

Interview with Billie Ray Morton
Interviewer: Leigh Anne Howard
May 20, 2005

Transcriber Notes: World War II has been shortened to WWII.

Q: 2005. I'm in Bowling Green, Kentucky. I'm talking to Billie Ray Morton. We've already talked about the purpose of the interview and what we are doing. So just to get us started, you were drafted?

A: No ma'am.

Q: No, okay. Well, tell me how you got involved with the military. I think you are the only person this weekend I've talked to who wasn't drafted.

A: I was smarter than the teachers in ninth grade, so I went to work right after school... went out in '44, no '45. Then, I went to work cutting grass, so when school started back up again my dad gave me a choice. Either go in the service or go back to school. Well, being as I was smarter than the teacher was, I went in the service.

Q: And about when was this?

A: This was September 9, 1946.

Q: Okay. so, WWII was already over.

A: Not quite. So, I took basic at Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, combat engineers. After the eight weeks of basic training we were shipped out to Italy. When we got to Italy, they broke us down into replacements, and I went to... well we landed in Leghorn¹ Italy and we went from there to Caserta, Italy. I went with the 294 Artillery, stayed overnight, and was transferred to the 204 Car Company which I spent four years with. Closed out the theatre in November because they were closing out the Italian Theatre. We moved from Caserta, Italy back to Livorno at Leghorn. Then they broke the unit up, and we all came back to the States. I had a choice to stay. I was only enlisted for 18 months, and I had the choice of either staying in or getting out. If we stayed in, we would've been detailed to carry the WWII dead to the family. Well I didn't want to do that, so I took my discharge and went home. That was in November '48 and I stayed out of the service from November '48 to May 9th of '49. I reenlisted in the army. Went home, told my mother and dad what I had done, and I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky the following Sunday and stayed there. I chased prisoners in a civilian uniform, civilian clothes; it was a suit, with a steel pot and a rifle and a quarter belt.

Q: What's a steel pot? A hat?

A: Your helmet.

Q: Your helmet Okay.

A: Chased prisoners while I was at Fort Knox.

Q: What year was this? That you enlisted?

A: This was in '49.

¹ Leghorn is the English translation of Livorno, Italy

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Q: Okay so you reenlisted in '49. So, you stopped in November of '48.

A: Right. Then we chased prisoners until we got our new issue in. About that time, we got orders to go where we wanted to. I got the choice of going to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. That was June of '49 we arrived at Fort Sill, and we were immediately picked up by the 18th Artillery.

Q: How come you got to choose what you wanted to do? Because you reenlisted?

A: Reenlisted. I wanted to go to Oklahoma, so they said, "Fort Sill's in Oklahoma." And it was still active duty, so I took it. Went in and reported to Eddy J. Copland, First Sergeant, and a great guy. At that point I had no profession or anything like that. I was just a plain dough boy. So, I was assigned as a radio telephone operator. I had no idea what a radio telephone operator was. Sergeant Whittaker took me to and showed me what it was and what I had to do. I joined the 18th in June of '49 and I stayed with headquarter battery 18th artillery until November of '55. I shipped over with them from Fort Sill to Badenhausen, Germany. I spent five years right there in Badenhausen. I did just about every job there. Jack of all trades, master of none. I was a machine gun sergeant, I was wiring chief, I guess that was just about it. I did just about every other kind of job they had a vacancy for.

Q: Do you remember what it was like to arrive in Germany? Was that your first you had been out of the country?

A: No that's the second time.

Q: Oh, that's right because you were in Italy.

A: Germany. Golly I don't know. I can't remember that far back. We went over there I think it was either '51 or '52. We rode a train from Bremerhaven to Bramberg. I mean through Badenhausen. It was four of us to car, or four of us to a booth rather. We slept on the train. They had top bunks and bottom bunks; of course, you makeshift your top bunk because it was nothing but putting your bags up above where you were sent. Well, when we got there the next day, got off the train and marched from there to Tent City in Badenhausen. That was just about it. We walked into Tent City. We had to pick up our own cots, our own bedding and the whole works, and set up everything. Then they started howling about "clean this up," "clean that up," "make this road," "make that road," "put these barrels over here where you can collect up your trash" and stuff like that.

