

Robert J. Flanagan, Narrator

Interviewer Bonnie Ziff

This interview is part of a joint project of the Library of Congress, the US Coast Guard Auxiliary (First Southern Region), and Shaker High School, Latham, New York

BZ: Today is Thursday, October 17, 2002. This is the beginning of an interview with Robert J. Flanagan at the YJCC (Jewish Community Center) in Washington Township, New Jersey. Bob is 82 years old, having been born on November 28, 1920. My name is Bonnie Ziff, I am with the Coast Guard Auxiliary, and I'll be the interviewer. Bob, could you state what war and branch of service you served in?

RF: World War Two, I was an Artilleryman in the 79th Infantry Division. I was drafted. Let me put it this way: I was married in April of 1942 and drafted in October of 1942. I was living in New York City and working at a defense plant, Western Electric, in New Jersey. They were making things that assisted in the war as far as that was concerned. I didn't do anything substantial, but I did my part. I knew I was going and I wanted to go but I wanted to get married as well. So I did and my wife was pregnant, had a child, and by the time I came home, my daughter was two and a half years old. I'd seen her twice.

I was born in New York. My father was a veteran of World War One. He was a fireman in NY and he was killed on the job when I was eight months old and my brother was a year and a half old. My mother never married again. She brought us up living with my grandmother and some aunts, brought up with all women and they were wonderful to me. I had a good life. I never went any further than high school because I wanted to go to work and help my mother out. She was a matron and the firemen paid her; she wasn't paid by the city, she was paid by the firemen themselves. They would chip in fifty cents a week or a day or something and she would go to other jobs after that. She was a great lady and we had a good childhood; I have nothing but good recollections as far as my youth is concerned. When I went into the service, I was activated in October or November. They gave me a week or two to get squared away. I went to Fort Dix. From Fort Dix I went on a train to Camp Blanding, Florida in Saint Augustine and I was connected with the 79th Infantry Division at that particular time, took my basic training there and they put me in communications. I was a radio operator which in artillery is very important because you have to be in touch with your forward observers to bring in artillery fire before the infantry jumps off; if you see any buildup of troops anywhere. That was my training in radio and I continued that all the way through. I was a supply sergeant for a while just before we shipped overseas but I went back [to radio]. I

preferred it because it was closer to the front lines; many times we were flanking the lines. The colonel of my battalion was Colonel Safford and he was a West Point man, real army. He was a great commander. He was wounded when his command car went into a town before it was cleared by the Infantry and it blew up. One of the wiremen was killed and the radio operator was killed and the driver was stone deaf and never came back again. And he left because he was sitting in the front seat and when they hit the mine, the back portion blew up and he was gone for a couple of months and came back to the outfit again. And up we went again. [laughs]

BZ: Did you meet him in training?

RF: No. I never met him until was in Headquarters Battery in 310th Battalion and the others were gun batteries. I had a Captain Thomas who was very good to me and a few other lieutenants but I never met the colonel until we went overseas.

BZ: Were you surprised when you were drafted?

RF: No, I was ready for it. I would have enlisted. My wife and family didn't want me to go. My brother was drafted into the Navy but he had bad ulcers and they released him after two or three months. I wanted to go in the Army and I knew what was coming.

BZ: How did your wife do?

RF: She did very well. I had an apartment in Inwood, NY. I asked her parents, who lived in an apartment, to move to a larger apartment. She had her own space and stayed there until I came back. I came home in the beginning of October 1945 right after the war. I was released early because I was a high-point man. You picked up points according to whether you're married, whether you have children, your time overseas, any medals you received, they gave you points. We were in Czechoslovakia at the time, after the war. As soon as they dropped the bomb in Japan, they didn't break up the outfit, but they took out the high-point men. Moved them into the 90th Division and that's who I came home with. Shipped to Marseill and then home on a South American boat, the [S.S.] *Cristobal*. The reason I can remember the name is that the ship docked at the pier in NY constantly after the war for years and years. It's not a big boat but I remember it very well.

