.
[laughter]

SI: Tell me a little bit about the Depression. You talked about its impact on your family and your neighborhood. Could you see the New Deal in effect in your neighborhood at all?

BL: What?

SI: The New Deal, if it impacted your neighborhood.

BL: Oh, yes, it did. In fact, well, the trouble even with me in Brooklyn, they had what they called the NYA, National Youth Administration, in colleges. [Editor's Note: The NYA was formed in 1935 to employ teenagers and young adults.] They appointed certain people that could get you a job, like, for seven, eight to ten dollars a week, in the libraries, the bookstores, stuff like that, the lab assistants. In Brooklyn, anyway, Brooklyn College had a terrible reputation. It was considered the hotbed of Communism. I found out early that I couldn't say that I went to Brooklyn College, because the minute I said it, I was out the door. In fact, after the war, one of the English professors there got to be an assemblyman and he got, I don't know, maybe twelve to fifteen well-liked, really liked, instructors and professors fired, because, well, in those days, people--today, even in the United States today, Communism is a big fear. In those days, it seemed to be a solution to the problem and people joined. I never would join--I didn't like the idea to begin with. If I wanted to make money, I wanted to make as much as I could and not share it with everybody else. My family first, that's it. My friends, they all had cars, the few friends that I had. I didn't have too many friends. The neighborhood that I grew up in was funny. When I was a kid, because of the store, I was handed over to, actually, babysitters, older boys and girls, and, when they went to high school and everything, I didn't have any friends. So, I had to play with younger kids. So, the result was that I didn't have too many friends to begin with. Two or three boys, guys my age from school, that's about all and they used to come mainly to hang around the store, so [that] they could read the magazines. One family in particular, though, lived on the block, the (Hix?) Family, and they were really hit by it, the Depression. Mr. (Hix?) had a job, believe it or not, his job, he drove a horse and wagon and he sold sawdust to butchers, fruit stores, bars, stuff like that. People stopped using sawdust, automobiles and trucks started to come and this poor old guy, he had no business or anything. He lived on the block in the sixth floor, six-room railroad flat. It was he and his wife, his father-in-law, mother-in-law, his mother and four boys in a six-room apartment. Charlie (Hix?), the oldest, was one of my buddies and all four were of close age and we would get together, say, on a rainy day and play cards in his house and everything. My house was not available for play. When Monopoly came out, it hit like a storm. It was expensive for the time, but people bought it anyway. They skipped meals just to buy a Monopoly set. I stole one from the store and I gave it to the (Hix?). My father almost killed me. He'd never hit me, but he was ready. [laughter] I'll give you an example how shrewd my father was--Fort Hamilton Parkway was unpaved. They decided that they're going to put in the Catskill Water System. So, they dug up the whole parkway. They went down about twenty-five feet, right in the middle of the street, very wide street, with wood and

everything there, and they put in these big mains and everything like that. Then, they said that, after they finished it, they're going to pave it with asphalt. My father went to Union Hardware and he bought all the roller skates that he could find, all that he could afford. I think he wound up with something like thirty-two pairs. They only sold for a buck-and-a-half, a pair of roller skates, but he had them. When they finally paved the road, everybody's looking for roller skates. Here, we've got a nice, smooth place to skate. My father had the skates. [laughter]

SI: Comic books came out in the late 1930s.

BL: Yes.

SI: Did your father start selling comic books?

BL: Oh, yes, big sellers; too bad I didn't collect.

SI: Yes.

Wendy Guanci (Granddaughter): Too bad, Gramps.

BL: My best friend, later on, he worked for the post office, but he was a big comic book fan. Every one that he bought and read, he put in cellophane. That was the plastic of choice in those days. When he retired from the post office, he moved down to Florida. So, when he got to Florida, he remembered he forgot his comic books. So, he took a plane the same day, took a plane back to Brooklyn, and went to the garage of the house and the books were gone, but he had a stamp collection, I think, that, finally, when his widow sold it there, she got almost a quarter million dollars for his stamp collection. He collected all first day covers, whole sheets and panes, all like that. He was a shrewdy, the best card player I ever knew. Besides he was a postmaster, he also was an insurance broker. On account of him, I studied at the (Polish Institute?) downtown. I became a broker, too, but I wasn't a very successful one.

SI: On the eve of World War II, in 1940 and 1941, did you think that the United States would get involved in the war?

BL: Oh, we all knew it was going to happen.

SI: Okay.

BL: We just didn't know when or how. I know that December 7th, I was working, it was Sunday. Sundays, I had to work day time; Sunday afternoon was big in the alleys. We're listening to a Dodgers--Brooklyn Dodgers, the National League at that time, the football league--listening to a football game and they gave the announcement over the radio about the bombing. [Editor's Note: On December 7, 1941, the New York Giants played the Brooklyn Dodgers in New York City's Polo Grounds.] So, we knew it wasn't going to be long. So, it was exactly two months for me, but I was 1-A from day one. Working those two jobs and the store, I got very fat, because, to keep my energy going, I was eating all the time. I went from 170 to, like, 225, something like that. So, when the doctor looked at me with all that fat, they didn't even put their

hands under my armpit to feel if I was warm. They said, "You're 1-A," [immediately ready for military service in the Selective Service System].

SI: Did you have any problems with the pre-war draft or did your job at the torpedo factory keep you out of that?

BL: No, always just registered. Then, we went for a physical, well, actually, two physicals--a preliminary one, to see if you had two eyes and two hands and two feet to walk. After that, they gave you a more thorough examination where you were classified. So, the classifications were physical disability, which was 4-F, and then, there was a limitation if you were married and a further limitation if you had children. My marriage didn't mean anything. (Perry?) didn't care. I'm going, that's it. He made up his mind. I'm going and that was it.

SI: Let us take a break for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You told the story about how you were told to escort these men to ...

SI: What happened afterwards?

BL: Well, we got on the train. We rode out to Ronkonkoma, Camp Upton was out there, reception center. The train had, I think, about 150 recruits on it. We had to line up on the platform, drop our pants, drop our shorts, and some little (pig's feet?) doctor, wearing a mask, with a flashlight, walking around, told us to squeeze our penis, to make sure we didn't have gonorrhea, and then, turn around and spread our cheeks to see if we had piles, hemorrhoids. Then, we would rest again. After that, they marched us into a mess hall and gave us coffee and donuts for breakfast. Then, we got measured for uniforms and boots and weighed everything and got shots, millions of shots, seemed like. It seemed everywhere we went, there were needles waiting. Being so fat, other guys got nice uniforms, my blouse was--the jacket, we used to call a blouse--was not like they are now, it was a full length jacket, but I got a pair of trousers that must've been made out of a thick horse blanket. I could hardly bend my legs in it and I fought to get the [other kind]--they wouldn't give them to me. Well, anyway, we get into our barracks. The First Sergeant comes along, says, "Leibovich, right?" He says, "Tie a towel on the end of your cot." So, he stands there, I'm standing. He says, "Well, in the Army, when a non-com gives you an order, you obey. If he tells you to tie a towel on the bed, you do it right away." He says, "You don't have to call me sir. You can say, 'Yes, Sarge.'" "Okay, Sarge," and I tied it. So, the Corporal came in later. I say, "Corporal, can I ask you a question?" "Yes." I said, "What does the towel mean on the end of the bed?" "It means, tomorrow morning, you're going to be KP." "What the hell is KP?" "Kitchen Police--you'll be working in the kitchen, washing dishes, swabbing the floor, whatever they tell you to do." Oh, yes, the guy next to me doesn't have a towel. I took my towel and tied it on his. He served KP. The First Sergeant comes in, he's swearing, he's murdering. I said, "What's up, Sarge?" He said, "Every time I break in a good mail clerk, they send him away." I said, "What do you have to do to be a mail clerk?" He said, "You know the alphabet?" I says, "A, B, C, D..." "Okay. You're my new mail clerk." So, for five days, I was a mail clerk. What I had to do was forward mail to the recruits. When the

shipping lists came out, I had to pull their immunization records, so that it went with them, their service record, to wherever they were going. On the sixth day, I opened up the list and there was my name, right there, and I see I'm heading for BIRTC, Fort McClellan, Alabama. I said, "Sergeant Hudson, what the hell is BIRTC?" He said, "That's Branch Immaterial Replacement Training Center. That means you're going to be trained first as an infantryman. After that, you can be placed anywhere, anywhere they decide, Air Force, artillery, anyplace in the Army, including infantry." I said, "I don't want infantry." He said, "What, are you scared?" I said, "Yes, I'm scared." So, anyway, after a two-and-a-half-day ride, we lined up in Fort McClellan.

SI: Was that the furthest you had ever travelled before?

BL: Yes, and the furthest I'd ever travelled before that was either to Bear Mountain, up the Hudson [in southern New York State], or Philadelphia, where we had a lot of family in Philly, or Atlantic City. Atlantic City was even further. We went to Atlantic City.

SI: What was travelling in the Deep South like at that time?

BL: Well, they didn't care much for us Yankees, I'll tell you that. It was like a different country all together. The towns looked like the shantytowns where all the unemployed veterans of World War I [lived], like the Hoovervilles [makeshift communities made by the homeless], like it. All the smaller towns looked like shantytowns. Railroads everywhere, place was not like Pennsylvania, New York or Jersey, where you saw a rail here and there. Down South, you see, everywhere you looked, there were railroads, all different kinds, Southern Pacific, L&N, East Coast, Orange, you name it. If you got a pass to town, forget it, you couldn't [get served]. If you went to a diner to get something there, most of the time, if you wore a uniform, they wouldn't even serve you. Some of the guys kept civilian clothes and, when they got out of the camp, they would change clothes and get served that way, but I didn't have good clothes to begin with and I sent them home. So, anyway, I wasn't interested in Anniston, Alabama. One trip was enough and the only reason I went, actually, one of the cooks gave me some money to go to a bootlegger to get some booze for him. Most of the South, they drank like fish, but all the states were dry. In fact, a lot of counties all through the South, even today, are dry. You can't get booze there, but the moonlighters do very well. [laughter]

SI: What was the training at McClellan like?

BL: Well, it was strictly infantry. We learned, first, how to handle a rifle, strip it, fire it. We practiced constantly on dry firing out on the ranges and everything, and then, qualified, or try to qualify. We did a lot of hiking. Every day, you ran through, like, a mile-and-a-half of all kinds of obstacle course. You had calisthenics. You had the lectures on chemical warfare, all the different weapons and all. You were busy all day. The worst part of training, the worst part of the Army altogether, is the "hurry-up-and-wait." So, we'd be notified, we'd have to fall out for roll call and reveille in the morning. So, you went out, maybe threw on a raincoat or an overcoat, if it was cold. This was February in Alabama. On Saint Patrick's Day 1942, in Fort McClellan, we had eight inches of snow. I got pictures there, showing us cleaning. We had tents. We got excused for that day because we had to brush the snow off the tent, keep them from collapsing, but we'd been told, "Fall out with leggings, ammunition belt, rifle." Well, we

didn't have steel helmets at the time. That was before we had steel helmets. We didn't have any helmets at all. We had to wear fatigue hats, but our fatigues were blue at the time. They didn't have the green fatigues, had a denim jacket, a denim pant and a big, wide-brimmed, denim hat. So, we'd fall out with the rifle and the ammunition belt and canteen and everything and you'd get in rank. They'd take attendance, or the squad leader would report, and then, we'd stand there and wait. Then, the Tech Sergeant, who was actually the field non-com there, would come out and say, "Change of orders--go back and come out in your overcoat and keep your leggings on, keep your [hats]. We're going to go for a lecture." So, we dumped everything in, went around into the tent, dumped everything where it's supposed to be, put our coat [on], marched to an assembly hall, got some kind of a lecture. I was lucky. We were directly across from the dayroom and latrines and showers. So, in my tent, I had my platoon sergeant, was in my tent, a little Kentuckian. We got along fine, though. We're both nasty--that's why we got along. Like, for instance, one time, I don't know who, somebody sent me a whole kosher salami in the mail. What they did was, they got an Italian or a French loaf, bread, hollowed out the soft part, put the salami in, wrapped it up that way and shipped it that way. That way, it made the trip, because you couldn't smell it or anything. When I opened it up and we got [it], four of us are all New Yorkers and we all knew what kosher salami was, but (Purdy?), he didn't know what it was. He said, "What the hell is that stink?" So, I said, "Sarge, you've got to taste this. It's good." He says, "I wouldn't touch that with a ten-foot pole." We all had a slice and everything like that. I wrapped it up and I put it in the bottom of my footlocker. That night, someone, one of the guys, Italian kid from Westchester, he says, "Hey, Ben, how about a slice of salami?" "Hey, that's a good idea." I go to the footlocker, here it was--the salami was this long when we started and it was only this long when I got there.

SI: It went from over a foot to a few inches.

BL: Yes. So, I said, "Hey, Sarge, you want a slice of this?" He says, "I told you, I wouldn't touch it." I said, "You son of a bitch, you ate half of it already." He said, "I'm sorry, but it's good, but I know where I can get a replacement." I said, "Well, you better. Otherwise, you're in trouble," but I couldn't handle him. He was like a wildcat. He got into a fight with a guy three times bigger, beat the hell out of him. He was one tough, little bastard. Oh, fun, we had fun. The other three guys in the tent there, they liked the two of us jousting all the time. It was like a comic scene. My best part in training there, one day, I was going to the bulletin board. I got, "KP," with, "RH," after my name. So, I go to the First Sergeant, "What's the RH, Sarge?" He said, "Oh, you're KP at Regimental Headquarters." I said, "Regimental? Don't they need KPs here?" "We got them here. I decided to put you in Regimental." "Okay," best thing that happened to me. I worked there two days in a row. Each night, I came back with a feast for the guys--pie, roast beef, roast chicken. We ate like kings. The following week, they put me on Regimental again. "They asked for you." I said, "Not me--I served my KP. I've got to be in the rotation, just like everybody else." "I'm telling you." I said, "I don't give a shit. You send me there, I'm not going to go." They wouldn't send [me]. That was one of the troubles. One time, back in Europe, I was being scolded by my company commander and there was a colonel from the outfit we were attached to in the tent. I gave a nice, snappy answer. So, the Colonel says, "You allow an enlisted man to speak to you in that fashion?" He says, "Colonel, what can I do? He's an independent fighting force." What I always say about my term in the Army, I did the job, I never got the rank or the money that went with it. I didn't want to be an officer. Like I told

you, I think I'm self-aware and I don't think I would make a good officer. I could lead people. In fact, in my job that I wound up with there, I had as many as fifty people working for me at one time and everybody was happy.

SI: It must have been somewhat rare for an enlisted man to have college under his belt.

BL: No.

SI: No, it was not?

BL: When we finished training at McClellan, we got shipped out to Fort Bliss, Texas, to what was then a regular Army outfit called the Third Separate Chemical Battalion. When I got there, the TO, Table of Organization, called for, like, 211 men, something like that. At the time we got there, there were about forty, I would say, all college graduates in the company and most of them were waiting to go to OCS. In fact, I had a faceoff with a former Boston College football player there. Every time we had a break and everything, he was talking about "dirty Hebes," "lousy Jews," all like that. So, I went up to him. I told him, "What are you talking about? You're an educated man. You don't have to talk like that and everything like that." "Why? Are you going to stop me?" and everything. I said, "Well, if you think I need to stop you, I'll stop you." "I'm twice your size--you're not afraid of me?" I said, "What are you going to do, kill me? The worst you can do is beat me up, but I don't think you can do it." We never fought, but, after that, he calmed down a little bit, but most of the guys, we had quite a few of them. In fact, in my squad, when I finally became a squad leader, I became, under [the] old TO, we're a squad--you've got to listen to [this], I don't know if you know about chemical warfare in the early days of the war, but we were a mortar squad. We travelled by six-by-six truck, a truck driver, a squad leader, an ammunition corporal, and then, eight privates. We had a mortar, a 4.2-inch mortar, which weighed a couple hundred pounds and travelled on a two-wheel cart, automobile tires. The cart had a steel tongue with a T-bar; two guys pushed the T-bar. Attached to the T-bar was a chain with another bar on the front. So, four guys pulled the cart and two guys pushed it. Ammunition travelled on a similar cart. We carried twenty-five rounds, or twenty-six rounds, actually, of high explosives and six to eight rounds of smoke, red or white phosphorous. That was also pulled by four guys. So, we were busy climbing over the mountains of Italy, jack-assing those things up and down the mountain. They could only go so far by big six-by-six truck. After we took Rome, they changed the TO, but that's another story.

