

William H. Balls, Narrator

New York State Military Museum  
Interviewer, Wayne Clark

Interviewed 2012 at the New York State Military Museum, Saratoga Springs, New York

[Also present at the interview was Mr. Balls' daughter, Barbara, who can be heard off camera. She has documentation that they refer to.]

INT: Sir, for the record would you state your full name and date and place of birth, please.

WB: William H. Balls, September 14, 1925 in Port Chester Hospital in Port Chester, NY.

INT: Did you graduate from high school?

WB: Yes, in 1943.

INT: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

WB: [I was drafted] right after my birthday, in September of '43, into the Army.

INT: Do you recall where you were and what your reaction was when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

WB: We were in class. I believe I was a sophomore at Rye High School. It was pretty much an element of surprise and the idea was that we were going to take care of those people pretty quickly.

INT: Did you notice if your life changed at that point with shortages or rationing?

WB: Not too much. My life didn't change much until I got into the service. Summer times I was a life guard at a private country club and I did a lot of caddying in the spring and fall.

INT: Did you participate in any kind of scrap drives while you were in high school?

WB: I think there was a shortage of metals and one of the guys in my class set up a one day collection, all the scrap that they could find in town and bring to one little depot they had set up. Yes, we did that.

INT: You were drafted into the Army in 1943 in October; where did they send you for your basic training?

WB: Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

INT: Was that your first time away from home?

WB: Yes.

INT: What was basic training like?

WB: It was pretty rigid. We had a sergeant that was keeping an eye on everyone and we had people from all over the area in this group and they called it "A" Group and I was the guidon in the group.

INT: Any idea why you were picked to be guidon?

WB: I have no idea. He just said, "Balls, I want you to" [breaks off] ... We were marching around with different exercises we were doing, he pulled me out of line and said, "You're the guy."

INT: When you attended basic training was there anyone you knew from back home?

WB: No.

INT: After basic training, did you go on to any advanced schooling?

WB: No.

INT: You were trained as an infantryman?

WB: No, I was trained in the artillery on radio.

INT: You completed your basic, it was basic infantry school, and then you went into the artillery?

WB: Yes.

INT: Was it on the job training?

WB: Yes, I had no previous at all.

INT: They didn't send you to any sort of artillery school?

WB: No. It was on the job, as you mentioned.

INT: Where did they send you?

WB: Camp Chaffee, Arkansas.

INT: How long were you there?

WB: At least three or four months. We did a lot of training at that time. We had the cats [caterpillars] pulling the guns around and the cannoneers were doing their thing and we were doing OP (Observation Post) work and things of that nature.

INT: Did you go overseas as a division? Did the whole unit go over together?

WB: The battalion went over together and we sailed on the *Queen Elizabeth* and went up the Firth of Clyde into Scotland. We were experienced gun people and there were a number of guns on the promenade deck of the *Queen Elizabeth*. Our guys in A Battery were assigned the guns and we had a pretty good sleeping arrangement on the promenade area. It wasn't bad duty at all especially compared to the troops down below.

INT: When did you cross?

WB: Mid-September.

INT: And you landed in Scotland?

WB: Yes, in Glasgow. We went up the Firth of Clyde and we could see the Scots walking along the hills. I guess it was a tradition for those people at that time.

INT: How long were you in Scotland? Did you do any training there?

WB: No, we were there just maybe a day or two days to get the battalion on trains and into England.

INT: When you got to England was there more training?

WB: Yes. There was a big area there where certain type guns trained here and certain infantry and mechanics and tanks trained in another big area. I think it was called Christchurch.

INT: Was the 81st Artillery Battalion part of a bigger division?

WB: No, we were a loose battalion. We were attached to a couple of different divisions once we started moving into France.

INT: Do you recall when you went into France?

WB: In September sometime because I had my nineteenth birthday in France.

INT: That would have been 1944.

WB: Yes.

INT: That was right before the winter.

WB: Right before the winter takeoff.

Barbara: In August you sailed from New York and in September you landed on Omaha Beach.

INT: When was the first time you came under fire?

WB: In Luxembourg near the Moselle River. We started getting some shelling in there for a while, we were in a defensive position mostly and a short time later, that's when [Field Marshall Gerd] von Rundstedt started his push and we were completely cut off. It was about a week before Christmas and in order to get out of there, [General George S.] Patton sent tanks in and escorted [us] out of that area. We were attached to the Third Army from there on. We went right into battle after that.

INT: Do you want to describe what it was like in battle? That was your first time under heavy fire?

WB: It was pretty scary for a young guy that had never been exposed to anything like that. At the same time you learned to keep your head and keep thinking of what you were supposed to be doing. Some people didn't handle it too well. You could see in surrounding groups in different companies. You had to be concentrating and know what you were doing and stay with it.

INT: What exactly was your job at that point?

