

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JAKE BENNISON
U.S. Army, World War II
2012

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Bennison, Jake., Oral History Interview, 2012.

Approximate length: 1 hour 46 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

Jake Bennison, a native of Kewaunee, Illinois discusses his service in the U.S. Army during World War II. Bennison briefly mentions a trip he made to France in 1995 to commemorate VE Day before going on talk about his enlisting in the Army in 1942. He mentions that he was put into the Army Enlisted Reserve Corps as he had already completed a few semesters of college, and he describes having to eat peanut butter sandwiches and drinking malted milk in order to meet minimum weight requirement. Bennison outlines his basic training at Camp Robinson, Arkansas and infantry school at Fort Benning, Georgia. He tells a story about playing clarinet, while at Fort Benning, in an unofficial regimental band and playing songs for Italian prisoners of war. He outlines the journey by train to Boston, from where they sailed in convoy to Glasgow, Scotland. Bennison recounts his journey to the south of England where they underwent more training before landing in France a few weeks after D-Day. He discusses their tactics for evading the Germans, how he reacted to being in combat and seeing dead German and American soldiers. Bennison tells a story about coming under friendly fire and then having to attack German forces. He reads a speech he delivered on Memorial Day the year before the interview.

Biographical Sketch:

Jake Bennison (b.19??) a native of Kewaunee, Illinois enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1942. He served in France during World War II and was wounded at Normandy.

Interviewed by John Weingandt, 2012.

Transcribed by Linda Weynand, 2014, and Charles Bellinger, 2015

Reviewed and abstract written by Helen Gibb, 2016

Interview Transcript:

Weingandt: New recording devices just came in. The old one was a big, big box. It had all sorts of wires and nonsense.

Bennison: Is that right?

Weingandt: Yeah.

Bennison: No kidding.

Weingandt: You know, one of the problems we had—

Bennison: You want me to put the address too?

Weingandt: No, no, that's all right. We have that. You've given that to somebody already, haven't you? Somebody has your address?

Bennison: I don't know that they have. Maybe I—

Weingandt: Well listen, let me put it down. What is it?

Bennison: Oh my god [laughs]. I get confused with my own address [inaudible]. It is [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Weingandt: [REDACTED].

Bennison: [REDACTED]

Weingandt: [REDACTED]. Of course the rest is Madison. Mineral Point Road. All set, Jake. Thank you.

Bennison: Sure.

Weingandt: I just have to tell you one quick story.

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: I was interviewing a gentleman who was in the Navy in World War II and he was on an Essex-class destroyer doing radar duty near Okinawa- the base at Okinawa?

Bennison: Oh, yes.

Weingandt: Well, as he called them the Japs--came in with their kamikazes. He was the radio operator and it was his job to send out an SOS or whatever had to happen. The first kamikaze hit the ship and the radio went out.

Bennison: Oh, no!

Weingandt: Now they can't even transmit—nothing. He's telling this story and—it was very interesting. He spent eight hours in the water.

Bennison: He did?

Weingandt: He did. No sharks. Eight hours in the water because the fleet didn't know that they were sunk because he couldn't send the message. The second kamikaze hit the radio shack. If he'd stayed in there he would have been dead.

Bennison: He would have been dead.

Weingandt: But he came out as soon as the radio was dead; he wanted to see what was going on. Well, that was kind of it. Charlie's memory wasn't the greatest and I started putting away this contraption—the tape recorder—and Charlie said, “John, I just remembered something.” I said, “Fine. Let's put it all back together again. Go ahead: tell us what you want to tell us.” And he did. He said, “Well, that's it.” I said, “Charlie, you sure?” “Yup, I'm sure.” So I started putting it away again. I had it all put back together in the case ready to go upstairs. “John, you're going to kill me.” [Bennison laughs] “You're going to kill me. I just thought of something.” I said, “Charlie, you mind if I ask you what it is?” “Yeah, I wanted to tell you how the Japs were strafing us when we were in the water.” I said, “Just a minute: we'll get that.” [Laughs].

Bennison: Oh my god. Getting strafed in the water.

Weingandt: And he said the Japs weren't—kamikaze pilot had one job to do and that was to get that thing up in the air and hit something. That's it. So they weren't too smart about strafing. The machine guns on a Zero were out on the wings out there. So the guy had aim right at Charlie and the rest of his pals but the bullets were going p-p-p-p on each side of him.

Bennison: On each side.

Weingandt: He said, “If the guy had turned the plane a little bit I wouldn't be here.” Yeah.

Bennison: Jesus Christ. You know that's the first story of that kind that I've heard about a Navy guy. I had good friends in the Navy who served in the Pacific—and in the Marines—but oh my god. I heard many stories but none, none like that one.

Weingandt: Jake, one of the neat things about this job is I hear so many stories and they're interesting, they're--one unusual one: a lady came in and it was not about her; it was about her husband. He passed away so she came in. It only took ten minutes—it was very brief. She said, “I got to tell you about my husband. He was in the Coast Guard in World War II. He was knocked off the bow of the ship by an explosion when a mine went off when they were removing mines from the New York Harbor.” I said, “Well, New York Harbor—mines? German mines?” “Yes, sir.” I had no idea.

Bennison: Mines? I didn't know that.

Weingandt: That's the interesting stuff that you learn. I had no—they were very—they kept it very quiet, the fact that the Germans were successful in mining all of our harbors, all of them.

Bennison: You know, the one story I had heard, John, is where they had mined outside of the coast farther south. But I didn't—

Weingandt: In. The. Harbor. [Bennison whistles]. Yup.

Bennison: Oh my god.

Weingandt: Any of those harbors when you went up Highway 1 to Nova Scotia?

Bennison: Yes.

Weingandt: Portland is a harbor, right?

Bennison: Yes.

Weingandt: And there's something—there's a little bit of New Hampshire that comes out to the water. Well anyway, they were in all those harbors. You thought the war was over when you got on the troop ship and came back?

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: Uh-uh. So you're at the dock, you're still out there.

Bennison: This is news to me. Yeah, you got it all.

Weingandt: I really enjoy doing this.

Bennison: Well, I'm glad to hear that because as I said to Molly and I'll say it to you, John, I admire and respect you for what you're doing because I just have to relate it to that point. It remains indelibly impressed in my memory when we were taking that tour in '95, yeah, '95, the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day—no, VE Day. Our British guide—we were on the bus--it was a small group--

Weingandt: Are you in England now?

Bennison: We were in France

Weingandt: France, okay.

Bennison: And we were on the bus traveling from Paris to—well, the Americans pronounce it Rems [Reims] but the French pronounce it “Rehs”. As we were driving along the highway he pointed it out, over to the left, he said, "Now you can't see it. It's just a few miles from here. It's a British World War I cemetery." he said, "There are thousands in there." And he said, "I think it's regrettable that I rarely see any young people of this generation who come to visit." In other words, history. It's too far back for them. They

don't relate to it. Understandably, but he said, "This is what I'm worried about the Normandy cemetery." There are nearly 10,000 Americans buried there. He said, "We see quite a few American visitors come over – today - but twenty years from now will they?"

