

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

EDGAR LENZ

Mechanic, Wisconsin Army National Guard, World War II – Pacific Theater

1981

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Lenz, Edgar, (1921-). Oral History Interview, 2014.

Master Copy: 1 audio cassette; analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

User Copy: 1 audio cassette; analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Edgar Lenz, an Oshkosh, Wisconsin native, discusses his experience with the Wisconsin National Guard 127th Infantry Regiment, Service Company. Lenz entered service in 1938, participating overseas in the Pacific Theater during World War II, and remained in service until his retirement in 1981. In this interview Lenz discusses his reasons for joining the Guard, participating in the 1940 Wisconsin Maneuvers at Camp McCoy and his regiment's function (supply, maintenance, personnel, etc.). He comments briefly on his role as a mechanic and his training. Lenz mentions that he and his father were both in service and went overseas at the same time. Lenz and the 127th Infantry Regiment landed at Aitape (New Guinea) and Lenz discusses their role in the Buna Campaign. Lenz mentions that his unit experienced some casualties but were primarily not in combat position. Lenz was discharged in 1945 but remained with the National Guard and spends the remainder of the interview reflecting on why he chose to stay in service, what the biggest reward of service had been and his homecoming in 1944. He touches on the camaraderie of his regiment and the ways in which he has stayed involved with veterans groups. Lenz and the interviewer discuss the medals and insignia Lenz has been rewarded.

Biographical Sketch:

Edgar Lenz was born in Oshkosh, Wisconsin in 1921. He enlisted in the 127th Infantry Regiment of the Wisconsin National Guard in 1938, while still in high school. Lenz served with his regiment overseas in the Pacific Theater from 1942 until he was rotated back to the United States in late 1944. After the war Lenz chose to stay in the National Guard and served a total of thirty seven years, including active and Reserve service.

Interviewed by Thomas Doherty, 1981.

Transcribed by Joshua Goldstein, 2012.

Edited and Abstracted by Ellen Brooks, 2014.

Interview Transcript:

Doherty: Okay. I wanna get some historical background from you. How many years have you been in all together?

Lenz: I've got about thirty-seven years.

Doherty: Thirty-seven years total. How many on active duty?

Lenz: About five and half years.

Doherty: Is that all Word War Two or--?

Lenz: No, I had four years, eight months in World War Two and then I had ten months out in Fort Lewis.

Doherty: Oh that's right. Okay. What was the unit you originally joined?

Lenz: Service Company, 127th Infantry.

Doherty: Service Company?

Lenz: Mm-hm.

Doherty: Okay.

[Interruption by unidentified individual. Irrelevant content]

Doherty: Let me get that again, the original company was--

Lenz: Service Company, 127th Infantry.

Doherty: How old were you back then?

Lenz: I was supposed to be eighteen [laughs].

Doherty: You can spill the beans now.

Lenz: I was seventeen, right.

Doherty: Seventeen, okay.

Lenz: Yeah, yeah. Because it finally--before some of the records here even showed up yet that I was born a year earlier than I really was so.

Doherty: What was going on in your life that you joined the Guard? Out of school and--?

Lenz: Well, I was out of school and jobs weren't too plentiful and I had an uncle that was in the Guard and he more or less got me in I think.

Doherty: What year was it?

Lenz: November 2, 1938.

Doherty: 1938, is that right?!

Lenz: That's when I first joined. Yeah.

Doherty: You were around for the big maneuvers at McCoy the next year?

Lenz: I was in--in 1939, that summer we went to Camp Douglas and that November then we put in a week at Camp McCoy as a winter camp. That woulda been the fall of '39 and in the summer of '40 we were in on the big maneuvers up in McCoy.

Doherty: Okay, okay. And marched down Main Street in October that year?

Lenz: Oh yes.

Doherty: You went through Livingston and--

Lenz: Beuaregard, Livingston, Devans.

Doherty: Now were you Service Company when you went overseas--

Lenz: Yes.

Doherty: --or were you re-designated?

