

**Melvin C. Brenner
Veteran**

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Q: Would you tell us your full name and place of birth, please?

MB: Melvin Charles Brenner. I was born in the Bronx, New York on August 26, 1925.

Q: What was your educational experience prior to World War II?

MB: Prior to the war, I was graduated from high school.

Q: What year did you graduate?

MB: June of '43

Q: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

MB: I enlisted.

Q: Why did you select the army?

MB: You may be aware of there was something called ASTP, {Yes.} Army Specialized Training Program. You took a test while you were a senior in high school, and I took that test. And you could have selected the Army or the Navy, I'm not sure why I selected the army. It would've been much wiser if I'd selected the Navy, as it turned out.

Q: Okay. Why don't you start with your basic training and where you went and what kind of training you had?

MB: Alright, the first thing was the ASTP... You went to school. I joined before I was eighteen. You were in Army Specialized training reserved. We went to Syracuse University for three months, but there was no room for us at Syracuse, so they sent us to Albany, New York. And they took over a theology seminary. And I spent three months there in school more or less studying pre-engineering. And at the end of that time, we were supposed to go to basic training. At the end of basic training, we were going to go back to college. So, when ASTP term was over, they shipped us all to Fort Benning, Georgia for... at the infantry school in the Sandhills area, as I remember, where we took infantry basic training. When I got there... I have very small feet, because I'm a small person. And they didn't have any shoes for me. I wore a five and half triple E army boot, and they didn't have such a thing. So, for the first six or seven weeks, I wore my own shoes. About the tenth... eleventh, I don't know some time in there at least, they dumped at least five pairs of shoes on me. At the end of basic training, we were supposed to go either the Brooklyn College or NYU. The orders had been cut, but in the tenth week, they ended the AST program almost completely and we were told we were going to be

reassigned. So, we got on a train and they took us some place and they put us in a room, not dissimilar to this, with a bunch of guys sitting at a desk. They said, "Okay soldier, what do you wanna do?" I was a bit of an idiot and I said, "Oh, I'd like to get into the glider troops." And the guy looked at me like I was crazy. And he said, "No you don't understand. You're in the 87th division and you can have a rifle company or a machine gun company. I said, "Well, that's one hell of a reassignment, but okay, I'll take a rifle company because machine guns are heavier. So, I got put into a rifle company and the first thing they did was to give me the BAR. You remember a rifle is about ten pounds BAR is twenty-one pounds. When I carried it and it rained, you had to turn it upside down because it had a large muzzle. So, if I turned it upside down, it'd drag on the ground, because it was too long. So, I tried like hell to get rid of it, but I couldn't get rid of it. We were out at the range firing and I was trying not to do too well. And they came over... They had a regimental list. I was third in the regiment, trying to do lousy. So, I decided the last 100 points I wouldn't hit the target at all. So, I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger, and my Sergeant's standing right there and he says, "Brenner, you'll never get rid of the BAR like that." And I didn't. What happened was, they finally made me assistant squad leader... Buck Sergeant. So, I didn't have to carry the BAR anymore. And while we had the BAR, the bores were pitted. So, they used to make us go into the orderly room at night with steel wool and wire brushes and try to get the pits out of the bore, which of course can't be done. Once the holes are in the bore, you have to widen the bore and you just can't do it. Okay, so I was in the 87th division and eventually became Buck Sergeant, assistant squad leader. We had infantry basic all over again. We had a captain who we all hated, because he put us through bayonet drills on a regular basis, and it was a bitch. We were in Georgia. It was hot as hell, and we were doing bayonet drills running at these throw cover things sticking bayonets in it. Guys fell out all over the place. I never fell. I never fell out of anything. Eventually, we went overseas in October of '43 and we went to England... We went on the Queen Elizabeth, a great big ship with thousands and thousands of troops. I was in a room for two with eleven other guys. I got seasick. Every day they had muster and you were supposed to get up out of your bunk and get on deck for muster and I just wouldn't go one day. I was just so sick. So, Colonel Moran, who was the battalion commander had to go through everything and see that everybody got out and I would get out. So, he looked at me and said, "Oh fuck you! Lay there and die!" That's what happened. Anyhow, we got to Scotland and we spent... Granite, Scotland. And from there we went to Leek, England where we stayed for about five weeks. We did some training there. Then we went I guess to South Hampton, and we crossed the channel, landed at Le Harve (France). You know months after D-Day, but Le Harve was a mess. We could see all the damage that had been done. We had camped out in an apple orchard for a while. And then... The first action we saw was in Metz. I don't remember exactly how we got there, by train or by truck, but we were in Metz a week or two before Metz fell. And we were in... My division, my company was in on the taking of the last... There was a Fort Duran, and I was in that fort and the Germans surrendered. That was the end of that. Then we were taken someplace in the Sar Valley. And we spent a few weeks in the Sar Valley in battle, in combat. The very first thing that happened to me... You know there is a sort of line. And you're on this side of the line and you're not in combat and on this side of the line you are in combat. As I stepped over that line, it was an eighty-eighty up on the... tanks with the eighty-eighty. They were firing at us and a shell hit near me, blew me up into the air, and I came down

