

Recorded Interview  
San Antonio 2010

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John J. Anania, Signal Co. Construction

I was born in New York, March 9, 1922. I served with the 103d Infantry, Signal Co., as a lineman.

I was in a movie theatre when the movie was interrupted and an announcement was made that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. My parents had not heard this news. I told them when I returned home. I was eighteen and working for the Ford Motor Company at the time.

I enlisted in the Army, January 4, 1942. My father had to give me permission and sign for me because I was not yet twenty-one, drafting age. My father was in WW I and was sent to France. The war had ended by the time he got there. My younger brother was called up at the age of 18. He was sent to the same camp that my father had been in, Camp Gordon, GA. My brother and I are only a few months apart in age. The drafting age had changed to 18. I was sent to Fort Custer and from there to Camp Claiborne in Louisiana for basic training. We got our shots, and were quarantined to the camp. Basic training was grueling, especially marching in the hot sun. I was a truck driver and truck drivers were given Thompson machine guns. I made expert with the Thompson and received a medal. We had that weapon taken away and replaced with the M1 rifle. I made marksman with the rifle and received a medal. We got the carbine after that and I made "sharp shooter." (The only gun I had used before entering the

service was a BB gun. I used my BB gun to shoot burnt out Christmas bulbs hung from a string in the basement!)

I was at Camp Claiborne for a year and spent another year at Camp Howze before going overseas. One of the men I got to know during training became a translator in Italy with a different outfit. A man whose last name was Broadhurst, trained with us. I found out later that he had lived halfway down the street from me. I never knew him prior to the war. I knew his father because he had a big Buick, but I never saw the son. One day I asked Broadhurst where he lived. He said he lived on Canton. I said, "I do too!" After the war we kept in touch with Christmas Cards. For a very long time after the war I sent out cards to some of the guys.

After Camp Howze we took a train to New York where I visited with aunts, uncles, and cousins in the Bronx. Before I left for Europe, I visited them and said good-by. I boarded a small Victory Ship, the USS *Abigail Gibbons*. We had 300 members in our company. A medical company was on board ship with us and I knew a couple of those guys. We were given tags that told us where to go on the ship. To our surprise we had a "state room!" Six of us were assigned that room which had double-decker bunks. No hammocks! The First Sergeant walked by, saw the room, and told the Captain we had state rooms. The Captain, a big shooter, came down and said, "All you men pack up your stuff and get out; this is for the first three graders." A sailor happened to be going by, heard what was going on, and talked to the Captain of the ship. The Captain got on the loud speaker and said, "Now hear this, this is the Captain of the ship and I will determined where those soldiers are going to stay. There is a reason for it." There was

a reason for it; we had to do KP. You talk about a mess, especially when we got going. Men were throwing up right into their plate! We had to clean all that up. That was why the Captain was so inclined to give us the nicer accommodations. The soldiers who were machine gunners also had state rooms. The rest of the men were in the "hold". We had two meals a day and we stood up and rested our plate of food on a narrow board.

Our room seemed to be a favorite local for playing cards. Sometimes we had to kick the men out so we could go to bed. It was difficult taking a shower with salt water because even the special soap designed for that purpose did not lather.

We had a long convoy; there were many ships. We had two aircraft carriers with us and sub chasers. They would come in and out of the convoy. We zigzagged across to Europe which made our trip longer; it took 14 days. Along the coast of Africa there was a bay and we received signals from three ships on the coast. I asked one of the sailors what the signals meant. The sailor said that their ships had picked up evidence of a German submarine and were afraid it would pick up our motors. They wanted us to pull away.

After the war, I kept in touch with Rosario Natoli who also lived in Detroit. When ever Rosario would go on furlough I would send him to my home to stay with my parents. After the war I gave Rosario some things of mine to take to my parents because I was stuck overseas.

We landed in Marseilles and disembarked. We lined up with our packs on and with our rifles anticipating a truck ride to our staging area. General Haffner said, "Get those trucks out of here, my men are walking."

What a trip that was! We probably walked twenty miles. Natoli and I dropped out along with many other men. We walked off the road, into a field. Natoli took his backpack off, tossed it down hitting another guy who was lying there. The man said, "Watch out, soldier!" He shared a few more choice words. I turned on my flashlight and saw that the man was a lieutenant! Natoli quickly apologized, "Sorry sir! Sorry sir!" When we woke up in the morning we started walking; eventually a truck picked us up and took us the rest of the way. We found some tar paper and we put it down under our tarp. We stayed in that area waiting for the trucks and jeeps to come up.