Lenz: No, we were still Service Company. I was still Service Company actually till I was discharged from the Army in 1945.

Doherty: What was the function of a Regiment Service Company?

Lenz: Service Company? They had--in Service Company they had the personnel section. They had the regimental maintenance section. They had the regimental transportation section.

Doherty: Was that you?

Lenz: I was in--no at that time I was a mechanic. And I was actually in the maintenance. They also had the supply section which furnished all the clothing, rations,

everything for the regiment. The regiment at that time consisted of—oh, it would vary from nineteen to twenty-one companies at different times, consisted of a regiment.

Doherty: And Service Company was to provide all those services?

Lenz: All the services—

Doherty: Personnel and maintenance and all that sorta—

Lenz: Except the Commo and that was it, but we supplied most of the services.

Doherty: Okay. Where did you get your training to be a mechanic at that time?

Lenz: When I first went down to Louisiana I went to three months at Fort Benning. I had been a mechanic previous to that and went down to Fort Benning Basic Mechanic course in 1941.

Doherty: Did a lotta guys go out to different schools outside of [Camp] Beauregard [LA] and Livingston, specialty type schools or did most of them get trained on the job?

Lenz: Most of 'em got trained on the job and there were some schools like in Lousi—in [Camp] Beauregard [LA] they had specialty schools going there 'cause I know I'd gone to a couple of mechanics courses down there.

Doherty: This was back when everything was really getting geared up, the Army was goin' -

Lenz: At that time all the vehicles were still under Quartermaster 'cause they are just switching from horses to [laughs] trucks really. Trucks were still Quartermaster equipment it wasn't till later on that it became ordinance equipment.

Doherty: I can't believe there is anyone still active in the State Guard who joined up in 1938, '39, '40 in that era. Do you know are you the last one of that era?

Lenz: I think I'm the last one who left with them in 1940. There was one other fella from Marinette, Frank Suwinski [?] and I believe he got discharged in December, somebody told me.

Doherty: You had mentioned that your dad had been in the Guard, was it?

Lenz: My dad had been in, yes. We went overseas together.

Doherty: You did?

Lenz: Yup. We went over to Australia together. Due to his age he was put in to what they called the Bay Section unit at that time. He stayed in Australia while I went up to New Guinea.

Doherty: Where you in the Papuan Campaign?

Lenz: Mm-hm. Yup.

Doherty: Is that where you got the Combat Infantrymen's Badge, in Papua?

Lenz: No, I believe we got the Combat Infantrymen—see at that time I don't believe they had that yet.

Doherty: Oh.

Lenz: I think we got it at Aitape in New Guinea campaign is what they called it. We made the landing at Aitape

Doherty: When did you come back from World War Two?

Lenz: I came back in October of 1944.

Doherty: Where you rotated back on points or--?

Lenz: No, it was just a rotation program and everybody was over there the same length of time so everybody had more or less you might say the same number of points there. Than the next step they went to was the number of days in forward area in the Buna campaign or Papuan campaign. There were quite a few who were tied there and then the next step they went to was the number of days in the forward area. So I had gone up on an advance to New Guinea the second time we went up there. Those four or five days put me six months ahead on a rotation.

Doherty: Tell me about the Buna campaign. What was your job and your role?

Lenz: Well, there for a while we unloaded—we picked up rations and stuff for a few days at the work there. We worked with some natives and we picked up the rations when the aircraft dropped them to us. And then sorted them out and hauled 'em, moved them up to the front. Primarily, I was involved mostly with the supply and every so often we'd get involved in—we'd get caught up in a combat situation. Primarily was involved with supply.

Doherty: I think it was late '42?

Lenz: Well yes, it was late '42. '42 and I think we came back to Australia I think around in March of '43.

Doherty: Did--well I guess you indicated, the personnel of Service company remained pretty steady throughout those three, four years overseas until rotation started up?

Lenz: Uh-huh.

Doherty: What about the Infantry companies? Was it steady there too or was there more attrition in that period?

