

## **Interview with Elmer Ownbey, World War II Veteran**

Interviewer: Kenneth Culbreth

HKC: OK, Mr. Ownbey, When did you go into the Army?

EO: I went in August of '42.

HKC: What were you doing before that time?

EO: I had been helping a civil engineer, (difficult to understand)

HKC: Do you remember Pearl Harbor?

EO: I remember Pearl Harbor.

HKC: What's your first memory, when you first learned about it?

EO: My fiance' and I was in a movie, we went to a movie, the Imperial Theater on Patton Avenue, and we went to see the movie, "The Rains Came. When we came out, they were yelling, "Extra, Extra" and that is what the guy was yelling, that the (United States had been invaded by Japan). December the 7th of 41.

HKC: You could have been deferred, but you didn't get deferred, do you want to tell me about that?

EO: I could have been deferred; A man asked me if I would take a deferment if I got it and I said yes, and he said, "Well, I want you to go with me, and help us." I was working for Carter and Bearden Company, a survey company, and they wanted me to go with them to Georgia, I forgot the name of the town or the fort or what have you, but they wanted me to go down there, and I told them I said, Well I think I am going to be drafted.

I had been told by the general public, not to volunteer, to wait and be drafted. They said, We went up to the draft board to check, to tell that woman that I wanted to be deferred and she said she had already mailed my card out. Well, I didn't get it, and I told her I didn't and she said, Well, I will just sit down right now and type you one, so she did and gave it to me.

Two years later, my mother sent me the original card, or the draft notice and the post office, somehow it had gotten on the floor, and there was heel prints and all that all over the card,

HKC: OK, when you went into the Army-where did you go-where were you inducted?

EO: When I first went in, I went to Fort Bragg, then I went to Camp Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, that's where I took my basic training. It was a Combat Engineer basic training camp. That's where I went and had my basic training because I was-my army MOS was a civil engineer so they put me in the engineers and I had to take Engineer-Combat Training for six weeks then I went to -they sent me to the University of Kentucky for a refresher course-in Civil Engineering. That's where I was married, by the way.

HKC: Elkin, West Virginia?

EO: Well after that I went to For Jackson, SC and stayed down there until I went on maneuvers in Elkin, West Virginia. After I went on maneuvers, they sent me to Fort.. .Camp (something) Ellis Island, New York ... I went over seas, took us five days to go over, went over on the Queen Elizabeth. 18,500 of us on the boat-ship... We changed course every six minutes because it took a German sub 7 minutes to set up and fire a torpedo, so we changed course every six minutes.

One time, the ship listed 51 degrees and almost went over, (almost capsized), they told everybody to go to the port side of the ship and we went to the other side and it righted itself.

HKC: How many people- passengers did you say were on that ship?

EO: 18,500

HKC: On one ship?

EO: On one ship- the Queen Elizabeth.

HKC: And you embarked to Edinburgh, Scotland -How long did it take?

EO: Five days-

HKC: Five days.

EO: I didn't stay there any time, I went on a train from there to Bristol, England and stayed nine months until the invasion.

HKC: You told me earlier, something about your group rebelling because you had a drunk lieutenant doing the inspection-what camp was that?

EO: That was Fort Jackson.

HKC: Fort Jackson, South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

HKC: OK.

EO: That was when I first went in and he was the bed check man and he came by every day when we were out on calisthenics and that sort of thing. He came by and checked the beds, he found the beds that were made properly, everything about it was perfect because we had been instructed to make them a certain way, we made them a certain way and he tore them up. We had learned to make the sheets so tight that you could pitch a quarter on the bed and it would bounce. So one certain night, we all got together and decided we wouldn't fall out for retreat. We didn't fall out and the sergeant came by and said, "You know you've committed mutiny."

And we said, "We don't care, we are going to stay out until you get rid of that lieutenant that tears up the beds. We've had all we want of him. And they got rid of him."

HKC: So you got through that one-that rebellion all right-

OK-let's go back to landing in Europe. You went from Edinburgh, Scotland to...

EO: Bristol, England.

HKC: You were there about nine months waiting for the invasion.

