

## Taped Interview

(By phone after Cincinnati Reunion 2008)

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Robert L. Leslie, Co. G, 409th

I was in Co. G, 409<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division.

I was born in New Castle, Pennsylvania. I was a senior in high school and I had had a date the night before and I was sleeping in the afternoon and my father woke me up and told me that war was declared and that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. I was in a sound sleep and it really confused me for a few minutes. I figured, "Oh, I am young it won't happen to me." I was drafted. When I graduated from high school I had a scholarship to a little college in Washington, Pennsylvania, Washington and Jefferson. I graduated in January and the following September I was to go to college. In the middle of the summer they passed the 18 year old draft law. Washington and Jefferson called me in and said I am sorry but the scholarship is no longer available. It was quite a blow. I tried to get into the Navy and the Navy would not take me. I wore glasses. I was subsequently drafted in March 1943. I was assigned to the 8<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in Camp Polk, Louisiana. It was a school division which trained men to form other armored divisions. I trained there for seven months. I was an acting

Reconnaissance NCO and they wanted me to go to OCS. I asked them what was open and they said infantry and armored force. I said, "Do you get shot at in both of them?" They said yes and I said no. I had a bad enough job as it was being a Reconnaissance Acting NCO. Then they came along and said they're going to send eight men to the Army Specialized Training Program. Those of us who wanted to go would have to take our classification tests over again and qualify. I figured, well, I wanted to go to college, so I'll try it. I took the test over and passed and subsequently ended up in the Army Specialized Training Program at the University of Oklahoma. I trained for 7 months in the 8<sup>th</sup> army armored division and then four months in the Army Specialized Training Program. All of us from the University of Oklahoma were assigned to the 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division. That is how I got into the 103<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division. The first camp I was in was Polk. It is now a Fort and a permanent installation. I left from New York on the USS Monticello; from Camp Shanks, New York. We landed in Marseilles. And from there we proceeded north to the Front. I remember being sea sick. I had the top bunk and as far forward as you could get. The ventilation system was poor; it didn't work most of the time. All the stale air would go to the top of the compartment. The bad smells and things like that helped to make you seasick also. But we made it. When I first trained with the 8<sup>th</sup> Armored

Division, we had a lot of vehicles. So we did not do too much walking. We did an awful lot of running. Getting out of vehicles and running and things like that. The pack didn't bother me too much. I was pretty well prepared. I am not a big man but nevertheless I was active. And frankly it didn't bother me too much. I was a machine gunner and when I went overseas I carried a carbine. I was an ammunition bearer for a machine gun squad. As the war progressed I gave up the carbine and got an automatic pistol. My squad leader was wounded badly and died of his wounds. I progressed up through the squad and eventually became squad leader. I carried a rifle when I was a squad leader. So I carried a carbine, a pistol, a rifle, and fired a machine gun, also. I fired four different weapons while I was in combat. My Company Commander was Captain Rodger Craddock, the man I will admire the rest of my life. He was a good man who looked out for his men. He had been an enlisted man and had every enlisted rank from Private to Sergeant. He went to OCS and then came to the 103<sup>rd</sup> Division as a Lieutenant. He became a Company Commander, and commanded G Company. I will admire him for the rest of my life. An excellent leader. Most of the time our objectives were given to us like, the next gully we would take or the high ground in front of us or something like that. A big part of the time we operated without an officer in the Platoon I was in. We

had four different officers: one officer wounded twice, one officer killed. A big part of the time we operated under the Platoon Sergeant who didn't get killed or wounded. The primary objective was usually pretty obvious. They would give us the objective and frankly we did a pretty good job with what we did. I remember what I was feeling the first time I came under fire. As an ammunitions bearer for a machinegun squad, I carried two boxes of ammunition and they weighed about 28 lbs apiece. We went down a pretty good size hogback ridge through the woods out into open ground. The open ground was interlaced with a few ditches for drainage purposes. And as we started across the open ground somebody shot at us! We all went down into one of these little ditches. There were five of us in the machinegun squad. We were lined up according to our job in the machinegun squad – squad leader, 1<sup>st</sup> gunner, 2<sup>nd</sup> gunner, the first ammunition bearer, which was me, the second ammunition bearer. While we were lying in this ditch being fired at by machine gun fire and rifle fire we were fired on by a light mortar by the Germans. A round hit in the ditch in front of the sergeant and exploded. Fortunately, it was far enough away that no one got hurt. Another round landed behind the last ammunition bearer. We knew we were zeroed in because they could take that mortar and fire into the ditch where we were. I got a little excited and nervous to say the least. I yelled at Sergeant Dorgan

