

Taped Interview

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I was born March 10, 1922, in Lafayette, Indiana. I was in my junior year at Purdue University when I heard the news about Pearl Harbor. We were having convocation in our auditorium, which is bigger than Radio City Music Hall, (two balconies!). The speaker was a reporter from the *Pacific* and the subject of her message was “Peace in the Pacific.” On the way to the auditorium we heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor (12-7-41). The suddenness of the event was most disturbing though it had seemed inevitable. I was in R.O.T.C. in my junior year of college. Purdue had over 3,000 in R.O.T.C. Everyone had to be in R.O.T.C in their freshmen and sophomore years unless physically unable. To be in the advanced course you had to ask for it and not everybody was accepted. They decided that it would be better for us to finish college and then go into the Army, so we went straight through. Otherwise, we would have graduated the next June. Instead, we were scheduled to graduate December 20, five days before Christmas. We found out a couple weeks before graduation that we were

not going to get a commission because we did not have summer camp; we were not eligible. They sent all of us, about 150 seniors, to OCS at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, the Artillery School, for three months instead. That was nice because we knew a lot of guys. OCS was educational in nature, mostly classroom work with some field work; they showed you how to fire the howitzer and sense where the shells landed. We got the practical side, driving the trucks; the intellectual side we had during four years of R.O.T.C. This was the chance to really see the stuff and do it. I was a civil engineer and the Assistant S-2 in a Field Artillery Battalion, a surveying officer. I surveyed the gun positions and the targets, getting the range, so we could fire on them. They sent about six or eight of us to surveying school; that was a month of training. I was the only civil engineer; the others became familiar with surveying, everyone had a little bit of it as freshmen at Purdue.

One of the guys, a mechanical engineer, had his car there. There were six in our cabin all from Purdue. Many were assigned to the 103d Division. In April or May we drove over to Shreveport, Louisiana, spent the night, and the next day continued our drive to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. We got down there and two vacancies were available; otherwise I would have gone into overflow. One was General's Aide and the other was Assistant S-2, a surveying officer. Since I was a civil engineer I took the Assistant S-2 job

and my friend took the General's Aide position with General Wicks. We had an overage in 50% officers. I taught surveying and the General listened in on me once and told me what a good job I had done; I had four years of Civil Engineering, taught civil engineering to other officers, and taught an enlisted crew how to actually do the work in the field! This was extra for me. A surveying crew was made up of about six or eight guys with a sergeant in charge of it. Some men held the poles and others read the instruments and tape. It was the right job for me and because of that I got an active part in the Division; I was promoted sooner than the others. In December, in only seven or eight months, I was promoted to 1st Lieutenant.

We went on maneuvers in Louisiana in October and November. There were three divisions and we would fight two against one. The last maneuver was a river crossing; we did so well they wanted us to do it again. We did it the second time and, unfortunately, one of our liaison planes, which was observing fire, was hit by a flare. The pilot was killed and he crashed the plane; if we had not had the extra river crossing, it would not have happened.

Targets were generally selected by the forward observer who sent the locations on the map to the fire direction center. Fire direction center could then measure the direction and range to fire on the targets. This data was

then sent to the gun crews and guns were set to fire on the targets. The orders came down to me and I told the men what data to put on their guns to fire them and supposedly we would hit the target. Now the fire direction center has the targets spotted and they know where the guns are on the map. The forward observers would stay close to the infantry officers to give the location to fire direction control. Then the infantry officer might point out to the Field Artillery officer an area of woods that had a lot of German soldiers in it and would ask him to get fire on those woods. The Field Artillery officer has a map and sends the coordinates down to the fire direction center that plots them on their map and they then swing around and tell the troops how to point their guns. It was pretty accurate too. I was on the OP, Observation Post, only once; I was with the guns most all the time. One day I went up to the OP and they were firing an experimental shell. They were trying to get a shell loaded with Napalm or something to set things on fire. I had to register first to find out what we were going to shoot at. I picked a house and sent the coordinates down to the fire director so they could plot it. I fired some rounds and they corrected them so they would hit the target; that showed how accurate we could be if the house was our target. The first round went five yards to the left of the house; I sensed 5 yards left, repeat

range. The second one hit the point of the roof. That is how accurate artillery was. They were using 105mm shells, about 3 inches in diameter.