EO: Waiting for the invasion, doing nothing, just waiting for he invasion.

HKC: And when the invasion came, June 6, 1943, you were in the second wave of the invasion?

EO: We went in about 10:00~the first wave went in at 6:00 and we went in at 10:00-1 don't know what wave it was.

HKC: OK, Well, that's close enough, close enough for government work!

And you told me about some of the things your engineering company did-that the Rhine River wasn't easy to cross and you needed a bridge to cross it.

EO: It was the swiftest river in the world, and the Ramagan Bridge, which was the main access across the river, had collapsed. So we built a pontoon bridge in 10 hours, which was a record. And then our troops and tanks and everything crossed it.

HKC: Who was in command at this particular time?

EO: Uhh...

HKC: Pollak?

EO: Major Pollak.

HKC: You told me one time about getting to meet General Bradley. Do you want to tell me that again?

EO: Well, this was in England, when I went from Edinburgh, Scotland to Bristol, England, they changed Commanders as they often did in the Army, and General Eisenhower was my Commanding General. And he went to Schaff, he organized Schaff, and he went there as Commanding General and General Bradley was promoted to my outfit. And he was the commander of the first army and one morning I was running down the street and I saw him coming, and I was late as usual, and I ran and saluted him running and he yelled, "Hey, soldier!" and when he did I slammed the brakes on and came back and he asked me how the food was, how the beds were and the temperature in the buildings. And I said, Well, as you know, we're in a dorm-it's a British college-and everything is fine. They keep me-I eat good food, I sleep well and I'm warm and that's all that matters.

HKC: You were telling me something about different kinds of rifles you had. Do you want to tell me about the two different rifles you had?

EO: When I went into the service, I was issued a Springfield-03, they called it-rifle, it was a rifle that you had to cock every time you fired it. One time, when we were in Germany, this sergeant, I cant remember his name, he went someplace and came back, and he said, "Does anybody in the outfit have an 03 rifle? I said, "I have one." He said, "Let me have it." And the men had spotted a-see the Germans were killing our-we had men going over-flying cubs-airplanes and they were spotting the German artillery and they were-this man-German soldier was killing them-he would move from one tree to the other, when he went to the left, they would aim to the left, when he went to the right, they would aim to the right, he said, "I'm going to kill that man," And he was a mile away-at least a mile. He took the 03 that I had, the Springfield rifle and killed the man, because he said, the sergeant,( he was the second lieutenant, by the way, at that time) he said, "Somebody stay here and watch that man and see if he comes alive, see if he moves. And he laid perfectly still and this guy ,we took turns watching him thorough binoculars, the man didn't move for two or three hours, so we assumed he was dead, which he was, and we forgot about him and anyhow, he killed him-he was at least a mile away, going up the mountainside, taking the man a meal in a basket taking him food because he was up there watching for us-to see if our cubs were showing them where to fire and the German soldier was up there telling them which way\*see he was, they were lobbing the artillery shells over the mountain and hitting our outfit and hitting us and when he went to the left, they'd aim to the left and when he went to the right, they'd aim to the right.. it was a harassing agent, that's what we called it. They had a name for everything like that-it was a harassing agent.

HKC: So what you're telling me is that the Springfield 03 rifle was pretty accurate and they wanted yours for that reason. It may not have been fast, but it was very accurate.

EO: It was accurate and it was deadly, you see, later I was issued the carbine, it was good for 50 yards but not a mile away. The 03 was good for a mile away, just like you said, because they killed the German, He was not a German, he as a Frenchman, going up to take the man his food, and he killed him, a mile way. A carbine wouldn't have done that. A carbine was good for- accurate- for 50 yards-a hundred yards, but not a mile.

HKC: Can you tell me something about the St. Lo breakout? Seems like that is something everyone remembers.

