

Interview with Leo Lenihan
Interviewer: Leigh Anne Howard
May 20, 2005

Q: Just to get us started, can you tell us a little bit about how you got involved in the military?

A: Well, the way I really got involved in the military... I was the right age when the Korean War broke out. I was drafted.

Q: Okay.

A: Went to Ft. Omaha, took the physical, passed, and was called in on December 6 of 1950. From there we went to... outside of Chicago Fort... I can't think of the name now. And was processed and from there went to Oklahoma for basic training. I took the basic, and I forget how long it was but after that we were transferred. I was in the 18th group, and we were transferred to 18th field to bring it up to snuff... or whatever word you want to use. Then we were very fortunate and sent to Germany rather than Korea. We were over there...well I think my draft was for 18 months then we were extended 6 months while we were in Germany. So, I spent about a year and a half in Germany.

Q: Talk a little bit about what your training was like... what your basic training was like.

A: Well, you (laughter) they just kind of... they had an MS¹... well they kind of familiarized you with what they thought you would be the best in. Actually, I was in what they called the wire section and in basic you would go out in the field and lay wire for telephones and things like that. Then you took up the standard things like the infiltration course. I took a hike one night with a compass and got lost and finally they had to come back and get us.

Q: So, you needed a lot of training! (laughter)

A: Oh yea! Everybody else is back drinking coffee and having a good time but we were lost. That was quite an experience. I learned to shoot a rifle... never had a gun in my hand before. They made you qualify. Then when we went to Germany; I carried the... they called it a grease gun²... I'm not too familiar with guns but that's what I always had with me in my truck. I drove a three-quarter ton truck when I was there in Germany.

Q: So, they chose the area that you would specialize in and that you would work with.

A: Yea, right. There's a word that... they evaluate you and I can't think of what that word is now. But it worked out good for us. I didn't enjoy it because I was drafted, I guess.

Q: Okay.

A: And after I got out, I realized...just like all my friends, you know. You don't think of that when you're a kid. Twenty years old, twenty-one years old.

Q: Tell me about this infiltration class. Was that like a spy class?

A: No, in infiltration course you went out to a range and had to get down and crawl under barbed wire, mud, and what have you, and they were firing live bullets above your head.

¹ Mode Selection- creating a selection from a set of candidate models.

² An M3 .45-caliber submachine gun adopted for U.S. Army service.

Interview with Leo Lenihan
Interviewer: Leigh Anne Howard
May 20, 2005

Q: Oh, wow!

A: I forget how long it was but then you carried a gun with you. When you got to the end of it you climbed out and there was an officer there and he checked your gun. Which most of them were full of mud and couldn't have fired. And the idea was that you were supposed to get through there and be ready to go. So, it was very interesting and a little scary.

Q: Yeah, I would think so. Was this the first time you had been away from home?

A: First time I had been away from home, yes.

Q: What was that like?

A: Uh, terrible. (laughter) No, I grew up, and when I was drafted it really huff. Because I had never been away from home. My parents were my guardians, and it was a whole different life for me.

Q: And were most of the guys at this event [union reunion] in that training with you? Or did you meet up with them when you got to Germany?

A: Well, when we first went to Fort Sill, I was in the 18th group and some of us got transferred from the group to the 18th field. Very few I think I really knew from the group that went up there, but a lot of them... in a year and half we were over in Germany why...

Q: So, it was new people and new places.

A: Oh yea.

Q: What were some of your instructors like at the training?

A: In training?

Q: Yea.

A: Well, kind of a hard question to answer because well you just... every morning you got up, you fell out of what they called a reveille³ I guess as I remember. And you assigned things to do that day; they changed every day. First thing you usually did, you went through exercise. Then, maybe we were going out in the field to lay wire that day... maybe we were going to go fire the gun. You just didn't know from day to day, just whatever and some just classroom work too. That's about all I can think of on that.

Q: Can you think of any stories or something that happened to you during training that was unusual?

A: Hmm... No, I guess everything was unusual to me because...you know you had somebody telling you what to do every day. You got up, you ate, you cleaned up, every Saturday morning you had inspection where you laid out all your clothes. Used to be after... pretty much after basic, if you accomplished that, then you had the rest of the weekend off. But you were still a soldier. You had to behave yourself as far as going into town or something. You had to be very careful what you did.