Q: Was arriving at Tent City very different from when you arrived in Italy? In terms of where you slept and all that.

A: Oh yea, quite a bit. You went to a repo-depot² in Italy and in...

Unknown: I'm short a camera.

A: Uh-oh.

Unknown: I spent the whole weekend looking for stuff.

² A repo-depot or replacement depot is a military unit containing reserves or replacements for troops in front-line formations.

A: When we went to Badenhausem you had to march up there. They picked us up in cattle cars in Italy and took us to the repo-depot. Then, they shipped us out by train to our different places. Then in Badenhausem you had to march from the train station up to the Tent City. Which is about oh maybe five or six miles. It wasn't hard. That was just about it. You had no equipment. The only equipment we would've had is what we carried on our back and a rifle and that was it. Of course, it panned out over a period of weeks later that we finally got vehicles and so forth and so on. Yes, sir?

Other Unknown: Just wanted to say hi. Come over and say hi.

A: Come say hey.

Unknown: Hey. What's going on? How you doing?

A: You going out?

Unknown: Yea, we're going out to the picnic. I don't know what time we are supposed to be leaving.

A: Oh well, I think they were talking about around 5 o'clock.

Unknown: I thought that was what time we was supposed to be out there.

A: Oh well I don't know. We're going together up there. Bill in the other room in there. First thing... one thing leads to another. First alert we had in Badenhausem we were automatically considered to be infantry, so we had to march in all the field gear we had. Put it in a pack, put it on our back, and went down to the woods which was about three quarters of a mile from where the tents were. We stayed down there until they blew the whistle again for us to come back.

Q: What is a first alert? I don't understand what that is.

A: Well that's in case the Russians come across the border.

Q: Okay so you were going to evasive maneuvers.

A: Rendezvous area set up. Put out a print and you sit there and wait until they tell you, "We're going to go here" or "We're going to go back where we started from" or something like that. Then gradually we started getting vehicles in and so forth and so on like that. We didn't get our guns for about two months after we got over there. They were shipping them over by boat, and there was some difficulty getting them over there. Then the first alert we had with them it was a disaster. Everybody got all excited and frustrated, and they saw the company commander with his pistol with live ammunition. Everybody got excited, and things just fell apart from there, and they started getting crazy.

Q: You said they started getting crazy. What do you mean?

A: Just doing dumb things. Just doing dumb things that they wouldn't normally do if they were in the right mind or the right state. And they had the alert, and it stayed out for overnight, and then they came back and put everything back in order again. Then they start training sessions on different things. Setting up... being able to operate the field artillery unit. I was in headquarter battery all this time. The fine batteries of course operated a little bit differently than headquarters. Then we started hitting the fields. At that time our units, or the units that were in Europe, had the run of the country. But, the 18th was the 155SP artillery piece. We were in general support of the seventh army and was their main support of the first infantry division which was in Schauenburg. Of course, every time the first infantry division went on alert, we'd go on alert too. Sometimes we would go on alert as much as five or six times a month or sometimes even more, it just depends. But that happened after we got all of our equipment and got

trained a little bit. Knowing the country and taking drivers test and learning the roads and stuff like that. The rest of the time we did training like physical training and conduct ourselves. Learning the different roads, we were able to travel, and it was just... of course it's more organized than what I'm talking about. But it was fun at the time. And at the same time that we arrived there they had just started redoing two buildings in the concern that were horse stables. They raised the roof on the two buildings about seven or eight feet to make it a two-story building. It took them about... let's see November we finally moved into the barracks there. Most of those pictures out there laying on the tables are ones that I could find to bring. We finally moved in the barracks. I think we had Thanksgiving dinner in the barracks. That's the first time we had a solid floor that we could walk on.

Q: What was the Thanksgiving dinner like over there?