SI: Tell me a little bit about this initial training in Fort Bliss. What was it like getting acclimated to this type of unit? [Editor's Note: Fort Bliss is located in Western Texas, near El Paso and the border with Mexico.]

BL: Well, Fort Bliss was funny. They populated us mostly with guys from Fort McClellan, from Fort Wheeler, Georgia. They were Massachusetts, New England, New York, Middle Atlantic guys, but I don't know what camp they came from, a whole bunch of Pennsylvania coalminers, mostly Polish, Hungarian, tough as hell, strong, have no idea how strong a coalminer can be. So, when we first got to [Texas], the first night we got to Fort Bliss, they didn't even have a place for us, just in. They had the cots in the tent and everything, but they weren't set up or anything and it was like two or three o'clock in the morning. The Pennsylvania miners didn't

like it. So, the area that we were in had no fence around it. It was right on the main highway into El Paso. So, all these hunyaks and all got on the highway, went into town and boozed up. They beat up a whole bunch of MPs in town, [laughter] came back and we were lepers in Fort Bliss the whole time we were there. The commanding general of the First Cavalry Division, that they were based at Fort Bliss, the famous "1 Cav" that you see all over in Korea and, now, in the Middle East, his name was General I "Something" Swift. We changed it to "I. P. Swiftly," but we had to set up camp. [Editor's Note: Innis Palmer Swift was a major general and commander of the First Cavalry Division from 1941 to 1944 in the Pacific.] We had to rebuild the camp out on the desert, actually, rocky, a lot of snakes and scorpions. We built latrines, shower stalls and kitchens and stuff like that and set up company streets, but we said that, "Chemical? They're never going to use chemicals in World War II. They learned their lesson in World War I." So, what we did, every morning before breakfast, we had calisthenics, after roll. Then, we had breakfast. Then, we had, like, an hour, much more time than usual, to get our tents in order. Then, we went out, independent, our side arms were forty-five automatics with holsters that are great, loved it. So, we'd take footlockers out, each squad would take a footlocker out, [in] the company street and we'd practice stripping and reassembling and cleaning, learning how to shoot and all that, spend an hour that way. Then, we'd go for a run, and then, it would be dinnertime. In the Army, you have breakfast, dinner and supper; you don't have breakfast, lunch and dinner. So, dinnertime, oh, dinner was a very tough time. We had to have our siesta afterwards. So, we'd go in our tent and, for an hour or so, we'd have a rest period. Then, they would take us out for another hike. We did a lot of hiking, a lot of calisthenics. After that hike, from three o'clock until retreat, we'd have footraces, play volleyball, play softball, some guys would do gymnastics, some guys were baseball players, like me, we'd play catch and all like that. Then, we had retreat, and then, supper. We had the world's worst cooks, so, most of us didn't eat supper. After we got paid, we went to Juarez in Mexico. You'd put two cents in a [bus] coin box and you were there. For a quarter, you got a complete steak dinner, salad, drink, everything. Then, finally, I had a company commander by the name of (Robin?), had a gorgeous wife who was living in El Paso, and one of the officers, I don't know which one, some handsome rascal, was playing around with her. He looked like a milquetoast type, not much chin, little sandy moustache, but he knew that she was fooling around. Finally, he moved out of the apartment into the bachelor officers' quarters and, one night, he committed suicide. So, we got a new company commander, a guy from South Carolina, a nice guy. His name was Guy, Raymond Guy. Anyway, one day, we finished with our hike and everything and the First Sergeant comes walking down the street carrying a bridge chair. A company clerk is carrying a wooden box and the Captain's walking with him. He said, "Okay, form a semi-circle there." So, the whole company formed a semi-circle. The Sergeant opens the chair, the Company Clerk opens the box and there's two shelves in there, green with yellow stripes on them. The Company Commander says, "Anybody here know what this is?" I'm a smart guy, I said, "It looks like two rounds of high explosive." He said, "Yes, this is your weapon, the ammunition for your weapon." We'd been fooling around. We didn't have any guns, mortars, at that time. We had either infantry eight-one-[millimeter] tubes or logs as a substitute for a mortar. We drilled, we had the sight, but we didn't have anything else, no baseplates, nothing. So, he says, "Does anybody know what this means?" I said, "I guess it means we're going to be taking a boat ride pretty soon." He laughed, he said, "You're right, but, first, we have to get our weapon and we don't know when that's going to be." About four, five days later, we got brand-new mortars. So, anyway, after that, we went to Louisiana, for maneuvers. We were there from early in July until November. We were in three

phrases, three different Army maneuvers. In fact, Wendy googles a lot and she questioned about the Third Chemical Mortar Battalion. Well, I was amazed at the report they sent back. They said, "Very outstanding unit; 480-some-odd days in combat." I don't know how many thousands of rounds fired from our battalion, had the enlisted medals and casualties and all that. I never got a decoration. In fact, they even wanted to take away my Good Conduct Medal. The guy who became my company commander, for whatever reason, I don't know what, but, from day one, he never liked me, but I have to say that, in most cases, he treated me fairly. Where I was right, he defended me. Like, for instance, the fuses on our shell used to be machined in metal. Then, some outfit in Brooklyn came up with a plastic fuse. It had a fault, once in a while, that would be an early explosion. So, one day, when we were firing a smokescreen for a tank attack--this was after we crossed the Rhine. I don't know if you know the topography of Germany, but, when you get past the Rhine Valley deep enough, you hit what they call the North German Plain. The land is beautiful, slightly rolling, but a fact, they know how to farm, anyway, but the tanks had to climb a slope to get up to the flat part and the Germans were waiting with their eighty-eights, [the German eighty-eight-millimeter artillery piece, an antiaircraft and antitank weapon]. So, we had to fire a smokescreen to protect them. So, as luck would have it, we had a premature burst. It was smoke, so, it must've burst about fifty feet in the air above the mortar. So, our platoon leader, Lieutenant (Peacock?), orders, "Ceasefire and fire by lanyard." Well, lanyard, a lanyard you know is a piece of rope. It's attached to a horseshoe-shaped thing and the shell has a ridge on it. You put the shell [up] and it's engaged in the horseshoe, and then, you put it in the thing, pull the lanyard and the shell slides down and fires. In the first place, I didn't like the order. I said, "We have to maintain the screen. These guys are going to get killed." He says, "I order you to do it." He was shaving. He went back in the hut, [I] said, "The hell with him." The other guys, they stopped. I had my guys throwing in the shell, all the four mortars in the platoon. So, when the ammunition guy came around, [he] wanted to know the count of shells we had left. So, we had prepared extra white phosphorous shells for the screen. I didn't have any for my squad. Most of the other squads had two or three. (Peacock?) wanted to know how come I was out. So, I told him. Then, the Company Commander came along and (Peacock?) says, "I want to court-martial him." So, I even said, "What, again? What is it this time?" So, I said, "Can I speak?" [The Company Commander said], "Sure." [I said], "You know we had to fire a smokescreen. We had a premature burst. Lieutenant (Peacock?) ordered fire by lanyard. I didn't think that we could maintain a screen. So, I disobeyed and I fired." He said, "Why?" I said, "Military necessity." He laughed, he said, "You're right. I'm glad you did that. We got a good job mentioned from the infantry general." I forget--oh, we were attached to our Second Division at that time. The way it works in combat, a battalion was attached to an infantry division, each weapons company was attached to a regiment and each platoon in the regiment was attached to a battalion. So, like, when we went into Sicily, when Third Chemical was attached to the Third Infantry Division, so, First Platoon was attached to Seventh Infantry [Regiment]. I was Second Platoon, we were attached to the 15th Infantry and the Third Platoon was attached to Thirtieth Infantry. We lost them. We hardly ever saw them, except when we were brought together. They were separate. He, in his report, mentioned, like, that we had to hit the beach, it says there, H-minus-thirty. That's a lie. We didn't. We went to Florida after maneuvers to get invasion tactics. They mounted 4.2 [mortars] in landing crafts and we practiced firing. What happened was, the shock was so great, we knocked the bottoms out of some of the landing craft. They repaired that. For the invasion of Sicily, H-minus-twenty, we were supposed to lie off the coast about a mile and, if it needed to be fired, we would fire them, but we didn't. In fact, in my boat I

was in, the coxswain, the Navy driver, was a little high, had some booze, and he went too fast. So, we hit the beach at about maybe minus-six, or something like that, and broached. The boat went sideways. Luckily, there was a high dunes about fifty yards away. We all ran and dug in by the [dunes], but we didn't have any trouble anyway. Our beach was kind of quiet. We had a lot of trouble with the German Air Force. They were bombing the hell out of it, but, then, they sank two LSTs [landing ship, tank]. Outside of that, they didn't do too much other damage.

SI: When you were training in the States, you said you were in maneuvers for about four months.

BL: Four months, yes.

SI: At Louisiana.

BL: Correct.

SI: Looking back, do you think that the training you got there prepared you well for what you saw in Europe?

BL: Well, I'll tell you one thing, as far as the maneuvers went, militarily, it didn't. It got us toughened physically. It's all swamps there. Everywhere you look in Western Louisiana, Eastern Texas, lots of snakes, lots of swamps, and we were out all kinds of like [missions]. I'll give you an example. Our job was chemical warfare, so, we didn't fire any mortars. We had an order to contaminate the DeRidder Air Force Base. So, a guy by the name of Brown, he came from that neighborhood of Louisiana. He knew all the paths through the swamps. We had a mixture in tin cans of cosmoline, what they use to store weapons. It's stinky stuff and it's brown, leaves an awful stain. So, he got us onto the airport and we spread the stinky stuff there and we contaminated it. They had to call off the problem, because they couldn't fly the planes. [laughter] One time, we had to decontaminate a bridge over a road. So, myself and three others, I had two guys on each side, we had armbands that made us like referees. They couldn't imprison us or anything. So, they put us out there and they forgot about us. So, the problems generally lasted two-and-a-half days. They started it at night, and then, they went two full days after that. Here we are, they gave us a C ration for one day and that C ration was really not enough to feed you. You had three little cans of crap, and then, sea biscuits and a couple of lemon drops and that's [it], powdered coffee, and here we are. The water is not fit to drink in the thing. We're out of water. We don't have any food. I don't have any radio, no contact. I don't see any planes, nothing. So, they said, "Well, what are we going to do?" I was a corporal at the time. So, I said, "I think all we can do is wait. Somebody will come along, we'll make contact." All of a sudden, we hear, "Clop, clop, clop." Here comes a black man riding a mule and he looks down, he says, "Hey, hi, you Yankee." I said, "How you doing? Hey, Daddy, got any food? We're hungry." "You're hungry? What do you mean you're hungry?" I said, "We haven't eaten for two days." He says, "Don't move." He galloped the mule away. About an hour later, he came with a ton of fried chicken, watermelon, corn, unbelievable. Finally, they came. Somebody remembered where we were, but, otherwise, I didn't see the [point]. I can see the practice for moving large forces of troops and everything, tanks and infantry battalions and companies, but, otherwise, as far as fighting goes, I couldn't see the purpose.

SI: Once you were done in the maneuver area, where were you sent next?

BL: Well, we went back to Fort Bliss, and then, we were told to crate everything, all our weapons and kitchen and everything, put it on a flatcar for APO San Francisco. So, we went to Juarez for dinner that night and there's a bunch of doctors and dentists sitting in the booth next to us and the table was in the middle of the floor. There were about two or three tables with suits, guys wearing suits. I didn't know anything, but, then, I hear one of the lieutenants say, the guy said, "Hey, did you hear about Third Chemical? They're going to San Francisco." Well, these guys in the suits jumped like they had springs up their ass. They went and they arrested the whole bunch there. They were FBI.

SI: Wow.

BL: They were only there for dinner, but "loose lips sink ships." So, what happened there? We uncrated everything. Instead of going to San Francisco, we went to Camp Carrabelle, Florida. [Editor's Note: Camp Gordon Johnston, located in Carrabelle, Florida, was an amphibious training base during World War II.] That's on the Gulf, just south of Tallahassee. We trained in landing craft in there. That's where they tried to fix up the landing craft with the boats. In fact, one day, we're out on the boat there and the coxswain ran us on to a sandbar and couldn't get off. We climbed out and pushed the boat off the sandbar. [laughter] After that, we went back to camp. We were there for about three weeks or so, and then, without crating everything there, they put us on a train and we went to Camp Myles Standish in Taunton, Massachusetts. Then, from there, we went to Staten Island and we got on the USS *Orizaba*. We sat there for about a week until, I guess, a convoy could be assembled up the coast and we set sail. I could look across the Narrows there for my old neighborhood, Bay Ridge. [Editor's Note: The USS *Orizaba* was a passenger liner that was converted into a troopship for World War I and World War II.]

SI: Were you ever given leave during this time in the States?

BL: I never had it.

SI: Yes.

BL: What happened, I got in trouble at Camp Myles Standish. They gave us a pass to Taunton, actually for a couple of hours. So, when the First Sergeant gave me the pass, it gave the return date for the next day. So, I looked around--there was nobody there. I went to the railroad station, took the New Haven, went to Brooklyn, spent the night in Bay Ridge. The next morning, I got back to Taunton. Everybody's looking for me--everybody's on the train heading back to New York. So, the Colonel--I had to do it to Guy, I'll tell you that story--the Colonel said, "I'm surprised that you ducked out like that." I said, "Colonel, I have a pass." He said, "The pass was for last night." I showed them the pass. "You took advantage of a stupid mistake." I said, "That's what you do." [laughter] What happened was, I told you about my pants made of horse blanket.

SI: Yes.