Lenz: Well there was more attrition; they had more casualties really than Service company had. So therefore they got more replacements that way. But, um, we had quite a few casualties primarily due to Malaria and very few through wounds and stuff like that.

Doherty: You mentioned at times your company was caught up in—

Lenz: Different personnel would get caught up in different situations. But primarily our job wasn't a combat mission, you know, outside of getting stuff up there to them.

Doherty: You were assigned to regimental headquarters then you didn't have a battalion commander per se or anything like that, is that correct?

Lenz: We were assigned to a regiment.

Doherty: Okay, regimental. Who was the C.O.?

Lenz: We had—hm. We had Colonel Gross, Colonel Baurum [sp?]. Yeah, as much as I can remember.

Doherty: Let me mention some names and see if they strike a chord with you, tell me what comes to mind. Edward Harding.

Lenz: Harding was a general. He was the division commander.

Doherty: What was--did you ever see him?

Lenz: Yes, oh yes.

Doherty: Your impression of him?

Lenz: My impression of him? I was really never that close. I mean, we knew he was division commander. He'd come through on different reviews and stuff like that is probably where we'd seen him.

Doherty: Was he highly thought of or people just didn't know enough to have an opinion—

Lenz: I really couldn't say. At that time I really didn't get that close to that many of the officers you might say.

Doherty: Herbert Smith, was he--?

Lenz: Herb Smith, no Herb Smith was originally from Oshkosh but he was assigned to the 128th Infantry. And he was a battalion commander at that time. I had bumped into him when he was taken off the line at Buna there. He'd been up there, I think he told me twenty eight days, straight. Him and this colonel from Neenah, he's dead now, he used to be a Senator. This other Herbert Smith I think was from Michigan. Yeah. Him I don't know, him I never knew. Draheim was the other colonel.

Doherty: Pardon?

Lenz: Draheim was the colonel that was with the 1-2-7 that had met Colonel Herb Smith at that time.

Doherty: Oh okay. Um, other family members in the Guard? Your dad and you, was it--?

Lenz: My dad had twenty eight years when he hung her up about 1960, when he retired.

Doherty: Was he overseas then in World War One?

Lenz: World War Two, no he didn't make World War One. Herb Smith and him were sergeants together in the old B Company here in Oshkosh.

Doherty: Oh, okay.

Lenz: And he'd come in probably around, I'd say, 1921. I had a brother that was a captain in the Guard when we were out in Fort Lewis. He had about fourteen years in. And right now I got a son in here.

Doherty: You been active in any of the old timers groups?

Lenz: Mm-hm. Yeah, I'd go to the old timers when it didn't interfere with the camp and stuff, you know, 'cause usually we were up at camp about the same time. I'm still involved with the Red Arrow group here in Oshkosh.

Doherty: What about the Division Conventions?

Lenz: Division Conventions, I make 'em once in a while not too often but I don't miss too many of the old regimental conventions.

Doherty: They still have those?

Lenz: Oh yes. This year we had it up here in Stevens Point and next year it will be up in Marinette and the year after it'll be in Neenah. This 1-2-7 Convention is where this girl came from the National Guard magazine. And she wrote a very nice article on the 1-2-7.

Doherty: I heard about that but I haven't seen it.

Unidentified male: I have it.

Lenz: And she also at the time is when she interviewed Frank and myself.

Doherty: Is there a Xerox machine or something like that around?

Lenz: I don't know if you can copy it?

[Background conversation about copying article]

Lenz: This article here, she did a very good job on that.

Doherty: Yeah, I'd like to see the whole thing. I heard about it but I don't get the magazine.

[Background conversation]

Doherty: Have you had different jobs in the Guard in the time you have been in? Maintenance or always been associated with vehicles?

Lenz: Well, pretty much been associated with vehicles. There for about three years I was first sergeant.

Doherty: Most recently truck master, what is that job?

Lenz: Truck Master?

Frank: In Truck Company it is just like operations sergeant in a battalion [armored?]. Mainly the main operations--

Doherty: Calling the shots like you'll do this and you'll do that.

Frank: Right.

Doherty: Okay. I got a couple of trick questions here.