and I wasn't hurt, which was just incredible. One of our sergeants, who I disliked intensely... Because he... Not in my platoon... He was in another platoon, but he was a bastard. He decided... You know in the fields in France there were crosses all over the place. I never found out why they were put exactly where they were but they were there. So, he decided that he was going to take refuge behind a cross and we told him, "Don't do it. They probably have it zeroed in and it's a bad place to be." And I'll never forget, he said, "Oh they can't kill me." So, he got down by the cross and boom, a shell came the cross and he was gone. From there, the Bulge began, and we were in Sar Valley. General Patton said he would bring up three divisions into the Bulge. They put us on these trucks, a whole platoon, on one of these enormous trucks. It was rainy and cold. It was absolutely miserable. They drove us up into, I guess it was Belgium. They dumped us off the trucks and they said, "Dig in here." Well, the ground was like rock. It was frozen. You couldn't dig in. So, I spent the next... Well till the Bulge was over. I went all through the Bulge. I was outside of Bastogne (Belgium). I was in St. Vith (Belgium), Houffalize (Belgium), and all these places, went on patrol... Of course, our idiot captain wanted us to go up to a cannon and put a phosphorus grenade in this cannon. We had on these white suits and I... one of us... carrying a phosphorus grenade to put into this cannon so you wouldn't be able to use it. And we knew it was crazy, and it couldn't be done. So anyhow, we went out and we're crawling up this snow-covered hill, and the Germans were in some bushes. And they began to fire ball ammunition high and tracer ammunition low. Is that right? No, tracer ammunition high and ball ammunition low, so you would think, that you could sort of be up, but we knew better. So, I was buried in the snow and all of a sudden... woo (cooing sound)... and a bullet put a crease right in my helmet, so we turned around and went back and gave the good captain his phosphorus grenade. Fortunately, no one was hurt doing that.

Q: How well were you equipped for when you were fighting?

MB: Pretty good. Pretty good. I know I've read a lot of stuff about guys who were just not... you know... didn't have any equipment. We were pretty well equipped.

Q: Did you have the combat boots?

MB: Yeah. {Because some others told me they just had the *ballcots 10.48*-inaudible-} No, we had combat boots by that time. We started with shoe packs...

Q: Where you wearing an overcoat?

MB: Yeah, had an overcoat.

Q: You had a white cover?

MB: Well, when we would go out in the snow like that on a patrol or something, we had these white... looked like Klu Klux Klan guys... You know to blend in with the snow.

Q: Yeah, because some of the other units we talked about, they said the Germans did but they didn't.