BZ: What was basic training like?

RF: It wasn't too bad if you were in shape. We had some older people that they had drafted as well. Many of them were released before they went overseas.

BZ: How old were they?

RF: Well, I think early forties, thirty-eight, I was twenty-one so I think I was in a little better shape. [laughs] It wasn't tough for me at all. I think the toughest part for me was the 50-mile forced march.

BZ: What did you think of your officers?

RF: They knew what they were doing. The captain of my battery—I didn't particularly care for the first one—but he was moved to a gun battery and thereafter, I had great officers. Some of them were what they called in those days "90-day wonders." They went to officer's training school for 90 days and then they became officers. I had great relationships with the officers.

BZ: Where did you go from Florida?

RF: From Florida we went to the hills of Tennessee where it was warm in the day and it was all mud. In the evening the ground would freeze and your nostrils would freeze it was so cold. Having grown up in the North I never realized how it was in the South about the bigotry. Blacks having to ride in the back of the bus, couldn't go into restaurants and things like that. When I went to Tennessee it opened my eyes. When we were in the hills of Tennessee, they would feed you and you would have a mess kit and when you were finished with everything you would put everything in a big barrel. You called it a "slop barrel." There would be eight, nine, ten children with their feet wrapped in rags and a young mother, about 16 years old, with hardly any clothes. They'd come and take the slop barrel. You weren't allowed to feed anyone but they'd come and take the slop barrel. I couldn't believe that in the United States we had such poverty. That really opened my eyes. You have to experience it to know it.

Then from Tennessee they put us on a train and sent us to the Mojave Desert, Arizona so we all assumed that we were going to the Pacific which made sense because we'd be in 110-120 degree heat. We were there a good six months. When we first got there we couldn't start until the sun went down. We'd get up very early in the morning and people were dropping like flies because of the heat after coming from the weather in Tennessee in the high hills. We'd work early in the morning, until maybe 10 o'clock, and then be off for the rest of the day until the sun went down in order to get things done. We were constantly out in the desert, there was really no camp. We built our own camp, I think they called our camp "Camp Laguna" or something like that. [Camp Laguna Desert Training Center—California-Arizona Maneuver Area] We were out all the time, coordinating with the Infantry, setting that up. I was taking radio courses. Then all of a sudden, we thought we were going to the Pacific, they put us on a train and we ended up in Kansas. I think the snow was about 10 feet deep. [laughs] They changed our orders;

obviously they were getting ready for the invasion. So we spent some time at Fort Riley, I think it was, in Kansas. They had winter maneuvers which were pretty cold, let me tell you. And then we thought "Well, this is it" and sure enough we ended up in Taunton, Massachusetts, right outside of Boston. It was a POE (Port of Embarkation). We had a few days and I went over the hill to Providence, got on a train, there were about five of us that came from New York, and we got out at Penn Station, maybe it was Grand Central, and took a cab. Broke down on the West Side Highway and had to hitch-hike up to 184th Street. I got home, saw my wife and child. She came down to the station with me at 2 o'clock in the morning to say good-bye.

BZ: Was it a surprise?

RF: Completely. I wasn't in touch with them. It was a teary good-bye. When I got back, the outfit had been alerted, we were ready to go. I was doing supply sergeant work at that time so nothing happened. I think there were only two of us that got back. The others were AWOL (Absent without Leave). I met one of them in Paris a long time after that, they had put him in an infantry outfit. [Interview interrupted] The ones that came down on the train, we actually left without any passes or anything. It was just to get home. We knew we were leaving in a day or two, we didn't realize it was going to be that next morning and they never got back. I met one of them in Paris after the war and he got through it as well, so that worked out.