Weingandt: Well, that's our job, Jake. We're preserving what you folks did, you know, your experiences and—good and bad. And it's--we've interviewed somewhere around 1,300 of you veterans.

Bennison: Is that right? 1,300?

Weingandt: 1,300. And what's going to happen here Jake, and will happen with what we're talking about right now: first, we will have a CD [compact disc] sound recording of this conversation. It will be mailed to you; you can do with it as you wish. Pass it along to your family—

Bennison: I certainly will do that.

Weingandt: That preserves what Jake had to say this day in July of 2012 in your family. We also will preserve that recording, another copy of it, here in our archives. And the recording of this conversation will be put eventually—there's not a hurry to do that since we have it—but will eventually be put in to our archives as a manuscript. Now, this has happened: a number of books have already been written and I can't even count how many people from the History Department at the University of Wisconsin and other places—they all have access to these conversations.

Bennison: Oh, that's interesting.

Weingandt: If you're writing a book about D-Day, as people have—Stephen Ambrose for one—

Bennison: That's right. Oh, I've read his books.

Weingandt: You've read his books?

Bennison: Yes.

Weingandt: Oh, boy. We've got something in common! I love that man. His son just spoke at any event which the Museum sponsored this spring. He was here for our Foundation.

Bennison: Where is he living?

Weingandt: Stephen Ambrose is dead. He died.

Bennison: I knew he was gone.

Weingandt: I don't know where his son is from.

Bennison: I met Ambrose.

Weingandt: Stephen Ambrose?

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: He was quite a guy.

Bennison: Oh, god, I should say.

Weingandt: Wonderful, interesting guy.

Bennison: Very interesting.

Weingandt: But at any rate, the point here is that people like him, people that are history majors at the University or any school have access to these manuscripts. Depending on what their field of interest is we catalog these things. So we can pull out who you guys are and what you've done and they go forth from there. So as of today, you're in history. Now if people are going to forget who you and I are now, in future they can have it, you know, the reference. But this will be preserved, well, I don't know what forever is but—

Bennison: Yeah, yeah.

Weingandt: Well, let's back up a little here, Jake.

Bennison: I'm glad you explained those things.

Weingandt: Well, I think you're entitled to know that. You take the time to come in here and—is this something that's just exercise and I don't know what or is—I just want you to know that you and your experiences are going to be preserved. Right? Well, as part of that, I'm curious: you did say outside that you're from a small town in Illinois.

Bennison: Kewanee, Illinois.

Weingandt: Kewanee. Well heck, I know where that is.

Bennison: Do you?

Weingandt: It's off the Interstate, but I wasn't sure.

Bennison: Yeah, it is. Let's see, what is it, 80?

Weingandt: Is that 80 going over to Quad Cities?

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: Okay, not a very interesting road: it's just flat, nothing around. [chuckles]

Bennison: Yeah, flat.

Weingandt: I just want to get there.

Bennison: Exactly, right.

Weingandt: Well, you were born and raised there?

Bennison: Yeah, born and raised.

Weingandt: Yeah, and... World War II breaks out- let's jump up to that. Are you in school at that point, or in high school, or what?

Bennison: In college.

Weingandt: You're in college?

Bennison: I was—I'm trying to zero in on it. I was, I think, third semester in college. I was at Illinois Wesleyan University—

Weingandt: Okay.

Bennison: —at Bloomington, Illinois, and, uh, John, I tried to avoid the draft. Okay. It was breathing down my neck in August of '42. So, I investigated the—first of all, the Navy. V-Five, and V-Seven. V-Five, I think—I think V-Five was the flying, Navy flying.

Weingandt: You sure?

Bennison: And then V-Seven was deck.

Weingandt: Oh! Okay, I didn't know that.

Bennison: And I, uh, flunked two to requirements, basic minimum requirements. One, weight. Their minimum weight was something like a 135 pounds. I was a 118, skinny, so, uh—

Weingandt: 135 pounds, is that what you said?

Bennison: 135 pounds.

Weingandt: For that period in time, that's quite—

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: That's not chunky, but it's—

Bennison: Yeah. Right. I think that was the minimum weight requirement.

Weingandt: And you wanted to be a Navy pilot.

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: I would think they'd want light guys so—

Bennison: Yeah. And what's more, the other, pitfall was, even though I was third semester in college, I did not have the math requirements, basic math requirements, for flying, in science. They had certain minimum requirements, and I couldn't meet them. So I was rolled off V-Five, V-Seven. And I had no interest in the Marines, 'cause I was skinny, and so, I thought, Well, finally, the Army, which always brings up the rear, [Weingandt laughs] they instituted an Enlisted Reserve Corps.

Weingandt: Is that something like the Reserves or—

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: Okay.

Bennison: Enlisted Reserve Corps. But it was new then, and they were ready to take anybody, and so, so, um, I went down to Peoria, uh, to the Armory, and I remember, I still remember the--I don't want to take a lot of time on this, but I had to tell you this, it was a lieutenant and I remember his name still: he was an Irishman named Cruikshank.

Weingandt: Crookshank.

Bennison: Cruik— C-R-U-I-K-S-H-A-N-K. Cruickshank.

Weingandt: Okay,

Bennison: And a lieutenant. He was enlisting guys in the Army Reserve. And he said, "Our minimum weight requirement is a hundred and twenty-eight pounds." So when I weighed in, it was a 118. He said, "I'll tell you, this is July, '42." He said, "I'll give you one month to make—"

Weingandt: Fatten up?

Bennison: "— to make up ten pounds." I said, "I don't know whether I can do it, but I'll try it," and he sa— I said, "What do you suggest?" So he gave me the menu. [Weingandt laughs] "Peanut butter sandwiches thick with mayonnaise."

Weingandt: Oh god.

Bennison: Mayonnaise and—

Weingandt: It's amazing you're still here.

Bennison: Peanut butter, and he said malted milk.

Weingandt: Oh yeah.

Bennison: So, in Kewaunee there was Richard's Dairy, and I practically lived there, drinking malted milks, and then mother would make these thick peanut butter sandwiches, and anything else that was fattening. And finally, the day came when I was to go back to Peoria, and he weighed me and he said, "My god, congratulations, you're a half pound over. 128 and a half." I lost it in about a week after that.

Weingandt: Basic Training will take care of that.

Bennison: Oh god, yes, well—

Weingandt: Would have been easier to put rocks in your pockets?

Bennison: I--I didn't even think of that.

Weingandt: Well, it's a little late now.

Bennison: But he said, "One hour before you come in and weigh," he said, "If you possibly can, drink a quart of water." A quart. And then he said, "As many bananas as you can." And he said, "Water and bananas together," he said, "will put it on." And so, I did that. That was an hour before I went in to weigh. 128 and a half.

Weingandt: Well, you blew it away

Bennison: [laughs] I blew it away. But that was how I got in. So, um—

Weingandt: So, what's the advantage of being in this quasi-reserve unit? Did it allow you to stay in school?

Bennison: There, that's a question. That's a good question. It did. For one more semester. It allowed me to stay in school and then finally—[coughs] Excuse me. A notice in February said March 10. And there were some of us at Wesleyan, um, students, guys, only must have been twenty of us, in the Army Enlisted Reserves. And so we were called up March 10, 1943. And I remember it was a dark, dismal, misty day, oh, it was great for morale.