WB: Each battery had a couple of units, OP people, there was a team of three. There was a lieutenant, a guy with a BC (battery commander) scope and a radioman. They all had maps, the same maps that G2 sent to all the batteries that we had with us, and then we started an Observation Post, finding areas where we would not be exposed to the sky. We had dark backgrounds otherwise those Tiger tanks would start picking you up pretty fast. They were fierce, they were tough, the 88-mm [guns] on those tanks. And that's when we started doing some work. We were looking for targets that were troop movements, tanks, rail cars, or any kind of supply. When a target was spotted, we'd radio back to G-2 at battalion headquarters and they would determine, from the maps that were identical, okay, take a shot or two, find out how far it is, give us a read on it and then we'll decide whether we want you to pick the target, start shooting, or just one or two rounds out there until we can bring in some additional help if it was a large target. Sometimes you'd have A Battery you do this, B Battery you do that, to the left, to the right, or over or under, and concentrate on getting rid of that target, killing that target. I was up on the OP with the radio for our lieutenant, and we would radio back what we saw. We had a big scope and a couple pair of these 5-power glasses that you could see quite a distance out and I could report back on the radio that I had to headquarters.

INT: You'd have to relay the coordinates for the artillery.

WB: That's right. We had a map of the same coordinates, back to them so they knew exactly where we were and what we were doing.

INT: So you were on the move quite a bit.

WB: Yes, we didn't stay too long in one place because if something happened and you were exposed ... There was one occasion maybe four or five weeks later, when all of a sudden we heard these overhead shells coming in and the lieutenant said to me, "Balls,

get the hell out of here” so I rolled back down over the hill and where we had the OP set up, it was destroyed. They had us, somebody may have showed a silhouette that they picked up. The radio wasn’t damaged. I managed to push it into a foxhole as I was rolling down. Nothing hurt more than everybody’s pride – we’d been spotted and that wasn’t a good thing. [laughs]

INT: What about casualties in your group?

WB: Not too much, we had three in the first couple of weeks we were out there. Other batteries had a minimum because the positions had come under shellfire and there were a small number in that area but not too many casualties, it wasn’t too bad.

INT: You were out in cold weather. Was your clothing and personal equipment satisfactory?

WB: Yes, you had your regular ODs (olive drab), your work gloves, big overcoats, boots, wool hats that you wore under the steel helmets and mittens – just make sure you didn’t lose them. Everybody had a sleeping bag.

INT: What about frostbite, was that a problem?

WB: Eventually it did, on my feet for a short time afterward. When I came home, I got treated for it and no, nothing. I didn’t want to do anything about it, I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

INT: What about a change of clothing or socks?

WB: We didn’t do a change of clothing too often because we weren’t indoors that much. Everything was in the Jeep that we owned, our clothing and stuff like that. Every once in a while we’d find a farmhouse and change our clothes. The old stuff was so bad and in need of laundering that you didn’t want to keep it around. [laughs]

INT: I heard that they stressed changing your socks every day. You take your socks off and put them next to your body.

WB: Yes, that’s right. Keep them warm and put it back on. You always slept with your shoes on.

INT: Why is that?

WB: In case you had to move in a hurry, you don’t say, where’s this where’s that? I always had four or five pair of socks in my knapsack, all the time. We managed to pick them up from different units we were attached to, the supply people would give them to us, whoever we were attached to at the time. [laughs]

INT: What about food?

WB: Very little hot food unless we were coming back into an area where the mess sergeant had set up a kitchen. Most of the time we were on C rations and K rations and we had one of these little stoves with a single burner. You could heat up a can of beans or something. You could also use your canteen cup, put the coffee in there – strong and black – and that’s pretty much what was par for the course.

INT: How long were you out on line typically for?

WB: It depended on where we were, what we were doing, and how the war was progressing in our area. Mostly three days, maybe no more than four, and they’d try to get us back and get us some warm food. We were relieved by backup teams from our own battery. There were three groups. The first group got pretty well beat up, that was our first casualty, in Luxembourg.

INT: Were you in Holland at all?

WB: No, just Luxembourg, France, and Germany.

INT: Do you want to tell us what it was like in France? Was it any better for you than Luxembourg?

WB: Not really. There was more fighting going on in France. I remember on one occasion we were in a small convoy, moving our battalion up to join another group and this big tall sergeant at an intersection in Metz was there directing traffic and I was driving the Jeep with the lieutenant with me. All of a sudden I hear this voice, “Hey Bill, what the hell you doing here?” It was my cousin Neil from Rye, NY. He was a sergeant in the MPs. That was a very strange but very good thing. “I know exactly where you’re going, I’ll see you a little later when it gets dark.” And he came out with two bottles of champagne. So we split two bottles of champagne with a couple of friends of mine and he stayed there until we finished it. He wanted to make sure we just didn’t give it away. It was a lot of fun, running into him like that. Very unexpected, but pleasant.

INT: When you were in Luxembourg, you were in Welfrange? By the Moselle River?

WB: Yes, there was another town near Luxembourg, Trier, that our battalion was spread over, two places.

INT: Tell us about the Bulge.

WB: When that started I think I was in France or Belgium. What did I say, was it Belgium?

INT: [reading] “16 through 28 December battalion holds southern edge of the Bulge by denying enemy crossing of the Sauer River northeast of Luxembourg City.”