The signal company rode in wire trucks. We left wire behind as we drove and there were men who took the wire off the road. When we would come to a crossroad we would either go "up" and "across" or dig a trench and cover it up. Tanks could really chop up the wire. We started out with wire head, at the switchboard. We would plug into the switchboard and take off. Anytime we wanted to call in we would hook the wires up to the telephone and call. We would eventually hand the wire off to soldiers who would hook their phone into the wire. We would return to the wire head and get the next assignment. All the wires would start at the switchboard and go out. We had a team with each regiment and when the regiment moved that team would move with them; we would have to lay the advance wires. When one assignment was over we had to catch up to the regiment's location.

Captain Beck was our Company Commander. Braun was our Colonel. Major Gallagher was a very nice guy. Each section had a Lieutenant.

Sedenze and Johnson were our Lieutenants. Johnson became a Captain after the war was over and retired as a Colonel.

We were shelled in the Vosges Mts. We had a big orange panel on our truck for aircraft identification and it would draw the fire. Somebody finally yelled, "Take that panel off!" We flipped that panel off. We had it pretty good. We got hit a couple of times with eighty-eights.

One time Bill and I heard the shells coming in and we jumped in a gully in the road. The truck got hit: three tires were blown and the windshield, the radiator and the tarp in the back were damaged from shrapnel. A piece of shrapnel landed right under my nose. I did not know it was there but I smelled something and immediately yelled, "Gas, Gas!" The guy behind me yelled, "What is the matter, John?" I said, "I smell gas!" He told me there was no gas. I looked down and realized it was the shrapnel. One piece barely nicked my nose. I never did get the Purple Heart for that. There was another guy on the other side of the road and the shrapnel went right through his helmet. He was crying, "Bloody murder." They threw in five shells right around the truck. Everybody took off when the shelling ended. Bill and I were stuck there. The guy is still hollering, so we ran over to him. The shrapnel had gone through his helmet. We told him the medics would be right over to pick him up and that he would be all right.

We were parked when the truck got hit because we were waiting for the engineers to clear a path for us because the road was mined. There were guys walking ahead with mine detectors. One guy coming up from behind was killed when he hit a "shoe mine." The mine "blew his heel."

They called for the medics, who came up and put the in man with the head injury on a stretcher. As they were taking the injured man away one of the stretcher bearers stepped on a shoe mine. Bill and I had been sitting on the fender of the truck and when we jumped off to help with the stretchers, the shelling started. It is a good thing we walked away.

We called the wire head and told them what happened. They told us to take our spare tire off and they will send a truck up with two tires. They were also going to tow us in because the radiator was blown. After help came, Bill and I caught up with the men running back. That is when he called in and said, "Hey John, go get the truck." I said, "No, I am not going to get the truck, Wilbur is driving today." Wilbur said he was not going after the truck. We went back and forth but finally Bill said, "Come on John, let's go get the truck." I told Bill, "I should not be doing this." We drove the truck with the flat tires to the location where we would meet the truck from wirehead. Wilbur Ellis should have taken the truck down because he had been driving!

They sent another truck to finish our lines. The truck coming to us went the wrong way and set off road mines. Fifteen mines went off around that truck. The sergeant sitting next to the driver was killed and the driver lost a leg because the truck blew up. The guys in the back of the truck also had to go to the hospital. One guy lost an eye. (At the same place where the truck broke down.) Our road was mined also but the engineers went before us and cleared the way.

Another time we were finished laying wire and were in a place where we were staying to wait for orders. Colonel Brown wanted to see me. The sergeant found out that the Colonel wanted us to take the wire by hand a mile down to the town. I asked Sergeant Jones, "Just how bad is it down there?" Then he said, "Who else wants to go?" Bill said, "If John is going, I am going." The three of us met with Colonel Brown. He said that he would drive as we held the reels off the jeep. We took the jeep but it only went part of the way when Colonel Brown said that he was not going any further. We had to get out and walk to that town after we had been told that they were throwing 88's at anything that moved.

We went on further and heard shells coming in and I yelled, "Jump!" All the way down to the town we jumped into foxholes when we heard the shells coming in and moved out just as quickly. They were still throwing 88's at us when we came back. I thought I could hear better without my helmet so I took it off. Bill said, "OK." Soon, I said, "Bill here comes one." We jumped on opposing sides of the road. We thought the sergeant was following us with another reel so we could lay another line on the way back. As it turned out he dumped the reel and left us. Bill said, "We have to lay this line or we will have to come back tonight and lay it. We took that reel and started again under the same shelling. We left the line just at the edge of town because they were still fighting in town. The sergeant said he was going to turn us in for a Bronze Star but we never got them.