Weingandt: Yeah right. [Bennison laughs] In a good mindset.

Bennison: Yeah, [inaudible] to start with, and we got on the train, Bloomington, went down to Belleville, Illinois- Scott Field Induction Center. And I remember my buddy Roy Palmer, he's with me when he walked into that camp area, and the Induction Center, and saw these uniform buildings, barracks, and of course it's misty and it's cold, and I looked over at Roy, and I detected a bit of a smile on his face. And I said "Roy, if I'm--if I read you correctly, I get the impression you've found a new home here." [laughs] He blew up. He said, "The hell with you!" So, anyhow, we ended up in the barracks and of course, naturally, naturally, it comes, two things befell me: one, the flu. We started getting stomach flu—that was great, good timing. And then, at the same time, I assigned to kitchen police- KP.

Weingandt: That's not the [inaudible] for guys with flu?

Bennison: No. Absolutely not. And so, I remember I was in the kitchen scrubbing big pans, pots, and looked out, and saw one of my high school buddies out there. He had just arrived, and he was a student at Illinois State University at Normal, Illinois. And he was a member of the Enlisted Reserve Corps too. And there are a whole bunch of guys from ISU, who are out there, and of course they were all in fatigues, and picking up—they were on detail, picking up cigarette butts and stuff like that. And I remember one of the cooks in the kitchen there looked out and says, "Well, I see there are a new bunch of yard birds out there."

Weingandt: Yep. Picking up stuff.

Bennison: Heads down, tails up. Cigarette butts and anything else that—so, anyhow, after that, John, came the order to embark on trains from Scott Field, Illinois, to Saint Louis. And we didn't know where we were going- they didn't tell us. Of course, they never tell you. And so we wondered, "Well, where the hell, it's someplace in the south." We always figured that.

Weingandt: Oh great. [Bennison laughs] What time of year is it now? It's getting to be summer right?

Bennison: This was March.

Weingandt: Oh, you're still in March?

Bennison: Yeah. And so, we were in St. Louis, got on the train, oh, I was sick. I mean—

Weingandt: Was it some sort of the flu?

Bennison: Yeah. [inaudible] And I remember one lieutenant, young lieutenant—of course I was a I was a private—and this young lieutenant came up to me when I was dragging my duffel bag on my back and I could hardly make it. He came over to help me, and I said, "Thank you so much." "Don't mention it," he said, "I can tell you're not up to it." And so we got on the train, and we traveled from St. Louis down to Little Rock, Arkansas, and Camp Joseph T. Robinson.

Weingandt: I've never heard of it.

Bennison: Is that right?

Weingandt: No, I'm sorry.

Bennison: Okay. Well, don't be sorry, because it was temporary.

Weingandt: Okay.

Bennison: It was a temporary camp.

Weingandt: Well, at least you got past Leonard Wood, you don't want to stop there.

Bennison: No. No. I heard all about that.

Weingandt: I spent time there.

Bennison: Okay, all right.

Weingandt: I'll tell you anything you've heard is true.

Bennison: Okay. I heard, I did, from other guys, who were at Leonard Wood. Oh, Camp Joseph T. Robinson—and this is amusing. We got on these little G. I. buses, from the train in Little Rock, and we're on our way out to Camp Robinson. And we'd never heard of this place before. And we were driving through, and we went through the old area first, and there was some fairly neat-looking--not barracks but “hutments” they called them..

Weingandt: Hutment?

Bennison: Hutment. They were, of course, huts, and they were small, accommodated maybe twelve guys.

Weingandt: Squad size.

Bennison: Ah, yeah! Squad, right. And they had small trees out in front, and plantings, you know, plantings around the base. I thought, “Well, this might not be so bad.” Our bus kept on going [Weingandt laughs] into the new area. There was nothing there. Tar paper shacks for--they were called hutments too, but they were shacks. I mean, really- tar paper. And they had a coal-burning stove at one end and a coal-burning stove at the other.

Weingandt: There's a certain smell that you'll never smell anyplace else, and they all smell alike.

Bennison: They all small—and the latrine, of course- no toilet in there. The latrine was several yards down the way, so you had to get up and go.

Weingandt: You needed to know where that was.

Bennison: Yeah, you needed to know where it was. And I recall so well how our guys, most of us—most of 'em were ERC, Enlisted Reserve Corps. There were a couple in there from University of Chicago and University of Michigan, thrown in with us. And next to us, in the hutment next to us, were these limited-education guys from Mississippi.

Weingandt: You said that nicely.

Bennison: [laughs] And, I remember Gerald Freeburg [??], one of our guys. He could imitate that southern. And when he would greet one of these characters in the city, he'd say, oh how was it he put it? Freeburg would say, “Good morning. How y'all?” How y'all.

Weingandt: “How y'all.”

Bennison: “How-uh y'all.” And when he'd ask one of them, instead of “What time is it”, “What tam it?”

Weingandt: “Tam.”

Bennison: “Tam it.” Oh, he was clever. He was killed in the war, later. And, anyhow, it was a twelve-week cycle, training cycle at Camp Robinson.

Weingandt: How does that differ, Jake, from the normal boot camp? You guys are all university--not graduates, but attendees. Is this a different basic training?

Bennison: It was infantry basic.

Weingandt: Okay, so you're really in infantry basic training that you have in this Enlisted Reserve Corps.

Bennison: Right.

Weingandt: Status.

Bennison: I'm glad you brought that up.

Weingandt: What's the difference between you and Joe Blow in basic training?

Bennison: Draft. I'm glad you raised that question, John, because when we were inducted, I remember the corporal who interviewed me, he said, “Well, you've had three semesters, nearly three semesters of college.” he said, “Your group, soon it will probably be singled out for special training.” And there was--the Army did institute what is called ASTP, Army Specialized Training Program for college guys. And I thought, “Well, it would be fine if I could be assigned to the signal corps or something.”

Weingandt: Sure. Like a radio operator or—

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: So, you—the goal was to take you people and perhaps put you in jobs higher than—

Bennison: Yeah. Right.

Weingandt: —some farm boy—not attacking farm boys, but—

Bennison: There. Exactly.

Weingandt: You had a little more smarts.

Bennison: Uh-huh. Right. But then—

Weingandt: Did it work that way?

Bennison: No. [Weingandt laughs] Said, “We need infantry.” Every one of us ended up in infantry. Not a one of us was singled out for any—

Weingandt: I wondered why I hadn't heard of this Enlisted Reserve Corps.

Bennison: [Laughs] Well—

Weingandt: Didn't work out that way.

Bennison: Didn't work out that way.

Weingandt: I see what—

Bennison: I was asked, “Since you had some college with you, would you be interested in trying to qualify for officer training?”

Weingandt: Oh.

Bennison: And I said, “Absolutely not.”

Weingandt: “I don't want to be up front.”

Bennison: “I don't want to be responsible for other guys' lives.”

Weingandt: Okay.

Bennison: “I am more of a--my burden, take care of myself and look out for myself.” so I was content to just remain an enlisted man, just a private. And I later was--had graduated to private first class.

Weingandt: Yup, I see that.