From Claiborne we went on maneuvers for a month or so. That was hard work; we did have rest periods between them. Then we went to Camp Howze in Texas. Our survey crew went ahead of the battalion to set out bivouac markers to tell the others where to camp. I was short one route marker when we were coming into town so I told Capt. Thomas that I needed an officer control point. I made him feel very important, although a private could have done the job. I did that once or twice but I still remember when we came to Howze and we came over this hill and there was nothing there but black tar paper shacks; no trees. I said, "This is terrible!"

It turned out Denton and Dallas, Texas, were south of there. Many went into Dallas for weekends. I still say the best looking girls in the U.S are in Dallas, TX, and I only have had one person to disagree with that. Denton had a women's college and a coed college. We had no problem with dates. We were there from December or January until we went overseas in September. We were there about eight months. We would go out on the range and fire artillery.

From Camp Howze we went to New York City. We took a number of trains all in different routes to get there because we did not want the

Germans to know we were coming. We landed in Marseilles and the French people welcomed us. We boarded the ships from Camp Shanks, NY. For me, the trip over was terrible; I did not know I was going to be seasick. I had a plan to lay down a half hour before eating and a half hour after and then go up on the deck. It was working great but I decided that I did not have to do this. One day I did not lie down before I ate and I just barely made it through my dinner and reached my bunk but immediately had to go to the head. But that was the only meal I lost. I went back to the routine until we went past the Rock of Gibraltar into calm seas. The first three days had been pretty calm. It took ten days, a long time, for the convoy to reach our destination. We went over on the *Conte Grande*, of the Italian Line, Commissioned *USS Monticello*, April 16, 1942.

At times I was duty officer for those guys who were way down below decks. There was not much room between bunks. I would be there at night and the poor guys would come staggering out of the doors green from being sick. I felt so sorry for them. We had better arrangements as officers: wider bunks and more space between bunks. I had the top bunk so I was in good shape.

My Battery Commander was Captain Cam and my Battalion Commander was Colonel Jun, who was also a civil engineer. The same guns

we trained with were shipped ahead for our use overseas. All the equipment other than personal equipment went by train from Camp Howze to New York City. On the passenger trains I found out there is only one bed long enough for me and that was in the bedroom which measured 7 feet; I am 6'4". I think the bunks were 6'4" because I touched both ends.

We landed in Marseilles and there were supposed to be trucks to take us the 14 miles to our bivouac area. But since the trucks were not there we were told to start walking and the trucks would pick us up. Everyone had big packs on their backs, their overcoats on their arms, our pup tents and a raincoat; we were heavily laden. Every time we stopped we would slide everything off our back. I had a 21 jewel Gruen watch on because I had not been given a watch from the military before going overseas. They said I could take my watch off and put it in my belongings. It was rainy by the time I got to my bivouac area; about half the men did not make it. With my long legs I got there without too much trouble. I just threw my stuff on the ground and put my tent over myself and my stuff and went to sleep. My watch was gone! About half the men came in the next day; it was quite a shock to walk 14 miles after not doing anything for ten days. We stayed in that area for a month; we did have to dig slit trenches most of which were not too deep because of the rocks.

We eventually started up the Rhone River; the landings had taken place by that time and the Germans were retreating up the Rhone River. We sent an armored division to cut them off and trap them so the planes could strafe them. We came upon German tanks and trucks littered along the road all the way up the Rhone River Valley. We stopped in Dijon and Lyon and we got over to St. Die.