EO: The St. Lo breakthrough came on a Sunday morning- there was 2300 planes came over- we were in an apple orchard and that apple orchard was shaking-literally shaking-because when those bombs started dropping-I was within a half of mile from where they started dropping the bombs and 2300 of them went over and I saw them start dropping the bombs and there was everything-planes were falling, men were falling.. .men were jumping out of the planes and everything. Anyhow, when we went through St. Lo, the Germans were there and they were shell shocked, they would just sit there and stare. And somebody said, "are we going to kill them?" and the sergeant in charge said, "No, just leave them alone, because they can't do any harm, because we had an aerial bombing, we bombed St. Lo, it was a town,- St Lo breakthrough, it was a town and the Germans were in there so thick, somehow they knew about, well, when we invaded France, the first mile, we lost 6500 men and the second day, we lost 5600, you could walk on bodies.. .for a mile, they were yelling and everything, some of them saying, tell dad, "I'm sorry.", "Tell momma, I'm sorry.", "Tell Mary I love her." and all that sort of thing. They thought that we would be their last communication with their loved ones. And the St. Lo breakthrough came just after that. When there was a concentration, see the Germans had gone to the Russian front, the Russians had obliterated them just about and they had come back to Berlin, to Germany, to regroup and resurface and get all of the supplies and all of that. Then they came to France, where we were going to invade on maneuvers.

And they got there, it was a coincidence, strictly a coincidence, they got there at the same time we did. And we invaded and they were coming west and we were going east, the invasion, and we met. And that is where the 6500 men, Germans, Americans and the English was ... north of us and Caen, they said they liberated Caen with the assistance of the Americans. Which was a bunch of bull-the Americans went in, see, they had their tea and crumpets every year, every day at 4:00, they had their tea and crumpets, they'd just stop what they were doing, because it was a tradition. And they would have their tea and crumpets every day at 4:00. Well, the Americans went in and took Caen, and then they said, "with the assistance of the Americans", they captured Caen. Bull.

HKC: What about this "Buzz bomb Alley, how did that name come up? What caused that?

EO: Well, just after St, Lo, we took off, and we were in Buzz bomb Alley for 6 months. And I was assigned a jeep, whole time I was overseas, I had a jeep. No one drove it but me. Anyhow, I was driving down the road going to someplace, , I guess, and everything seemed to-it seemed a

hush came over. I was driving along the highway and a hush came over, and you could hear anything, and I looked over to the right and here went a buzz bomb down the American runway because they had built an airstrip for the cubs to check the artillery that I just told you about. Well, here went the buzz bomb down, the buzz bomber, and he went right to the building and ran out of fuel-power and he stopped just short of the building! If he had hit the building, the plane was rigged so that when it made contact, it would have exploded. It did not make contact. Then, I had a radio in my jeep, so I called my outfit, back 25-30 miles and told them that the buzz bomb had come down that runway. They knew where the runway was, so they came down, and neutralized it?

HKC: Yeah, I guess you'd say that, exploded, whatever..

EO: Anyhow, they kept it from exploding.

HKC: You told us about a buzz bomb one time that circled, and hit one of your trucks.

EO: Well, this happened during the... what as it?

HKC: St. Lo?

EO: No, the next one.. .the invasion that came in December, started the 16th of December...anyway, we were going to retreat-the colonel said, "Don't ever say retreat," he said, "Advance" anyhow, we were going to "advance back" to (?Lies, Belgium). And this buzz bomb went over and made a circle and came back. Well, our trucks had already gone. I had volunteered -he volunteered me to stay back and drive him through St. Lo breakthrough-no anyway-I stayed back to drive him through and the buzz bomb went over and made a circle and came back down. You could see it at night because it had a trail-blaze behind it-of the fuel and you could see the blaze and I saw it go down. And I said, "Colonel" (because I was driving him at the time) no, I was back there at the headquarters because I was on guard duty. Anyway, I saw this buzz bomb pull over and make this big circle and come back and when I went in, I said, "Colonel, I believe one of our boys was hit." He said, "What makes you say that?" and I said, "A buzz bomb went over and made a circle and came right down where the men were going-the convoy. And I didn't (believe or leave) that one, but anyway, he did, he came down and when he landed, he landed in a truck and there was 12 men on it and all of them were just blown to bits.

HKC: And what did you find, what evidence did you find.