Bennison: Yeah. And, um, so, the short of it is, John, that I—ah. Oh. Lieutenant Rawlson[?]. I named him in here. He was a wonderful guy. He was from Boston, from the Little Italy section of Boston, and of course he had that Boston accent, and he was our platoon leader, and he turned out to be great. And I remember the last—in Basic Training, the last week of training at Camp Robinson, I was on KP, I was—

Weingandt: You seem to be doing quite a bit of that.

Bennison: Yeah. Because my name, last name ‘B’ and they'd always start at the first of the alphabet, and like, one of my buddies in California, his last name was ‘C’, and he said, “We always get the shaft,” he says, “They get halfway up through the alphabet and then they get screwed up and so they start all over.” Anyhow, I recall that I was back in the

rear end in the mess hall, peeling a spud, and Lieutenant Rawlson[??] was inspecting the mess hall, and he came back and saw me, and of course, he'd become acquainted with me because I was part of his platoon and he knew all of us by name. He walked in and he said to me, "Bennison," he said, "If you had your druthers, where would you like to be assigned next?" - because we were about to be assigned to another camp. And he said, "If you had your druthers, where would you like to be assigned?" And I said, "Anywhere in the Midwest, anywhere in the north. Not in the south!" And I detected a slight smile on his face and I knew--I could tell by that he knew where I was going. I didn't know. Fort Benning, Georgia. [Weingandt laughs]. Infantry school.

Weingandt: Good god.

Bennison: This was in the beginning of summer, practically, late spring. And so—

Weingandt: Nice try, Jake.

Bennison: [laughs] S—[coughs] infantry school. And of course, that's where you run field problems for the officer candidates that the enlisted men would.

Weingandt: Oh boy.

Bennison: And they also, candidates of course, would be watching you as you run through these different field problems. And I remember one time, during one of the problems, I had to dress up in a Japanese uniform.

Weingandt: Probably because you're the littlest guy there, right?

Bennison: Right! The littlest. You're right! Absolutely. And, uh, dress up in a Jap uniform, and of course they would have to try to locate me.

Weingandt: They were not using live ammunition, I hope.

Bennison: No, fortunately not. And so, that was just one example. There were other examples, too, where you would have guys that had to be dressed in German uniforms, and--well, at any rate, we would have to run field problems, and then the OCS guys would have to be part of it. Well, um, I was at Fort Benning. I was first assigned to B Company, and we were gratified to know that the sergeant- mess sergeant there - had been drafted early on. He was from New York City, and he had been chef for one of the better restaurants. So, every company, you know, had the same rations. Exactly the same in a--typical army, no difference, and he, being a chef, knew how to make it palatable.

Weingandt: Something like make SOS taste like a steak?

Bennison: *(laughs) (inaudible) goddamn (inaudible) I loved that expression "S.O.S."*

Weingandt: You know what it is.

Bennison: I know exactly what is; I learned it early. He made it very palatable. Well, then some of

us were reassigned from B Company to K Company. And we wondered, “What are we going to get there?” Well, that turned out to be a mess sergeant who was old Army. He had been a mess sergeant from the old Army, regular. And he boiled everything. All the vegetables, and, just, the flavors—

Weingandt: No flavors there,

Bennison: No flavors at all. And I remember we'd line up at the mess hall, and on a Sunday, when they were supposed to have a special food on Sunday, and I don't know what he did with the meat, but the windows of the mess hall, of course, were open, and guys were lining up to go in it, and two or three of them starts to “Beugh, beugh, beugh”, and this is goat meat, you know.

Weingandt: Oh god.

Bennison: [laughs] That was the sort of thing, and then finally there was a Lieutenant Zablanic[sp??]. He was personnel officer for our 300th Infantry Regiment and he, uh, he got in touch with me, and he said, “You know, on your record, you have noted that you play the clarinet,”—my father was a musician, and I learned clarinet early, and played in school band- the high school band. And he said, “The commandant here at Fort Benning had invited me that—“ They had—what do you call it? Table of Organization. Each regiment is entitled to a band. But he said, “We have our quota of bands, but you in your 300th Infantry Regiment – which was the new one. We can't authorize the band, but you can unauthorized. You can form a volunteer band, but it means that you are susceptible to call,” as I was a rifleman, and, um—

Weingandt: So it doesn't get you—

Bennison: No. No.

Weingandt: --your MOS doesn't become band.

Bennison: There you have it. Yeah. And so—

Weingandt: That would have been nice.

Bennison: That would have been nice. However--so we had formed this little band, and it was like maybe twenty-eight, thirty guys. And, I just have to note this as an experience. We played for Officer Kennedy graduation exercises, when OCS guys--we would play for their ceremonies.

Weingandt: Graduation?

Bennison: Graduation, yeah. And there was one time when there was—this was fascinating—we were playing outdoors- retreat. Retreat. Reveille in the morning, and retreat in the afternoon, and it was outside and an Italian prisoner of war compound in Benning. And we stood out there and we played our different marches, and these POW's – Italians - they just clapped and, you know, they were happy and they were joyful and they were,

you know, whistling, and singing along, and every piece that we were playing. And of course we tried, obviously, to play a couple of Italian songs, and, uh, they went nuts. And so, that was an interesting experience there. Well, then finally, we got word that the regiment, 300th Infantry Regiment, was going to be disbanded and broken up and different ones of us would be shipped out to ports of embarkation - some to the west coast, and others to the east. And I, of course, was hoping to go east, because I didn't want to go to the Pacific. Hot, and, you know—

Weingandt: So far you're getting plenty of hot.

Bennison: Right, exactly.

Weingandt: This is still December of '43?

Bennison: Let's see. I think it was the beginning of '44. Early part of '44. And, uh, so, we were told that--oh yeah--a group of us were to get on board the train. They didn't tell us where we were going.

Weingandt: Of course not.

Bennison: But we could tell that it was headed toward the east coast. We were all happy to see that. And most of the guys—there were just a few Midwesterners—most of them were easterner: New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, and Connecticut. Well, when our train--troop train came up through Carolina into Virginia, and we thought, “Well, we must be going for one of those port of embarkations.” And, uh, the guys from New York, Pennsylvania, they were beginning to brighten up, you know, thinking, “New York, New York, port of embarkation.” And the train—this is fascinating memory to me—the train, the troop train, is pulling up through New Jersey, and coming in to New York City, and slowing down, and these guys were just--“Oh god, you know, this is it. We'll get a three-day pass!”

Weingandt: I would say, take a good look, because you're not going to be there long.

Bennison: I know, I know. That's for sure! Well, that train slowed down, and then started to pick up momentum, and then started out of New York City. Well, you should have heard the air. It was blue with profanity. “Sons of bitches,” you know. “The Army. Oh, god, you know, they never do anything right.” And so, we passed on through New York, very slowly, picked up, and kept on—of course, the guys from Connecticut, “Well, maybe somewhere here.”

Weingandt: Sure.

Bennison: Well no, we kept on going through Rhode Island, Connecticut, and then up to Boston. Nobody on that train was from Boston. And that was our port of embarkation. And we ended up at temporary camp for a while for about a week. There they equipped us with new equipment, fresh. Uh, Camp Miles, Standish.