We got into position in Larousse to fire on the attacks on St. Die and an unfortunate thing happened there. There are three firing batteries in a battalion, Headquarters Battery, and Service battery. The First Sergeant of the Headquarters Battery was Sergeant Wiggins. I knew him well because as Assistant S-2 I was assigned to Headquarters' Battery. He had been in the Army for seventeen years. He was leading a kitchen truck into the woods so that the Germans would not see it. The kitchen truck hit a landmine and he was out in front and it killed him. He is buried in Epinol; he is the only man our battalion lost all during the war. The guy was a perfect soldier, seventeen years in the service and was killed before we had even fired a round. I just looked at the Killed in Action books in the other room and they are wrong. They said he was born in 1925 and that is three years after I was born! I know he was a lot older than I was; they are going to check that out.

Sergeant Wiggins was a perfect soldier. From this position it was the first time we fired in combat. We were under fire at St. Die.

We replaced the Third Division coming out. The Third Division had the Japanese Regiment attached to them. That really was odd to see these Japanese soldiers coming toward you. They had the best record of any outfit in the Army. They wanted to prove they were good American citizens.

Every battery had trucks and we sent them back to the ammunition dump for artillery shells. I think we had to go to Division or beyond to Corp to pick up what we needed, including food and everything. We were always behind the infantry three or four miles. The artillery weapons had a range of 8 miles. We would fire on the town before the infantry moved in, generally speaking. I think we were fired on by German artillery once.

I was taller than my battery commander. We had dug slit trenches; mine was pretty long since I am 6'4". My battery commander was about 5'6" and his was shorter than mine. We had a shell come about 300 yards from me. It was kind of loud and you never knew when the next one was coming. My battery commander jumped in my trench; I didn't fit in his so I had to lie under a truck instead. That is as close as it got to me.

Sometimes we went into a town that we had fired on but not always. We did not go into St. Die at all; it was not necessary to go into the town. In

a small town the road might go right through the town but many times the road went around the town.

Selestat was the last town we liberated in that group. We probably had ten different positions over there in this attack. I got into trouble there but it was not my fault. We moved into position to fire an attack on Selestat at two o'clock in the afternoon; we didn't fire at all that evening or that night. About 10 o'clock the next morning, "Fire Mission!" Word came down that we had to fire "fuse quick" (which means as soon as it hits it goes off). We fired and fired but we only had so many shells at the gun. I called back to my ammunition crew to get them to bring more ammunition up. I could not get them on the phone. Our commander was back there and I could not get him on the phone. I finally told the Battalion that I was sorry but I do not have any more fuse quick shells. So they had another battery take over the fire mission. I was still a First Lieutenant; you don't go to captain until you are a battery commander. But I explained what had happened. The battery commander was more at fault than I was. When I was up there my assistant executive officer took over for me. They started firing "timed-fire" which goes off in the air. He had his four guns loaded with his last four "time-fire" shells. They cancelled them. He came out smelling like roses. He said he could have fired those but would just use HE

shells he would tell them but the “time-fire” was too long. It wasn’t his fault; it was the wrong setting. The first campaign lasted about a couple of weeks. We had about three days off to clean the guns. Our division is primarily fighting north while the 3d Army is going east.

One of the best things about the artillery was our three hot meals a day. We had our own kitchen truck and good meals. The weather was worse in the Vosges Mountains with the snow, fog and mud. As soon as we got off the highway, we would sink in the mud. We would have to run a cable over to a tree before we ever got into position; if we ever had to move the howitzer that was a real job. You would have to dig them out of the ground. That didn’t happen very often. You could shift 400 mils each way from center. Once you shift more than that you have to shift the whole gun. The guns were towed by 2 ½ ton trucks that had two wheels in front and eight wheels in back. They had a little longer wheel base that supplied us but they were 2 ½ ton trucks, too. The next size was 4 tons; we did not have any 4 tons but the supply people did. When we were not in action we were working on repair and cleaning up the guns and the trucks. Then we went up into line. We moved all the way up into Germany. Once we went into a town and there was not a soul in the town. I forget the name of the town. There were a few cows and chickens; they did not last very long. We were

not to the Siegfried Line but we were in Germany. We were there about two days. We were in a high position in a vineyard and there was a castle to our left and then we retreated back down and were in position for awhile. At that time we went from the Eastern end of the Front over to the Western side; that was an all night proposition getting over there. We stayed over there a month or so. That is when the Battle of the Bulge started and that is why we were over there. First we were supposed to go up to the Battle of the Bulge but they decided they wanted an armored division instead so we stayed and the 6th Armored came out and they went up to the Battle of the Bulge.