MB: Yeah, we had them. We did. I saw the Germans with them. But we didn't do them all the time, but when we went on patrol or something like that, that's when you put the capes on. So anyhow, I spent all that time during the Bulge... We lost a lot of guys. I was a staff sergeant by then, I was a squad leader. Colton, this fellow Colton, had been our

platoon sergeant. And Captain Dool one day... a few days into the Bulge said to John, "My back hurts, I can't go on." So, John and I carried him out of the forest, and we never saw him again. I think my respect for him went even lower than ever will be before. John saw him later on... John was wounded... He saw him later standing at a bar perfectly okay. Anyhow... So, we went to the Bulge and the worst... the weather was unbelievable, as you know. And we had sleeping bags, mummy sleeping bags. When you put them down... You tried to dig a slit trench, push the snow away, try to do the slit trench, and you put your sleeping bag in the slit trench, and your body warmth would cause some of the land to melt. But then it got colder and it would freeze, so when you got up in the morning, and you tried to get your sleeping bag out of the place, you couldn't get it out. You need your trench knife to cut your sleeping bag out of the thing. Anyhow, we went from there into the Siegfried Line, and we had a couple of terrible days. The fourth platoon, one night, the fourth platoon, the third platoon were decimated. We had an infantry tank attack. The Germans could always hear the tanks and they knew... so if they zeroed in on the tanks and they missed, they hit the infantry. And this time the fourth platoon got decimated. Our cooks... The cooks were really good guys. And when they could, they would bring hot food up to the front. They had these thermos cans like, and every once in a while they would be able to do that. And this particular night... (emotional moment) So many guys had been lost during that day, that there was so much food... I mean you could've had seconds and thirds because we had lost all these guys. I decided that I was gonna go home, that I had enough (emotional). I sat down next to a tree, and I said I'm going to get transferred and they're gonna have to send me home. So, I took off my boots; I took off my socks and I let my feet out and I got cold. It was just awful. I rubbed my feet, put my shoes and socks back on and said I can't do this, you know, I'm going to stay here as long as I stay here. I think one of the most difficult things to do... because when you're a squad leader, you're really the only guy that says to somebody, "You go do that." Everybody else has numbers, 87th division, you know, 2nd platoon, 1st squad. But it only comes down to you, the squad leaders say you go and do that there, do this. And so sometimes when you did that, guys didn't come back or guys would come back wounded. And I think of all the things that I went through and did, that's the most difficult to think about and to remember. Anyhow, we walked across Germany, took thousands of prisoners, maybe not thousands but many. We crossed the Rhine. We had a new lieutenant. Colten got hurt in Koblenz. Colten got shot in the leg in Koblenz. And we got a new lieutenant, his name was Lieutenant Paton. And you may remember, they called General Paton, Blood and Guts. So, we used to call him Piss and Shit, which was unfair, because he was really nice... turned out to be a nice guy. But how could you not? You know. He had no combat experience. He was a six-day wonder. The night we crossed the Rhine... During the afternoon, they took the non-coms, and they took us... we had... about ten miles back from the river, and they took the non-coms to show us where we would have to cross that night. When I saw that, I thought "I don't want to do this." Not a thing to do. So anyhow, we went back and that night we had a walk. They had driven us in the daytime, but at night we had to walk up there. And the engineers had set small boats on the edge of the river so we could get in the boats and paddle across. In my boat, I was on the upper left and the lieutenant was back here on the right, there were ten of us in the boat. And we start to paddle and I could see that we were going down the river, and I turned around and the Lieutenant Patton sitting there not moving. And I said, "Fuck it lieutenant! Row the boat!" "Oh!"