Weingandt: Well, there's a good New England name.

Bennison: That was a good New England name, and it was on Cape Cod. And I thought, “Gee, I'd love to be stationed here permanently!” Well, of course it lasted a week, and then they said, “Okay, it's time to for the train. Boston.” And we rolled into Boston, and that was the port of embarkation. And I still remember the name of the old transport ship that they called them “victory” something. I can't remember what they called those ships for supply and troop movements—

Weingandt: Weren't they victory ships?

Bennison: Something on that order, yeah.

Weingandt: Can't recall, either.

Bennison: And—[coughs]

Weingandt: They had a lot of them, I know that.

Bennison: Yeah. That--hell yeah. They made them—manufactured a lot of them in New Orleans, and anyhow, um, John, we were—Miles Standish, on the train to Boston. And then went down to the harbor, got on board this vessel, this ship. They were forming a convoy there. And so, we were on that for a couple of days in the harbor. And then it was on Mothers' Day, 1944, May 13th, that before dawn they moved out. The convoy formed up, and then we were out at sea. And of course, first couple of days were okay. And then we started hitting it rough. And I was seasick. Oh god, I was in my bunk, and all I could drink was water, and food just didn't appeal to me. And I wasn't alone. There were other guys; and of course, the smell of vomit was just all over the ship. And we were several days out, and I finally had enough strength to get up on the deck. It was a decent day, and the sun was out, and it was fairly warm, and a bunch of us were all on the deck, and we looked over to the side - we could see in the convoy, destroyers, our own destroyers and a few cruisers, and then an aircraft carrier. And I thought, “Whoa, jeez, we're well-protected.” Well, none of the planes on the carrier were fit to fly; they were all folded up. They were being shipped over to England and they couldn't fly from the deck, so—

Weingandt: So there's no air cover.

Bennison: No air cover at all and of course they warned us in advance. They said, “Well, there's still German submarines, you know, floating around somewhere.” So we just bide our time and the convoy went north, up toward Greenland, and then Iceland, up around that way, up around the north, and then came in to Scotland. And we debarked at a little town called Gourock—G-O-U-R-O-C-K. Gourock. It was a small town outside of Glasgow.

Weingandt: Mm-hm.

Bennison: And so, we got off ship, and got on board a train. I remember still, there was a Red Cross lady there, handing out candy and stuff like that, and she said—she called several of us, looking at each of us—and she said, “Are any of you from Fresno, California?”

None of us, of course. And so then we boarded the train, and then we thought, “Well, where's the next destination?” Typical, as I've said before. They didn't tell us. They're just (*inaudible*). So—

Weingandt: Never do.

Bennison: Nope. They never do. We kept looking out the window, you know, going down through Scotland, and knew we were going south. And then finally we got out of Scotland and then ended up, in the dead of night, a place called—in Wales—Wrexham. W-R-E-X-H-A-M. Wrexham, Wales.

Weingandt: 'Kay.

Bennison: It was the dead of night, and they had Army trucks there to take us to—our destination is a temporary encampment called—uh, let's see--trying to remember the name of it. Now, it was a camp named after an old Victorian estate, and pyramidal tents. And I can still remember the old-fashioned stone wall. When you came along the road, you saw that stone wall, a bunch of nice tall trees, and then the pyramidal tents, and we were assigned that. We had a training march--we were there for advanced training. And there we had a training march, as we were all softened up from the, you know, the trip over.

Weingandt: Yep.

Bennison: And, uh, so they were trying to get us limbered up again, and our number, uh—let's see, training march—oh, the memory that I have, John, is, we were—had our packs on, our rifles, canteens, gas masks, the whole stuff, trudging up—there are a lot of hills in Wales [Weingandt laughs] like that, and they had us going up and the thing that I remember so well, is that a young woman and her mother and they were pushing a—the Brits call the pram- buggy for the baby.

Weingandt: Oh.

Bennison: And we were trudging along, “Huh, huh, huh,” like that, and then came right along beside us, going up that hill and passing us, you know, just drr, drr ,drr. [laughing] I thought “Oh my god. I wish I were in that condition.” I'll never forget it. The guys started laughing, and all of a sudden, one of us went, “They must have been doing this for years, every day.”

Weingandt: They're used to the hills.

Bennison: They're used to the hills. So we were in training in Wales—

Weingandt: A guy from Kewaunee, Illinois doesn't know much about hills.

Bennison: No, no.

Weingandt: I can tell you that right now.

Bennison: [Laughs] Like some boy said--can't remember who it was, said, uh, what was it? Oh, he was comparing guys from the Midwest- Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska—see the— How did he describe it? I can't remember now the specific ___[??]- “A pile of dirt seems like a mountain.”

Weingandt: Yeah.

Bennison: But at any rate, this was Wales. And after toughening--toughening-up training, it was to southern England for further training, and I mean, there we really got the works for physical, to get us up to get us toughened up because D-Day, June 6th, 1944—

Weingandt: Yeah. You're right up to that, aren't you?

Bennison: Yeah. And that was—we were in southern England when that occurred, and I can remember up to this day, some of our guys looked up and they saw an American fighter plane flying over, a squadron of them. And I remember this one guy shook his fist, and he said, “Go get 'em you sons of bitches. You're getting paid for it!” 'Cause there was a pay differential, you know.

Weingandt: Serious one between the flyboys and—

Bennison: Yeah, right? “Go get them, you sons of bitches!”

Weingandt: “You get paid for this.”

Bennison: Yeah. [laughs] And I've never forgotten that. And then, uh, southern England, this was a tough training down there. And then we were taken by truck near Southampton, and it was on a Sunday, and I think we were to board ship for the Channel crossing the next day—no, Saturday. Sunday we were to get on board ship. And I recall so well—now let's see what did I have down here? Uh, no, um, Sunday we were getting aboard ship, and the convoy was grouping at Southampton, and we got on board ship, and I remember—one of the memories that stands out—there weren't enough hammocks on board ship, so I spent first night sleeping on the mess hall table, like this.

Weingandt: Mm-hm.

Bennison: That was my bed. And it—I was just—I thought, “Well, I'm getting adapted, you know, for what I have later on, sleeping on the ground.” So, anyhow, fortunately nobody got seasick, the Channel was very calm, relatively. Like, I can still remember, I was standing on the railing, looking out at the fairly calm Channel water, and this British sailor came up, and introduced himself to me and we started chatting, and knowing where we were headed, he said, “Would you mind joining me in prayer?” I said, “Well, of course.” And then he pointed to one of his shipmates just up the railing, and he said, “I asked him, when we're starting up, he join me in prayer; he said, ‘I can't. I'm an agnostic.’” That memory struck me right then and there. And so, when we offered each other a prayer, and we got to the beach, and course, by that time, the beach had been cleared.

Weingandt: Which beach are you going into?

Bennison: Omaha.

Weingandt: Okay. Omaha.

Bennison: Omaha. The beach had been cleared, and they had, um, blimps up here, suspended low, uh for protection against air. And we still had those. This was—see, June 6th, was D-Day.

Weingandt: Correct.

Bennison: This was—D-Day on June 6th, this—

Weingandt: We're trying to pick the date that you went on shore.