During the clean up period of time, I was walking down the street one day and this sergeant, one of the gun commanders, was drunk, staggering down the road. I said hello to him but I didn't ball him out because he would not have understood anyway. The next day I called him aside to tell him that he had been in pretty bad condition. I said, "You need to think about this, suppose we had a mortar shower five minutes after I saw you?" You were not in any condition to lead that gun into anything. I won't tell the battery commander (the sergeant had a pretty good record.), but if you do it again I will tell him and you will probably be a private." Later on, we were in a house and we heard a knock at the door. One of the village men told us,

“One of your men is shooting my chickens with his carbine!” It was that same sergeant, so he went back to private. A staff sergeant who was head of the guns had three sergeants under him. Before we could get to our designations they pulled us over into a German Army Camp to spend the night. While we were there the staff sergeant was looking for something; it had to be the right thing because this guy was perfect. He got a march order and he did not get back in time so the Battery Commander broke him to private. So, when that happened he had to get another guy to take it and he took the gun commander and made him Staff Sergeant; I could not say anything because I had given my word. I tried to suggest other things. So the soldier got his old job back again after another drinking episode.

Then we moved back over on the Eastern end of the Front. I think Division Hdqts. was in Phaffenhoffen and we stayed there for three months, from January to March 15. We finally jumped off after that and never stopped. There was some hard fighting. We went up through the Siegfried Line, which was the tough part of it. That was the only time that all of our guys in our battery had ammunition in their guns ready to fire; not in the case but actually in the chamber ready to go. There were still German troops there when we went through the Siegfried Line. They did not fire on us and

we got through. I put the men in position in case we had to fire beyond that point.

My Corporal, that kept my records, said there was an old sugar beet pit near there. He decided to make it a shelter; he put logs over the top of it. He was trying to make it bigger all the time. In the middle of the night I woke up and my arms were pinned down and dirt was all over. The top had come down. I asked the guy next to me, "Can you move?" "No!" "How about the next guy?" Nobody was hurt. We finally got the dirt off and got out of that place. He was trying to make it bigger but he went too far. We were in French territory after that period. I spoke German but not French which came in handy later on.

We went through the Siegfried Line. We had a black outfit, tankers, which came through there before us. They really busted a hole through there. When we came through, there were Germans, horses, wagons, and tanks all over the road. Those guys were good; they went through there like it was nothing.

The Third Army came across and we fell in with them. We crossed the Rhine at Worms. The Third Army went East and we went South eventually to the next town which was Oberammergau. They had the Passion Play there. I don't think we had to fight there. There was a

haystack and I walked around it and found a man and two kids; he had killed the kids and committed suicide thinking these awful Americans are coming. We went to the next town which was Sharnitz. Another place we faced snipers in the mountains; we called the anti-aircraft guys to come in and you could see people scurrying up the mountain to get to the other side. We had artillery and we fired on the Germans; supporting our troops ahead. One German civilian was all excited about the gun noise damaging his houses. Our guys did not speak German and they thought the word for shooting was schiss (shit); so they thought we were going to “shit on their house.” We did not damage their houses either way.

Then we went to Innsbruck in the Inn Valley. We came down this long, long, rambling road. The first dead American soldier I saw was laying along side the road. We got into position to fire on Innsbruck and the Austrians rose up against the Germans and took the town and surrendered to us. The Austrian girls gave our guys big hugs and kisses and the German soldiers cheered us too. Their Generals would have ended the war earlier if it had not been for Hitler. We were in Innsbruck two days before the war was over, about May 6. Then we went down to the Brenner Pass and took it. The Fifth Army was supposed to take Brenner Pass coming up but we got there first. They made us pull back and let the Fifth Army retake the town.