When Bill and I got to the Rhine we could not get across because the bridge was blown. The engineers were constructing another one. We could not wait so Bill went and talked to the engineer lieutenant. The only

thing he could do for us was give us a boat so we could cross. He added that we would be under fire. They had someone who was brave enough to drive the boat. We volunteered again and jumped in the boat. There were two tanks that were waiting to cross the river. One of the tank drivers told us that they would cover us as we crossed. They opened up with a 50 caliber and it looked like someone had gone through on the other side of the river with a lawn mower. When we got there no one was there! The sarge went around to the next town and picked us up. We were to get the Bronze Star. We never got the Bronze Star for anything. All of the six men in our wire team made it through the war.

Another time, we had Lieutenant Sedinsky with us and we were on the wrong road. We noticed a bunch of guys coming toward us wearing civilian clothes and carrying rifles. When they got to the truck they asked us where we were going. They said there is nothing but Germans down there! They were our soldiers who changed their clothes and disguised themselves as civilians. They asked us if we had any ammunition and grenades. We had grenades because we used to pick them up on the road. We handed them the grenades and they headed back down again. They were in a bad position, also; they almost got captured.

Bill, Rudy and I were a little closer than the other guys. Rudy ended up close to both of us. At first, he rubbed us the wrong way. We said that we had a team; Bill and I were the "B" team. The other guys were closer to the sergeant. Rudy asked, "How can I get on your team?" I gave him a grenade and told him to throw the grenade at a shack that was in the area. He went down to the shack and pretended to throw the grenade. Bill and I



went down to the shack area and Rudy was laughing. Rudy threw the grenade came running up where we were and we were friends again.

We found a German tank and started to scavenge. That, in hindsight, was stupid because the tank could have been booby-trapped. We were not even thinking of that. I had a camera and took a picture of the tank.

We were going along nicely and then everything stopped at Innsbruck. We had come from the Vosges Mountains into Innsbruck and toward the Brenner Pass. Everything was stopped at Innsbruck. That night General McAuliffe came up in his jeep with some high ranking British officers. McAuliffe jumped out and they walked into Innsbruck, going toward the Brenner Pass. When McAuliffe came back he told the British officers, "If you guys want to move any faster you get your own "God damn men up here." Those guys shut up! When we heard him tell that to those English officers we were surprised; they were some high ranking officers. He came up to the wire truck and said, "Give me the phone!" I said, "Yes, Sir." I don't know who he called but when he was finished he put the phone down, jumped in his jeep and drove away. We could not go any further because the war ended right there. (We did not know that at that point.) We met the Fifth Army coming up from Italy and that was the end of the war. I was overseas from Oct. to May, when the war ended. We were lucky they issued us all new clothes before we shipped out.

We went into Guggenheim on the German border to find a place to stay. We passed by some people who just standing there was watching us. We continued to the edge of town and returned. The people we passed

were members of the same family and offered to put us up. The family included Mary whose husband had been killed, her daughter and son-in-law. We really got to know them. We found a German ambulance and found some high quality German blankets inside. We went back to Mary's house and she offered to line our jackets with the material from the German blankets. When we told them we were leaving they threw a party for us and killed a pig for the meal. Someone they knew who played the accordion for us and put on a little show. Eventually, we had to leave the town. We did go back on our own to visit Mary and her family before we left Germany. They were good people.

When we were at the Maginot Line we went into a pillbox. There were ladders that would take you two stories down where there would be a tunnel to another pillbox. They had sleeping quarters. The Germans were gone. At night Germans would come into camp to give themselves up. Only blackout lights were on and at first we were not sure who they were. We could only see their boots. We would yell, "Hande Ho!" (Hands up!) There was one group that gave us some trouble. We did not have our guns with us. All I had was a leather pliers' kit (a pocket knife, a pair of pliers). I took the kit and motioned for him to put up his hands, and he did. I told Bill Barklay to go pick up the rifle.

After the war my son, my nephew and I went to Italy. When we were planning, I told them I wanted to go to Innsbruck. Upon arrival, we rented a car, headed to Venice and later to Innsbruck. On that trip I took a picture that matched the one that I had at home. We went up one side of Italy and down the other side.

Some of us did not have enough points to come home at the end of the war. We were in Innsbruck and they broke up our outfit. Some men went to the Fifth Division and men from the Fifth Division came to the 103d. The men from the Fifth Division were getting discharged because they had enough points. They picked out guys from our division to go on a thirty day furlough prior to being sent to Japan. I was still in France, at Camp St. Louis (our shipping out camp) when they dropped the bomb in Japan.