The next morning we went onboard ship. I think it was a 15 or 16 day trip because we were on the tenth largest ship in the world, a British ship. When they have a convoy, they take the largest ship which usually is the fastest ship, and put them last in the convoy. We were last in the convoy and we kept having attacks and we couldn't maneuver the way we should have so we broke off and went by ourselves and the convoy went on. We landed in Scotland. It was a British ship and the food was terrible. I had chocolate bars all the way over, we did a lot of boxing and things like that onboard ship, tournaments and weight classes, which was good. The food was terrible and I couldn't sleep down in the hold at all. They had piled up life jackets and I found a spot in there, I used to sleep there every night. We made it and got off in Scotland. By the way, that ship was sunk going into the Mediterranean right after we got off. It must have been going to make a pickup somewhere. I can't remember the name of it. I think it was the tenth largest ship at that time. We landed in Scotland and got on the little trains and they took us to northern England around Wigan where we spent a little time. Some of the fellows were foolish enough to buy bikes and things like that, but in no time at all we were alerted, down south, and ready for the invasion.

BZ: Where down south?

RF: I don't know exactly. We were out in the hills. They let us into town once but it didn't work out. There were some fights.

BZ: How far ahead did they let you know about the invasion?

RF: They don't tell you anything, you just know. We were there for that reason. They don't call you together and tell you we're going in for the invasion. You just pack up, we're leaving, get in the trucks. We had a lot of vehicles and you ride on down south and they put you in a certain area of the hills and you bivouac there and wait until your turn comes and you go. They gave passes one time and it was a problem because the soldiers that were stationed there permanently got in trouble with some of the fellows we had. We went off one night and I think it was on D plus 7. My outfit didn't go in on the [June 6] invasion. We went in and that was the start of it, we just kept going.

BZ: Did you get to the beach by boat?

RF: No, we went by landing craft to Utah Beach. It wasn't too bad because the troops were somewhat inside. We went immediately into action. We cut across the Cherbourg Peninsula and we cut off the troops that were in Cherbourg, anything that was west of there, and then we worked our way into Cherbourg, and we took Cherbourg. Then turned around and went back to the southern part of the peninsula—it's all on the maps that I brought with me. We went in and fought there until the breakthrough came and then we took off. I was in the First Army when we went over there but when the breakthrough came we ended up with the Third Army because they let [General George S.] Patton in with his tanks. It became really mechanized then and we took off. We went until we ran out of gas in Belgium and we swung around [breaks off]

BZ: Sounds [breaks off]

RF: I'll tell you why: you don't know where you are half the time. In rear echelon they get a chance to know where they are because they go into a certain town, here you were working through places, you didn't even know where you were, you had no idea. I'm sure the officers knew but when we worked on plans it was all local areas. We would have to give coordinates when we were directing fire, they would take the coordinates and fire on it and the forward observers, who would be watching, would say, "It's 200 over, 200 left." That would go back to the batteries—this was all radio communication, wire communication. You had to run a lot of wire because sometimes the radios couldn't work if you were on the other side of a hill, things like that. So you'd wire to the radio and the radios go back to the 105mm and they were quite far back. If you said it was 200 over, 200 left, they would come down 200 yards and go and go back right 200 and then

fire again. If it was on target they would say “fire for effect” and they would walk them in.

BZ: What was your gear like? What would you carry?

RF: Practically nothing. I got to a point where I carried nothing. All I had was a cup that’s on your belt. When we got back to the headquarters area, you were lucky if they were still feeding and they’d put potatoes or whatever they had in and if they had dessert, you’d go back with the same cup and that’s the way it was.

BZ: Where were you sleeping?

RF: On the ground. There were no quarters. Later on when we got into Germany, we took over some homes. The German people were very good to us. Once in a while they’d bring you in and you’d sleep in a bed but you weren’t supposed to. You know I never thought of it. When I left the service I put everything behind me. I did the same with my son. I had a son who left college and joined up for Vietnam. He was hit twice, got two Bronze Stars, got the Vietnamese Medal, called me up and said, “Dad, I’ve been hit again, every time I try to take a leave I get hit.” I said “I’ll meet you in Hawaii” and my wife and I went to Hawaii and met him. I wanted to get him off line; he made it, he was very successful in life. He’s died now. My wife is gone now for almost 16 years so I’ve been alone. I had three children: my oldest was the girl I had while I was in service, I had two boys after I came back. They’re all retired now, all doing very well. I have eight grandchildren and four great-grandchildren with one due November 2 and another one due next May. So I’ll have six great-grandchildren if I can make it that long. [laughs]

BZ: [Asks about luck.]