(makes rapid paddling motion) and off we went. And so we got to the other side. And then he says to me, "Alright Brenner, take your squad down the road and check it out." So, that's what I did. And as I did... The Germans... The other side of the Rhine is vineyards. They go straight up, sort of, and they have these vineyards. And I was the leader. So, I'm going down the road and the Germans were dug in every fifteen to twenty feet, and I come up to the hole. I had a machine pistol at the time. And I'd come up to the hole, "Com'n ze out wid de hand on de cop." And they would surrender. As we got to the town, a... obvious an SS guy, was coming out to inspect the guard. So, I drop down on my knee behind a tree and I pointed... he didn't see me... and I pointed the thing... he was quite a distance away... and I yelled at him, Com'n ze hand wid wid de hand on de cop." And he wasn't haven any of it. He heard my voice, and he started to fire at me with a machine pistol and I fired at him. And I hear one of the guys down the road, "They cut Brenner in half! They cut Brenner in half!" And I said, "No, No, No! I'm still here! He's down!" And I had hit him in the leg with a 45. And when you get hit with a 45, you just fall down. You know, no matter where you get hit. So, when we went over to see what he was doing, he had fallen on his face, and I reached down to see what... if he was alive... if he had a thing with him. What he was, he laid down on his face and he threw the machine pistol about a foot and a half in front of him and played dead. If we had just left him there, he would've picked up that machine pistol and we would've been in trouble. Fortunately, that didn't happen. We realized he wasn't dead, and we picked him up and sent him back as a prisoner. And then we were cleaning out the town... We open up the basement of a house and in the basement of the house were all these citizens of the small village. And when the door opened up and they saw people with guns, they were frightened to death. And then they said it was Americans. "Oh, thank God! Thanks God! Americans! Americans! Thank God! Americans!" And they were pleased to see us because what they had gone through. The next one I went down, and there were three German soldiers. They had rifles and they were pointing and I came in with the machine pistol and they decided to surrender. I brought them up out of the basement. When we captured prisoners, we would destroy their rifles so they couldn't be used again. We'd take the bolt out, throw the bolt away and crack the stock. So, I cracked two of the stocks against a tree. I took the rifle and smashed them up against the tree (motions smashing rifle against a tree) and the stock flew off. The other one wouldn't break. And there was a big concrete block. So, I took the rifle and I smashed it down and the butt of the rifle came up and hit me in the mouth and knocked my teeth out. I lost four teeth up here. I went through the rest of that day... First, I didn't even know it happened. Then when I put my tongue there and I was bleeding and my teeth were gone. But I went through the rest of that day doing whatever. Anyhow, at night they sent me back to an aid station across the Rhine, and they pulled out the roots of my teeth. And they sent me... I was going to stay there. The next morning, they sent me back up on line. And then I said "I want to get a Purple Heart." And they said, "No, you don't get a Purple hear for that. It's a self-inflicted wound. We're gonna get court marshalled." So, I said, "All right, to hell with it." Well, since then, over the years, I have tried to get a purple heart for this. And no matter what I do, I get turned down. I've written to Senator Moynihan years ago. And they're no help, they're just no help. All they do is forward your letter to somebody, which I could do myself. I tried Senator Schumer recently, same thing. The Army refuses to give me a Purple Heart. They claim it's line of duty, not due to combat. They don't want to give me a Purple Heart. The next day, I'm crawling up this vineyard place and a

whole bunch of Germans in a machine gun nest, were three of them. And I guess they didn't see me, but I had a hand grenade, and I threw the hand grenade into it and killed two of them and wounded the other one. When that happens, it's okay. When you think about it later, like now, you killed people... and that's you know... Even though you had no choice, that's what war is about. And at the time, you just did it. Now, when I think about having killed those guys and a couple of others, it's not something human beings are supposed to be doing. After April, things got somewhat quieter and there wasn't much... We took a lot of prisoners, but there wasn't all that devastating armor again, you know, all the shelling that we did. We got strafed twice, but fortunately, I didn't get hurt. We liberated a whole bunch of slave laborers. They were on this airfield. There were thousands of them living on this airfield, and somehow or other, I got to be sergeant of the guard for about three days on this airfield. They didn't have a bathroom. They had a railroad trestle. So, what they would do is they would climb to the railroad trestle, back over the railroad trestle and do their business on the railroad trestle. We had them build a great big latrine. And they began to use the latrine, but frequently there were too many in line and the women would simply spread their legs and urinate. These people had been treated so horribly by the Germans, that they were like animals.

Q: What nationality were they?