Bennison: Yeah. That was June, think it's June 22nd.

Weingandt: Oh, okay.

Bennison: And, um, but the Allied armies both—I mean Canadian, British, and American were only three or four miles in, because the hedgerow country.

Weingandt: Yeah.

Bennison: I mean, they came up against some stiff opposition.

Weingandt: They weren't ready for that.

Bennison: That's right! You're right.

Weingandt: Didn't show up really on air photography.

Bennison: No. No. You're right on target. The air photography did not pick up all that stuff, and the Germans were masterful in their defense, arranging their defenses. And, boy, they had it. And it was hard for tanks to maneuver. And finally, some sergeant, bless his heart, who just decided, “Okay, let's fit one of these Sherman tanks with a bulldozer blade, push through these hedgerows.”

Weingandt: Right.

Bennison: They have the mounds of dirt with hedges on top, and—

Weingandt: Literally plowed through

Bennison: Literally plowed through. And that's the only way you could get—and this is where two guys—I'll never forget them 'till the last day of my life—One, Stanley Sajak[sp??] from Hamtramck, Michigan and the other one was Arthur Haslet[sp??], from Cleveland,

Ohio. They--when my group of replacements came in to join the regiment and the company, and we were assigned to platoons and squads, they were on a half-day rest--the regiment was. They'd been in combat for two weeks—and so Sajak[sp??] and Haslet[sp??] were assigned, or they volunteered, to take me aside and, um, wise me up as to what to expect, what to avoid, what to look for—and, boy, I'll tell you, their ideas, their advice, I think, saved my life a couple of times.

Weingandt: I would guess, Jake, that you hadn't gotten into it yet, but—

Bennison: --that's right.

Weingandt: —none of your training had you prepared for hedgerows.

Bennison: Bingo. You hit it right—

Weingandt: So these guys really, literally saved your life.

Bennison: That's right. They did, literally! And both of them were killed the first week I was in, both of those guys were.

Weingandt: You talking about Sajak[sp??] and—

Bennison: Sajak[sp??] and Haslet[sp??], both of them. They'd helped me, and they—for example—just one example—they said, “Okay, you're going in from one field to another. No fences, no stone walls or anything like that, everything was hedgerow.” And they said, “If you go from one field to another, and you see the hedgerow over there and a clearing, where you think you can dive right through and get to the next field—Don't! The Germans are clever, and in a number of instances they have cleared it purposely, and they have machine guns.”

Weingandt: They cleared a way to get through the hedgerow

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: Knowing that you're going to go there?

Bennison: Knowing that you would see that, and “Whoa, I'll get there—”

Weingandt: They're trained on it—

Bennison: And so they'd have machine guns—pshooo!—zeroed in. Oh, they were, oh--this is what I learned. What to avoid. From then, they told me, said, “Just, just avoid those things. They're traps.” And so, when we went through the hedgerow, we'd have to go around the hedgerows or go over them, [inaudible] our way through, and hoping that nothing, you know, no rifles and machine guns were trained on us. And Sajak[sp??] and Haslet[sp??] gave me lots of tips on what to avoid and, of course, a lot of us were cigarette smokers, naturally, and that it was just never to light a cigarette after dark, because the flare of a cigarette lighter or anything like that might show up, so always—and then, uh--I just

want to point out, on the first day—and it was a Sunday, too—[inaudible], and I'll use the GI expression—I hope it's okay.

Weingandt: Mm-hm.

Bennison: Scared shitless.

Weingandt: There's no other way to say it.

Bennison: No other way to say it, exactly. And I was assigned to carry bandoliers of rifle ammunition—not assigned, I was ordered to—to Sergeant Hester's squad, which, we had learned, is about to be ambushed, and they said they need rifle ammunition right away. So, I had these bandoliers, they were heavy as hell, and here I am at a 120 pounds, [Weingandt laughs] but I had good legs and feet because I—all my life I had had to walk or run, and I had strong legs—

Weingandt: That's all you need.

Bennison: Ah, yes. And I carried these things wrapped around me. Oh, they were heavy. And I was going down this tiny country road, and there was a German tank that was still smoldering. It had been hit by an American tank, and I thought, “Oh god.” Just before that, I had seen an American Sherman tank get hit. And 'cause I still have memory, sad, of when it got hit, was the 143rd Tank Battalion that was supporting us, and this tank was in the field next to where I was, and they took a shot. The German tank was behind an outbuilding near a farm with shrubbery. It was well-camouflaged. Nobody saw it, and this shell came in, hit it directly, and I saw in the driver's seat, a pair of hands come up. The driver couldn't even get out, and a field medic came, one of our field medics started to run over to help him. Our platoon leader grabbed him, intercepted him and said, “No, you don't. That thing's gonna blow.” And sure enough—

Weingandt: And they do, yeah they do.

Bennison: Pfoo! And then I saw the hands come up, and the whole—there wasn't a survivor in that crew. Well, when I was carrying these bandoliers to this Sergeant Hester's squad, they were afraid they were going to be ambushed—they were—they needed ammunition, and I was carrying these heavy bandoliers of rifle ammunition, I was going down this little road, and this German tank had been hit, and it was smoking, and I thought, I gotta pass that damn thing suppose it—pkkhh? And so I got to it quickly, and [coughs] I reached where their squad was, and I got the ammunition to them and then ran back. And then I started seeing—well, I'd seem them before already, this was still the first day in for me, that Sunday, and as I went over the hedgerow, I saw another dead American soldier and the other side of his face had just been obliterated and unrecognizable. Apparently a grenade or something had blown up in his face, and he was lying on the ground and I damn near threw up. That was just one of several GIs dead that I'd seen there, and then, uh—oh yes, this I have to tell you. This was still the first day on that Sunday. Sergeant Peeples[sp??], he was a North Carolinian, he was our platoon sergeant. And I was still numb from the neck up from fear. I was scared to death. And I remember I was climbing over a hedgerow, and I got up on top, and I just

suddenly froze, and couldn't move. And I don't know why, I just couldn't think right. And I heard this lusty southern voice yell up, and this is what he said: "Hey, you dumb son of a bitch, get your butt down off of there!"

Weingandt: I say, that's not a good place to freeze.

Bennison: No. It is not a good place to—exactly, because stuff was just flying all over, you know, but I was just paralyzed with fear in that moment. And so, I got down and I privately in my own private thoughts thanked him for, you know, waking me up. And, uh, after that—Sergeant Peeples[sp?], incidentally, was killed a couple of days later. And, that was a Sunday. And that night, we were digging in. Eldon Wolff, farm boy from Minnesota, was my buddy. We were digging our foxhole down, and inside a hedgerow for protection. And, uh—let's see, uh, what was following that? And, um, we were digging down and—oh, that was the night that we were digging a foxhole, and it was pitch dark, and Wolff reached out for some of his equipment, and he called back to me, "You have your cigarette lighter?" and I said, "Yes," and he said, "I just felt something here, and I can't figure out what it was but it feels like a boot." So I took my raincoat, put it over my head, flashed on the cigarette lighter, and it was the leg of a dead German soldier in this field.

Weingandt: The leg?

Bennison: The leg. And the body was there too.