Lenz: Okay, go ahead.

Doherty: How's the Guard changed in the time?

Lenz: How's it changed?

Doherty: Yeah. What comes to mind?

Lenz: Basically I think probably the biggest change is the people in the Guard today are required to know a hell of a lot more than they were when we first came in. They've got a bigger job to do because they got more equipment to take care of. And when they have more equipment they are in turn required to have more knowledge about this equipment. And personnel-wise I am still dealing with the same people really. They've been pretty good people overall I can say, the majority of the people, I would say ninety eight percent of the people I have met our real good people.

Doherty: What's been the biggest reward for you?

Lenz: The biggest reward for me? Well, I don't know, probably being able to more or less work with younger people and gettin' along with them I would said. That was toward later on here, you know. There's quite a difference in age.

Doherty: You mean between you and the—

Lenz: Between myself and the people that are—

Doherty: You don't look it, I wouldn't have guessed you joined in '38, that's for sure.

Lenz: It's been a pretty--I can't say I can complain, I coulda done a lot worse during the war. I would probably have gotten in it anyway. I coulda wound up in a lot worse situations probably than we got into. Called up in Fort Lewis at least you were with a lotta people you knew and you knew how they could function and stuff.

Doherty: What about the drills back in '38 and '39? What would you have done on a--

Lenz: We used to drill one night a week for an hour and a half. Mainly we would go and draw your rifle, go out and do your squad formations, mostly close order drill. At the end you cleaned your rifle, put it away and that was that. You had about an hour and half every week though. We used to drill on every Tuesday night.

Doherty: What was the attraction for the guys, essentially the same stuff, was there a social life afterwards or?

Lenz: One of the attractions--I'll be perfectly honest, one of the attractions at that time was you got a buck a night.

Doherty: Regardless of rank?

Lenz: No, no when you started out you got a dollar a night as a private. And, well a buck sergeant at that time, I would say, at the most got two dollars a night.

Doherty: Any social life follow drills? The guys?

Lenz: Oh well yes, there used to be social life about the same it is now. You sometimes go and have a beer.

Doherty: At the Armory?

Lenz: Probably--no at the Armory at them days you really didn't have the beer in the Armory. You would probably go down to one of the neighboring taverns or something and have a few beers. And oh once--they would have their parties, once a year, you know. Some of 'em were Military Balls.

Doherty: When you got out in '45 you'd served your time, you'd done your job. What brought you back in?

Lenz: What [inaudible] to get back in? Okay. They were gonna to restart the Guard. And, well most of the people we had been with started coming back in. You were pretty close to them people at that time and so one guy just got the other guy in and we started the company over so we could get federal recognition. And continued on from there you might say.

Doherty: Once you got your strength you got the recognition?

Lenz: As soon as we had a certain amount of people. I forget what it was, whether it was about thirty I guess. We got federal recognition we started Service company back over again.

Doherty: Essentially the nucleus was the same guys you went off with in 1940?

Lenz: Mm-hm, the majority of 'em were, right. In fact I think everyone was.

Doherty: I don't have anything else written down here. Anything you'd like to say or any reflections you have for today?

Lenz: In that time we have seen the division go from a Square division, which used to be four infantry regiments, to a Triangular division which was three infantry regiments, then they went to Pentomic division which was five battle groups.

Doherty: Battle group was a different concept?

Lenz: It's a smaller unit than a regiment.

Doherty: These were small groups that could operate independently in case of atomic war or something?

Lenz: Supposedly could operate independently. Then they went over to the--under the division than they went to three brigades set up. See where as a regiment used to be--we had brigades at that time under the Square division you had two regiments in every brigade. When they went to Triangular they still had artillery brigades and they had an infantry brigade but they could shuffle them around, see. So then when they went to Pentomic they went with the brigade set up and at that time I'm quite sure they had three brigades. Well then the division got knocked out and then we got one brigade left is what we got, plus the other troops in the state.

Doherty: When you get together with some of the old timers at the 127th reunions and so on is there talk of a new division coming back?