BL: Well, I weighed like 225 when I first got there. In McClellan, with all the running and hiking and everything like that, I lost some weight, but, when we got out to El Paso, which is desert country and it's hot, I lost weight. I got down to 174 pounds. Now, everything is big on me. I had the biggest size. We wore leggings in those days. They didn't have combat boots yet. These pants were too big and everything like that. The shirt was all right. We're having an inspection on Saturday. The Battalion Commander is expected, a colonel, West Pointer. We had forty-fives, I told you. Anyway, what happened with a forty-five, when we came to inspection arms, you took it out of the holster, you held it at forty-five degrees, you pulled the slide, make sure there was no shell in the end. They were empty magazines anyway. You shot out the magazine and the Colonel inspected it, gave it back. He looked at me. He said, "Are you kidding? You trying to make a disgrace of the United States Army?" I said, "What are you talking about, sir?" He says, "You dare to come out in that rig?" I said, "These are the only clothes I have." He says, "Don't you have a supply sergeant in this company?" I said, "Yes, sir, Sergeant (Fawcett?). I keep on asking him for proper clothes and he tells me he can't get them." He says, "Well, we'll see about that. You'll see me in the orderly room after inspection." "Yes, sir," and he didn't even inspect my pistol. I go to the orderly room afterwards. He said, "Well, we fixed this Sergeant (Fawcett?) deal anyway. You've got a new supply sergeant. Maybe you'll get the proper size, but I suggest, right now, I'll give you a pass, go into El Paso, to Sears, and you can buy a couple pairs of trousers--they're approved, same as the Army--and an extra shirt and tie," stuff like that. I said, "But, I have no money." At that time, I was only getting thirty dollars. I hadn't even been PFC yet. We're only getting thirty dollars a month and the money was going home on the allowance. At payday, I think I had six dollars and seventy cents and most of those went for cigarettes. So, he gave me a twenty-dollar bill and I went and I got the uniform. I had to wait for the leggings and, finally, got a right, correct pair. I said, "I don't know when I can pay you." He says, "You'll pay me." So, a couple of weeks later, we had a poker game. I won some money and I paid him, but he always remembered me. So, finally, when I got promoted to corporal, I got to be what was called meteorological corporal. I was supposed to determine the weather and its effect on mortar shells and flying stuff like that. It didn't turn out to be that way. What happened, they made me go up to observation posts and calculate fire data. Well, one of my majors in Brooklyn College was geology and topography was one of my favorite subjects, so, working with maps like that was a synch for me. I got up there and they had a target and the mortars and we finally got ammunition and they wanted me to hit a target. So, I'm trying to figure out how to calculate. I've got a range card and everything. The Colonel comes up and he said, "Did you ever do this before?" I said, "No, sir." He says, "Okay, you've got this pad, right. Do you got a ruler with a pencil?" He says, "Put the ruler down the middle of the paper. Draw a line, put an arrow, point up there. That's north." Then, he told me the steps to do it. I said, "Oh, that's easy." He says, "Oh, you think it's easy? Let's see you shoot a round, one round, at that target over there." So, I bit the pencil and I'm figuring and the range card and everything and I ordered the round. I only missed it by about ten feet. He said, "Wonderful." Later on, as it happened, in Italy, one day, I was in a wonderful OP, did a lot of damage to the Germans that day. It was about eleven o'clock on a bright, sunny day in October, more like a summer day. I get a phone [call]--we had sound-powered phones there--I get a phone from my platoon that my platoon leader wants to see me immediately. I said, "I can't leave this OP in daylight like this. They'll kill me. I'll be under direct observation. They're hunting for me all the time anyway." He says, "Well, I'm only telling you he insists." So, I figure the Germans are

very methodical. When they fire harassing fire, it's always at the same time, like, if you knew that they've shot at one o'clock, at one-twenty, the next barrage is coming. So, between one and one-twenty, you could do whatever you want. We used to go out and sit in the sun like that. So, anyway, I waited until they fired a barrage looking for me and, when it was quiet, I left all my equipment in my OP and I dashed over the mountaintop and I tripped. I started rolling down the mountainside. I guess I must've gone down a hundred feet. I got all kinds of bruises. I got down, winded and everything. I'm in a nice grove of pine trees. I reach in my pocket for a cigarette and a voice says to me, "Can I have one of those?" I've got my captain, Captain Guy. He said, "What the hell are you doing here?" I said, "You're my company commander. You don't know what I'm doing here?" He says, "That's right. What are you doing here?" I said, "I operated the OP for Second Platoon, calculating the fire there." He said, "That's a job for an officer. What are you, a corporal?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, you're not a corporal anymore. I'm cutting orders--you're going to be a sergeant." I said, "I'm going to be a sergeant. Captain, I don't want to be a squad leader." "That's what you are."

SI: When was that, approximately?

BL: It was just below Purple Heart Valley in Italy. Purple Heart Valley was a big, wide valley that led to Monte Cassino. You had two rivers going--you had the Rapido and the Liri Rivers going through there--and that's also another story. I've got lots of stories.

SI: Yes. To go back, you talked about being on the ship for a while as the convoy assembled. What about the voyage over to Europe?

BL: Well, before we set sail, a standard saying in the Army is, "A GI doesn't volunteer for anything," but I'm saying, "I'm on a ship and, if I don't volunteer and they give me work to do, what am I going to be doing? swabbing decks, cleaning toilets or something like that." "We need a volunteer." I volunteered. I got the most luscious job. I was nighttime anti-aircraft defense man. I occupied a tub with the big helmet radio and a twin forty-millimeter cannon. I never fired. I fired, I think, eight shots one day, just to see. They let me fire into the water.

SI: Wow.

BL: But, between hours, they would bring me coffee and sandwiches and, when I was through, I'd go down to the mess hall, eat whatever they had there, all the ice cream I wanted, breakfast, ate just like all the sailors and everything. The poor GIs ate GI food, yuck.

SI: Do you know if the convoy was ever attacked by submarines?

BL: No, they suspected it most--several nights, I wouldn't say most nights, because it took almost a week-and-a-half for us to get across--but I would say, like, four or five nights, they dropped depth charges. We could see destroyers running around, because the water starts frothing when they cut up like that. The USS *Texas* was the convoy leader and the exec officer was [actor] Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. I don't know if you remember Douglas Fairbanks.

SI: I remember, yes. You landed in North Africa.

BL: Yes, we landed in Oran.

SI: Okay.

BL: Algeria. We got there, all our equipment, I don't know how it got there, was already uncrated on the dock and we had to load it on. There was a big convoy of trucks for the battalion and we got it loaded up on the dock and we headed out. We went about twenty-five miles and stopped and it was a camp, a temporary camp. The cots were set up. We slept there that night and had breakfast the next morning, then, got on the convoy and headed east again, towards Tunisia. They were still fighting in Tunisia at that time. So, that's when I became a determined soldier. I saw these guys are crapping their pants, peeing in their pants--they were worried about going to Tunisia--and we left a long, brown streak on the road. Guys were hanging their behinds over the tailgate, crapping on the road. I said, "I'm not going to be that way and I don't care what happened. I'm as afraid as anybody there, but I'm not going to be craven." I said, "If it happens, it happens. I'll do everything. I'm not going to be a *gung ho* or anything." They didn't have that term then, but I said, "I'll do everything to protect myself, but, if it happens, that's it." That's the way I was, [for] the whole thing. Later on in Italy, I was supposed to go to a very hot OP and the new lieutenant replacement we had there said, "I'm glad that's you going up there, not me." I said, "Thanks, Lieutenant." He says, "Aren't you ever afraid?" I said, "Do you have any brains?" He said, "Why? What do you mean?" I said, "You have to be an idiot not to be afraid. Of course I'm afraid." He said, "Well, you don't show it." I said, "I made up my mind not to show it and that's it."

SI: Let me pause again for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

BL: Yes.

SI: You and your unit were headed up to Tunisia. What happened when you arrived?

BL: Well, we pulled into a camp area, where we could hear artillery. We could see a flash, but I guess we were about seven or eight miles away from the frontline. They had tents already up there, went in. Most of the guys were worn out from the trip and everything. They went right to sleep. So, the Second Platoon was--I was a squad leader. No, I wasn't a squad leader yet. I have to get my dates out. I was still a corporal then, but I was a sergeant of the guard. So, I'm at the gate to this thing there and it's like two-thirty in the morning and I hear motorcycles. So, I said, "What the hell is this?" Two motorcycles come up and a guy with a flashlight shines it on our signpost we've got, A3G, that's [our] company, Third Chemical, and he says, "This is Third Chemical?" I said, "Never mind this is--advance and be recognized." Who the hell are you? "You've got arms?" "Yes, we have arms." I said, "Take them off." My sentries are there, too. They're two Englishmen and they had orders for our company commander. Guess what? The next morning, we got back on the trucks, headed all the way back almost to Oran. [laughter] We went into training there. We're there for a couple weeks, and then, we went to Tunisia. By then, the fighting was over and we did a lot of practice in Tunisia and, from Tunisia, we got on the

landing craft to go to Sicily. [Editor's Note: Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily, commenced on the evening of July 9-10, 1943.]

SI: Was there any special training for the Sicily landing or were you just relying on the amphibious training you had already gotten?

BL: Oh, no, we had a lot of landing practice. Believe it or not, we had a lot of practice climbing up cargo nets. It was murder for me. I had to carry so much as an observer; I had to carry so much equipment. They took away our forty-fives, they gave us carbines instead. That was a break, because I could sling them over my shoulder. It was light. I had an ammunition belt. I had twelve clips. I had a belt with my canteen on it and everything, first aid kit. Then, I had a map case in a canvas bag over my shoulder. I had a sketching case, which was a tin box. Then, I had all kinds of equipment. I had an aiming circle, which was a big, fancy compass, actually, with an alidade, so [that] you can aim it. I had a rangefinder, portable rangefinder, all that stuff, and I had to climb up a cargo net with all of that on me. It wasn't that it was so heavy, it was just that everything was so clumsy. Everything's sticking out, but one thing that was good, in the tin case, I could carry four cartons of cigarettes. I fed them--we ran out of cigarettes a short time in Sicily. Everybody smoked.

SI: Were there any air raids when you were in North Africa?

BL: Oh, yes, almost every night, especially around--not so much in Algeria--but every night around Bizerte, Lake Bizerte, without fail. If it wasn't for a regular raid, it was "Bed-Check Charlie." Some, like, a Cub would fly over and it's sputtering and everything. Some of them dropped anti-personnel bombs, little hand-grenades and stuff. Some dropped little leaflets, telling the Americans are going to lose the war, "Surrender," and we'd just say, "Chased them out of North Africa, they're telling me to surrender?" In Bizerte, we did a lot of work, a lot of physical work and a lot of practice with the weapon. Then, finally, one morning, about three o'clock in the morning, we got up and we went to the shores of Lake Bizerte and they told us to dig in. So, we did, straddled trenches there, slit trenches, and got in. Sure enough, we got raided about three or four times by German fighter planes, strafed the beaches, but, then, after that, I think they got gunships out and nothing got through. So, when we sailed for [Sicily], we got out on the LST, we stayed out in the lake there for two days. We swam off the ramp, and then, finally, we set sail. That was an adventure. When we left the lake, the lake was calm, but, when we got out into the sea, there was a storm. The waves were, like, twenty feet high. How the hell are we going to get into the boat like that? We got past Malta and all and the waves and everything, the call comes to board the landing craft. So, they drop it down to the water and the first individual man goes down a cargo net. He met it the wrong way, got a broken leg. Another guy got hurt. They didn't know what to do. They pulled the boat up. They decided to set up ladders to the davits and we climbed the ladder to go in. All of a sudden, miracle, the moon comes out, the water is glassy, not a ripple, just like that. We got in the boats and we sailed to Sicily. An hour or so later, we're lying--we're supposed to be lying off the coast. Like I say, most of the boats did; none of them fired, as far as I know. They were never called on to fire. So, that first day, we actually spent on the beach waiting for everything to get together. So, the next morning, I fired my first mission, got a very good compliment from the head of the little village up ahead of us, must've been a German headquarters or they had Bulgarians fighting

there, too, at that time then, for the Germans. It was a walled town and, outside the wall, they had four trucks lined up and they were taking stuff from inside and loading it into trucks. We destroyed all the trucks, four rounds, one round per gun, and we got them--boy, did they complement me; the next day, was I in trouble. The next day, the Second Armored Division and their infantry were going to go for a town up at the head of a valley. They were going to try and do it early in the afternoon, so [that] they could clean it out at night. I don't know what the plan was. Anyway, I set up an OP. I knew where my mortars were, I knew where the target was, easy to figure out, everything like that, figured the range card right, called it down to the platoon sergeant. He repeated everything after me. The range I figured was, like, 3,800 yards. So, the way we fired ordinarily, we fired four thousand, and then, thirty-six, and have it bracketed, and then, we knew it by judgment. So, I called up for 3,800 yards. So, we're going to fire at four thousand. So, at H-Hour, in come the tanks, they're zig-zagging. I get the order to fire. I'm supposed to fire five rounds of smoke, and then, if they're still fighting, HE [high explosive] into the town. So, I fire one round of smoke and, before I can even take a breath, get, "Ceasefire." "What's the trouble?" "It landed in our infantry." "Well, where are they?" They figured it out--they were only ahead at 3,200 feet or yards; it's six hundred yards short. I said, "Look at the range card. I figured it for 3,800 yards. Something's wrong here." So, they said, "Don't fire anymore." So, I think, after that, I fired maybe four more missions, but for short distances. Like, for 1,500 to 2,500 yards, we were okay, but anything over that, we didn't do good. Finally, we got new mortars from Ordnance. We did better with that. The third time, we got in Holland, I think we were, at the time, we did better with those. I don't know what they did. I think they lengthened them more than anything else and they changed the powder, whatever. Anyhow, I'll tell you, I did the job, but I never got the rank or the pay. Hell, we had some funny [incidents].

SI: Tell me more about the campaign in Sicily. There was this place where there was the friendly-fire incident. What happened after that?

BL: Well, after that, we just went along until we were detached from the Third Infantry to the Ninth Infantry. They attacked the town. We fired a couple missions for them. Then, there were a couple more short missions on the way to Palermo. Then, I don't know what happened, but, at Palermo, they took the vehicles away from us and we marched from that point to Palermo. I think it was, like, fifty-five miles, something like that. We marched all night and all next afternoon, something like that. Oh, I couldn't wait for them. They finally told us to sit down. My ankles were so sore, carrying all that junk. Anyway, we didn't do much after that. After Palermo, after Sicily was secured, we didn't have any attachment. We set up camp on the northern highway that leads from Messina to Palermo. There was a nice beach down below. We went swimming and we played softball, and then, we packed up and we went down to the south coast, to Agrigento. I don't know if you know about Agrigento. They've got Grecian ruins there that are even better than the Acropolis. We were there. We put on a demonstration for an infantry division and they didn't attach us. We went back up to Termini, where we were up [on the] north coast. We were there, I think, a day, went back down to Agrigento again and, finally, we got attached--guess who?--34th Infantry Division.

SI: In the drive to Palermo, did your unit lose any men?

BL: I don't think that my company, from the moment we landed in Sicily until we got well into Italy, I don't think we had a casualty. It was afterwards they took it pretty heavy, but we did a lot of fighting and they were after us all the time. That gunpowder packed a wallop. That shell is twenty-five pounds and it's got seven-and-a-half pounds of TNT. It doesn't dig deep, but the concussion is murderous.

SI: Were you mostly firing high explosive missions?

BL: Yes. I didn't like to fire the smoke too much, because that would give us away.

SI: You said that, at one point, you used white phosphorous. [Editor's Note: White phosphorous is used for screening and incendiary purposes. When used for incendiary purposes, it is in a chemical form that burns the skin.]

BL: Yes.

SI: Did you use it at all in Sicily?

BL: I used it. Well, we had red smoke, too.

SI: Okay.

BL: But, white phosphorous served a double purpose. For instance, like I told you, we were attached to the 34th Infantry Division. They had a unit that you know of, the 100th Infantry Battalion, all right, the Japanese boys. [Editor's Note: The 100th Infantry Battalion, a segregated Japanese-American unit, joined with other Japanese-American units to become the 442nd Regimental Combat Team in Italy, the most highly decorated US Army unit of World War II.] My platoon was attached to them. They were stuck--I don't know which river it was. I don't think it was the Volturno, I think it was the river after the Volturno. Every mountain had a river at the base and each one was a tough one to cross, until we got to Purple Heart Valley, and then, it was a bastard. What happened there, I could look down, I had a terrific OP there. They could have shot at me for months and they would never touch me. These Japanese kids there, every night, they were improving my hole. I wound up, I had a nice bench, I had an earthen desk. They set it up so that I could set my flashlight to read or figure whatever. I had enough room where two guys could sit with me. Sometimes, we played gin. [laughter] They would bring me my rations and mail and everything, every night. Every night, I got out of the hole there, went over the backside of the mountain, took a crap, did some exercise, and then, went back in. I could look down and here's this--they call it a river, it was maybe twenty-five feet wide and maybe three feet deep, running like crazy, though--here, all these Japanese boys in slit trenches, foxholes, all around on the south side. On the other side, [you] see all the Germans. I could see them. So, somebody, the Company Commander from [the infantry?], he said, "Give them a dose." I said, "Okay." So, I said, "Where do you want it?" He says, "Right flank." So, I called off the targets to the mortar and figure out the range for white phosphorous and HE. Here was the infernal part of the plan. I shoot the white phosphorous. As soon as white phosphorous hit air, it burns. It gets on your skin, it's tough to get out. So, here, I fire four rounds, one round each gun at the spread, and it's like Fourth of July. It really bounces around. Here, they're

getting WP all over them. They're jumping over, and then, trying to get it [off]. Then, I give them a dose of HE, cut them down like grass. A reporter from *The Stars and Stripes* [a military newspaper] came up to visit. He spent the day with me. He said, "You're cruel to do that." I said, "It's war--what do you do?"