A: You know, I got a copy of that someplace on a napkin. It was great, red tablecloths, and all the tables were decorated. I can't remember what the decorations were, regular, traditional, Thanksgiving decorations. We didn't eat until about 1:30 it was, 1:30 or 2. The way the barracks were set up, Headquarters and A Battery and half of the Service Battery were in one building. D Battery and C Battery and the other half of the Service Battery were in another building. Well, each building had their own mess hall on the end of the building there. Headquarters and A Battery had their cooks to work in their side of the mess hall and same with D Battery and C Battery. They both had good cooks, and we all lined up in the hall there and pass through when they started serving. At that time, I was a Corporal, and of course you got to sit with the NCO's³ at that time.

Q: Was it weird to have Thanksgiving in Germany?

A: Sure, we had Thanksgiving. We had Christmas and Thanksgiving, and we celebrated New Year's. In that time... I forgot about that, candies, beer, and cigarettes were all rationed. There were certain items in the PX⁴ that you could get, but you had to have a ration card for them. But, during the holidays you got a candy bar, a cigar, and a pack of cigarettes. They were on the table for you.

Q: Little extra.

A: That was the big thing there. I forgot about that, by golly. Of course, they had napkins and the whole bit. It was nice. It was nothing unusual about it I don't think. It's always been Thanksgiving. There had been times that we were in the field and had Thanksgiving and that's a different story.

Q: What was that like?

A: Well, a lot of it depends on the weather and depends on what sometimes you could eat if you weren't moving. If you were moving, you grabbed a bite on the run. We always had good chow, and the mess hall always had coffee. Even when we were moving, we had coffee. Sometimes we would drive maybe three or four hours, but every hour on the hour or every 45 minutes they'd stop for a break and

³ NCO- non-commissioned officer.

⁴ Post Exchange where military' members could obtain consumer goods.

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get coffee and a bit to eat and stuff like that. I'm trying to think. At that time Jack Wolfson was our battalion commander, and he was great for making moves. He was a regular GI. They called us... when we were in Fort Sill right after the Korean War broke out... they called battalion Wolfson's Rangers.

Q: They called you what?

A: Wolfson's Rangers.

Q: Wolfson's Rangers?

A: Wolfson

Q: Wolfson.

A: W-o-l-f-s-o-n. Wolfson. Lieutenant Colonel Wolfson. They called us his rangers. His favorite deal was to run out while we were staying in Fort Sill, to run out to Geronimo's Bluff, run to the top, then run back. That was done every morning before we went to Germany.

Q: Trying to get you in shape.

A: It did. (laughter) A lot of times it was raining, snowing, and you'd just fend for yourself on where you could eat at. A lot of times, maybe we get C-rations' instead of the regular deal, but even at that, it was good.

Q: Did you see any combat?

A: No.

Q: Okay.

A: The only combat was where you were going to get your next beer from. (laughter)

Q: German beer is very different from American beer.

A: Quite a bit. When I finally got into the wire section... I was a Machine Gun Sergeant for a long time, and my job was not only a Machine Gun Sergeant, but I carried the mines and booby traps for the battery. They sent me to school for it. I drove the supply truck for that. We had to unload that and reload it and change it around, and after a period of time I had to inventory it and send it off and get replacements and stuff like that. But my main duty was looking after the arms in the room there for the battery. But I got the chance to get into the wire section, and I was put in charge of the Headquarters Communication, running the wires from the switchboard and the Headquarters and stuff like that. Every time you moved into position; our job was to set up the communication part. Then we'd get orders to move; we had one or two guys go with the advance party to find out our next movement, and they'd go in and set up the areas where the detail would be. The Headquarters, the S3, the S2, and Headquarter Battery and stuff like that. There are two things there: there's Headquarters and there's Headquarter Battery. Headquarters is one where most of the officers worked out of; the Battery is where the men were staying that did the work for the officers. Then after that, I got a little bit more experienced in Communications and working back on the radio and eventually later on in time I got to go into the radio section. I went to several different schools. I went to communication school down at [Murnau], I believe.

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No [Murnau] was the mining and demolition school. Then I went to another school for Compute. Then after that I was a bad boy.

Q: You were a bad boy?

A: I was a bad boy. I got married.

Q: Yea. While you were in the military?

A: What?

Q: While you were in the military?

A: Oh yea. I met a girl who was from Amsterdam, Holland and over a period of time we decided to get married.