who was my squad leader, "Let's get out of here." I didn't expect him to say, "Les, you go first!" He pointed to a pretty good size house. I got up and ran. I heard the bullets go past me, but fortunately I didn't get wounded or killed. I went into the house. I kicked the door open and went into the house. There was a German officer in there that was dying of his wounds and a German medic who was treating him. Fortunately, I didn't shoot either of them. I wouldn't do that anyway. The rest of our squad got there and nobody got wounded. We stayed there for about a half an hour or somewhere along in there. We set the machine gun up in the manure pile. The first gunner and I fired on a ridgeline across a creek that we had to cross. The Taintrux River was the name of the creek. The lieutenant came up and told us to quit firing. We thought we were doing a good job keeping the enemy down while our men advanced. The platoon leader told us not to fire so we didn't fire. After that we proceeded across the river. It was such a small creek, it was deep enough that you went in about up to your waist. We were told don't take the shallow places, they are mined. So, we kept to the deeper places and that is why we got wet up to our waists. We proceeded to take the other ridge and clear out the enemy and captured some prisoners. All this operation took from roughly 9 o'clock in the morning until dusk. Just about dusk we were fired on by heavy mortars. They fired a

round of smoke on our company position. We all started to run as hard as we possible could. Fortunately, I was in a place next to a pretty good sized rock. And I got down below the level of the earth. A lot of the fellows couldn't dig because there were too many rocks around. The Germans shelled us all night. We had more casualties on the top of that ridge than we had crossing open ground in the small creek we were crossing beforehand. G Company took a pretty big casualty that day we had forty some casualties that day. We were near Le Haut Jacques, which was the closest village. After that, I had the experience of the first day of combat. We realized we were not infallible. We realized our vulnerability to the enemy. We moved on through the Vosges Mountains. We engaged in different battles across the Vosges Mountains. We eventually ended up on the Rhine Plain near the town of Selestat. We had casualties going from the town where we were to St. Die. From St. Die we went to Selestat clear across the ridges of the Vosges Mountains. [A little aside: I took liberty one time after the war was over to copy the morning reports of the company which was illegal. They were secret. You weren't supposed to do that. The morning reports, up until about twenty years after WWII were still classified secret. And I copied those. On the morning report they would have the name of a little village and the names of those who were replaced and how many. I didn't have

time to copy down every name. I wish I would have been able to. I did copy down all the casualties and those who were missing in action, those who were killed in action. Sometimes they would have those who later died of wounds. That would come from the rear area up to us saying they had died of wounds. It was very interesting. At one of the reunions of our Division, I got in touch with Lieutenant Colonel Strange who was our Regimental Commander after Colonel Lloyd our original Regimental Commander left us. [Colonel Lloyd was our Regimental Commander during most of our combat.] Colonel Strange was our Regimental Commander for the last few weeks of the war. I talked to him and asked him if the Morning Reports were still secret. He said he thought they had been released. I found out that they had been released and were no longer secret. I had my wife type up copies of the Morning Reports and I sent a copy to everyone that I knew. I think they thought I had given them a million dollars when that happened. In the Morning Report they would have the name of the town for example (sometimes it would not be spelled the way it was on the French maps of the French villages). Our linguistics were not as good as they should have been. We all should have learned French and German before we went over there. After we took the town of Selestat we turned from our Eastern objectives and turned north and fought north for about twenty or