Weingandt: Oh, the body. Okay.

Bennison: Yeah. But he had just, when he was reaching for some of his equipment, he happened to touch that, and he asked me—'cause he didn't smoke, I did. And we were ordered, our squad, that night- out where this happened - to be—get it straight—on outpost duty. And the strangest thing happened. The Germans were firing buzz bombs from northeast France, Belgium, and Holland, over across the Channel to London.

Weingandt: V-1 rockets?

Bennison: Yeah. Rockets.

Weingandt: Right.

Bennison: At once, everyone's involved, one would boomerang, come back. I had never experienced this and had never expected to. About fifty feet above us, one came over. Now I could just—both of us looked up and could see the flash—

Weingandt: Yeah, the flame.

Bennison: —flame—

Weingandt: Sure.

Bennison: —coming out of the rear of it.

Weingandt: I'll be darned.

Bennison: And it's going back over into enemy lines. His—

Weingandt: Good place for it.

Bennison: Yeah, good place for it. And that was one thing that happened that same night that we found that dead body. The next morning, John, when daylight came, we realized that near this road where we were ordered to set up a roadblock is a small country road, but large enough for vehicles and tanks. So we had this roadblock. We had part of our squad on one side of the road, and the rest of the squad with a machine gun or BA—Browning Automatic—guy on the other side, and a bazooka. And it was just getting daylight and I got up, and I was looking around, and in that orchard were at least twelve or thirteen corpses, German. And the curious thing was, they apparently had been caught by surprise by American mortars, or artillery, and had been caught, and every single guy had their mess kit out. So apparently they had been caught as they were getting ready for chow.

Weingandt: In the middle of the field.

Bennison: In the middle of the field.

Weingandt: Not a very good plan.

Bennison: Not a very good plan, even though it was an orchard. And this is one thing I've got to note for you, the thing that just caused me to—when I looked down at him I was speechless, I couldn't think, I was just—

Weingandt: You're looking at a German corpse now?

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: Okay.

Bennison: And I looked at that young man there, and his facial features were identical to my own. I couldn't get over it! That guy—I mean, nose, even! Same shape face and I thought to myself that old saying—expression, you know, “There, but for the grace of God”—

Weingandt: —“go I.”

Bennison: —“go I.” I couldn't—that's an indelible memory, just looking down at that young man, his different uniform—this is one thing I couldn't get used to, in spite of the best kind of training I had in the States and in Britain—England—I wasn't ready, mentally. I couldn't adjust to the idea that here I'd be on this field, and another young man on the next field wearing a different uniform and armed, and his mission was to shoot and kill me. I couldn't get—the first day or two, I couldn't get used to that. I mean, I soon did, but I

mean I just couldn't think that in a civilized world—

Weingandt: “He wants to kill me and my job is to kill him.”

Bennison: Yeah, my job is to kill him. Well, at any rate, after we saw all this, we had to move on, of course, and I can remember the night before, our sergeant, our squad leader, had his walkie-talkie and it was dark, dusk, the very beginning of dark, and he was calling back to company headquarters with his overlay map, wherever we're going to be, to set up this roadblock, and company commander said, you know, “If I read you correctly, you're about two hundred yards into German, enemy, territory. You better back up.”

Weingandt: This is you now.

Bennison: Pardon?

Weingandt: Your unit?

Bennison: No, that's my squad.

Weingandt: Your squad. You're two hundred yards into the—

Bennison: Into the—

Weingandt: —German lines.

Bennison: —in German lines. (*chuckles*) So—

Weingandt: Who did that?

Bennison: [laughs] Well, you know, the Army, everything's fucked up. So, we, of course, backed up to take our positions. Um, and that was the same night the buzz bomb came over and all that kind of stuff. One of the worst experiences I ever could imagine that I would ever have was friendly fire.

Weingandt: God, that's the worst.

Bennison: That is the worst. It was our Air Force, Air Corps. Um, General Bradley had designed this, uh—

Weingandt: Well, we were stalemated then, and you were part of that.

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: Breaking out to St. Lô?

Bennison: Yeah. Right. St. Lô.

Weingandt: St. Lô.

Bennison: Uh, we're—our unit was—

Weingandt: Just trying to fit this into the bigger picture here.

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: There was a huge bombing run.

Bennison: That's right!

Weingandt: Two salvos, (*inaudible*)

Bennison: Two thousand bombs—

Weingandt: You were a part of that.

Bennison: I was a part of that.

Weingandt: Okay, tell us.

Bennison: Okay. Wow. First of all, the dive bombers—

Weingandt: Yeah.

Bennison: —came first, and everything they did—Oh, excuse me. Back up. Our artillery fired smoke shells.

Weingandt: Okay.

Bennison: Colored smoke shells out in front.

Weingandt: To mark where the boun—

Bennison: To mark the boundary.

Weingandt: Sure.

Bennison: Anything south of that yellow or blue smoke line.

Weingandt: So far so good.

Bennison: So far so good! And then the dive bombers came over, and everything was going well, Guys was standing up, you know, watching them, and then, suddenly, a wind came up from the south, and that smoke, that colored smoke—

Weingandt: The marking smoke?

Bennison: —was blown back to the north

Weingandt: Oh god. Is that what happened?

Bennison: That's what happened.

Weingandt: I didn't know that part of the story.

Bennison: That was part of the story. The smoke came back, the colored smoke. And the big heavy bombers were coming up, and they saw, of course, the line and the smoke, and—shfoo—dropped their loads—

Weingandt: Dropped their loads.

Bennison: Dropped their loads, and I have here—

Weingandt: We're looking at a book right now.

Bennison: This is the regimental--

Weingandt: Oh sure.

Bennison: Our regimental history. And here it is. It started at midday. Do you mind if I read?

Weingandt: Please do.

Bennison: “Huge flights of planes in seemingly endless numbers, coming from beyond your scope of vision, moving - seemingly - slowly and ponderously, on toward their target. Wraithlike, they seemed to thread their way like huge fish, in and out of a sea of clouds. Ack-ack goes up towards them, most of it not reaching quite high enough. Occasionally, however, one is caught,” and I saw that, “and there is a burst of flame, and a long trail of smoke. Then, still like a huge fish, the ship spirals slowly earthward,” and I saw that, “as you watch, the death throes of the fish seem to last for hours. Actually, it's a matter of seconds. Fascinated, we stood and watched this mighty drama, entranced to such an extent that all thoughts of our own role were put into the back of our minds. Then came that awful rush of wind, that awful sound like the rattling of seeds in a dry gourd, as Ernie Pyle said. We were jarred back to reality. They started firing the rear of us, two or three miles or more, and then they slowly, fatefully, moved up toward us. Instinct made the more fortunate of us seek foxholes, folds in the ground, ditches, anything. Instinct made others forget all reason and logic, and begin running blindly. The terrible waves of concussion swept them like leaves before a storm, and they were cut down. The earth trembled and shook.”