MB: Polish, Russian, others. It was terrible, just terrible. One day, there's a big fight going on and so we broke up the fight and we tried to find out why they fought. Somebody was able to translate. They were beating up this guy, because he had been an overseer. And one day, a woman came in and said to him, "I can't work today because my hand hurt, and I can't work." He was sitting at a desk apparently, like you, he said, "Well, put your hands down and let me see. And he took a knife and stabbed her through the hand and then he said, "Now you can't work." At least, that's what these people told us. And that's why they were getting even with him. They beating him up, because he had done that. People do terrible things. We released a couple of Italians who had been taken prisoner, young guys. And sometime in April... And Germans, at that time, were in retreat. What they would do... They would cut down trees across the road so that the tanks would have a lot of trouble, and guys would have to go around... And Hitler youth would dig in behind the trees and they wouldn't give up. They just wouldn't give up. So, either the tanks blew them out or we blew them out. It was crazy. So anyhow, these two Italian guys were in the woods, and they saw some Germans chopping down a tree. And they took the butt of the rifles and they killed them with the butt of the rifle. They had rifles and they killed these guys who were cutting down the trees, and they killed them with the butt a rifle, smashed their heads. I mean, there are so many things like that on a tank attack. If we had infantry tank attacks, and they would put some of us on a tank. I had half of my squad on a tank one day and they stopped for a minute near a railroad. And the two... It was a smaller tank. And these two guys, the driver and a lieutenant, open up their turrets and they stuck their heads out. Now I was sitting right like this (sits far back and upright) and these two guys are by here (leans forward) and a sniper picked them both off. I got off that tank and I said I'm not riding in a tank again. It's the last time I ride a tank. And I wouldn't get on a tank after that. These two guys just... got one through the ear. I think it was the same bullet, that got the second guy. You can go on and on with stories like that unfortunately. Towards the end of the war... My closest buddy was a guy name Roland Gillman. And every time there was a battle, the first thing

we would do after the battle is go look for each other to see if we were still alive. And fortunately, we both made it through the war. One day, he and I were doing something and we notice a sniper up in a building shooting at us. And it was a German small cannon like a fifty-seven millimeter. So, he and I turned this thing around and we put the German shells it and we were shooting at the house. And it turned out that the shells were... I forget what you call them, but they didn't explode going through the house. I guess they had to hit a tank {armor piercing} Armor piercing, right, that's it. So, they went right through the house. But the sniper got frightened, and he came out with his hands up. I went over to him and I had a machine pistol and it had a little cover on it. And I put the machine pistol in his gut and I wanted to kill him, because he was shooting at me. I mean he wasn't shooting at random. He was shooting at me. And I really wanted to kill him. And I just couldn't do it. And I don't regret not doing it, only half, only partially. I just couldn't do it. And it would've been wrong. We used to have these arguments about killing prisoners. I insisted... After Lieutenant Berk... After lieutenant got killed in the Bulge, we captured a whole bunch of Germans who had killed Lieutenant Berk. And the guys wanted to kill them. And I said, "You can't do that. First place, it's wrong. And the second place, it's bad for us. Because if the word gets out that the 87th division is killing prisoners, they're not going to surrender. And they'll kill more of us. So, it's to our benefit to take the prisoners and live." I managed to prevail. We didn't kill prisoners, least that I know of. I guess toward the end of the war, we were just on the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia. On May 8th, May 7th we heard we were going to make an attack on Czechoslovakia the next day, but we also hear that the war was going to be over the next day. So, nobody wanted to do anything. We got up... We had these little radios and we said, "The war is gonna be over. Can we just not do anything?" "No, no. You have to go ahead, just continue." But nobody wanted to move, so we took these little tiny steps and finally they told us, "Okay, the war is over." And you could stop. We were in Germany for a brief time after that. We did guard duty in a small village for a few weeks. And we came back to the states in preparation in going to Japan. We were the 4th division to come back to the United States. We had a thirty-day furlough, and we were back at Fort Benning, Georgia. We were supposed to be on our way to the pacific when they dropped the bomb. So, I've never had any qualms about whether it was the right thing to do or not. And I've also seen recently... There's an 87th division association. They have a reunion every year. And I've gone to the last two or three because I go with John, and I get to see him that way. Somebody in the division obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, they obtained the detailed planning for the invasion of Japan. And it would've been a slaughter on both sides. The Japanese had apparently put aside a lot of Kamikaze pilots. And they were prepared to sink the American troop ships as they approached Japan. There were hundreds of thousands of soldiers to make the invasion of which we would've been a part of it, so I was very glad that, that didn't happen. I was discharged. I had sixty-five points and I had to wait at Fort Dix for, I don't know, two or three weeks till my points were right. So, they put me in a clerk's office filing something. So, I used to go home. My mother lived in Brooklyn, I would go home. And one day, some captain got a hold of me and he was pissed because he couldn't find where I was. He said, "If you didn't have the combat you did, I'd court martial your ass immediately!" But he didn't. Finally, I was discharged, and I went back to school.