EO: Well, the next morning, when we went through, we found a wheel from one of the trucks, and we knew, I told him, "Colonel, that's one of the wheels from one of our trucks. He said, "how do you know?" and I said, "I just know it." And it had the outfit stamped on the wheel. And I said, "The stamp right there tells me that that's one of ours. And when we got to liaisons, we found out that they had been bombed and the buzz bomb hit and completely destroyed the men

and the unit-the bomb disposal unit was all in one truck and it killed every one of them-the driver, the men sitting beside him and all the men in the back.

HKC: Why did this bombing-explosion happen where several men got the purple heart and you were in the shower and you didn't get it-do you want to tell us where you were and what happened there?

EO: Well, that was just after this we went to (?Lies, Belgium) and I was in the shower, In the German barracks, taking a shower and a buzz bomb came over and landed and destroyed the building and men was there with their eyes popped out, their arms off... and all that sort of thing, and they said, "everybody that brought blood, come over to headquarters the next morning and get a purple heart. Well, I wanted to be a big shot, I didn't want to go because I wasn't hurt, all I got was a little piece of glass made a cut on my knee, but it brought blood. Anyhow, I went over and told them I wasn't going to accept it and I didn't accept the purple heart-some of the men did. When we got back to the states, we had to have 85 points, to be discharged and I had 83, because I didn't accept the purple heart, if I had, that would have been 5 points, but anyway, I had to sit down there at Fort Jackson, two months and wait for the time- two months to be up so could get the two point and I'd have 85.

HKC: Whenever you got enough points to be discharged, did you decide to make the Army a career or go in the reserves, or did you decide to take the full discharge?

EO: Well, I had the options, all of those options, that I had, and I was married, in the meantime, I got married in Kentucky, because I was sent there on a refresher course. I was married, when I got there and I found out my wife was pregnant with our son, and I told her, I think I'll make the army a career. She said, what about our son, we don't want to travel all the time. And so, I accepted the full discharge. I didn't join the reserves, I didn't stay in the Army or nothing, I just came out.

HKC: But whenever Korea came along, what as your involvement there?

EO: I stayed out till '49. I went to the Post Office in '47-1 stayed out of the Army till '49 when I joined the reserves. It was- a call- a Postal Unit, the commanding officer who was a second lieutenant, went to a correspondence school back there we called it, and he got to be a second lieutenant, well, he was our commanding officer. They didn't send us as a unit, they just drafted us all when the Korean Army-the Korean War came along. They drafted us and we went in. Then it was said that they told the commanding General who ever he was, I don't know, "Either declare war or release the reservist, there were 100,000 of us already called into the service. So they discharged us, we were released. I went in August and came out in August. I was in the Korean War one year. And they said we didn't have to go overseas if we had been over 18 months or more. I had been over 24 months so I didn't have to go overseas. I was sent to an Army Reserve recruiting headquarters in Decatur, Alabama, and that's where I spent the year with my wife and my son and I talked about the reason I didn't go in-because of him-she was

pregnant with him and by that time he was about 5 years old, he was born in '46 this was '50-he was 4 years old and I went out to Decatur, Alabama and spent the year and then was discharged.

Well, no I had to stay in another 9 months-they extended our entire men in the reserves and I was due out in October and I had 9 months to go and I got out and I stayed out until now.

HKC Mr. Ownbey, tell me the most memorable involvement you had during the Allies Invasion of Europe.

EO Well I guess the one I remember most is the one I wish I could forget. It was when we liberated that awful concentration camp they called Buchenwald. It is unbelievable, what some people can do to other people. The camp had a woman in charge. She was a ... well you don't want to know. They had corpses stacked up like cord wood, waiting for the crematorium. We saw human bones in the crematorium furnaces. If a man prisoner came to Buchenwald and he had a tattoo on his body, he was dog meat. She would have the tattooed skin removed from the corpse and would have it tanned and use it for crafts she made, such as purses and lampshades. I actually saw the items she had made from these men's skin.

Most of the people that ran the camp had left when we got there. The men, the prisoners that were still alive were almost starved to death. Their legs were less than the size of an arm. Many didn't live long enough to be rehabilitated.

HKC: Thank you very much, Mr. Ownbey, we will be back in touch whenever we get this in some kind of order.