Q: How'd you meet her?

A: You don't want to know that. (laughter)

Q: I think I probably do, but I understand if you don't want to tell me.

A: A friend of mine, a buddy, in the evening after we'd get off work and had nothing else to do. If we could get a pass, we'd go downtown to Badenhausen and buy a case a beer. He'd get a case; I'd get a case... that's 12 bottles of beer... and we'd go up to the train station and sit on the side of the road and drink our beer. One time we decided we would go to Schauenburg. We stayed a little too long in Schauenburg, and we missed the train headed back to Badenhausen. We were supposed to be in the sheets at 12 O'clock or in the barracks at 12 O'clock for a bed check. Well, we weren't. We were in the train station, and Robbie met a girl that he knew and there was another girl with her. They sat down, we sat down, and started talking. This other girl she started on about how well she knew Billie Morton. She called him all kinds of names, and Robbie and I sat there just busting a gut laughing. Finally, he punched me in the side and said, "Show her who you are." I pulled out my I.D. card and showed her who I was. She was talking about me all the time thinking she knew me. Then, come to find out she didn't know me; she had just heard about me through other people. That's how it got started. One thing led to another, and here I am in '55 I ask her to marry me and she did. We went to Amsterdam, and I met her parents and that was quite an ordeal. They really were excited about it.

Q: They were?

A: Yea. We told them what the idea was us being there. So, her dad went down to the courthouse to get permission from the queen so that we could get married. That was on a Wednesday, and we got married on a Saturday. I couldn't spend any time there because I had to turn around and come back because our unit was in the field at that time. I had to come back and go back out to the field.

Q: So, she stayed there and lived with her family?

A: She stayed there until we came back from the field.

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Q: Until you came back from the field, okay.

A: Then when we came back out of the field, we found a place to live. She could cook an entire meal, a four-course meal, on a two-burner electric stove and keep it hot, plus coffee.

Q: There you go. That's doing something.

A: Yea, she was really great. Then, we came back to the States. She met my mother and dad and my family.

Q: So, after you got out of the field, you were able to live together then.

A: Whenever we weren't in the field then yea. Then, she would do a lot just like a regular housewife would and stuff like that. It's been 55 years since I've seen any of these guys here at the reunion.

Q: This is the first reunion you have been to?

A: This is the first one. I didn't even know it existed. I'm a member of the VFW, and I was looking through one of the magazines on reunions, in March I believe it was. I saw a reunion for the 18th Artillery that was from '50-'55. There was a phone number there, and I called the phone number and talked to Scott, Ewell Scott. Anyhow I got all the information, and he sent me a roster from the last reunion. I called Scott looking for what kind of information and after we got off the phone, my daughter got on the computer and started making reservations to come out here.

Q: So, a lot of these men you knew?

A: A couple of them. I didn't know them because I forgot all about them. Fifty-five years is a long time.

Q: Yea.

A: But they knew me. Several of them knew me as I walked in. They knew exactly who I was. My wife passed away in August. She had been ailing for the past six or seven years, and I couldn't do anything except take care of her. So, when I saw that, and I told my daughter about it... she'd been dogging me all along. She's been looking after me and making sure I do things. Anyhow she made the reservations and everything for coming up here.

Q: What's it like to be here, then? That's got to be amazing. Just to walk in after 55 years.

A: To me it is. They talk about things that I have forgotten about. After a period of time I get to thinking about it, and I can remember what it was that was going on at the time. I was in a lot of other artillery units. They were also good units, but they are not like the 18th. The 18th was my first unit, and I spent 7 and a half years there in the 18th in one battery which is kind of unusual. Usually you only stay there about two years, then they move you on to someplace else. But I was very fortunate I got to stay there in that one unit all the time.

Q: How long were you in the military?

A: 20.

Q: Twenty years?

A: Yes mam.

Q: Wow. What did you do after?