Then we went on occupation duty in the villages around that area. We took trips, cleaned guns, and worked on the trucks. An officer would take a truck load of guys up to Munch, Berchtesgaden, and Brenner Pass. I walked across the Brenner Pass six or seven steps so that I could say I was in Italy. I haven't been there since. We had volleyball games between units during occupation in Götzens, Austria. We were in two villages and our teams played each other. There was a ski lodge and most of the men were in the ski lodge; we also had two houses. The officers were in one and the enlisted men were in the other. We were there a month. We even had a dance and invited some displaced women to come up there. There was only one good looking girl, the rest were heavy. I saw her and asked why no one was asking her to dance. They said I should ask her; she was out of her seat before I even got over there, an officer I guess. I saw her once after that; I think she was bargaining for price. We enjoyed it up there. It was nice country up in the Alps. I did a floor plan of the house we rented in Götzens to show what they looked like. We took trips out of this area, also. Another girl wanted passes to go into Innsbruck with us. I could talk with the Burgermeister because I could speak German. We had volleyball games. The kids knew me because I could speak German and I would round them

up to cheer for our Battery and the other team didn't have any cheering section.

We stayed a month in each of those villages during Occupation. Then some of us were transferred to the 45th Division further up into Germany. We were not there long before we went to Camp St. Louis on the way to Japan. We were there for three days during which the war ended. After two more months we went up to Camp Lucky Strike, staying there for three days prior to boarding a ship for home. We had a track meet at Camp Lucky Strike where I earned two ribbons. I had run the high and low hurdles in high school.

We heard about the bomb (A Bomb) drop when we were at Camp St. Louis. I had a dreadful feeling about it. It's too bad. It was a real God send and it ended the war. That's why we were in Camp St. Louis for six weeks because the war ended and they didn't know what to do with us. When I came back to the United States to Camp Shanks, I got to go home for 14 days before going to another camp, Camp Kilmer in New Jersey. I went with the 45th Division down to Texas. I was there a month or so and transferred to the 2nd Division at Camp Swift near Austin, TX. We were there a number of months. We fired and practiced just like we did before the war. Then they transferred the 2nd Division to Fort Lewis in Washington

State. I was there 3 weeks. But on the way up we were going to march on Market Street in San Francisco, the whole division. One guy had a car, so I got permission to go with him instead of taking the train up. There were 3 to 4 days between when we left and when I had to be in San Francisco. So we went to Hollywood.

My wife, before she was my wife, worked at Camden, NJ at a modeling school. They were making a movie about “we of the hero guys”. They needed some extras for the movie. Eleanor Parker was the lead and my wife did look something like Eleanor Parker, she was the second for the actress. She got pretty good pay and was in these shows for a month or two. Later, after we were married, we went to see it. “That’s her, that’s her!” The distant shots were sometimes her, but the close-ups were Eleanor Parker. Eleanor had laryngitis and couldn’t do the outside shots in the winter.

I was at Camp Fort Lewis for three weeks and I got discharged. Then I joined the Reserves. I was in the Reserves for thirty-one years. After I got out of the Army I went to USA Reserves School for four years; two weeks ever so often and took Advanced Artillery. Then I went to Command General Staff School for seven years. The last year was at Fort Leavenworth. I was eligible to be a Major and I did become a Major. I was

a G-3 in an Infantry Division Hdqts., later becoming Asst. Division Commander and then Division Commander. I got to be a Full Colonel. I was still a Civil Engineer and retired after 45 years in that field.

Another memorable experience.....

After we crossed the river, we started the final attack on March 15. The engineers had cleared an area so we could put our guns in position to fire on the Germans. I told my men where to put their guns. Then I told one of the corporals to take his machine gun up to a certain area so he could see over the ledge; that way if the Germans came along he can take care of them. Well, there was about one foot of snow on the ground and it was outside the gun area. He said, "Lt. Ball, there might be some mines up there." I always had faith I was coming back; I had faith in God. So I said, "OK." So I walked up there with my size 14 shoes and when I came down I said, "Stay in my footprints and you'll be OK." Some months afterwards, we had a get together and he had a few beers and he says, "Lt. Ball, I remember the day you walked before me." It made me feel good that he remembered; I had forgotten it.