

## Recorded Interview

San Antonio 2010

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### Edwin McGhee, Co. B 409th

I was born on December 31, 1925 in Brownwood, Texas. I was probably a sophomore in high school when the Americans got into the war. As a typical teenage boy, I was afraid the war would be over before I could get into it. It did not work out that way. By the time I was eighteen, which was the legal requirement, there was no enlistment. There was volunteering for induction and you had to go through the draft board and I did. My older brother was already in the service in New Guinea in the Pacific. He was a Texas A&M graduate and a Second Lieutenant. I am sure my parents had reservations about their youngest boy going off to war but they did not interfere. A couple of months after I had volunteered I was called and told to go to Dallas for a physical examination for induction.

I went to Camp Walters for basic training. For me, that was one of the biggest disappointments of the war. I was ready to see the world and instead, I was shipped down the highway 100 miles to Mineral Wells, Texas. I joined the 103d Division at Camp Howze, in Gainesville, TX which was also a disappointment. I still had not left my state! I joined Company B and my platoon leader was Sergeant Gaines. Sergeant Shreckengost was

second in command. Bruno Braganini, “a real soldier,” was the squad leader for our twelve man squad. A platoon was made up of four squads. We had M-1 rifles. Worlo R. Gear from Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania and Don Carter from Missouri were my buddies in basic training. I joined the 103d in July or August of 1944.

We took the train to Camp Shanks, New York. I got a weekend pass and went to an Army football game at West Point. That was quite a thrill for a young boy.

My grandfather was a Texas Ranger in the days when the Rangers rode horses and chased outlaws and Indians on horseback.

I made two important discoveries onboard ship. I was allergic to tobacco smoke and I was prone to motion sickness. Everybody on our deck, which was the bottom deck of the ship, smoked but me. The combination of those realities made the two weeks onboard, the most miserable of my entire life. We were able to go to the top deck once a day and breathe some fresh air. That helped to partially resuscitate me. (I probably weighed 150 pounds when I got on the boat.)

Going through the Straits of Gibraltar made quite an impression on a country boy from Texas. Once we debarked at Marseilles, we had a long march to the staging area. That would be the only march that I ever “fell

out” on. The combination of seasickness and poor appetite on board ship had left me weakened. After resting for thirty minutes or so I rejoined the march.

It was quite an experience for a country boy to see what France looked like. We experienced the first casualty of our group at the staging area. A windstorm blew down a telegraph pole which fell across a pup tent where two men were sleeping. One the men was killed.

Eventually, we were put on trucks. The “dog soldiers” like me did not have any idea where we were going, why we were going or what we were going to do when we got there. You just waited until someone told you to do “this” or to do “that.”

When we got to the next location we dug our foxholes. Close to our location was a body of a German soldier who had died recently. That was educational. It was hard to face the reality that this soldier had been a living human being like us. We realized that we were staring death in the face literally and figuratively.

We liberated a series of towns with a minor amount of gunfire. We experienced no major confrontation and no hand to hand combat. We returned fire in the direction of the gunfire from our enemy. We had to turn in the rifles that we had prior to getting on the boat. I realized that we were

not given the opportunity to test fire our rifles that we were given when we got to France. When we got off the boat there was never a time that we could zero in those rifles. The M-1 rifles were sturdy enough but their sighting system was not dependable. I could not have hit the side of the barn with my rifle and that was true until the day I was captured by the Germans. I probably was ten or twelve when I went into the woods on my own to shoot my rifle. When I was squirrel hunting in Texas as a boy, I had to be able to hit the squirrel in its tiny little head. If you hit it anywhere else you would blow the squirrel meat apart. The point of hunting was to put meat on the table so you had to be accurate. I was pretty accurate. Everyone in the company and perhaps in the battalion had not been given a chance to site their rifle.