Q: Were you ever aware of the existence of the concentration camps?

MB: Oh yeah. I personally didn't do it, but other guys in the outfit liberated Ohrdorf (Germany). Yeah, I knew at the time. I saw... I don't know which one it was. But I saw one of the concentration camps after the people were taken out and I saw the ovens and that kind of business. Yeah, I did see that. I don't know which one it was.

Q: How do you think the war made a difference or effected your life?

MB: For the last two and a half, three years, I've been seeing a counselor at the Vet Center in Babylon (New York). Because I'm very troubled. I live in a house in North Massapequa (New York) and my house is all wooded. There are no houses in back, and it's a big woods. And in the winter time when it snows, I know where the German machine guns are. It isn't that I think that they're there, I know where they are. I know where the German machine guns are. For the most part, when I first got out of the army, I think I went back to being a kid. I was twenty years old. I wasn't twenty-one yet. I think I went back to college and I got married a few years later and had three children. I think I was kind of too busy to think about those other things. But in the last, I don't know, ten, fifteen years, I've thought a great deal about it and it troubles me, a lot of it troubles me. I applied for a pension and compensation for post-traumatic stress disorder about six years ago. And I've been seeing this counselor at the vet center, and finally, they agreed to give me a pension dating back to 1999, so I'm appealing it because I think it should go back to 1996. I don't go to war movies.

Q: Do you ever read books about World War II?

MB: Sometimes, yeah. I don't do much of that. One of my buddies, local guy, I went to high school was recently gave me... You know the book Citizen Soldiers? {Mmm hmm} He gave me that book, so I read most of that. As a matter of fact, I wrote Ambrose a letter because I thought he treated the 87th division improperly. But I never got an answer. I think I've lead a fairly normal life. Although, when I was fifty, I was seriously depressed. I was hospitalized for a while. I never thought that my military experience had anything to do with that at the time, and I was seeing a psychiatrist. But later on, having seen John now for a couple of year, I'm sure that, that depression had something to do with my military experience and all the killing. I was... out of 242 guys, only seven of us survived the war, Gillman and half a dozen other guys. The only ones of the original to come back.

Q: Sorry. You've stayed in contact with some of the...?

MB: Oh yeah. {fellows you served with} Oh yeah.

Q: Do you ever talk these things over with them?

MB: Yeah, yeah, with John. John Colton. He's the one I see now. {yes} He's a wonderful man. He's really a wonderful man. I love him. I really do.

Q: Do you belong to any Veteran's organizations?

MB: Because I was seeing John, I never took part in any... Well, no. Right after the war, three or four of us joined the Jewish War Veterans. And they were calling everyone comrades. We didn't want to be called comrades, so we quit. About three or four years ago, I thought it'd be a good idea if I would walk in the Memorial Day Parade. So, I lived

in Farmingdale (New York). I went to one parade one day and I said to the guys... I decided I would walk with them and when I would walk with them I said I should really ought to join. So, I asked for an application. And the application asked something like 'I hereby affirm my belief in God' and something else about God. So, I said to the guy, "What the hell does God have to do with my joining a Veteran's organization?" He said, "Well, people believe in God and they pray." And I said, "Well, I don't think it's anybody's business whether I do that or not." So, I never joined. I would have joined the VFW at that point, but I didn't because of that. But I walk with them, the last three or four years. I marched down Main Street in Farmingdale with my own little cap.