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You told us the story about *The Stars and Stripes*.

BL: Yes. Well, I started to tell you, finally, when we left Sicily, we trucked through Messina, up through Calabria, up to a point south of Naples and we were attached to the 34th Division. They get me and they put me in an officer's mackinaw and they give me a cap with the metal braid on it and they say, "Go to this colonel and tell him what we do." I said, "You're crazy. What the hell do you want from me? I'm a two-stripe corporal there and you send [me] and you dress me up like an officer. Send an officer." "Never mind, you go." So, I went and I told him and everything. He attached us to the *Nisei* [first-generation Americans of Japanese descent] and we did until they were relieved and we stayed in line. That's what would happen. That's why we had so many days in the line. We'd be [with], say, the 15th Infantry, and then, they'd be relieved and we'd be still in the same position, supporting the new guys. Eventually, it got to the point where they had to take us out. Sometimes, we went six weeks without taking a bath.

SI: Did constantly being on the line get to you mentally?

BL: It got to some, but most of us didn't. We had it. It was because, even though we took quite a bit of casualties at one point--I'll tell you about that, where we really took a bad hit--but the casualties didn't all happen [at once]. At one time, a guy'd get hit with a piece of shrapnel or something, go to an aid station, get a couple of stitches and a bandage and come back, stuff like that. Those guys seemed to do better than the guys that weren't hurt. We had a lot of--there's one guy, he even writes about in his memoir there, the guy was "Mr. Atlas." He was a weightlifter, an Italian guy from Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn. He was so yellow. Every night, he'd try to desert and, every night, they had somebody waiting for him. Finally, he got tired and they did something with him, shipped him off, but most of the guys are all right.

SI: After Sicily, were you part of the landing at Salerno or did you go after?

BL: No, we missed Salerno. [Editor's Note: Operation AVALANCHE, the Allied landings at Salerno, Italy, occurred on September 9, 1943.]

SI: Okay.

BL: All that time, while Salerno was going on, we were trying to get attached. After all, our commander was a West Pointer and he's a fighter. Unfortunately, he got killed. I'll tell you that story. We had a reputation we were getting with the work we were doing there, *Yank Magazine* and *Stars and Stripes* mentioning a strange new weapon that's doing a hell of a lot of damage and they wanted to know about it. So, the Colonel decided to form a mortar squad from some guys in Headquarters Company and he's going to put on a demonstration for reporters. We didn't

know what was going on. We knew the demonstration was going on. So, our company commander, Captain Guy, and battalion exec, Major (Ramsey?), they decided to go to Capri for a couple of days. In the meantime, for the demonstration, all the other company commanders have to go up to the town where the CP [command post] is for this demonstration, in order to talk to reporters and everything. So, while they're in the streets setting up, a three truck convoy, carrying about one hundred German prisoners of war, are going down the street. All of a sudden, an ME [Messerschmitt] 109 comes over, strafes, bombs, kills all the company commanders and the Colonel, and I guess the squad, I don't know, probably killed some of the guys that they picked for the squad. Anyway, we had to reorganize. We didn't know at the time, but we were supposed to go to Anzio with the Third Division, but, since we had to reorganize with new officers and everything like that, they threw us over to the French colonial troops there. [Editor's Note: In Operation SHINGLE, the Allies landed an invasion force at Anzio and Nettuno on January 22, 1944, to bypass the German Winter Line and seize Rome. When the Allies failed to move in from the landing zone, a marshy basin surrounded by mountains, German forces were able to encircle the beachhead and flood the area. The Allies endured months of intense shelling and casualties until a breakout was achieved in late May. The Allies then liberated Rome on June 4, 1944.] So, they had--oh, they were real monkeys, but they'd fight, those little bastards--but they also had the Foreign Legion. So, we went with them to a point across the Purple Heart Valley, to a point on Mount Cairo. Halfway up the side of this mountain, Germans had a big observation point on the top of that mountain. The next mountain to the west was Monte Cassino. We were north of Monte Cassino. The road ran like this, Cassino was here, we were there, north. So, there were terraces. The road was about 150 yards down below [where] the terraces were. We set up our mortars. I don't know where the other platoons were. I know where ours was. Down on the lowest terrace, there was a dugout that the Germans had left. It was protected. I've got to place my guys around and we're all told we're going to be standing there a long time. There are a lot of dugouts, but, when I finally got all my guys placed, I don't have a dugout. So, I dug a slit trench that night. I figured, next day, I'd try and, the next day, I went, I found a spot and, boy, did I have a dugout, a luxury hotel type. [laughter] It was big. I made a step on top. I put logs on top of that step there. We used to get rations, besides Ks and Cs, there were either five-in-ones or ten-in-ones. They came in big, portable cartons, cardboard cartons. I covered those logs with the cartons. I papered the walls of the dugout with those cartons. It got soft from the weeds and everything on the floor. I got empty ammunition boxes, I put them on there, put the cardboard on there, blankets on there and fifteen, twenty sandbags on the doorway. We were secure. On top, I must've had ten tons of dirt and rock. I think, one night, we got hit with a 380-millimeter naval shell, because there was a big hole up on top. We didn't hear a thing. One of the other squad leaders asked if he could bunk with me there and we did. He was in the same position as I--he had no place. We set up and I was the number one squad, so, my squad did all the zeroing in for the platoon. So, we were there for harassing fire, mainly, while we were with the French. We didn't know when they were going to attack Cassino, but we had, I had, eight different targets set up in place [for] the mortar and I didn't like the setup, because, when we fired, the mortar would dig in and slide back. So, I decided, in my own time, I dug a hole about four feet in diameter and seven feet down and I lined it with sand and rocks. Then, I put four poles from trees that had been knocked down in the back of that thing and backed the baseplate against that and it was resting on that solid thing. That baseplate not only didn't move the rest of the time we were there, and we were there over a month, but we lost the baseplate. We couldn't get the baseplate out of that position.

SI: Wow.

BL: They wanted to charge me for it. I said, "It'll take six months' pay for me to get the [money] to pay for that baseplate."

SI: That was all leading up to the attack on Cassino. [Editor's Note: Operation AVENGER, the codename for the bombing of the Monte Cassino Abbey, occurred on February 15, 1944. Beginning in the morning and continuing into the afternoon, 250 bombers dropped six hundred tons of explosives in conjunction with heavy artillery.]

BL: You're right.

SI: What do you remember about the final push on the mountain?

BL: Well, of course, there was the bombing and, after the bombing, the combination of English, Polish, French, American went up there to take it and it was a mistake. They should've left it alone. It didn't serve no military purpose and all it did was get a lot of guys killed and hurt, because, then, it became house-to-house fighting to take over the Cassino, the abbey. After that, we got pulled down and we were given different positions somewhere, not too far from the coast. Main reason after that was to save the Third Division at Anzio. So, we were about a mile from the coast at a place called, at a river, the Garigliano River. The only thing there was, we were in a nice ravine, good defilade for the shots and everything, and told, "We don't fire unless we're fired upon." So, we had a new replacement lieutenant at that time. He'd never even heard of mortar fire before that. So, Lieutenant (Peacock?) decided to teach him how to fire a mortar platoon. He didn't know himself how to do it. We had another lieutenant used to do that. So, I told him, "Hey, we're under orders not to fire." He said, "Don't tell me what to do." My basic load was twenty-six high explosive. He says, "I'm only going to fire HE anyway." I said, "You're not supposed to fire." Well, anyway, he wound up shooting nine, takes nine shots, and, sure enough, twilight comes and the Germans threw crap at us, oh, boy. Anyway, I ran out of ammo. That's another story, but, now, they've got an inkling, "How come some of the other squads got ammo left and you don't?" I said, "Because (Peacock?) fired nine." He said, "Well, how about your ammunition guy?" I said, "Well, he's busy brown-nosing, making tea and coffee for the officers. He doesn't pay attention to the ammo. I keep telling them, 'Next time we get any peace, if we don't get rid of that guy, I'm going to resign. I don't care if I have to be a buck private. I don't want that guy in my squad.'" I finally got rid of him. The worst enemy of a GI is a brown-noser. I hate guys that suck up to officers.

SI: Did you have a lot of problems with getting the supplies you needed?

BL: Once in a while, not too often. The big surprise on supplies was in Southern France. Well, what happened with that, in my own way, I told you the makeup of a squad. So, I had a little guy from Delaware, Joe (Pesta?), was my truck driver, and I had a San Antonio Mexican, (Wesley Obregon?). They were pals. I couldn't stand (Pesta?). I'd let (Obregon?) ride with him in the cab because I hated (Pesta?). I didn't hate him; I just couldn't stand him. He was a drunkard, ignorant. Anyway, we took Rome, we got passes to Rome. He bought a few bottles of

denatured alcohol, brought them back to the camp, drank two bottles one night. So, we had reveille in the morning, roll call. I went to wake him up. I thought he was snoring. I had never really heard death rattles before, but that's what I was hearing. I tried to wake him up and I couldn't. So, I went to the platoon leader, Lieutenant (Cam?), I asked, "How do I report him?" "Oh, say he's in camp but unavailable." That's the way I did it. (Obregon?) went to get him for breakfast, he saw something wrong, called first aid, but he was dead before they got him to the aid station. So, (Peacock?), on the way from breakfast, he says to me, "If you would've reported the guy right, you might have saved his life." Well, I jumped on him. I was going to--I lost my temper--but they held me back. Anyway, three days later, we get notice, they're changing the TO of the outfit. Unfortunately, about anywhere from eighty to a hundred of us are going to be sent somewhere else, going to be dropped from the company. So, we had two guys in the Third Platoon. One was a reclassified Ranger, (Stapleton?). I knew that he was going to go, because he was bothering them all the time. He didn't want to [be there], he wanted to be a Ranger and he didn't want to be a squad leader. We had another, French Canadian, (Massy?), he loved going out at night and cutting off German ears. I think he had something like forty gold rings that he took off Germans that he killed at night.

SI: Wow.

BL: He didn't want to stay with us, either. He wanted to go with the infantry. Then, they put out the list and who do you think is at the top of the list? me. I'm on temporary duty. So, how is it, the TO, going to be? Instead of eleven men to a squad, we're now going to be five men to a squad. Instead of travelling in trucks, we're travelling in jeeps with a jeep trailer. There's a driver, a squad leader, ammunition handler and two gunners, or whatever you want to call them, five men to the squad. It's good. At least that way, they could be able to get a vehicle up to a position; [not so] with a truck. So, after that, we were about eight to ten miles north of Rome, beautiful area. We're in a natural amphitheater. They set up. We saw Al Jolson and the three girls there, Kay Francis, Carole Landis. They'd made a movie about them. They'd put on USO shows. We got, finally got, passes to Rome. That's when (Pesta?) picked up his alcohol. Then, we were sent from there down to a strip of pine trees just north of--I forget the name of the town--just north of Naples. We go in training for Southern France. Then, I get another lollapalooza. Company Commander called me into his tent this morning, after breakfast. He gives me a whole bunch of books and papers. He says, "You're in command." I said, "I'm in command of what? I'm only on temporary duty here. What the hell do you want from me?" He said, "When I give you an order, you're going to obey." I said, "Yes, sir. So, what's the story?" He says, "You don't talk to me that way." I said, "I don't give a shit how I talk to you. What's the story?" He said, "Well, Third Division is running a war college and all non-coms above third grade and all officers have to attend. You are in charge of the company." It's now a reduced size, small company. So, here I am, I take them to the beach. We're practicing firing shots, more practicing, setting up and tearing it down for speed and stuff like that. About the third day, I'm giving a lecture on my specialty, maps and compass reading and everything. We're in a beautiful spot. This was, of course, all pine trees, no grass, no bugs, nothing. The only thing was mosquitos, but, every day, they used to spray DDT, so, we had no mosquitos. So, here I am, starting to lecture, and Major (Hoffman?), the battalion exec, comes walking by. I call attention. He says, "At ease. Do you mind if I listen in?" So, I said, "No, sir. You're the boss." So, he lights up a cigar, sits down. I give this lecture teaching them how to read a compass and maps, magnetic

declination, "Because true north is on the map, but magnetic north is what you read on your compass and that's based on the North Pole, somewhere west of where we are. So, if you take a reading off a map, you have to decline the difference between magnetic and true." He objected. He said I was wrong. So, I said, "I don't think so, Major." He said, "I'm going to check up. What's your name?" and I told him. So, that afternoon, I'm putting all the equipment away in the box, one of my guys told me that the Major went to see the Captain and he asked if the Captain wanted to keep me on temporary duty. He didn't hear the answer, but, after supper that night there, the Captain says, "Hey, Leib, I've got good news for you." I said, "What's that?" He says, "You're back on regular duty." [laughter] (Hoffman?) wanted to take me to Headquarters Company. That's what the guy told me.

SI: Wow.

BL: Oh, I would have loved Headquarters Company.

SI: In Italy, did you ever get a chance to interact with the civilian population?

BL: Oh, yes. We had something illegal. When an outfit went overseas, every outfit had a slush fund. We kept ours. The rule was, though, if you went overseas, you had to get rid of it. So, for us, I could show you, I've got a picture there, General Teddy Roosevelt visited us up in our position near Cassino. He said he saw something he'd never saw in all his years. [Editor's Note: Teddy Roosevelt, Jr., son of the US President, was a US Army brigadier general in World War II.] Every platoon had a trunk, a big overseas trunk. In that trunk, we had fresh laundry. We used our slush fund to get laundry with the civilians. The way we did it, every so often, we were treated to a quartermaster shower. I don't know if you know about them, but they put two trailers together. They had duck boards, and then, about ten showerheads on both sides. You'd go in and you got maybe three, three-and-a-half minutes to take a complete shower. At the end of that, they turned off the water. If you're sudsy, it's tough shit, but you go from there to a quartermaster store. There, they've got fresh uniforms, underwear, handkerchiefs, socks, sweaters, caps, everything like that. So, when we went, we put our clothing in bags that they gave us. Then, if there's a new shirt my size, I took the new shirt. If it wasn't a new shirt, I didn't take a shirt. I used my old one. New trousers, new boots, we supplied ourselves all new clothes. The Supply Sergeant would stamp our serial numbers on--he knew everybody, mine were 9240, the last four numbers. Then, when we went back to the outfit, after showers, or we went up to position or like when Roosevelt was there, all of a sudden, a guy comes up with the weapons carrier, says, "Laundry." Roosevelt, "Laundry?" Here, they open up the trunk, every guy gets his bundle of clean uniforms. We go up to our dugouts and change, dirty clothes into the trunk and away. Well, when we got to Rome, the Army must have heard about our slush fund--maybe Roosevelt reported it. So, they decided to have a party. So, some of the boys went down to the church nearest us. They spoke to the priests and we arranged to have a dinner dance in Rome. They hired, with the money, a band and they brought in girls from the town to be partners for dancing. We had a wonderful time. That's as close as we had. What we did have until we left Italy, we had three Italian prisoners of war. They were with us all the time. They did all the KP. They dug the garbage pits, the straddle trenches, washed the pots and pans, everything. They ate good. At least we were getting good rations there.

SI: You were issued a carbine at the beginning of the campaign.

BL: Yes.

SI: Were you ever in a situation where you had to fire it?

BL: Yes, once.

SI: Okay.