Our first firefight was at Steige, France. We were on the side of a hill firing down into the town where there were several hundred Germans. Just before we made our move, some Germans appeared. We fired a bazooka into the farmhouse that they ran into but they ran out another door. Most of us were told to occupy the houses and get ready for what might be coming next. I was still recuperating from the trip on the boat and hiking through the mountains for over a month. I could hardly move and went to sleep. The Germans mounted a counterattack during the night. I could not get

myself up from the bale of hay that I was laying on to respond to it. The German attack was repelled and we continued on to Selestat. There was a vineyard that we had to walk through. On the other side of the vineyard was a German machine gun nest or nests. The Germans were firing up through that area. The vineyard was built with wire rows; there was no protection at all. One of my good buddies was hit in the legs by that machine gun fire but did survive the war. Our squad leader, Braganini, had to put a tourniquet on his own leg and he did survive his injury and survived the war. I think we had a light 30 caliber machine gun set up but I can't say whether it was effective or not. We made it through the vineyard and the Germans had disappeared. Three or four Germans were captured by some of our troops.

We were on one side of a small bridge across a little creek. We waited there for awhile. My supposition all these years has been that when we moved across that bridge there was no opposition at that time. We moved across that bridge because our new captain, who had been our company commander for two days prior to that, did not want to spend anymore time out in the cold and wet. He wanted to get into a house. That was, in effect, a fatal error. We crossed the bridge and entered the house that was close by. Then the German tanks came. I was on the second floor of one of these houses and the squad leader was downstairs with some of the other guys.

When the German tanks came up they pointed their 88 mm at that house and fired. The shell went through the building through the room next to where I was. I was not harmed. I was standing full in the window. A few moments later an American 155mm artillery shell landed outside on the ground and did not explode. I got lucky twice in that case. A spotter had called the artillery in because of the tanks. As infantrymen we did not know where the German artillery shells were coming from. We did not even know if we had support. Our squad leader instructed the seven of us to leave the house. We walked out of the door and faced Germans with their burp guns. Although they could have shot us all quite easily, they just disarmed us. I had already disposed of my rifle but I had hand grenades in my coat pockets. The Germans didn't think that was a good idea. This happened after midnight the second day of December. We also had American dive bombers targeting our area. They took us down to the Rhine River and we crossed at daylight. We were put on boxcars along with most of the men in Company B. We were taken to a prisoner of war camp. I experienced the firing of a German burp gun for the first and last time on that train. That one shot was fired purely accidentally by one of the guards in the boxcar with us, hitting the man next to me and killing him instantly.

I was at the POW camp and the stalag for about ten days. The commissioned officers and the non-commissioned officers were separated from each other. The 106th Division was taking the brunt of the Bulge. Some of those men, who had barely arrived at the front when the Bulge started, were prisoners at the same camp. We were put in a stable and the sanitary conditions were so bad that I caught a raging case of diarrhea. They took me to a designated area for the sick and fed me charcoal to cure the diarrhea. The charcoal was all I ate and that treatment did cure me after three or four days. When I was returned to the stable that housed the prisoners all of the men out of my unit had been transported to other stalags. This was a transition camp for men to stay until they were moved to other camps. Eventually, they move some of us via boxcars. When our planes would strafe the boxcars the Germans would leave us in them with the doors locked while they found shelter. Boxcars were typical transportation for prisoners. The Germans took our uniforms when they made us strip down and gave them to their own soldiers to wear in the Battle of the Bulge.

When we got to the new location there was a compound of British soldiers that had been captured in North Africa. They were better organized, treated, and accommodated than the American POWs. When the Germans had taken our uniforms they had given us old French or Polish uniforms

which were better than nothing. The shoes that they gave us amounted to shower clogs. It was mid December and the water was bitterly cold. One of the Brits, an Irishman from the Irish Free State, saw what I was using for shoes and gave me a pair of British army boots. I am sure that those boots saved me from frostbite. In the camps the British were very organized. We were not.

The Germans moved us closer to the West once or twice. One time they attempted to use our group to work on streets and roads. We were in no condition to work because we were not fed enough. The Germans gave us several opportunities to go to the Russian front where we could work in kitchens. That was appealing because we were hungry. They thought that we would want to fight against the “Communists.”