JF: Luck. Most of the time when you’re forward observing, you’re flanking the line because you want to be able to see what’s going on, you’re not on the field of battle. You just want to see where they are so you can direct fire. And then you have high places that you have to attain, then they counterattack and things like that. It’s hard to explain on the soldier’s level, not on an officer’s level. You don’t see the things they see; it goes on, you do what you’re told. You had people that broke down, couldn’t make it, that fell apart. When the colonel came back we went forward and we had a problem and he was a wireman. When the shells come in they can break the wires and then you can’t communicate with the rear.

BZ: [Asks about R&R]

JF: We were 127 days of constant battle until we got to Paris. We were supposed to take Paris but they changed our orders and the 4th Division took Paris and they assigned our infantry division to go over the Seine River, to be the first one over. They called it a [stub]. We went over and held and there were a lot of air raids because the German planes weren't too far from us. We held a position over the Seine so we had a jump-off point and then the 4th Division went into Paris and in a week or so, we broke out and started again. That was the entre, crossing the Seine. We were the first to cross the Seine and the first to the Rhine in Alsace-Lorraine. We crossed the Rhine way up with the Ninth Army, after leaving the Seventh Army. We went from one place to another, it was amazing. We fought through the Huertgen Forest.

BZ: [Asks about weapons]

JF: I had a carbine. When the colonel came back, we were taking a high position, I think it was in Alsace Lorraine around Ruetlingen and that's basically where we were when the German breakthrough came. The German breakthrough was much further to the east but this was the Rhine River way over by Strasbourg, in the western portion of Germany around Luneville. That was the area where it would be French, and then it would be taken over by the Germans, there was a real mixture of people in Alsace Lorraine. The people were very nice to us. I think they had a diversionary attack over here when they broke through and they figured if they broke through here, it would also cut off, and they would meet eventually, the Germans this is. There was high ground to be taken and we were days there, as far as that was concerned. The colonel was back and we had the command car there and the wireman had to run wire because we couldn't get communications back to the guns, the howitzers, and we were a few days in there. That was just before we went on a break. We were supposed to go on a break and they attacked. I think the 1st Division was supposed to take over, started to take over, then we had to turn around and come back. We were all pretty well exhausted after that. I think that's when the colonel put me in for the Bronze Star because I was on the radio constantly for days. We'd take it and then they'd take it back, it was just one of those things.

BZ: Did you get a break? Where did you go?

JF: Yes, we got a break after that. I went nowhere. I was really shook by then. I just took it easy and got myself back in shape again. After that we went around for the breakthrough with the Ninth Army. We were way up on the north end of the Rhine.

BZ: You said the Germans people were very nice, do you have any special [breaks off]

JF: There in Alsace Lorraine because basically, they were French. They were very nice to me, we gave them food and things like that. We met the Seventh Army coming up from Italy and we ended up with them, stayed with them. But the people are people just like anyone else. Some spoke English, some French. The ones that could communicate best were the Jewish people because [their language] is very much like German. I spoke a little bit of German, a little bit of French, mix it in and sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

BZ: [Asks about religious support.]

JF: I'm a Catholic and we had a priest come up all the time. I'm sure there were other services. They would let you know there were services and he would set it up on the hood of a Jeep or something like that, give you communion if you wanted it. Not often.

BZ: Once a week?

JF: There was no such thing as once a week, it didn't work that way. When there was a break and an opportunity to come up, they would.

BZ: Did you see a USO group?

JF: I never saw one.

BZ: Did you ever encounter any camps?