BL: They sent me up to an OP and I looked at the situation map. This same lieutenant who asked me if I was scared said, "Are you chickening out? You don't want to go up there?" I said, "Hell, I'd be chickening out? I don't think that we're clear on that spot. I think the Heinees [Germans] still got it." He said, "Go on, they reported it." I refused to go. I wouldn't go. So, the Company Commander of the infantry, he says, "I'll give you three guys to go up with you." So, I said, "Okay." So, I had, supposedly, a telephone or a radio operator from our platoon helping me carry a reel of telephone wire to carry up there, plus, some of the other stuff. We're going up and the lead rifleman suddenly goes like that and we all jump into the bushes and everything. Coming down the path comes a souvenir hunter's delight. I don't know what his rank was, but he had everything that any German officer [could]--he had a leather overcoat, he had binoculars, he had a camera, he had a Luger, he had a dagger, he had a (goblet?) on his belt and a cap and boots and everything like that. I fired one shot. I don't know if I hit him or not. We all fired. We killed him and we dove. I got the pistol, but everybody got something else there, but we came back down. I couldn't go up there for another two days.

SI: Go ahead.

BL: I'll tell you the real bad part, where we took the bad hit. All these officers got killed by the plane there. My platoon leader, Lieutenant (Arnold?), who became the exec, he was killed there. So, I had a guy from Brooklyn, Lieutenant (Cohen?), became the [platoon leader]. I don't know why they didn't have (Peacock?). (Peacock?) was an enlisted man in peacetime and they sent him to OCS. I don't think he graduated high school. He just liked to drink. Give him beer, beer or gin, that's what he liked. Well, anyway, I'm at an OP and we're not going to fire until early the next morning. So, I'm planning--I'm picking out targets and calculating fire data. I have to call down and I ask the telephone operator, "Where the guns being set up?" So, he points out the coordinates on the map. I said, "Hey, that's a stream bed." So, he says, "Oh, it's beautiful, what defilade we got here." I said, "Yes, you know something?" said, "The Germans were over every inch of this ground. You think they don't know that spot?" I said, "You fire one round from there, they're going to counterbattery you. They'll kill you." Lieutenant (Cohen?) gets on, said, "Why don't you mind your own business? I think that's a wonderful spot." Well, we got an order the next day to fire, fired, I think, eight, maybe twelve, rounds. Then, they caught it. We had eleven guys killed and fourteen wounded in the platoon, twenty-eight men. You know what happened? (Cohen?) ran, went over-the-hill. Later on that spring, in Caserta, Fifth Army had a Passover *Seder*. So, all the Jewish guys were invited for the *Seder*. So, naturally, the Captain came and everything and they had, like, each table had maybe ten, twelve soldiers. They had about forty tables set up there, great, big, I guess a riding academy, or something like that. So,

they had a colonel at the head of the table. He said, "Okay, now that we're all relaxed," said, "let's have some war stories." So, some lieutenant over there says, "Lieutenant (Cohen?) over there has a terrible story. Let him tell you that." So, our captain there said, "(Cohen?), that him? That yellow bastard, arrest him--he deserted." [laughter] They took him away, but that was the worst that we had. From that point on, I was like the yellow fever. Nobody wanted to talk to me, said I'm a jinx. So, after that, I got promoted anyways, so, I didn't have to do it anymore. In France, the guy, the lieutenant who replaced me, was captured by the Germans. He was of German descent from Milwaukee and he had a jeep driver, Andy (Johnson?). They were coming back from an OP and these three Germans jumped out and stopped them, pointed guns at them. So, Lieutenant (Blanc?) his name was, in German, was telling them to surrender, they were surrounded and everything. They shot him. (Johnson?) had his foot on the clutch with the motor going. When the shot rang out, he released it. That jeep just flew out of there. He managed to get away. They fired at him, but they didn't [hit him]. After that, I don't who figured fire data.

SI: Tell me about the landing in Southern France. [Editor's Note: On August 15, 1944, Operation DRAGOON, the Allied invasion of Southern France, began.]

BL: Oh, that was a picnic. [laughter] The bad part about that was booby-traps. We landed in Saint-Tropez. There's lots of vineyards there and they're the special kind of grapes. They didn't grow on bushes, like you see in the travelogues. They had trellises and the wine grapes grew on trellises and, attached to these wine grapes, they had twelve-inch naval shells, booby-traps. So, the first guys to enter the vineyard, they got it pretty bad, but, otherwise, I think the whole area was being defended by Romanians or Hungarians, no Germans. We didn't run into any Germans until we went west toward Marseilles. When we hit the delta of the Rhone, we turned north. I had to--yet again, another special job, I had a lot of special jobs--but this time, being that I could read maps so good and they said that we're going to travel very fast, so, I travelled in a weapons carrier. I had four six-by-sixs, in charge. My duty was to go to the beachhead, pick up ammo, gas, food, mail, water, everything, and go up to the front, deliver it to the platoon, go back, restock on everything. I did that for five days. Then, finally, the Third Division, which we were attached to again, they said, "Step aside, you're in our way. We're going too fast for you guys." So, then, I got back to my squad. Although, on the way north, a couple of days later, our platoon was put on guard on a freight train. We went to a town called Besancon, up near Strasbourg. That's where I learned to grill with briquettes. When we got to that town, we were in a briquette factory, waiting for the outfit to catch up, and a Frenchman showed us how to set them on fire and roast your pork chops. [laughter] The French didn't like us, believe it or not.

SI: How did they show that?

BL: Well, for instance, when we guarded this train, we had stopped for the locomotive to pick up some water and there was an old guy--maybe not so old, but gray-haired with a moustache. He had a Maquis [French guerillas] brassard on and he carried a rifle with an ammunition belt. He asked for a ride. So, I said, "Come on." I took him in our car. We had a stove. The trip was a day-and-a-half, two days, so, we had a small stove where we could cook something, coffee or heat up your rations or something. So, we gave him food and we happened to have quite a bit of wine and booze, so, we gave him some drinks. So, then, all of a sudden, he started with a diatribe, "You goddamn lousy Americans, you think you're saints of the whole world, everybody

owes America and everything," said, "You're the slime, the grease, of the Earth," said, "True patriots, men of steel, they stayed here and fought. You slimes ran away like yellow dogs to the protection of the gold coast in America." We found that to be a pretty pervasive opinion.

SI: Going up to Strasbourg, you had not encountered too much resistance in your unit.

BL: Oh, yes, we had plenty of resistance.

SI: Yes.

BL: We fired a tremendous number. We had mission after mission.

SI: Okay.

BL: One or two missions every day, not big ones, maybe just for the [infantry]. The real big ones were preparing for a big push, but, when we were fighting ordinarily, where they made small advances every day, "Here's a roadblock over there," we'd throw a couple on the roadblock, or, "There's some machine-guns or emplacements over there. Throw there," and then, they would advance and we'd move with them. It was sleep in the mud. Once in a while, we'd have an empty house, maybe a cave, some, always cold rations and everything. Finally, toward the Bulge, our company commander says, "We've got too much--too many guys are getting sick. We're going to need better food anyway." So, we wound up with getting a hot breakfast before daylight and a hot supper after daylight. That was hell. Our kitchen was very smart. We had them, there's classes of rations--you got A rations, which are for posts in the States, right, then, you've got B rations, which the ordinary dogface gets, an ordinary daily ration when he's in a post in the States. As are for officers and stuff. That's with the wine. Cs and Ks you know and five and ten-in-ones you know. We didn't have all these nice ready-to-eats that they have today. So, here, each one cost so much. A B ration is the equivalent of--no, a C ration, let me see--we had to make up so many rations. If we had B rations instead of Cs and Ks, we had to make it up, the difference in cost. So, instead of getting B rations when we're supposed to get them, they had to substitute [the] other kind. So, after the shooting was over, that's when we did it. So, one day, we're out, guess what? in a nice, open field, doing close-order drill in Germany. That's our lieutenant, his idea of a good time. We could smell something. Two trucks show up that we had, two truckloads of lamb, fresh from the States. The lambs are our rations for a week, but what I told you, the smart part about the kitchen, somewhere along the way, they found a trailer, a German trailer, thirty-five-foot trailer. They hooked it on to the kitchen truck. Everywhere they found smoked meats, stuff like that, into the trailer. We got shoved aside. We crossed the Rhine attached to the 17th Airborne Division. They shoved us and gave us to the 102nd Division. While the 102nd was coming up, there was a cheese factory on top of a hill. They manufactured German Swiss cheese. The wheels were that big--I think a wheel weighed 120 pounds. The kitchen truck took six of those, put them in the truck. So, we had sausage, lots of sausage, lots of bologna, lots of cheese, eggs, oh, I had eggs. I supplied the whole company with eggs one time. If it wasn't for those extra rations that we salvaged like that, I don't know how we could've made it. The following week, we had chicken for eight days. I had chicken soup for breakfast. We had to find different ways to serve meals, but we got through them. We got to a town and we'd been in line a long time. So, they told us we're going to be on relief for anywhere

to seven to twelve days. We go into this town. It's untouched, except for one end--there's a big steel mill that's been bombed out. The town itself, perfect, no civilians. I'm temporary--this is another job I got--temporary platoon sergeant. I'm still a squad leader. I was a platoon sergeant for three months, temporary, never got the rating or the pay. What could I do? So, I had to do it. The guys in the platoon, they wouldn't listen to anyone else, they listened to me. I don't know why, they didn't like me really, but they knew that I always had an even hand. Nobody was a favorite. Nobody got extra benefit. Everybody got treated the way they should. So, anyway, my platoon, plus a bunch of communications guys, would get billeted in a nice, little apartment house. So, the first floor, where I and my squad are, and a couple of communications [men], we got three bedrooms, a bathroom and a kitchen. The other squads are up in--it's an elevator apartment, three stories, they got an elevator. So, somebody, (Peacock?) most likely, he wanted to know where there was booze in town. So, somebody told him, I guess whatever civilian or something, that the old *Gestapo* headquarters at city hall had a lot of booze. So, he took a six-by-six and crashed the door in and I think he got something like fifteen cases of whiskey, all different kinds. We had a party that night. About five o'clock, a regiment comes marching into town, fresh, just over from the States, never heard a shot fired yet, right. Their colonel, I'm standing in the doorway in my apartment, watching him, the Colonel comes over. I salute him, he said, "Are you in command of this post?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "I want this building." I said, "Sorry, can't give it to you." He says, "What do you mean? I'm ordering you." I said, "I don't take my orders from you, Colonel. I take my orders from my commander. My commander told me this is my building. You see him. If he tells you that I have to give it to you, then, you can have it, *capisce*?" He was Italian, by the way. He had a nameplate. So, he went over and the Captain wouldn't give it to him, but there was a big department store a couple of blocks down. They had a restaurant and everything and the Captain told him, "That's a wonderful place to set up a CP and there are plenty of houses here for your regiment." So, they left. Anyway, we start drinking. We've got radios playing Armed Forces Radio music and the moon is shining and I've got a big Swede on guard on the door. We had to have sentries. All of a sudden, I hear him yell, "Halt." He's loaded, drunk. He said, "I said halt. If you don't halt, I'm either going to kill you or throw your ass out in the street. Halt." The next thing I hear, "You dirty bastard." The Swede took the Captain from the infantry by the collar and the seat of his pants, I think he threw him twenty feet into the street. [laughter] The next morning, the whole company is under arrest. They put us in, believe it or not, a Jell-O factory, J-E-L-L-O, just like they sell here. It's got walls eighteen feet high around it and it's got all this gelatin powders and flavors. When he finally let us out of there, we looked like snowmen from all the dust and everything. We were there for five days and, finally, they let us out and we went up north. We joined the Ninth Army and we got attached to the 17th Airborne. We were supposed to go back to Reims, France, and take glider training. We were supposed to glide across the Rhine. Well, fortunately, the Remagen Bridge was taken and we got across. They had infantry go across in gliders--what a mess, took, oh, I think they had fifty percent casualties, not too many fatalities but injuries. We crossed on pontoons. [Editor's Note: The capture of the Ludendorff Bridge on March 7, 1945, allowed the Allies to form a bridgehead across the Rhine at Remagen.]

SI: During the period of the Battle of the Bulge, you were to the south of the Bulge.

BL: Yes, we were down near the Swiss-German border. Let me see, the German border is like this and the Swiss border's like this--we were in that corner. [Editor's Note: The Battle of the

Bulge, also known as the Von Rundstedt Offensive or Ardennes Offensive, was the failed German attempt to break through the Allied lines in the Ardennes Forest in Luxembourg and Belgium launched on December 16, 1944, and which lasted into late January 1945.]

SI: Okay.

BL: Not far from Strasbourg.

SI: Okay.

BL: We never got to Strasbourg.

SI: There was another offensive that targeted Strasbourg. Did you get caught up in that?

BL: Well, that's where we were originally, but, by that time, we had so much time in the line, somebody had mercy on us and took us out for relief. At that time, I was in the hospital. I had dysentery twice while I was overseas and, at this time, December 12th, never forget, I was in the hospital being treated for dysentery. They had only been out two days. They had to pack up and go up to the Bulge. As an ambulatory patient in the hospital, I was dismissed and sent to a replacement depot up near the Bulge, too, and then, a couple days later, they sent me back to the company. Then, I had another crazy job.

SI: Yes.

BL: Honest, maybe you think I'm lying, but I'm not.

SI: No.

BL: I am in the supply room. Sergeant (Sappo?) had been the supply sergeant, was now first sergeant. My friend (Leo Richmond?) was supply sergeant and, when I got back to the company, it was sleeting and frozen rain, real misery. I was sick as a dog from the dysentery. He took me into the supply [area]. He's got a fire going. He's dripping gasoline on a rock in the fireplace, nice and warm. He said, "Get warm, Ben." I unroll my duffel and I go to sleep. Next thing, somebody shakes me. It's my jeep driver. He says, "Captain wants to see you." I look at my watch, three o'clock in the morning. I tell (Harrod?), "I'm sick. Tell him I'll see him in the morning." Half-hour later, I get a kick in the ass. Captain says, "When I want to see you, you come see me." So, he made me roll up and I went to his tent there. I'm supposed to be liaison now between our company and a regiment in the 26th Yankee Division. It's snow, ice, cold, terrible. So, the first day we moved, we went into a field, there's nothing. We heard guns and stuff like that. We didn't have any action. There was a big pit in front of a little farmhouse, had a nice roof on it. I didn't know the roof leaked, but ten guys got in that pit and their body heat melted the snow up on the roof and it dripped down. They got frozen during the night. We were in the house, we were in the basement. They had acetylene lights down there, nice and warm. That was the first night. The next night, I think we just dug holes in the snow. We wrapped ourselves up. After that, then, we get a mission. I'm supposed to go to a forward CP with the platoon and set them up there. That's what the Colonel told me, that they're waiting for me, says,

"We've got to push before the day is over." "Good." I take the platoon and I lead them. I get to the place on the map--nobody there. There's a couple of burlap bags over an empty doorway and telephone wires hanging and nobody there. So, I tell them, "About face." We head back. On the way back, the Captain's jeep comes. He said, "What the hell are you doing here?" I tell him what happened. He says, "Come with me." We go to the Regimental Headquarters. He bawls out the Colonel. He says, "They moved and never told me. What can I tell you?" Next day, we get another assignment, same thing, only this time, we really had the shit scared out of us, because they told us to set up there anyway, said some more troops were going to be coming up. All of a sudden, we hear tanks. I sneak around to look and I see, about a mile away, three *Panzers* are coming to us. I said, "Let's go, boys. Take what you can," said, "Hurry up." He says, "If you have to leave the mortar, put the magnesium [in], burn the barrel," but we saved everything. We got out, met the Captain away, and then, we got disconnected from that outfit. We served somebody else, but we fired, I think, two missions. We didn't really do too much, but we kept advancing in. The main thing was what the 101st did at Bastogne. We were not too far from them and their fighting kept us going toward them, especially when, finally, Patton shook his ass out to do something. We were able to go, and then, the weather cleared. That was the big thing, once the planes could get their work done. They [the Germans] were finished anyway. They'd run out of ammo, food and fuel. They weren't going any further, but they did terrible [damage]. They did a lot of damage with that one. [Editor's Note: A and B Companies of the Third Chemical Mortar Battalion were attached to the 26th Infantry Division from December 22, 1944 to January 25, 1945.]