A: After the 18th I went to Fort... oh god I can't think of the name, it's in El Paso, Texas. Fort Hood, I think, no it's not Fort Hood. I went to the fort in El Paso, Texas [Fort Bliss]. I was assigned to the 59th AAA Artillery. I stayed there for about a year. I found out at that time I could put in an application to go back to Germany. So, it was approved, and I went to Fort Benning, Georgia where they were activating the 10th Artillery. The only people who were in the 10th at that time were the CO⁵, First Sergeant, and the Field First, a couple other sergeants, and myself. That was all that was in the battery at that time, and we were the cavalry. They brought one- or two-year draftees in wearing civilian clothes and started training them right there on the spot in Fort Benning. After they had their eight-week basic training and had their AIT⁶, they were broken down into different sections; they needed to go to what they were suited for. After they were trained for that, we did a couple of different field exercises, and then we gyroed over to Baumberg, Germany.

Q: Gyroed? What's that mean?

A: Rotated from Fort Benning to Baumberg.

Q: Okay. I've not heard that term before.

A: That's what they used to call it. I don't know what they call it now, but it used to be gyroed over. So, I spent another five years in Germany. It started out to be the 10th Artillery, then they broke that up, and made it the 1st Battalion of the 42nd or 41st Artillery which is only two batteries, A and B batteries, headquarters A and B batteries and service battery. We trained there for quite a bit. There were a couple of hot spots; there a couple of times with the Russians just a few miles away from where we were. Matter of fact, it was two main arteries from where the Russian line was to Baumberg. Two main arteries, rather, and it was an eight-minute flight from where the Russian planes were to Baumberg. It was a hot spot there for a long time. Baumberg was more or less a... I forget now what they call it. A slow reaction it was considered to be lost to stan with. If ever war started out, it was a thing of the past. We were expendable, let's put it that way. But we trained quite heavily, quite frequently. We were limited to the amount of training that we could make in the local area, and we could only go once or twice a year to Grafenwöhr for field training, real live fire.

Q: So, were you still in the military during Vietnam?

A: Oh yea.

⁵ CO- commanding officer

⁶ AIT- Advanced Individual Training where a military member learns to perform the skills of their military job.

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Q: What was that experience like, if you don't mind? You spanned an amazing amount of time.

A: I was downtown, it was a Saturday, and I was downtown in Lawton, Oklahoma. I just got a car; I rebuilt a '42 coup Chevy. I was cleaning the walk with that Chevy. I thought I was real hot. I went downtown to get a haircut. This was close to about 11:00 on a Saturday. I was sitting in the chair, and the guy had the radio playing, and a special bulletin came on requesting all service personnel to return to their posts. That's all they said. So, I said, "Well, I guess I go back out there." So, after I got through getting my haircut, I went home and parked the car, and I went into the battery. They had these guys lined up in the hall there. I had no idea what was doing. I went up and put my clothes up. I went down to find out what was going on. They were pulling out half of the men of the battery for shipping to Korea on Sunday morning. They left directly from Fort Sill to Korea. They took half of the men from each one of the batteries, and they cleaned out service battery. All of service battery went and half of each armed battery went. Well at that time our battalion was field troops for [Office Tendish] who ordered for the officers to take field artillery training, troop school I'm saying it wrong. But they just left us enough people to continue on with the mission of training the officers for field artillery. But all those men were packed up lock, stock, and barrel, signed all the necessary papers, and were on the plane Sunday morning going to Korea.

Q: That was quick.

A: Yea and all the units in Fort Sill were like that. They took half the men of all the different units there. Well of course, that put everybody in a bind, and we had to start doing double duty for everything. You had double CQ, you had double KP, you had double this, you had double that. You came right off of one shift, and you'd go right on to another. But that's the way it was. Then we started getting people in. Draftees and reserves that had not made the proper amount of meetings that they were supposed to. We started getting them in. Before all the Korean stuff started happening, most of the men were regular army and of course after the Korean War broke out that kind of went to pots and we started getting just anybody and everybody that could breathe.

Q: So, were you shipped overseas again during Vietnam? Or did you stay in the U.S.?

A: I stayed in the U.S. I was down there to volunteer. A buddy of mine came over to me, and said, "Bill, they'll get you soon enough. Don't volunteer for anything." So, we went back up, and I didn't get to go.