JF: The camps that we had were work camps. When we went around to the Ninth Army, that was in the Ruhr section, Essen, this is where all the industrial parts were. When we came over the Rhine River we didn't have one casualty because there was hardly anything left, they were completely beat. We went from town to town and when we got to the big cities it was unbelievable. It was like Nagasaki, razed, completely razed. It was from our bombings, it was the industrial center, that's where they made everything, and what we found there were forced workers, and they were working at a concentration camp. My God, they were like sticks, I don't know how they could do any work. They were Polish and Czech and all different denominations. I didn't see any of the other camps that you were talking about.

BZ: Were you liberating the work camps?

RF: Sure, they had no place to go, they had nothing. When you get a chance to look at the devastation, you'd say, "Look at that we've done, look at the devastation, how can they live like this?" And look at this now, we're right back to where we started, there's no end to it. They would kiss your hands and things like that.

After that they sent us to Czechoslovakia and we had a break there, like a rest camp, where there were horses and it was really nice. We took a group into Paris. At one of the *folies berger* I had a caricature done of me. We took them in on trucks, so that was basically the only place we had and that was the end of it, while we were there. Our division was monitoring and taking care of German prisoners of war. They had a whole bunch, maybe 40,000 or something like. Little by little they let them go. Then they dropped the bomb, the war ended. By then were able to get the army newspaper. When you're on line you don't get any of that stuff so I very seldom saw any of that. Shortly after that I was pulled out and went with the 90th Division to Marseilles, shipped on board the *Cristobal* and came on home. [laughs] Where was I? I was in the Northern Ruhr section, we were monitoring, the 79th Division was in charge of that whole area. It was all over then. On VJ (Victory in Japan) Day I was in Czechoslovakia and I got home shortly after that but I didn't get any big parade. I came into Fort Patrick Henry in Virginia with a bunch of German prisoners that we had over here. It was a monstrous place. I was discharged in no time at all, came up to Fort Dix and got my discharge, took a subway up to New York by myself with my pack over my back, duffle bag over my back.

BZ: Did your wife know?

JF: No, she didn't know. I rang the doorbell. You know, it's a sad thing. You're away for years and some people had been away for a lot longer than me, and I have no complaints because I had never really been wounded. I was very fortunate. It's like starting all over, we were strangers even though we communicated. There were times overseas when I couldn't communicate for a long time and then I'd get my letters all at once. It was like we were complete strangers and my daughter knew me only because my wife kept showing her pictures. So we built a life and in 1947 I bought a house in Dumont. Found a house, there weren't any houses being built. They hadn't even started building. Stayed there for six years and my brother was getting married so he came in with me and bought a two-family house, brand new, ten rooms. After six years we parted and I bought again and brought my family up here. That's the way it went. It was a great experience.

BZ: Did you believe it was the war to end all wars?

RF: I did. That's what they claimed at the time and six or seven years later we're back in Korea, it's ridiculous.

BZ: Did you go back to school on the GI Bill?

RF: I went right to work, I really should have. What I used it for was the house, 4% interest. [laughs] It's close to today's rate!

BZ: Did you have money saved up from your service?

RF: I did.

BZ: What were your wages like?

RF: The wages were very low but everything is relative, the wages were very low in those days. I sent all my army wages home to my wife, I took nothing. You didn't need anything, there wasn't a need for any money. I gambled a little onboard ship coming over, made a few bucks and sent it home. [laughs]

BZ: How were you involved with the German prisoners of war?

RF: I wasn't, I had nothing to do with that. I think that was basically the Infantry. I was really in a rest camp. It was really beautiful place along the river, with horses; they made ice cream there. They would send four or five from my outfit into this rest camp for a few days and then they'd go back again. I stayed there for some time and got the trip into Paris. It gave me a chance to get back on my feet again. You live from day to day, you never know what's going to happen, you sleep wherever you can. Some time you get into a barn. One time we were laid out along a railroad and we heard some noises and there were five Germans trying to get back through our lines again. And they had more food than we did. They had eggs and everything else. [laughs] They were ready to surrender. After a time there were no lines because you went so fast, you were bypassing everything, you didn't know where you were, you had to be careful all the time.

BZ: Have you ever gone back?

RF: No, never went back and never thought about it again either until you people brought it up with me.