SI: Where?

BL: From there, we went to Liege in Belgium and we were there for about three or four days. Nice and warm, we were in a coal mine there. They had nice showers in the coal mine. We were showering all day long. [laughter] Then, we went up to Holland and, actually, Aachen, [Germany, on the border with the Netherlands and Belgium]. Did you know that Heineken has a brewery there?

SI: No.

BL: I found out. We were attached to the 102nd Division again. So, here I am, liaison again, only this time with a battalion commander. He's got a nice office and we can't move, because the British destroyed a reservoir and the water was going to take anywhere from a week to two to empty. We couldn't cross the waterway, because that water was going down at fifty miles an hour. They put a float in there--the guys were carried a mile downstream before they could even put the oars in the water. So, every day, I would take a water can, go to Heineken's and, for a buck, I'd get five gallons of beer, and then, take it into the Colonel there and we'd be drinking beer. He'd smoke a cigar and all of us would finish five gallons of beer every day, but that Heineken really tasted good. I don't like Heineken here. I don't know what it is.

SI: You said, later in the spring, after the pontoon bridges across the Rhine ...

BL: Yes.

SI: What happened after that point?

BL: Well, we went. We were attached to the 17th Airborne. They advanced. We fired, like I say, a mission here and there, a roadblock, they had a couple of anti-tank setups and everything we fired at. Every day, almost, we fired one or two maybe three or four-round missions and followed them. Finally, the same old story, they said that we're holding them up. They can't move faster than us. Well, our setup took time and artillery setup is relatively easy. Ours, we've got a baseplate that weighs, like, almost two hundred pounds. It's got a "V" flange in the bottom. The way you aim it, you put an aiming stake in the ground and you center the baseplate. Then, you lay out two more aiming stakes and, with a compass for the azimuth, you lined them up, and then, you line up the baseplate. So, your rocket and the flange leaves a dent in the ground. You take a pick and clean out the flange and the flange fits in, the baseplate is on the ground. Then, you set up the mortar, the tripod or bipod, and pile about ten sandbags on the baseplate. Then, you're ready to fire. The sight was simple but wonderful. Later on, right toward the end, they finally sent some more chemical troops in. They had an electronic optical site. Ours was actually two-piece brass. It had two legs that fit on the edge of the barrel, a curved structure that fit over, who connected it, and then, there was a swing arm, had a bubble level and a (steadier?) with (mills?) on it, so [that] you can move, change direction. It was quick and it worked. We had a speed contest. We met this Second Chemical Battalion. He had been, the commander had been, executive officer in our company. In Africa, he got parasites or something; they sent him back to the States. His father owned the Tennessee Military Institute. He got a quick promotion and became battalion [commander], lieutenant colonel. He was a nice, funny guy and we used to have a lot of fun together, always swapping jokes. So, when I met him, he was looking over the supposed battlefield and he saw me, "Hey." I said, "You going to give me a lot of bullshit about what you guys have done?" He says, "Well, we fired a lot of shots." I said, "How many shots did you fire?" He said, "Oh, you guys can't keep with us." I said, "I saw that sight there. How can you say that? We can set up our mortar twice as fast as you." So, we had a race--nowhere even close. They were still trying to make the original siting on the azimuth when we had simulated five rounds.

SI: Let me just pause for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We were talking about the final phase of the campaign in Europe.

BL: Yes.

SI: What do you remember about those last few months of the war, in the Spring of 1945?

BL: Well, after, especially after April 25th, we moved real fast. We got to the Elbe and we set up there. Germans were fleeing the Russians and they were trying to swim across the Elbe. They used logs, everything. They were all over the place. So, the Army decided to build a footbridge and they connected the eastern bank with the west and all these German refugees, all soldiers, now, they could cross on foot. Here's where I could've killed my company commander. His pet platoon was number one. So, they met all these guys as they came off the bridge. They

got wristwatches, diamond rings, pistols, cameras, you name it. They had first pick at these guys. The Third Platoon marched all these guys to the railhead to be put in boxcars to be shipped fifteen miles away to a prisoner of war camp. My platoon, we're riding the boxcars with the prisoners. So, here, we're going back and forth with about 150 prisoners at a time. There were thousands--I don't know how many, maybe eight or ten thousand. The place stunk--they crapped everywhere. They didn't dig any latrines or nothing. It was so jammed, they couldn't move. Anyway, we come back for supper. "Dear John," that's what we used to call him, (Herman?), he said, "What's the trouble, Leib? You don't look happy." I said, "You know, I don't mind so much that you don't like me and everything like that, but you're punishing my guys." He said, "How am I punishing them?" I said, "We know you don't care as long as the platoon has a '1' in front of it. You don't care who's in it, if it's the First Platoon, it's yours, you treat it like it's your baby. They're meeting all these guys and getting all the loot. The Second Platoon is waiting there for your guys to finish. They get second pickings. What the hell do my guys got, the stink of all their farts and shit, taking them to the prison camp?" He says, "Okay, tomorrow, you'll have first pick." By the time we got first pick, there was nothing left to pick. I got a cheap, little Voigtlander camera that I sold to a guy for ten dollars. It wasn't a good camera, couldn't even take pictures. He just wanted it for a collection--Voigtlander was a famous name for cameras--but we moved very fast. We were in a nice town. I think that town was Stendal, if I'm not mistaken, might be something else. The quarters were nice and we were there for about, again, two or three days, four days, maybe five, and then, we were sent back to guard a poison gas dump. After all, we're chemical troops. So, this beautiful place, buildings were real modern and we had a professional photographer in the company. He was in communications. He came from Cleveland, (Godsonkowki?), his name was. He changed it to (Goodwin?). So, in this one building, they had industrial hand washers, had this great, big fountain area with running water. Workers could go there and fifteen, twenty of them could wash up at a time. So, we set up a darkroom out there and I don't know how many films we processed. All of those that I got in that album came from there. We saved the good ones, beautiful pictures, and my three-by-fives, which they took.

SI: You said, before the interview started, that those got stolen at Camp Lucky Strike. [Editor's Note: Camp Lucky Strike was one of several receiving camps, dubbed "Cigarette Camps," established by the US Armed Forces in the vicinity of Le Havre, France.]

BL: Yes, they did. I had a roll of different coins, some gold, some silver. I don't know how much they were worth, maybe thirty coins, like that. They took that, too. The one thing that I hated, I had taken a camera from a German major. It was the first Contax reflex that they made and it had a separate lens. So, (Goodwin?) told me that I would have to have a technician put the lens in, came in a leather case. That was stolen from me in Camp Lucky Strike. Somebody took that.

SI: How long did you have the camera that you were taking these photos with?

BL: Those photos?

SI: Yes.

BL: I don't know. Some of them were still in the States.

SI: Okay.

BL: Like, we did a maneuver out in the desert. General McNair, he was a big shot in the Army in the early part of the war [US Army Ground Forces Commander Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair], he observed this thing. He liked the way we moved, so, he gave us a holiday. We had a weekend at the Carlsbad Cavern. So, we went to the cavern. We stayed in the motel at Whites City, [New Mexico], no tents or anything. I've got pictures of me at Carlsbad Caverns. So, I've got pictures of me at Fort McClellan.

SI: Were you at the poison gas factory when V-E Day was declared?

BL: No. When V-E Day was declared, we were at the Elbe. [Editor's Note: V-E Day was declared on May 8, 1945.]

SI: Okay.

BL: And I got a picture there with a big garden wall there, says, "V-E, May 8, 1945." V-J Day, I was in a nice place; I was in the Hermitage Hotel in Nice on V-J Day. [Editor's Note: V-J Day was declared on August 14, 1945, in the United States and August 15, 1945, in the Pacific.]

SI: Okay.

BL: Did I tell you?--I don't know if I told you--they broke up the Third Chemical. They sent me and about five or six other guys to the 76th Division. There, I--oh, this job, you would like--I got a super company, a 280-man company, and a master sergeant. The Master Sergeant was actually in charge of the company. I was the maneuverer. We had a pole guard across the highway. On the other end was the Russians, with also a pole. This was down in, I don't know, the name of the town was Hof, H-O-F, where the 76th Division was in. So, anyway, the second day, we're on guard there. I'm placing all these guys along the border. They've got slit trenches and big logs and sandbags and rock, everything for protection. I didn't want them walking around where the Russians'd see them. Anyway, a convoy comes along, must've been about a hundred trucks, jeeps, weapons carriers. There's a lieutenant colonel in charge and he says, "Who's in charge here?" "That's me." He says, "Show these to the Russians--we're heading for Berlin." "Can I ask what it is?" He says, "Yes, the 82nd Airborne is going to occupy Berlin and these are supplies for them." So, I get in my jeep, I hop down to the Russians and there's a Russian captain, speaks English. I give him the papers. He goes in, comes out, he says, "They're no good." I said, "What do you mean, no good? Look at the signatures. Zhukov, Eisenhower, Montgomery--all these names and everything, how could it be not good?" He says, "General inside says no good." So, I said, "When is it going to be good?" He says, "I don't know." I go back, I tell the Colonel. I said, "They're saying they're not going to let you go through." So, he gets in touch with headquarters and they talk and talk. The next thing you know, the convoy backs up a little, all the guys jump out. They set up tents on the hillside alongside the road and everything and the day passes. The next morning, I look at the Russians--now, there's a big to-do over there. There's a limousine and there's a guy that must be a general. He's wearing red

pants with a big gold stripe down there and a bright blue jacket and those big hats that the Russian officers wear and everything. Everybody's jumping and saluting. They have a jeep, the jeep comes up the road to me and the General is in the limousine right in back of it. The Captain comes along, the one that speaks English, and he gives me the papers. I look at them, says, "No good." He said, "What do you mean, no good?" I said, "What did you tell me yesterday, 'No good?'" He says, "Yes." "Same thing, no good--come back." They start arguing in Russian and everything there. I said, "I don't give a shit--get back." I said, "I've got all my guys here with Tommy guns and everything." They went back. Later in the afternoon, he comes back out. "You going to let him go?" I said, "You let the convoy go through, I'll let him go through." A command car pulls up about fifty feet in back. The driver takes out a newspaper, leans across the front, he's reading. a dog jumps up on the backseat, barking. I see smoke. I walk back there, some brigadier general. He's got a book, he's smoking a cigar. I ask him, "Can I help you? Is there anything you want to know or something?" He says, "No, it's a very interesting situation here. We want to see what happens." [laughter] So, anyway, the next day, [the Russian delegation] comes there and they said, the Captain says, "Well, we made a decision." He says, "You let the General go through, we'll let the convoy go through." I said, "No, you've got it backwards." I said, "You let the convoy through, then, I let the General through." They start arguing again. I said, "That's the deal. You want the General to go to headquarters? You let the convoy go through." So, they go back. About an hour later, they said, "Okay." They let the convoy go through; took them about four hours to get through, but they finally did.

SI: Wow.

BL: So, the General says, "You know, you could've started World War III." [laughter]

SI: Did you have any other interactions with the Russians when you were around that area?

BL: Yes, only one. Before this happened, when we were still in Stendal, we had a truck driver who claimed to be an armorer. He knew all kinds of guns. So, we crossed the Elbe on the bridge and we disarmed a whole bunch of German soldiers. So, I had nine different pistols in my musette bag. We came back to our side. His name was Schwartz. There, he's going to show us how to disassemble and clean the guns and everything and he shoots himself through the palm of his hand.

SI: Wow.

BL: So, I went outside and I gave my guns away. [laughter] That was it. That was when I picked up the camera, too. It sounds like we had a lot of fun, but that's what--if you're normal, I think that's what happens--you remember the good, the fun. You forget the misery.

SI: When you were in the occupying force and you would have interactions with the Germans, how would they usually go?

BL: We didn't have too much. We patrolled one area in north of Nuremburg for about three days and the only trouble we had was, civilians didn't like two girls that occupied a house with an old guy. It turned out that the two girls were Jewish and the old guy was a German and he

had protected them all during the war. All the citizens in the neighborhood hadn't known until after everything was over that these two girls were sisters and Jews. Breaking up that, I don't know what happened with that after that, but we sent somebody from Military Government to take care of it. They were in charge, actually, Occupying MG. Then, after that, we were sent down to a little college town called Heroldsberg. I didn't tell you, but that cheese factory on top of the hill, in the basement of that cheese factory was every kind of booze that you could possibly think of. Now, here, we've been arrested for drunk-and-disorderly and put into a Jell-O factory. Major (Hoffman?) came up and found almost everybody drunk and he said he's going to make a deal. He knows that I have one real sick guy. This poor guy'd been trying to get out for, like, a year. I don't know what's wrong, but I think he only weighed about eighty pounds, skinny and everything. He's on light duty. He said, "Load up a six-by-six with all the booze you want and send them back to headquarters. He'll guard that truck. Once the shooting stops, you can have that truck back and drink all you want." So, here we go to Heroldsburg. My platoon, I get a mansion. I get rooms--this is a bathroom, a room this size.

SI: Yes.

BL: Had a bidet, had a Jacuzzi, it had a five-car garage with a big driveway. So, what do we do? We set up a bar and we're drinking. We get umbrella tables on the driveway, five-car driveway, plenty of room. We're drinking and everything. (Peacock?) comes around, he says, "I know where we can get beer." He took control of a brewery where they had been brewing beer since I think 1276. They had a gold plaque in the rock sent by the King of Gothenburg or something like that, complimenting [it]. So, all we could get was a fifty-gallon drum. So, what they did, they went into Nuremburg and they got a big steel drum and there was an ice plant there. So, they filled up a truck with ice and they went to the Coca-Cola plant and they got a couple of tanks of CO2 and we set up a bar and we're all drinking beer down with the booze. The beer was so good. [laughter] So, a bunch of guys from 15th Air Force go by and they see us drinking there, they stop. They want to drink. "All you can drink, but no beer. You want booze? You can drink the booze." So, we gave them booze.

SI: Wow.

BL: But, that didn't last too long. That's when they broke us up.

SI: Towards the end of the war, news started coming out about the concentration camps.

BL: Yes.

SI: Do you remember how you found out and if you started seeing evidence of DPs [displaced persons] around, that sort of thing?

BL: The main thing we saw, believe it or not, were the overseas military copies of, like, *LIFE* Magazine. They saw it before we did.

SI: Yes.

BL: In fact, I think, yes, I saw one camp, but I never saw the inside. I saw a pile of bodies back in one building, didn't know what it was, and we killed a lot of dogs for them to get into the place. They had the pinschers nose to nose, couldn't get by them without them. So, they had [us shoot them] and we shot--I know I shot one, but one guy, I think, killed about six. There were about forty of them around the whole place.

SI: Wow.

BL: I don't know what the name was. When you're just an ordinary mortarman, you don't know too much.

SI: Particularly after that, when you were in the occupation, how did you feel towards the Germans? Did you have any feeling towards them as an enemy or former enemy?