thirty miles into the Siegfried Line. That was about the time the Battle of the Bulge started, about the 15<sup>th</sup> of December. We had a pretty rough time in the Siegfried Line. Again we had a great number of casualties in fact I was wounded slightly in the hand November 16<sup>th</sup>. The first action I told you about I was wounded in the face, December 20<sup>th</sup>, in the Siegfried Line. Both times it wasn't bad enough to be evacuated. I sprinkled some sulfa from my wound pack, put a bandage on it and kept on going. The second time I should have gone because there were some scars left on my face where I was wounded. The medic told me to go to the aide station. I had to go back down a pretty good size hill, across a valley to a hill behind us where the aide station was. At the time there were some German troops running up and down the hills I didn't want to fight a tank or anything like that to get to the aide station. The medics looked after me. In the Siegfried Line I lost the second squad leader I had; he was killed. The one that I had the first day of combat was killed. He died of his wounds. The one that took his place was killed on the Siegfried Line. Through attrition I became Squad Leader, not because I was the best person for the job. That was how you inherited jobs. After the relief in the Siegfried Line we moved north and licked our wounds and were in a position of defense. The only killed or wounded we had were from the patrols. Then we moved back to our original area around

the 20<sup>th</sup> of January and were on the defensive again. From that time until March we were on the defensive but we did go on quite a few combat patrols, reconnaissance patrols. In fact, the company I was in, G Company, was given a mission to raid a town two kilometers behind the German line of resistance. After seven minutes of firing we had one man killed and six men missing in action and we had seventeen wounded. This was a night operation. It was a difficult situation for us. We were back behind their lines. I have never seen such fire in my life. We were in an orchard and they cut down trees with the machine gun fire. Fortunately, I was so close to the fire it was going over my head. The boys behind me were not that fortunate. I was so close to the enemy machine guns that I could almost reach out and touch the one in a window that was firing out of it. We made it into the town and did what we were supposed to do; we were to take enemy prisoners and pull back to our own lines. When we were going back to our lines the Artillery did an excellent job and fired a "box" around us. This prevented the enemy from coming in to fire on us or capture us. It was a very well planned operation. Our company commander had gone up the day before in a little airplane and looked over the ground. He had done his homework. He had done it well. We were briefed on how to do it and the manner in which to do it. He did an excellent job. They were good. It was

an artillery airplane and he was given permission from a Regimental Commander to go up in that airplane and make an aerial reconnaissance of the area before we did the actual job. Somebody saved a lot of lives because of that particular thing. There is one more action in the latter part of March. We broke through the Siegfried Line for the second time in the same basic area we fought in it the first time. We worked with the Colored 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion. They were well trained. They did a good job even though we had a lot of casualties. They did a real good job for us. And we broke the Siegfried line. That was our last major action. We did have delays after that but nothing like the casualties on the first day at Selestat, the Siegfried Line the first time, the night raid on Kindwiller in February, and the breaching of the Siegfried Line in March. I was in Kindwiller in 1980. I found the window of the house I had fired at. It still had bullet holes in it. I had missed the window a couple of times. There were coins around it and bullet holes in it. It was a pretty traumatic experience. A man in the village took us out and showed us where we had come from and where we had gone into that village. I bought a little pamphlet there and I found out there were more French civilians killed during WWII in this little village than there were men in the French or German Army (some went to the French Army and some went to German Army) that were killed in the war. That was a very

traumatic experience when that happened. I became a spectator trying to relive the moments that happened before and it was very difficult, very difficult. We were in a little village in Austria when we heard about Victory in Europe. The village was called Aldrans. It was on a mountain top in Innsbruck, Austria. This village had three ski resorts and it also had the radio tower for Innsbruck. We got the job of guarding that radio tower because there still some SS Troops that did not want to give up and they were going to blow up the radio tower. We took a five or six kilometer march up the side of the mountain to a little town of Aldrans. We secured the radio tower and secured the three ski resorts. And we were there quite some time before we moved back into Germany. The French took over the Austrian Occupation area we were in. It was a relief. You could walk tall and you did not have to worry. You had a beautiful panoramic view of the Inn River Valley Austria ... the experience of having lived...It was quite an experience. We enjoyed it..... It was nice.....Nobody shooting at us.