I was lucky. I found a foxhole that somebody else had dug earlier; it was just a single one. I dived into it, and during that bombing, I remember I was just covered with dirt, just crumbled, you know, and on both—all sides of me, I was just covered with dirt, and-- “The earth trembled and shook. All hedgerows disappeared and entire platoons were struck. Huge geysers of earth erupted and subsided, leaving gaping craters, dust,

and the acrid smell of burnt powder. Yellow smoke grenades were thrown in an attempt to show our airmen that they had erred. But the smoke only mingled with the dust and smoke of the bombs and that was in vain. Panels were displayed everywhere, and airmen, seeing them on vehicles far to the rear, perhaps thought they were designating our front lines and released their bombs still more to the rear. Between the flights of bombers there was sufficient time to get out of the hole, dig frantically for those who had been buried alive, put the wounded into ambulances, and then dive into cover again from another menacing flight overhead with just wave after wave. Ambulances loaded between flights were rushing to the rear were torn to pieces. Tanks were burning everywhere. Ammunition dumps had been hit, and the large shells were booming, and the small arms and ammunition crackling in the distance. Men were screaming for aid men and medics. Others cursed the planes still coming in endless groups out of the distance. Finally, after ages it seemed, the bombs stopped dropping in our midst and were hammering down to our front where the enemy was.” And then it says, “Reorganization began in small unit leaders trying to account for their men.” But I remember—

Weingandt: Were people in your unit hit?

Bennison: Badly.

Weingandt: Okay.

Bennison: General Leslie McNair had just been, uh, had just been ordered by General Marshall to come to Normandy for inspection purposes, to determine what was needed and what had to be done, and what was falling between the cracks, and planned to report back to him. And he, General McNair, was with our battalion at that time and he was killed in that bombing. And so many of my buddies were—I mean, I vomited because I saw so many body parts of our own guys. And yet, when it was all over, we were ordered to attack. Phoo- I wasn't ready for that.

Weingandt: You weren't ready.

Bennison: No. Nobody else was, either. But we had to attack, and there we had one of the worst times, because even though some of our planes' bombs went true, and the Germans were just as rattled as we were, they responded quickly, and we—I don't know how we survived. I mean, it was just intersection, road intersections. We'd get machine gun fire. I remember I hit the side of the road into a ditch, and this stuff was just--and I could feel this stuff all over my head and, uh, if it hadn't been for this ski slope—

Weingandt: Pointing to your nose.

Bennison: —a bridge, if I'd had a bridge that had protruded, I would have lost part—

Weingandt: Shot it off.

Bennison: Yeah. Exactly. So, there was one place in here, uh, I had—this was a speech I delivered at a Unitarian meeting house on Memorial Day a year ago. And I said, uh—no, I should

have mentioned this much earlier. I wish I had—

Weingandt: Go ahead.

Bennison: —and so I'll back up. “Speaking as a full-fledged octogenarian, who in six months will qualify as a nonagenarian, I am pleased and honored to appear as a participant in this special tribute to our national Memorial Day, and as a Purple Heart veteran of World War II, I ponder this question: How long have people throughout the world been talking about peace, seeking peace? Truly, no one can place a number on the answer to that question. Countless books and stories have been written about peace, and how virtually impossible it is to obtain. Tolstoy's masterpiece, *War and Peace*, is exemplary. An excellent modern testimony to the hideous aspects of World War I is Barbara Tuchmann's *Guns of August*. We like to think of the power of peace as we think of the power of love, even the power of prayer. And I suggest that we add to those, the power of words and the power of humor. Both complement the power of peace. Both are essential to the exercises of diplomacy and human relations, as well as in international relations. Humor goes far toward the easing of tensions. A pointed example of this is an experience of mine at a time I was an Army rookie, taking Infantry Basic Training sixty-eight years ago at Camp Robinson, Arkansas. Our regiment was leaving the main part of the post for a rugged ten-mile quick stride march bearing field packs and rifles. For many of us, such an exercise on a hot muggy day inflamed our tempers, even though we knew its purpose was to toughen us up for eventual combat. The blazing sun was setting on the horizon. We approached an intersection at which there was a bus stop just to our right. Waiting there for a bus was a delightful sight rarely seen by us GI's on that or any other place: an attractive young civilian woman wearing a very short, filmy skirt and high-heeled shoes. With the sun setting just behind her, it was obvious she wore no underskirt. Quickstepping along, faces to the front as ordered, we could only shift our eyes to the right, limiting our view of a person desirable and feminine. Knowing his men as he well did, Lieutenant Rawlson[sp??], our platoon leader who was a strict disciplinarian but eminently fair and blessed with a keen sense of humor, did the noble thing, issued the command, ‘Eyes right.’” [Weingandt laughs] “But what followed forth provoked nearly uncontrolled laughter among my GI buddies. One of them among our ranks blurted it out, quote, ‘I wish he’—our Lieutenant—‘hadn't done that. It unsettled me and I'll be unsettled for the rest of the day.’ But it did accomplish a purpose- that of easing the drudgery of a hot, sweaty march on a dusty rural road, giving all of us something to smile about, a little peace of mind.” And there was one instance that I didn't include in here because I didn't know whether I should or not. That was when Jerry Collins was in our squad. And he had, like everybody said, a perverted sense of humor. And he called up to our buddy Bob James, he said, “Bob, later on could you tell me what you saw?” of that young woman, “I didn't have the courage to look.” And—

Weingandt: [Laughs] What?

Bennison: And Bob—that was his kind of humor—Bob turned back and he said, “Jerry, we're gonna have to rush you back to the infirmary,” [Weingandt laughs] “and later check you in with the chaplain.” I've never forgotten that.

Weingandt: That's good.

Bennison: That is good. And anyhow, the upshot of everything is--John, let's see, July. This is moving up again.

Weingandt: As I recall, you've just been bombed by our people.

Bennison: That's right.

Weingandt: And you've been told to attack,

Bennison: Mm-hm.

Weingandt: —And you're in no mind for that.

Bennison: That's right.

Weingandt: What happened then?

Bennison: And then we had to attack, and that's where we, well, as the old GI expression has it- the shit was flying all over. And, uh, then, let's see—following that—oh, the last three days of my twelve-day stint before being hit, I had been ordered by my platoon sergeant—I mean by my squad leader—his name was—his last name was Sparks, nicknamed Sparky.

Weingandt: Mm-hm.

Bennison: He, uh, had assigned me, or ordered me, the last three days, to become, um, squad scout, which meant—

Weingandt: That means you're out front.

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: Don't like that.

Bennison: No, no, no. He and I were good friends, and the only way I could interpret it is, that he trusted me, I mean, to give me that assignment. Uh, I had—in other words, when our whole unit - maybe regiment, battalion, squad - were pinned down by fire, then it would be the job of the scout to go over for flank security, alone, to the next field, and listen, watch, for any movement of the enemy. And—

Weingandt: Do you have a radio, a walkie-talkie?

Bennison: No. I didn't. I had to communicate--and of course—

Weingandt: Like, with hands?

Bennison: Yeah.

Weingandt: Okay.

Bennison: 'Cause, the squad was pinned down this one day, and the whole platoon, the whole company, was pinned down by heavy—the Germans were counter-attacking. It was late afternoon. That was their time schedule. These were late afternoon, early evening—pfoo—stuff would come in heavy. And the entire unit—company, platoon, I'm sure the whole battalion—

[End of Interview]