BZ: What did you do after the war?

RF: I went back to work at Western Electric. I was in NY at the time. The department offered me a job up in New England or down in Virginia, and they closed that place when I left there. The next day I got a job at Curtiss-Wright because the war had started in Korea. I went on in the propeller division out in West Caldwell [NJ] and worked out there for five or six years. I went selling and I was very successful in selling. I got involved with an outfit in Newark and they hired me as their purchasing agent and that's what I did for 32 years, group purchasing. We have group purchasing now where the towns get together and they purchase their fuel oil and things like that. We started group purchasing here in Jersey; they have it in New York and all over the country. It's only on a non-profit basis, it's very successful. You name it, we bought it.

BZ: Did you keep in touch with anyone?

RF: No. I had one master sergeant, I was doing a job in Egg Harbor, and I called the priest down there and asked if he knew a guy named George Sartorio, he was the sergeant major of my outfit in the war. He said he was sitting right next to him! [laughs] I spoke to him and I used to go down to the Cape and to Wildwood Crest and I always said I'd stop in, but I never did. I spoke to him on the phone.

BZ: What was your final rank?

RF: T4 Technical Sergeant, what they call a Technician Fourth Grade. I wanted no more, I wasn't looking for anything as far as that was concerned.

BZ: [Asks if RF joined any veterans group or knew any veterans.]

RF: No, I'm not a joiner. My son is a veteran. At my age group, you're bound to know veterans, most everyone was in. My old friends from New York, we have reunions every year. Not from school, they come from neighborhoods because for a nickel you could go to any high school in New York. They were all veterans, we met after the war and we were all friendly but everyone went their own way. I think I was the first to buy a house in New York.

BZ: What did you pay for your house?

RF: It was 10 rooms, a brand new house, \$16,000 at 4% interest in 1947.

BZ: How did the war affect you and your view toward the world and life?

RF: The world today's very disappointing. You asked me if I thought it was the war to end all wars and I did at the time. That's the type of person I am, we'll go in and get this over and everything'll be fine. Just doesn't work that way. We've moved ahead so far, the world is so small now. It's not like it was in those days. A few years after that we had the Korean thing. They didn't call it a war and yet it we such numbers of people killed in a short period of time with the cold, and amputations, it was horrible, terrible. My son went in and I didn't think my wife would make it. My other son wanted to go in and I wouldn't let him to go in. I got him in the National Guard; he spent six years in the NG, he had his duty but I didn't want two sons overseas at the same time. It's very disconcerting to have gone through it and then see what's happening today. Life just doesn't mean anything when people can go in and put bombs on themselves and blow themselves up. There's something wrong. It doesn't make sense to me.

BZ: Tell us about your medals.

RF: [Shows Bronze Star] This is the Bronze Star that I'm very proud of. My son has gotten two of them in the Vietnam War, he's quite a hero. [Turns medal over to read back.] Some are for bravery and some are for meritorious service. Either way, it's for exceptional work. I received this is Alsace-Lorraine, I think, in the battle that we kept going back and forth. I was constantly on the radio for days.

This is the European-African-Middle Eastern-Campaign Medal that they handed out. This is the World War Two Medal. This is the American Campaign Medal. This is the Meritorious Service Award; this is an award from NY State that they gave the veterans; NJ has the same thing, my son got in NJ.

This is the Presidential Unit Citation for my unit for the work that we did in Alsace-Lorraine.

This is the Cross of Lorraine and I'm very proud of it. On May 9, victory in Europe, the 79th Division was engaged in the Industrial Ruhr Valley. We packed up after that and left for Czechoslovakia and left that's the end of the story. At this time, I thought we were going to Paris, we were invasion troops.

[Shows photo of self as Corporal.] This Cross of Lorraine is in the States shortly after of Lorraine and this is the insignia of the 79th Infantry Division. These two were taken in Paris after the war, we came in from Czechoslovakia folies bergere. I went to the folies berger and then home to my wife, and this was taken after the war myself. That's about it.