³ A bugle call, trumpet call, or pipes call chiefly used to wake military personnel at sunrise.

Interview with Leo Lenihan
Interviewer: Leigh Anne Howard
May 20, 2005

Q: So, after your basic training then you went to Germany?

A: Right.

Q: So, what was that like? And how did you get there?

A: Okay we left Fort Sill on a train, and the train took us to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey and from there we... as I recall a few days and then boarded this boat. That thing was really packed which was nice because we went over in November and the ocean was calm. I mean, it wasn't a bad trip but then we got to Germany.

Q: Wait, back up. How many people were on this boat?

A: Oh gosh. I would say eight or nine hundred maybe.

Q: Whoa. It was packed!

A: I might have to be projecting that but...yea.

Q: And everyone on it was military?

A: Yes. The name of the boat or ship or whatever you want to call it I can't think of that now, but somebody would know. Oh, yea and as I recall you ate standing up and...

Q: You ate standing up?

A: Yea you just went in and got your chow and stood up and ate it. Then every morning you had to clean your areas. You know it was...

Q: How long did it take you to make that trip?

A: I think it was about 10 or 11 days to go.

Q: Whoa. And then did you have any duties while you were on the boat?

A: Yes, I had some KP⁴.

Q: Okay, I think of peeling lots of potatoes.

A: Yea, and it turned out pretty nice at that time because the cook, he cooked us hamburgers. It was probably one of the better tasting meals we had on our way over. We did. It turned out to be a pretty good deal, for me I mean.

Q: Yea so a little bonus there.

A: Oh, yea and that's about all I can recall.

Q: So, what was it like to actually get to Germany? What was that arriving there like for you?

A: Well, you know you got off the boat, and they loaded us on a train and took us down there to Badenhausen. You kind of look around and it kind of made you wonder, "What am I doing here?" and

⁴ "kitchen patrol" work done by military personnel.

Interview with Leo Lenihan
Interviewer: Leigh Anne Howard
May 20, 2005

"Why am I here?" The countryside was beautiful as I recall going down. The train ride wasn't very nice because they didn't have very good transportation in those days. But it wasn't all that far... I forget probably a day maybe, if it took that long to get down there.

Q: What was your assignment like when you got there?

A: Well, when we got there and went down, our barracks were not built so we lived in tents. We called it "Tent City".

Q: With two people to a tent?

A: Oh no it was probably 6 or 8 there. They were bigger tents.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: Then you did the best you could. In the morning you made your bunk and you fell out and probably, maybe once a month you would catch guard duty. They had an animal dump and the motor pool and well the gates. They called them "concerns" as I recall.

Q: Concerns?

A: Yea and they had guards on the front gates when you came in, and you walked two hours north it was... you'd do that for 24 hours and then after we got in our bunks why then... you kind of went on maneuvers and...

Q: So, you had to build your own bunks? Did you have to build your own... hold on let me backup. How long did you stay in the tents? Not the whole time you were there.

A: No, no. Probably three or four months and I could be corrected on that too. But, something... wait until the barracks were completed.

Q: Okay. But you didn't have to build your barrack?

A: No, the Germans built them. And then they had rooms and there was probably 6 to 8 guys in a room and you know... double bunks there, one on top of the other. You had your own bed and a kind of public restroom and shower, what have you. Then every morning you'd fall out, and first thing you would do is police the area and in those days, everybody smoked so there would be cigarette butts all over and the whole bunch would go around and clean up in front of your barracks.

Q: Now, you didn't see any combat because you were stationed in Germany?

A: No combat, no.

Q: Can you talk about some of your experiences? The kinds of stories or things that you remember that you'll talk about with some of your buddies here today.

A: One thing I faintly remember... and I think I'm telling it right... I was driving this $\frac{3}{4}$ ton truck, and we had a sergeant, I think it was Sergeant Jennings, and one or two other soldiers, and we were sent up to the Russian border. Now the Russian border in those days extended beyond Berlin. And we set up there for about a week, and we just had to call in every so many hours on the radio. You know, I really kind of

Interview with Leo Lenihan
Interviewer: Leigh Anne Howard
May 20, 2005

forget what our assignment was... if we were just watching to see if anybody crossed over. I'm kind of blank on that... what really took place.