BL: Well, the truth was, I hated them for their Nazism and everything like that, but, as far as we were concerned, we didn't have very much to do with them. Everywhere we went, they had been displaced, so [that] we could occupy. Like, in this town on the Elbe, there were no males, was only women and children. So, they were all sent to two or three buildings and the rest of the buildings in the town were occupied by the Army. In one town we came to, in fact, the people never left. They were shooting at us as snipers. In fact, one of my squad, one in my platoon, got killed there, the son-of-a-gun. We were told to stay undercover. They were sending in some tank destroyers, take care of the snipers, but Bobby (Rivers?) and another guy decided they're going to go out. So, while I was on the radio, they sneaked out. Half-hour later, the other guy came back and (Rivers?) was dead. Oh, in one place where we'd stopped on a rainy day, we were standing in the doorway of this store and there was something squirming in the mud there, growing from [a fountain]. There was a town/community fountain. That's the way, in some of these small towns, their water supply comes from fountains. So, they said, "What's that, a rat or something?" So, I went out, I said, "Doesn't look like a rat." I picked it up and I held it under water, said, "Looks like a puppy to me," just about fit in my hand. So, I take my handkerchief and I dry him and everything. Then, we get orders to move. I put him in my field jacket pocket, forgot about him. That night, we were allowed to sleep in a building. So, I stripped, stretched out my bedroll and I woke up in the morning, I thought I was having a heart attack. This puppy must've tripled in size overnight. He's lying flat on my thing. He had all the coloration of a German shepherd, but he was built like a white haired fox terrier. He had a knob on the top of his head. Our battalion commander, (Ramsey?), he was bald and had a knob on his head. When he wasn't around, they called him "Knobby" and everybody called the dog "Knobby." (Ramsey?) passed one time when somebody called the dog intentionally, so that Knobby would hear, and he thought that somebody was making fun of him. They were, but he let it go.

SI: Yes. How long were you in the cigarette camps before you got sent back?

BL: Cigarette camps?

SI: Camp Lucky Strike.

BL: I was sent home from Lucky Strike.

SI: Yes.

BL: Well, what happened, we went down to Nice for, supposedly, seven days. A new force was being sent into Berlin at the time and they were using all forms of transportation to get them in. So, I was supposed to report back to the 106th Division, where I was at the time, on a Sunday, but I went on a Saturday, just to make sure. The WAC lieutenant there, she told me to come back on Monday. I said, "What's the matter?" She says, "They're having transportation problems." I go back on Monday, "Come back Wednesday." I wound up with another week-and-a-half in Nice. I get back, the 106th Division is in Landsburg. You know where Landsburg is?

SI: Yes.

BL: Landsburg is where Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* when he was in prison. We get there--instead of a whole division and the street buzzing, there's three truckloads, maybe fifteen guys. The place is deserted. Myself and the other guys from Nice, we go, "What's happening? What's happening?" He says, "What are you guys doing here?" I says, "We're just back from R&R." "Well, they left. They left early this morning. They're heading for Le Havre." So, we hitched a ride with them. We caught them about two hundred miles farther on. We got to Camp Lucky Strike. We're there for maybe four days, got put on a ship and sent home. That was it. [Editor's Note: In 1924, Hitler was imprisoned for leading a failed uprising known as the Beer Hall Putsch. He was jailed at Landsburg, but was released after serving nine months of his sentence.]

SI: Were you discharged right away or did you have to serve more in the States?

BL: No, I got discharged. We landed in Jersey City and went to Camp Kilmer, New Brunswick, and, from Kilmer, went to Fort Dix. At Fort Dix, they had a final interview and a ticket on the Pennsylvania [Railroad] back to Brooklyn. That was it.

SI: In your final interview, did they try to talk you into staying in or staying in the Reserves?

BL: Yes. I told them I would stay if I got the rank, but they said, "Well, you'd go back to your original [rank]." I said, "I had enough of that."

SI: What was it like coming home after having been gone for so long? How long had it been since you had been home?

BL: Well, I'd say it was, say, April 10, '43, the only time that I was home, and I got home September 30, '45. So, that's like ...

SI: Two-and-a-half.

BL: Two years and four, three months.

SI: Yes. What was it like coming home and seeing your family?

BL: Oh, it was great. At home, I had people that knew me. I had friends that I didn't have friends before. People became friendly with me who never were. Like I told you, I'd never had too many friends, but, now, business was good in the store and a lot of the customers knew me from training with me and everything. The family, had a big family at that time. Now, there's nobody left. I have one cousin left, yes; I mean from direct blood family. My first cousin, Jack, he's down in Mount Holly.

SI: After you came home, what was your first move to get back into civilian life?

BL: Well, the first thing I wanted to do was get a job. So, then, I found out that my bowling alley and pool hall was out of business. It's now just a pool hall. The building itself couldn't support the bowling alleys. So, some guy that I used to bowl with, he never served, he worked as a clerk in a German deli out near Fort Hamilton and the guy liked him. When he died, he left the deli to this Al Balukas. Al Balukas' daughter, by the way, became the first championship women's pool shooter, from practicing in her father's pool room. Then, I went to see where (Armor?) Engineering went and I found out that they had moved the whole plant to some salt mine out in Michigan, where they're doing secret work. I didn't want to go to Michigan. So, then, I reported to the US Employment Service, because they had what they called "52-20 Club." I was getting 52-20. [Editor's Note: The GI Bill included a "52/20" clause, which provided twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks to discharged servicemen while they looked for work.] They'd send me out on interviews and I happened to--I don't know why I did it, but it seems that I engendered dislike in people without even trying. This guy that I had to report to, I could tell he hated me. He even sent me on jobs where they were all--in post-war, I'm going to get ten dollars a week, with a family and everybody, you crazy? So, one time, he accused me of something or other--I picked him up. From all that mortar work and everything, I had muscles. I picked him up and I had him against the wall. I was going to smash him and the guys pulled me off. The big boss of the agency, he says, "Look, I understand you're having trouble." He says, "How about aptitude tests? You ever take aptitude tests?" I said, "No, I didn't." "How about if we send you to an aptitude test and you get paid at the same time? You don't have to report for a job until the tests are done." I said, "How long will it take?" He said, "Well, probably five days, a whole week." I said, "Okay." They sent me up to Columbia, the Psychology Department. A professor, (Koff?), her name was, she did all the testing. So, then, it was through. When it was through, I said, "Okay, now, give me the same old story." She said, "What's that?" "You can do or be anything that you want to be," I said. She says, "Exactly." I said, "That's not good enough. I need something more specific." The truth is, in all my whole life, I never really had a decent job. I had a very interesting job. My warehousing job, a guy, if he was getting paid to do it, would love it. I liked the job, the doing of it--I hated the fact that I wasn't getting paid. I had a 48,000-foot warehouse, twenty-six feet high. Did you ever hear of "The Tiger in the Tank?"

SI: Exxon?

BL: Exxon. [Editor's Note: In 1959, Esso/Exxon began to use the slogan, "Put a Tiger in your Tank." The Exxon Tiger is still used as the company's logo today.]

SI: Yes.

BL: Esso and Exxon. Esso believed in window displays. My main job with Hibbert Company in Trenton was the assembly and the shipping of the Esso display. I did a lot of other things, but that was my main job. So, every month, we assembled, collated, packed and shipped anywhere from ten to twelve thousand.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Ready?

BL: Well, what happened was, finally, from this aptitude test, the professor said, "Seems like you're good for numbers and everything." I forgot--my worst subject in school was math. So, I go to Pace Institute. At that time, it was strictly a business school. It was owned by the Pace Brothers. They were right across from City Hall in Manhattan, but they're giving a regular college course--history, English, everything, eco, everything--and I'm acing everything. A few months later, it becomes Pace College and they expand. [Editor's Note: Pace Institute became an accredited college in 1948 and earned university status in 1973.] They take over Beekman Hospital, becomes Pace Medical Center or something, Fordham Law School, all kinds--they graduate, they got bigger and bigger. The old *Herald Tribune* building and all that, then, it becomes Pace University and they opened a campus up in Westchester. I don't even know if they have a campus in the city anymore, but I graduated. There again, I thought I was such a smart guy--number two. Anyway, I'm now thirty-two years old and I'm trying to be a CPA and nobody wants a thirty-two-year-old junior accountant. I had intern jobs during the summers and everything, but with small firms and they didn't want to keep me permanently. I was trying to get, like, with Arthur Young, KPMG, all the big ones and everything. I did temporary work with Price Waterhouse in tax season two years. That was good, but, while I was doing all that, I'm picking up a lot of tax work. I loved income taxes. I'm not good at numbers, but I'm good at law. In fact, my law professor at Pace said that I should've gone to law school after Pace, but I didn't. I was thirty-two. I'm ready to [work]; I didn't want to go to school anymore. Anyway, I'm doing fine. So, one of my bowling team members is a salesman at the Greenwich Street Washington Market wholesale produce market exchanges in Manhattan. The whole west side had a front there with all produce from down South, out West. He's a salesman there. He liked the way I did his taxes. His brother had a Chrysler agency and he was having trouble with taxes. So, I did his taxes. He liked it. Mike says to me, "I can make you a lot of money." I said, "How?" He says, "You come to my place at night. I can set you up in my boss's office and I'll send all these salesmen up and [you] do their taxes." I said, "Fine." I go up there. I'm making money hand over fist. Taxes are coming. Next thing I know, I'm getting phone calls, letters from IRS. I've got to go to the headquarters, at that time was in the Battery. So, I've got to go down there. I'm spending days, whole days, nine to five, after that, defending my thing there. All these guys are giving me a lot of crap for everything.

SI: Wow.

BL: To give you an example, there was one--this was the most outstanding [case]--this guy says he's got a girlfriend that lives near him and would I do her taxes? She's a legal stenographer. She doesn't have any investments, only income and dependents. I said, "So, what's the

problem?" He says, "Well, she would like to have a reliable [person] do it and sign the form." I said, "Okay." So, he brings me the information. He lives at, like, 3915 Seaman Avenue and she lives, like, at 3721 Seaman Avenue. Sounds like it's right [nearby]--it's one building.

SI: Oh.

BL: It's a great, big apartment building, stretches like three blocks, right near the (spiteaandiral?), beautiful place, beautiful lawns and everything; turns out they're married. I'm filing separate returns, where he's married and got two children and she's married and got two children. So, now, we're getting eight in deductions, instead of four. So, anyway, one of my clients had a friend who worked for McCann Erickson, which happens to be the world's largest advertising agency, and so was their account. Window displays was theirs; he didn't have anything. His brother had a nice business, wanted him to be partners. He didn't want to be a partner with his brother, but the friend set him up in the business of handling these displays. At that time, they were only sending out, like, maybe four thousand of them, but he promised he'd send other work down from the agency. So, this guy Joe says, "You're not doing too good. How would you like a steady job?" I said, "I would love a steady job. How much would you pay me?" big deal, sixty-five dollars a week, but compared to what I was getting, it was a fortune. In those days, you could live with that kind of money, if your rent wasn't too high. So, I became his manager, and then, we started to do real good business and he decided he didn't like the business anymore. So, he went to be a partner with his brother down in Florida and he sold it to another Joe. We started to make real money, even more, but picking up different jobs. We're moving. We moved out of where we were originally. We moved to a bigger place and, now, he's rich. He doesn't want to come to work anymore. He's enjoying his money. He goes out to California, to Las Vegas and all that, and, finally, he goes broke and he sells. The guy that he sold to is a cheapskate. He's a good businessman, but a cheapskate. For instance, index cards, you're through using them, throw them out, right? No, he wanted the girl to take a magic marker, put an X on it, on the printed side, reverse them, use them again. It cost him the business. Esso always wanted a motion display in the gas station. They tried, they spent--well, I'd hate to think of the money they spent. Finally, they come up with one that requires an electric motor that costs thirty-eight bucks a piece. At that time, Esso had large window displays and small window displays. The guy with a small display would pass a large one, say, "Gee, that large one looks nice. I'll tell the salesman, change it." So, these guys are constantly changing back and forth. I told him, my boss, "Keep a record of these changes." He says, "Too much work, too much work. Paperwork, paperwork, always paperwork, too much paperwork." So, anyway, finally, we got 7,100 displays we're sending out at this time, with motors, right. They ship in 3,800 motors, the first load. It so happened that we have 3,800 large displays. So, I said, "But, some of these guys, when you sent in the order for them, they had small and, now, they've got large. What happened?" He says, "Send it out." So, we sent it out. Then, finally, they said, "The balance is 3,400," something like that, and we send it out. Then, we start getting complaints. They didn't get this, they didn't get that. So, he says, "Well, we'll just order 3,800 more." So, from this machine company in Connecticut, he orders 3,800 more. What's thirty-eight times thirty-eight? a lot of money. The accountants go over the books, "Wow, hundreds of thousands of bucks missing here--what happened?" They trace it. Our name was Sunset Company, believe it or not. They trace it to Sunset Company. They ask him what happened. Well, he lost track and everything like that. I didn't butt in, say, "I tried to tell him." I started a system, but I didn't have

time. I had other duties. I could've done it, if that's what we started to do. Anyway, the agency said, and Esso said, "No more Sunset Company." We lose the account, but Esso said, "We've got to have the display." So, there's a printing company in Trenton. At that time, it was Hibbert Printing Company. They were doing, like, a three-and-a-half million-dollar business with Esso at the time. They tell them, "You want to keep the account? You've got to do the window display." So, Mr. James Moonan, who owned the company, said, "What the hell do I know about window displays?" So, our contact up at McCann Erickson said, "Buy Sunset Company, have them do the window display. Get somebody to take care of the paperwork, but make sure you keep Ben Leib." So, they buy him out for nothing, practically. He gave away the business for a fifteen-thousand-dollar a year job, gave away the machinery we had, a beautiful truck, an addressing machine, everything, and I got a lousy job. So, we move into--in Jersey City, there's the big laundry, was it Plymouth Laundry? used to be the biggest commercial laundry in the world. It's right on Tonnel Avenue, by the Pulaski Skyway, great big building. He buys it and moves us in, wonderful plant there, owned by Hartz Mountain. Their real estate man made so much money for Leonard Stern with the Meadowlands. I think he made something like six hundred million dollars for Stern, with all his land deals. [Editor's Note: Real estate investor Leonard N. Stern owns Hartz Mountain Industries.] When they first put it up for plebiscite, it got beaten. So, they wanted to get rid of it. So, he bought the whole thing there for something like thirty-six million dollars, and then, when they decided to do it, he sold it, everything, Harbortown Apartments, all that stuff. He made money. Stern made Gene Heller the President. Gene Heller now needs a real estate manager; he takes his father-in-law, makes him the real estate manager. There's a box company on the corner of our building. Some gangsters need that box company, they take it over. The poor guy is terrorized. He buckles under, he's so afraid of them. These gangsters want Art's part of where we are in the building. So, when the lease expired, Heller's father-in-law tells us our rent is now triple what it was. Hibbert used to be known as the Irish Mafia, all the big shots, Moonan and all, all Irishmen, tough. They said, "The hell with it. We'll move it down to Trenton." I said, "I'm not going to commute to Trenton." So, they said, "We'll move it. We'll give you a bonus and everything." So, I hired Armstrong Trucking Company in Jersey City. I got six trailers and they were constantly moving. It took us six weeks to move out of there. Then, the general manager, who was a very friendly [guy], Charlie (Stengel?), says, "You've got to come down." I said, "Charlie, I don't want to go down. I'm not going to work there." "Please, I'll give you a hundred bucks. Come down, I'll buy lunch, everything." I go down, here's this beautiful warehouse, 48,000 square feet. Whoever received all that stuff that we sent, that took a week-and-a-half for six trailers to unload, he's got three mountains of everything, that's all. The place is empty outside of that. I said, "Holy Moses, what are you going to do here?" He said, "You've got to help us out." I said, "Why pick me? You've got engineers down there--let them do it." "Oh, come on. We'll give you a nice raise and everything." I said, "Well, I'm in my fifth year there. Now, what am I going to do? I'm approaching--who's going to hire me, with my experience?" All these kinds of promotions are generally in-house. Some of my customers want me to own my own business. I said, "Yes, I'd need a half a million dollars to do the kind of business you guys want," had, what do you call it? Somerset Importers; that's Canada Dry, Johnny Walker. This guy said, "Issue stock that I can buy, and then, buy after you give me the money for the stock." What's that, Wild Turkey? That's Austin Nichols, Bombay Gin, all these, I have five liquor companies on my couple, I've got Coca-Cola, I've got Shell roadmaps, which they stopped giving out, I've got AT&T, American [Cyanimide], a tremendous job I had there. Every day was such a challenge and I