Q: You didn't have to go for Vietnam.

A: No that was for Korea. No, I didn't go. I stayed in the battalion, and then we started training to get ready to go to Germany.

Q: Okay.

A: Finally got our battalion built back up and started training more, and then we started cross training.

Q: About what time period are we talking about here?

A: '49,'50.

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Q: Alright so this is all related to the Korean War.

A: Yea.

Q: Okay.

A: Then we shipped out on the troop train. We rode the troop train from Lawton, Oklahoma to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey.

Q: Why did you stay in the military for 20 years?

A: Laziness.

Q: Laziness! I don't believe that. Nobody stays in the military because they are lazy.

A: (laughter) Well, when the Korean War broke out, I had signed up for three years. Of course, when that broke out, the President locked us in for the duration. Being smart I took a discharge, so I could get a bonus and reenlist... to get the money.

Q: Right. But then you stayed in for...

A: I stayed in until, well I took a discharge when my time was due and reenlisted. When I got reenlisted then I got this bonus. So, I had another six years to go in the military. By the time I had that over with I had 12 years in, so I wasn't going to throw that away, so I just stayed in.

Q: So, when did you actually leave the service?

A: April 30, 1967.

Q: Okay so it was right before the bulk of Vietnam.

A: (laughter) Another story. I had put in for retirement in January. January of '67 I put in for retirement. It was approved, and I was called up to have coffee with the division artillery commander. He tried to entice me to stay in, and I told him no I didn't want to because I wanted to get out and be at home with my children. My two girls were small at that time. They were about 5 and 6 at that time, and I wanted to be home with them. So, I went ahead and got out... and what was I going to say now?

Q: You were talking about going to retire.

A: Oh yea, I was going to retire, and he tried to get me to stay in and I said no. So, a week later I come out on orders for Vietnam. Then, I was asked which do I want to accept. And I said, "I'm going to take retirement."

Q: So, you were able to choose?

A: At that time.

Q: At that time yea.

A: Because my orders had already been cut and approved. I wasn't going to try to do anything other than that. The funny part was the whole... it was really unique, the communications chief of the 36th group was a master sergeant in 1948 at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. The same master sergeant in 1967 was my

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first sergeant. He remembered me, Master Sergeant Dunbar there at Fort Hood, Texas. That's where I retired at. He said, "Bill, what are you going to do when you get out?" I said, "Well, I've had plenty of experience on standing line. I can stand in a soup line with the best of them." He said, "You're crazy." I said, "That's true, that's true." But he was my first sergeant and he remembered me from the 18th in Fort Sill.

Q: I know you have dinner that you are probably getting ready to go to so we'll kind of wrap it up. Are there other stories or things that you think we should know about? Memories that you have that you want to share.

A: If I was to do that, I would put myself in Leavenworth. I don't want to do that. But there were many times that I did a lot of things that I'm not proud of. I don't regret any of it. I enjoyed it. The best time of my life was with the 18th. I had other good units, but they don't compare with the ones that I had in the 18th. I enjoyed the service very much. I miss it sometimes. Even after I got out, there was a couple of times I tried to go back in.

Q: Really?

A: But they wouldn't take me.

Q: Because of age and that you had retired?

A: Yup. I was an old man then. I was 36-years old.

Q: Don't say that.

A: Well I was. They had young people in there when I got out. But I enjoyed it, I really did. I have no complaints at all. It's just that I was so stupid not to finish high school. That's the only real regret that I've got about the whole situation. I did finish high school according to the army, later on. But I was not able to go to a prom or something like that. Education is very important. I drove for a battalion commander at one time, and I cannot remember his name, the lack of me I've been trying to remember all morning. He told me he said, "Bill, if you learn one new thing every day. Completely new. You'll be a wise man."

Q: wow.

A: But I haven't been able to do that.

Q: It's hard to do. Well, I think we probably should wrap it up because I don't know if your dinner is at 5 or 5:30 but we are past 5 now. But this is contact information, who I am and how you can get in touch with me. Like I said, what I'll do is sometime in the next however many months I'll transcribe what you talked about, and I'll eventually, it may take me a while, get you a copy of this.