Q: Yea.

A: But, the only good thing about it was that you were up there alone. Nobody really bothered you. I ate a lot of C-rations⁵.

Q: And what was that like? What was the food like?

A: Oh, they were in little tins, and they would be like hamburgers... maybe ham and beans or something on that order. They were just something to get you by and you had some kind of a little flame... oh, there was a word for that too, but I can't think... to heat it, that's what I'm trying to say.

Q: Like a Sterno⁶?

A: Yea. I can't say the right word for it. But... but, as far back as in the barracks the food was pretty good. Very good about feeding you.

Q: Did you have to do any kind of KP duty?

A: Oh yea. You'd get KP maybe every so often. You know, as I recall you ate off metal trays... I think they were... and then when they washed them, they went through a real hot steamer and you had to be careful because that baby would burn you. They killed the germs for sure!

Q: How did you stay in touch with your family and your friends while you were over there?

A: Well, just letters. There was no telephone or anything like that. You just... it was all letters and you'd write back and forth.

Q: Did you have to pay for your letters?

A: No, no free.

Q: Okay, so it was through the military.

A: Yea, free. It was free. But those that wrote us had to pay. I think I'm right on that. And every... you know I don't even remember on that for sure, but they would have mail call. That was always kind of exciting when you would hear your name. You were hearing from somebody. Hopefully your girl!
(laughter)

Q: Did you have a girl at that time?

A: The one I'm married to now.

⁵ A type of canned food formerly used by US soldiers.

⁶ Flammable hydrocarbon jelly supplied in cans for use as fuel for cooking stoves or chafing dishes.

Interview with Leo Lenihan
Interviewer: Leigh Anne Howard
May 20, 2005

Q: Okay! Were you married to her at the time?

A: No, no. I wanted to get married before I left but she wouldn't do it. Which I'm kind of glad now she didn't at the time anyway. It was the right thing to do... wait until I got home.

Q: That had to have been hard, though, because...

A: Very hard, (laughter) yea.

Q: I mean you are away for two years.

A: Yea. I kind of figured by the time I got back she would probably be gone. (laughter) But, no it worked out great. Very lucky.

Q: What did you do when you were on leave?

A: Well, we went down to the Garmisch-Partenkirchen hot stand which we stayed in the hotel that was Hitler's getaway resort.

Q: Oh yea.

A: And the rooms were very cheap... I'm not sure what the price was but, you didn't have a lot of money in those days. You were only making \$102 a month or something like that. But we went down there, and one night we took in an ice-skating show and just enjoyed the country... kind of cold at that time when you are up in the mountains.

Q: So, you were able to travel a little bit and see some of the county and Europe?

A: Oh yea. You could usually... then you were also eligible to get three-day passes. We were about 20 miles from Frankfurt, and you could go up there and stay overnight or whatever you wanted to do. Then, there was a lady from Council Bluffs and her husband was in the military and was a colonel or major or something and they found out I was over there and invited me down there to spend a weekend. As a matter of fact, I think it was Christmas, which was really nice. Even Council Bluffs in Germany. But that's about...

Q: Okay. What kinds of other things did you do to entertain yourself?

A: Well... you just kind of hanged out after you got done in the evening. There was no TV or anything... maybe cards or something like that.

Q: Smoked your cigarettes?

A: Oh yea. And they had a pub across the street, and you could go over there and have a beer. (Another voice in the background: Service Club.)

Q: Service Club? Tell me about the Service Club.

A: Well, it was for the enlisted men.

Q: As opposed to the Officers Club? Is that what the Service Club was?

A: Yea. The Officers Club you had to be an officer.

Interview with Leo Lenihan
Interviewer: Leigh Anne Howard
May 20, 2005

Q: Right.

A: But... you'd get off at night, and if you had any money you would go and drink a beer, chat. Like you said, smoke your cigarettes. (Other voices in the background)

Q: Are they talking about you?