Lenz: Yes there isn't hardly any convention that you go to whereby they don't really talk about possibly getting the division back or like to get it back or words to that effect.

Doherty: Okay let me get your decorations, is that a Bronze Star under your lapel?

Lenz: Yeah.

Doherty: Bronze and ARCOM?

Lenz: Mm-hm.

Doherty: Boy, and three tiers of campaign ribbons there it looks like?

Lenz: Good conduct, that's American Defense-American Theater, Pacific Theater, World War Two victory, National Defense, Ten Year Ribbon and Achievement and this is a State Ribbon, that's for ten years State, I guess, and Wright Medal.

Doherty: Pacific Theater which one is that, is that the blue one?

Lenz: Yeah, that's the one with the two stars in it, yeah.

Doherty: Where you in the Philippines too?

Lenz: No, I came home before the Philippines; I came home about thirty days before they made the Philippines.

Doherty: How did you arrive at home?

Lenz: I came back in San Francisco and we got off the ship in San Francisco on the dock and felt well we will see some USA. They marched us across the pier on to a

ferry boat and took us up the river a hundred miles to Camp Stoneman, California [laughs].

Doherty: They heard about you guys in San Francisco.

Lenz: [laughing] I don't know. When we got up to Camp Stoneman I guess about ten, eleven o'clock at night, they made us dump our barracks bag outs right on the street before they even let us in the building.

Doherty: What were they looking for?

Lenz: Shook us down. I suppose rifles and pistols and stuff and like that, photographs, even at that time you had to have your photographs censored. So they went through and they picked out what they pretty much didn't want you to have I guess, and well then they assigned me to a barracks. We were about three, four days there in Stoneman processing and then they shipped us up to Fort Sheridan and we got a thirty day delay in route before we got assigned to our next station.

Doherty: Which was thirty days at home?

Lenz: Yeah. We had thirty days, in other words, to get home stay at home and get to your next station, which was we got assigned down to Hot Springs, Arkansas for reprocessing and reassignment.

Doherty: There were several of you from the company that came back together or?

Lenz: There was myself—yes, there was three or four of us due to the fact that I was supposed to be on the June quota. There'd be two men a month that would leave the company. I was supposed to be on June quota. Well we never left there until August. We never left Aitape till August. We laid down in Milan Bay waiting for a ship to come in to take us home by that time another couple of months quotas had come, see. So therefore there were four or five of us plus there were a lot of guys from the regiment.

Doherty: What about your dad was he still overseas?

Lenz: No, he had come home already, previous to this due to the fact he was over thirty-eight and at that time they came out with a rule or regulation that if you were over thirty-eight you could come home. So he elected that. He came home about, I'd guess, November of '43 or something like that, about a year before I did.

Doherty: So four or five of you hit Oshkosh at the same time?

Lenz: Mm-hm.

Doherty: Arrive by train?

Lenz: Yeah, from Fort Sheridan.

Doherty: Did anyone know you were comin'?

Lenz: Oh yeah we called our folks and stuff, actually as soon as we could get to a phone in the States. We called to let them know we were in the States and when we left Fort Sheridan—or while we were at Sheridan I guess we called home and figured told them just about when we would be getting home.

Doherty: Nice celebration when you got back?

Lenz: Oh yeah. As much as you could celebrate at that time. We had a pretty good furlough I guess.

Doherty: Any recognition from the town and kind of a--?

Lenz: No because you had a few of them just drifting back at a time see. No there was no recognition than and actually--

Doherty: When you got back--excuse me--when you got back did people know where you'd been? Was the town was aware?

Lenz: Yeah, they knew about it because all the people that you knew knew where you had been. The town itself knew because they were aware where two units had gone that left Oshkosh here. Three units really, there was a band with us too.

Doherty: It was service company?

Lenz: H Company and the band.

Doherty: H Company is the 127th Infantry Company?

Lenz: And the band from the 127th, each regiment used to have their own band at that time.

Doherty: Okay, well I'll let you get back to your business. Thanks very much for your time.

Lenz: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]