enjoyed it. My wife, she said, "You're killing me with your joy." She says, "We need money." I said, "We're getting along okay." Thank God, we get along okay, but, every time I went to the main office, first words, "When am I getting a raise?" [laughter] The trouble was that almost every time I got a raise, United Parcel [UPS] went on strike and we lost a money-making job, which cut out my raise, like, "The Tiger in the Tank," at one time, they gave out scratch cards. You bought gas, they gave you a card, you'd scratch it, you could win gas or money. We distributed all those millions of cards. So, then, what happened was that a bunch of guys come to my building there and one tall guy looks, he looks around, he says, "This is my kind of place." So, they introduced me. He runs a big depot for RCA in Deptford. There, in-house, they're doing all their supply stationary, office supplies and everything like that, and they think it's costing them too much money doing it in-house, not efficient. We get the job. He wants it in my building. So, the first thing I have to do is create about 20,000 square feet. I did that. To do that, I had to move my pallet racks closer. So, with an ordinary forklift, these are twelve-foot turns. I need a narrow aisle stacker with an eight-foot turn. They promised me a new one, okay. I make it and where's the pallet racks? They don't come. The back orders are coming in by the hundreds every day. At one point, I'm 3,500 orders behind. RCA says, "If you don't catch up in two weeks, you're going to lose the job." All this time, I'd been recommending to my bosses for a second shift just to take care of that. They finally succumbed. So, hiring a lot of temporaries with Olsten Agency down there, I got twelve guys and one of the foremen from one of our other buildings and, in a week, we caught up. So, the company had two big plants, one in Denver and one in Houston. So, the President, Bob Moonan, said, "Now that we're caught up and everything is fine, I'll go visit." Well, Charlie (Stengel?), the manager, because of his delay in getting the pallet racks and costing a lot of money and everything, they fired him. They hired some guy from Curio Press in Pennsylvania and, with him and me, it's like I told you, all he has to do is see me and he hates me, and that's what happened. I knew, first chance, he's going to get rid of me and that's what happened. When Bob went to visit, he sent me a message to come to see him in the office, told me that the conditions might be the same, conditions may change, I may be terminated, but, for the time, I'm on a two-week furlough with pay. I tell my guy, "Pack up my stuff from the office--I'm through." At the end of the two weeks, I get a telegram terminating me. That was the last regular job I had, 1978. I did a lot of things since then. For instance, in Cranbury, we had the Windsor Clock Company. So, I learned a little bit about grandfather clock mechanics and I used to help install clocks when they sold them. I used to drive people to the airport.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about your family to wrap up the session?

BL: Oh, sure. Well, here's the best part of my family right there. [Editor's Note: Mr. Leib is referring to his daughter and granddaughter.]

SI: Okay.

BL: Nobody, she's absolute equal of--my wife was one in a million and she makes it two. Anyway, what would you like to know about them?

SI: When did you get married?

BL: Her mother was divorced. I got married in 1953. We didn't have any children of our own. We raised the children she had. I've been accepted as father, grandfather, great-grandfather. I did the best I could. I educated them, sent them to college and, little as we had, we managed. Me and my wife, until she passed away, we had a wonderful life, unmatched. Everybody that ever knew her, do you know what they called us? the lovers. [laughter] Joan here, she went to Brooklyn College. She denies that she has talent, but she could be an artist, but she says no. She went to Brooklyn. At that time, they had commercial art as a subject. She signed up for that, but, the following year, they cancelled it. She didn't know what to do. I said, "Well, what do girls do? They become secretaries." She says, "Well, they have an advanced secretarial course here." She says, "I can type." So, I said, "Take the course." She took it. She has a resume, women would pay hundreds of thousands to get it. She worked for [the] UN, for Immigration of Naturalization Service, she wound up as a private secretary for the plant manager in American Can Company in Brooklyn. She was only eighteen years old at the time. She went skating with her best friend in Prospect Park and, there, she met a guy. "Oh, he loves me, I love him. Oh, he's nice," and everything. "He's going to come over here." I met him at the doorway and I spoke to him. This time, it was the opposite way. I didn't like him for all the time. They were married for over thirty years and I didn't like him all that time. He was an immigrant from Romania, very smart in his field. I taught him manners. I taught him how to eat at the dining room table. My mother was a nut about table manners. My daughter was making--as a secretary for American Can, she was making more than I as the breadwinner. My wife worked for a bank, I think she was getting fifty-five dollars a week. She had a very responsible job, too, but that's another story. Anyway, he's still going to college when they got married. He had a year-and-a-half to go in college. She supported him while he was going to college. Finally, he got his electrical engineering degree and he got a job with, believe it or not, RCA and they did all right. They had a couple kids, but I still didn't like him. Finally, after bouncing back and forth and everything, he got a job here in Boonton, (Engelmann?) Electronics. They promised him a raise, which they didn't give him. So, he said he's going to go into business for himself and, believe it or not, we opened labs right down here. How come we? I said, "All right, you're going to go into business for yourself. Who's going to do your typing?" He says, "Well, Joan can type." I said, "Joan's taking care of two children." Then, "Who's going to do your purchasing? Who's going to type up your propositions and all like that?" So, he said, "What do you suggest?" and I said, "Well, I'll tell you what, I'll do it for you." "I can't pay you." "I'm not asking you for money. I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for Joan." "What do you mean you're doing it for Joan?" I said, "You going to get any money this coming Friday?" He said, "No, I don't have a job." I said, "Well, who's going to feed her? When you can start to feed her, then, I'll quit." Well, anyway, he was a ballsy guy. He knew his microwaves, microwaves especially. He was--he died last year. We started the business down here and the business grew. I said, "You need a bigger place." "I can't afford it." "You're never going to make money unless you get to a bigger place." So, he rented a studio where Yogi Berra has his racquetball courts on [Route] 46. I said, "You made the same mistake. The place is too small." He started to do so much business, he had to break the lease, cost him a lot of money. He finally rented a big place. So, what do you think he does? He subdivides it, rents it out to three different guys. Again, he's back to where he was. I said, "You never learn, do you?" Well, one of his tenants was a machine shop. He occupied the most space in the place, a young fellow, said, "I can't meet the rent." He says, "I have to break the lease." He says, "I can't pay you." He says, "I'll leave you all my machinery," which he needed. He could use that machinery. So, he said, "Okay," he let him go. The other

two spaces were two Japanese firms. One was for a Japanese photograph company or something and the other one for a recording company. In two months, both of them wanted to get out. So, now, he's finally got the whole building, big enough, but the business continued to grow and grow and grow. He rented a tremendous place up in Rockaway, right near Hewlett-Packard's place, a couple of hundred thousand square feet, and he made money. Now, my daughter is stuck with me. I had a nice, little retirement community down in Monroe. I had my private golf course, tennis courts and swimming pool, clubhouse, library, everything, loved it down there, loved my house. One day, I couldn't get out of bed, I was in so much pain. I lasted that day. A couple of months later, we took a trip up to the Catskills, to Villa Roma, and I couldn't get out of bed again. So, I went to an orthopedist. He recommended a CAT scan. They found some kind of an infection. I was in quarantine for a month. I took antibiotics every day for six weeks, in the hospital, and, when I got through there, my daughter wouldn't let me go back to my house. She took me up here and I've been here now going on seven years. She says I'm not a pain in the ass, but I've got to be. Look at this, all of a sudden, I thought I had a mild case of bronchitis, winds up I got double pneumonia.

SI: Is there anything we skipped over, anything you want to add to the recording about your time in the war?

BL: There was so much, it's tough to remember everything at once.

SI: Yes.

BL: Oh, well, I'll tell you about one of my un-favorite cases, for instance. My biggest fear, believe it or not, is diarrhea. I can't--just the word alone. So, here, I had it in Italy, the previous year, now, we're up near Strasbourg in France and we're going to have a big attack. All of a sudden, two nights before the attack, I get cramps and I said, "Uh-oh." The chief medic was one of my buddies. He said, "What's the trouble?" I said, "I think I'm being hit with the dysentery again." He examined me. He says, "Your abdomen is like a rock." So, we had our own aid station. So, they took me to the doctor. He examines me. He says, "Yes, you've got trouble," but the Company Commander was there, he says, "Wait until the attack," he said, "tomorrow morning, and then, we'll send you to the hospital." So, I said, "Okay." So, we pushed and it was good and everything and they put me in a jeep and I wind up in a luxury train. I wound up going to--what the hell is the name of it?--a spa, a very fancy spa in France, beautiful hotels and everything. I got a little bit of dysentery, but I took some Imodium or something, no, Kaopectate, and I was all right. I was only going to be there for three days. Everything is all right. I go back to the company and, as soon as I get back to the company, one meal there and I'm sick again. So, my buddy and a couple other guys are playing poker in the aid station. They're hungry. It so happened that I got about eight cans of German rations. German rations were good. Their black bread was like cake--we loved it. They had a sausage in one of the cans, absolutely no fat, delicious. All you had to do was fry it a little bit, crisp it up, oh. So, they said they were hungry. So, I gave them--oh, yes, the other was liverwurst, can of liverwurst--so, they opened up the can. I'm just kibitzing in the poker game. The Doctor comes in and says, "Ah, the goldbricker's here, eating German rations," said, "A guy with dysentery doesn't eat German rations." I said, "This guy with dysentery is not eating German rations, either." I said, "You know, Doc, you're making me a little sick. I want you to examine me right now. Make up your

mind. You're either going to send me to the hospital or you're not going to send me, once and for all." So, he took me into the dispensary and he called up. At eleven o'clock at night, an ambulance came and took me to the hospital in Bessan. That's where I went; from there, I went to the Bulge.

SI: All right.

BL: But, I was a pretty nasty guy. I'm not like that ordinarily. I sound terrible, how tough I talk.

SI: Thank you very much. I appreciate you sharing all your stories with me today and talking for so long. I wish I had more time to record you.

BL: Me, too, yes.

SI: Thank you very much. I appreciate it. Thank you for your service.

BL: Okay.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You had another story about your company commander.

BL: Yes, my company commander comes on to the invasion of Sicily like George Patton. He thinks he was in command of the company. What really happened was, while we were in the position I told you about up at Cassino, I told you how regular the Germans were with the harassing fire, where, in-between harassment, we could sit out. So, this one day, Captain Guy is squatting by a terrace wall. He's looking over Purple Heart Valley with binoculars. The Germans throw in one mortar shell somewhere, landed maybe five hundred yards to his right, but a piece of shrapnel went around the curve and sliced across his thighs, not a serious wound. He died of shock.

SI: Really?

BL: Yes. If we had morphine at the time, we could've saved him, but we had an Indian medic who was an alcoholic and he was selling his morphine to the Italians for booze. So, he died and, at that point, "Dear John," who was then the exec, took over. He became captain then. So, the first thing they did, since he had to reorganize the company, they took us down, they put the French on. We were attached to the French. They took the French in our place for two days and he took all the non-coms down to the CP tent and he told everybody how he's going to run the company. Then, he dismisses everybody but me. So, I say, "Yes, Captain?" He said, "From the day I came here, I've had my eye on you," he says, "and, one of these days, if I even catch you looking cross-eyed, I'm going to bust you." So, I said, "You know, Captain, you can do me a favor." He says, "What do you mean, do you a favor?" I said, "Bust me now, get rid of the tension." He says, "Don't tell me what to do." [laughter] That's the kind of guy he was. Oh, another crazy job, before you go ...

SI: Sure, yes.

BL: This crazy job, I've got to tell you about, because, unbelievable, I'm a buck sergeant, three stripes only, right. We get shipped down from the Ninth Army. On the way, we stop at a little town where there's, believe it or not, a Kotex factory. Alongside the Kotex factory, there's a labor camp, two big shacks, dormitories, nothing in them but lumber laying on the floor, kitchen area in the back, latrine area off to the side somewhere. It seems that, now, we are going to guard this labor camp. So, trucks start coming in. They bring in 301, I think, 301 German prisoners of war. Captain Ervin gives me a whole bunch of paper, says, "You're the commander." I said, "Okay, what the hell is this? You've got a master sergeant, you've got tech sergeants, you've got lieutenants," said, "put somebody in charge. I'm only a buck sergeant. What the hell do you want from me?" "When are you going to learn to obey my orders?" That's all he said. I said, "Okay." So, we set up the camp. I have a German immigrant in my platoon. I used him as an interpreter. So, we get all these three hundred Germans [in a] line. Oh, it's a big area. The three hundred stretch across, they don't even reach the boundaries on the side. They're lined up along there. Before, as they were in ranks, I asked to see who was the leading officer or non-com there. Nobody volunteered, so, I lined them up alongside. I had all my guys with their automatic weapons--they're shitting in their pants. They think we're going to kill them. I tell them, through (Bucksbaum?), "Take off their hats." They take off their hats. I said, "Now, bend down." So, they bend down, "And, now, start going across the yard here. Pick up everything that's there, every blade of grass, every pebble, every piece of glass, every little metal, any cigarette butt, matchstick, anything. Anything that's not plain dirt, pick it up." So, they go across. They have a nice wheelbarrow full. I said, "Okay, who's the leading man here?" Nobody volunteered. "Bend over, back again." In fact, they go to the third time, "Who's the leading [man]?" Nobody volunteers. I said, "Bend over." The guy said, finally holds up his hand, I said to (Bucksbaum?), "Tell him to come over here." He came over. "What's your name?" "Von Schmidt." "What's your rank?" "I'm captain." I said, "You speak English?" He says, "I have high honors from Cambridge. I was educated in Cambridge." I said, "What made you wait for this point?" He says, "I didn't trust what you were doing. I thought you meant to harm us." I said, "You're a fairly intelligent guy. What do you think Americans are? You think we're monsters, like you Germans, that we just kill out of hand for nothing?" He didn't say anything. I said, "Okay, you're the boss of all these guys. You obey all my orders." So, I said, "Come this way." I take him to the first dormitory. I said, "You've got nothing here. These men have to have a place to sleep. You've got carpenters, you've got mechanics?" He said, "My men can do anything." "Well, get to work. Make dormitories, both these buildings, and, next week, you're going to be inspected by a general. You'd better be in shape." So, my job now, every day, these prisoners are being signed out for labor in different units, like the 40th Engineers. This is the story. They had a party. So, they had four guys, one of them was a baker. So, they kept this baker overtime. So, instead of--fourteen miles away--instead of putting him in a jeep, they're keeping him overtime, they give him a pass and make him walk back to the prison camp. He's stupid enough to walk back, instead of running. [laughter] I lost my command on account of that. Anyway, everything is working fine until then. I'm in command of three hundred prisoners. The General comes with a colonel on a Saturday morning. The Captain is standing out in front of the first thing. He's got creases like razor blades on his pants, he's clean shaven, his buttons are glistening. My ODs are wrinkled. They're not dirty, because we have laundry all the time, but I've got the reverse green on my combat boots; I can't shine them even if I wanted.

My pants are wrinkled. The flap on my pocket here is missing a button and I said to the Captain, "Are you ready?" He says, "Yes." So, I open the door. He sticks his head in and yells, "Hup," and all you hear is, "Bang," just like that, one smack. The General looks, he goes in. The floors were like mirrors. Every one of these Germans, they're standing there, every uniform is pressed, all creases, nice and neat. Their shoes are like mirrors and their mess gear, everything, highly polished. He goes to the kitchen, everything, "You're in charge here? You're a sergeant?" I said, "Unfortunately, yes." That was my story. That was my last command. No, it wasn't--my last command was the Russian gate.

SI: Yes.

BL: I have to keep my chronology straight.

SI: Thank you very much. I appreciate you adding those stories.

BL: If I can think of more, maybe I'll write them down and send them to you.

SI: Sure.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Jesse Braddell 9/25/2014

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 7/23/2015

Reviewed by Joan Leib 8/4/2015