A: Probably are.

Q: They said you are the only one that fought in the war and the rest just supported you. (laughter)
That's what he said. Talk a little bit about the relationships that you developed as a result of this experience.

A: I think one of my favorite stories is with Ewell [Scott]. Maybe you've heard this?

Q: I doubt that I have.

A: When we left the service... I think he went home a couple months ahead of me... we had worked together in survey... (Man interrupts and speaks with Leo Lenihan for a few seconds) Just a minute until I get through here. But then we went home, and I never heard from him. About four or five years ago I got a Christmas card from him with a picture of he and I was down in Garmisch when we went on that leave. So, that's the first contact I had. We were going to Florida every year for the winter so down there I said to my wife, "I should probably write him a letter." So, I sat down and wrote him a letter and told him a little bit about my life. I never heard from him. Sent that letter and two weeks went by or longer and never heard another word from him and thought, "Well, that was a waste of time." So, one Saturday morning the phone rang, and it was Ewell. He had just been down to his daughter's in Huston and just got home and got my letter, so he called right away. So, one thing led to another and he said, "When you leave Florida come through Bowling Green and stop by and see me," I didn't know if I wanted to do that. That was over 50 years...

Q: I was going to say that has been quite a bit of time passing there.

A: Yea so finally I agree, and I said, "I tell you what we'll do. We'll come up there and get a motel and I'll call you and you can come and see me." "No," he said, "You've got to come and stay with us. We have to talk army." And I said, "You haven't seen me for over 50 years. Haven't you... you don't know who I am really." No, it didn't make any difference, so I finally agreed, and I didn't know how that was going to work out. First, I didn't know Sarah [Scott, Ewell's wife]. So, we stopped, and it turned out to be wonderful, wonderful and we've kept in contact ever since. They've come up to Council Bluff and stayed with us a couple different times. He is a really good friend. Like I told him, I'm SONY we let all those years go by. We didn't keep in touch.

Q: How long have you been coming to this type of reunion event, then?

A: I think about 12 years. The first one we found out about was in Moline, Illinois so we went to that. I've missed just one; last year we missed on account of a grandson graduation but, we made everyone since then. I try not to miss them.

Interview with Leo Lenihan
Interviewer: Leigh Anne Howard
May 20, 2005

Q: What did you do after the war?

A: Well, I got out of high school and went to work at the railroad. Of course, when I was drafted, my job was held for me until I got back. So, our town was kind of a railroad town in those days and it was something I always wanted to do. I never went to college or anything. I got out of the service and went back to railroading and spent 39% years there.

Q: Wow. Got married.

A: Yea got married. Four children. One in Kansas City, one in Quad City⁷, and two in Omaha. Very fortunate with them I have a good time with them. Spend a lot of time with the kids. Grand... grandkids (laughter)... 13 grandkids and one who had triplets!

Q: Wow, that is a lot of them with three the same age. How would you say that the service affected your life?

A: Well, I tell you what. Truthfully, I think it makes you grow up. I don't think it hurt me a bit. I was kind of a kid that needed... responsibilities would be a nice word to use for it. I was kind of carefree and everything growing up. You find out why (pause) you are yourself and you have to take care of yourself. So, you learn a lot. Like I said, at the time I didn't like it but when you stop and think back (pause) very good experience for you, very good.

Q: What other things do we need to know about or stories that you would like to share with us? Things that, you know, I may not have covered or asked you about.

A: I really can't think of a lot. A lot of it is the friends you acquire right here. You know I kind of was in the same thing and it just turns out. We have been friends for years. Always Christmas cards and you just always keep in touch, and it's great.

Q: So unlike with Mr. Scott there are some in this group that you have maintained contact with throughout the years?

A: Yea, mostly Christmas cards or something. But like Ewell, I just entirely lost contact with him. So that's about all I can think of.

Q: Well, those are all the questions that I have. If you think of things, snag me, and we will go back on the tape. I do have some paperwork and things...

⁷ Quad City is a region of four counties in northwest Illinois and Southeastern Iowa. It consists of five principal cities: Davenport and Bettendorf in Iowa, and Rock Island, Moline, and East Moline in Illinois.