We still had not gone to Camp St. Louis and I was on guard that night. The guys were walking past me saying, "Goodbye John." I said, "Where are you going?" They said they were going home. I knew they were going to the movies right then. I said, "How come?" "We got picked." I said, "What about me?" "You are going to have to stay." I said, "No, I want to come!" They said, "Go see the captain." I had someone take my place on guard duty and I went to see the captain. The captain said if I could get someone to take my place I could go home. I went back to where we were stationed and asked if anyone wanted to trade places. One guy said he would trade places. He said, "You just saved my life." He was supposed to go to Japan. If you were slotted to go to Japan you would get a thirty day furlough before you went.

Unfortunately, I got burned when a stove blew up while I was refueling it. I am currently having trouble with my leg now. I did not get home until December. The men who came home earlier were discharged and had jobs. I had skin grafts in the hospital and that was in '45. Just recently I have had trouble with the skin grafts drying up and falling off. I

get blisters in the area frequently. It is just like being burned all over again. We had the stove set up so we could refuel it with oil and gasoline mixed. Someone in the night was cold and put wood around the metal container. The wood got hot but it never burned. The next morning was Sunday and a sergeant came down the hall and said he was going to church. I asked him to wait while I shaved because I wanted to go with him. I needed some hot water. I started pouring fuel in and the wood along side of the can was still sparking. When I started filling up that can, it just blew. I dropped the can with the fuel. The can hit the stove and tipped over on me. I had to stay overseas from July to December to recuperate. I came home on a hospital ship that stopped in New York. I was able to see my cousins before going home. They shipped me to Crile General Hospital in Cleveland where I was eventually discharged. I took a train home.

I arrived home in a cab, knocked on the door and surprise my mom/family. They did not know about my leg. Natoli had taken some money to them when he went back to the states. I had asked him not to tell them about my accident. My father could not get over the fact that I was not home. He would say, "Something is wrong. He should be coming home." My dad pumped Natoli but Natoli would not tell him.

My brother was already home. He had gone to Camp Gordon, Georgia and then joined the mechanized Calvary. (My father was at Camp Gordon also.) Another transfer sent my brother to the medics and when he went overseas he was on the landing crafts that would pick up the wounded or the dead. The men he picked up would be taken to the ships in the harbor.

I was engaged before I left and when I came back I set up the hall and the church. \*\*\*\* Everything was set when she “gave me my walking papers.” She had met someone. When I got overseas, I put her name on the back of my jacket and no one said anything about it. I also was the only one that had his girlfriend’s name on the front of his truck and nobody said anything about it. It was written in chalk in case I had to erase it.

I had been to a movie with three friends and we were driving home. We saw two girls walking down the street and my friend slowed the car down. We started talking and we asked them to drive with us. They suggested we walk with them. First, one of the guys got out, and when they keep asking, my other friend got out. The girls were still trying to get me to walk but I told them I had been injured playing football and I could not walk. I finally got out; one of my friends drove his car. She had been at a farewell party for her brother; he was going into the service. The party was getting rowdy so they had walked out. We walked back to the party with the girls. Her brother was behind the bar and asked me “what I was drinking.” I said, “Coke.” We were too young to have alcohol but there were people who were underage drinking. I finally got Genevie’s phone number. Before we left the police raided the party. At first they did not want us to take them home. I told them we needed to get out of there or we would go to jail with the rest of the people. We ran up the stairs, jumped in the car and took the girls home. We were surprised the police did not stop us. I started dating Genevie’s after that. On one of my furloughs we got engaged. We had one more furlough before we left to go overseas. Everything was set for the wedding but it did not work out.

I met my wife Bernice after the war. We met when we worked for Detroit Aluminum and Brass. I was twenty-four when we got married. We have a daughter and she has two children, a boy and a girl. They are here with me. My son is a graphic artist for Farmer's Insurance in Burbank, California.

I saw one concentration camp. The people who had been held in the camp were walking around the town when I saw them. They would come up to the truck and ask for food. All we had was K-rations or C-rations. We would give them what we could. Eventually, they had to be locked up in a secure area so that our medical personnel could manage their diet for their own good.

I heard about a reunion in Flint, Michigan and one of my friends wanted to go. They would not allow us to participate because they were booked solid. After that we organized a reunion for the Signal Company in St. Louis. The next year we teamed up with the 103d reunion.

I became a tile setter after the war and retired from that profession. I picked up a job related medical condition because I was exposed to asbestos working with the tile. In the commercial settings, I was also exposed to asbestos that was being sprayed in between the floors where I was working. I can't walk far because of the affect of the asbestos exposure on my lungs.

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**Anecdote by interviewer:**

**Patriot Cane/Memorial Project:** The idea started with the EOWCA (Eastern Oklahoma Woodcarvers Association) and now other states are making canes and sending them to Veteran's hospitals. The MWCA Michigan Woodcarver's Association's executive board voted approval to sponsor a "Military service personnel cane project."

Mr. Anania has one of these canes.

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