*(Re: 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion) They were Black. Fortunately I was from the North and had no problem. I had gone to an integrated school. Some of our Southern boys said they (the Black soldiers) would not fight. But they proved to be excellent soldiers and saved a lot of our lives. I had a nice experience; I knew what they were supposed to do because I had trained for*

months in an armored division in a tank battalion. So these men did their job and did it well. And they saved the lives of a lot of infantry men. So many people who belittle the Black soldier had their eyes open. Some of the men became very good friends of these Black Tankers. In fact at one of our reunions the battalion we had invited members of the Black Battalion to come with us and have a reunion we had in Chicago, I believe in 1994. We appreciated them and gave them our thanks. When the war was over I was transferred to the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division which was an old regular Army unit. I was stationed in an airfield near Munich. It was called Birston. Because I was a noncom I got an apartment. Two of us shared a two bedroom apartment. We had a bedroom, living room, bathroom, and dining area. It was nice living. We trained there until the war was over with Japan. When we found out the war was over with Japan things became very relaxed and I started to teach school. They looked at my record and I had gone to Carnegie Tech drawing classes after I had graduated from high school. And because I had completed two semesters they said well you can teach the first semester. They got me drawing instruments. I taught two days a week. I had two days to prepare and you can't prepare too much for an engineering drawing class. I had a lot of free time and it was good living as far as I was concerned. I came home in January of 1946 with the 94<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

When I was discharged, I had just reached my twenty-second birthday. I figured I knew something I could teach somebody else so I joined the Reserves. I spent nine years in the Reserves as an Infantry Platoon Sergeant with the 79<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. I did a good job for them. I did things that I could teach somebody, but they never called me for the Korean War. I was very fortunate in that respect. When I heard about the bombing of Japan, it was a great relief. It meant that in all probability I would live. I had pictures in my mind of coming back to the States and going and fighting again and not making it. I figured I had given my best and I knew how to do it and the odds were against. The company I was in had the most number killed. We had forty-two from the Company killed and one medic. The medic was not from our company but from the medical detachment of the Regiment. So that meant, that he died in the service of G Company. He was attached to G Company all the time. In our total combat time we had 100% battle casualties (the same number of men were killed as were in the original company). I have a list of the 177 men that passed through the company. So we had 188 men. 312 men passed through that company. I have records from those Morning Reports, 13 were wounded twice and one was wounded three times. So our casualty rate was pretty bad. Only one other company had more casualties and that was G Company 411<sup>th</sup>. They had 111<sup>th</sup> percent.

But they did not have as many men killed as we did. It is a dubious record. It seems that it happened that G companies were given more tasks to perform than the other companies.

I got back to the States in January 1946. I was discharged. It was too late to go college. I went to work for my uncle who owned the family business that I eventually owned. I also went to school for the next three years. Eventually, I ended up as the President of a little corporation, Spencer Paint and Glass Company. I retired after I turned the business over to my son. My son eventually sold the business. My wife and I will celebrate our 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in August this year. I have seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. I started to go to the reunions in the 70's, 1974. I have missed two reunions. I was interviewed by a person from Pennsylvania. I had every letter that I wrote home to my mother and father. She requested to see all the letters and take notes from them. So she came to my home and went through all the letters. Then after the fact she called me back and interviewed me, asking me about pertinent things. Of course I couldn't say things in the letters that I could say now because they were all censored. She was employed by the State of Pennsylvania and it will go into the Archives of the State of Pennsylvania. She had interviewed quite a few people. She had not had the opportunity to find people and read

theirs letters and correlate them with what I had told her after the interview. It was quite a feather in her cap working on her doctorate. It will be in print. She is employed by the state in the State Historical Division and working on her Doctorate on the side. It was an interesting proposition. I have been very active in the Veteran's Affairs. We have a committee for the POW in our area. We have a banquet and ceremony every year in the month of September; it is POW MIA Day for all who were Prisoners of War in the area. I have been a trustee of the American Legion and a trustee of the VFW. I back those things so that things can be put down for someone to find out what the actual situation was. I became a Pacifist. I have a son who went to college and was part of the ROTC. He went Navy and retired as a Commander in the Navy seven or eight years ago. He was very successful in his military career. I am glad he never had a shot fired on him in anger in his twenty-two and a half years.