On April 26, when we crossed the Elbe River into American property again, I think I weighed less than 110 lbs. We had been marching with the German guards and officers from the stalag, always heading west, to keep as far from the Russians as we could. When we got to the Elbe River we were the German’s transport so that they could be captured by Americans and not by the Russians. We kept walking as ordered, not really knowing where we were going. On the 26th of April we saw our first Americans and I experienced a vast relief. I never was wounded or suffered even a scratch

except for the diarrhea. That was miraculous. The Germans did not abuse us in any way, except for not feeding us. They took us on work details but they observed early on that we were not in any condition to be of any real help. We never organized in the camp like the British in other camps. We were just herded around like cattle by the Germans.

A couple of weeks later, after I had a chance to eat enough food to get stronger, we put on American uniforms. That was a blessing because I had only taken two baths in the German stalag and never had a chance to change clothes. We were absolutely ridden with lice. At Bitterfeld on the Elbe we crossed into the West. We were there a couple of weeks and received a new set of uniforms and got doused with DDT, which was legal at that time. That was quite a relief because we had no defense against the lice. On May 8th the war was declared officially over while we were in this staging area and I think I remember being told that news. We were not accustomed to being told anything!

We were flown in a DC-3 to the coast of France to an army camp. That was my first flight. We had one more staging area there before they put us on a U.S. Navy troop transport. I think they felt sorry for me and they asked me to work in their butcher shop for the galley. I was manning whole sides of beef and sawing them up in a band saw. That was a fun trip and

thankfully I did not have motion sickness. We went into Newport News, VA. We were put in a barracks and received pay for all those months that we did not receive any pay. The amount of money was probably less than fifty dollars. I went into the PX (Post Exchange) on the base and bought a big box of Mounds candy bars. That was a real treat because I had not had a candy bar in a long time. I ate the whole box in a matter of three days. It was years after that before I could eat another candy bar.

We were given about thirty days leave in June and I waited for a train that would take me to my home in Brownwood, Texas. My sister, who was older, had been married at our house earlier that day. My brother stayed in the service for quite some months after the war. He had contracted Dengue fever which continued to negatively impact his life afterwards.

In early August of 1945, I went to an evaluation service in Fort Worth. Realizing that I would be out of the war soon, I wanted to know what courses to take when I went back to college. While I was there I heard newsboys in the street, hawking, "Extra! Extra! Extra! The Atom Bomb has been dropped on Japan!" I was somewhat confused because I had not heard of the Atom Bomb. I was even more impressed when it was announced that the "Japs" had surrendered, ending the war. After the war the GI Bill carried

me almost to the end of my major in Mechanical Engineering. After I graduated, like a typical Texan, I went into the oil field.

In the summer, between my junior and senior year at Texas A&M, I went to Lufkin, Texas to work in the foundry. That was a typical choice for a Mechanical Engineering student. My buddy and I rented a room for the summer in a house where an older couple lived. One day the landlady said, “If you boys will go to Sunday School and Church then you can have Sunday dinner with the family. We were ready for that after eating at the mess hall at A&M all that time. After the third week the news had spread around Lufkin that all these college boys were going to the Methodist Church and going to the Sunday School class. Every pretty girl in town showed up. One of them turned out to be the girl I married.

In the oil field at that time, when they hired fresh engineers, they were looking for operation supervisors more than engineers. It was really quite some years, before I discovered what engineers did. Once I realized what they did, I realized I wasn’t one. I gave up attempting to call myself an engineer.

I was always moderately interested in writing. I spent twenty years as an editor for an oil and gas journal. My experience in the oil fields was a great benefit. I put in a couple of years in an oil field in Venezuela and a

couple of years in an oil field in Louisiana. I was familiar with the oil business.

Jim White, in our company, was at Texas A&M when I got back there. Ralph Steiner also was at A&M at the same time. We were all on the GI Bill. A&M was all male at that time and 60% were veterans. One of the things we did not do in that company was to speak about our war experience. Most of us were trying to forget the experiences that we had and I was certainly one of those.