BW: We were in that area and it started to get very damp and cold very quickly so everyone was pretty much bundled up and we still had our work to do. If they needed OP

people, they'd take one from C Battery, one from A Battery, wherever we were needed, we went out and did it. It started snowing. If you see the map there, we started down into the Bulge area and we wound up on the Bastogne highway, it was snowing like the devil. They told our battalion to keep shelling in certain areas because the German troops were coming through and you could hear the tanks occasionally and they also had ski troops and they tried to get through. There was one occasion where the battery next to us in our battalion, this Jeep came driving along with two guys in American uniforms. It turned out that the driver was the only one who talked to our people where the roadblock was set up to stop the infiltrating. This one group almost got through. The two other people with them couldn't speak English at all. They asked them questions like, do you know the New York Yankees? Who's Babe Ruth? Who's the President of the United States? They immediately arrested them and took them away, according to the MPs that we knew at the time. Yes, there was infiltrating going on.

INT: Were you working with the 101st Airborne at all?

WB: They were there on the Bastogne Highway and what's the name of the general who said "Nuts"?

INT: He was with the 101st.

WB: He was inside and we were out, attached to them, firing, shelling, and trying to stop the Germans from coming in.

INT: That was [General Anthony] McAuliffe.

WB: Yes, that's him. We were attached to them for a couple of weeks until that calmed down and then we kept moving. That was a long time ago. Sleeping in foxholes, who knew? Maybe the Germans had been there before us, before we came along, we didn't know. There were huge pine trees, 25 and 30 feet tall, and the shelling into the pine trees, which spread out and down, around all these guys that were exposed. We were doing a lot of that on the ski troops that were coming out with the infantry behind them and the tanks that they had coming over the hill there. What's the name of that burst?

INT: Aerial burst? Like around the Huertgen Forest, they said that a lot of guys were killed just by the splinters.

WB: Yes, and if it got down and hit a tank, then [whistles]. It was AP, armor piercing was one type of shell and this other one that I just mentioned to you.

Barbara: How many weeks were you sleeping out in the snow?

WB: For a little over two weeks we were in that area before they moved us out. There was mopping up to do and they would ask for fire in certain areas where there were pockets of Germans still around.

INT: You were involved in the Battle of the Ardennes? That was 31 December to 4 February.

WB: Yes, in the Ardennes Forest, yes.

INT: How close were the Germans to you being that you were out on a forward observation post? You must have been pretty close to them, weren't you?

WB: Yes, maybe 300 – 400 feet sometimes. Coming in, the other battalions should have picked these guys up before they got near us. An infantry officer would call for fire and he'd give the coordinates and whoever was closest to them just lay down the barrage, lay down the barrage, lay down the barrage. And you could see them.

INT: Did you have any problems with friendly fire? Your unit dropping shells in too close to you guys?

WB: No, not to the best of my knowledge. You'd hear about it at times in other areas or infantry but not us, we were fortunate.

INT: When you were in the foxholes did you have any kind of cover?

WB: The branches from these big pines trees, we'd cover foxholes with them like a canopy cover, and we'd lay under them and they'd keep the snow off us, but the minute you got up, you were out in the snow again. So the honeymoon was very short. [laughs]

INT: It must have been really tough if you guys had to relieve yourselves in conditions like that.

WB: Yes, you had to crawl out of the hole to back somewhere in the trees. You had to let your guys know where you were going so somebody didn't take a shot at you. [laughs]

Barbara: Because you were in the observation post and you got close to the Germans, did you ever confront any Germans yourself?

WB: No.

INT: You weren't involved with capturing Germans?

WB: There was one occasion shortly after the Bulge in February in the Ardennes area. Our battalion had pulled off the road and we were split up and there was a rumor coming around that there were Germans in the area and sure enough they were there. They came moving down this road and we were set up for them. Some of the infantrymen who were with us had set up a roadblock and they captured a bunch of them. But there's a story I don't think you ever heard before: The Jeeps were put together on the front bumper, an inverted "Y" with a post coming up, straight out here. And that post had three or four big cuts, straight through. They would put a huge piece of piano wire across the road, particularly at night or at dusk, and it would take the head right off. And that cut on the

inverted “Y” on the front of the Jeep would cut it right in half. They were pretty successful, word got around fast. Motor pools were working double time to put these brackets up on the front. I’ll tell you, I never had much time to sleep. I had to stay alert all the time.

INT: It says 4<sup>th</sup> of February 1945 your battalion entered Germany in the vicinity of Buw [spells] and you were attacking the Siegfried Line in the Schnee Eifel Forest.

WB: Is that where we crossed the Rhine or was that later on?

INT: Let’s see, it says you crossed the Rhine on 29 March. So you guys were basically stuck there through the month of February.

WB: Yes, in the Ardennes. There was a lot of shelling going on in there, there was a big group in the Ardennes, some kind of castle or fort in there. The Germans wouldn’t surrender so they just kept shelling this place and shelling this place until they destroyed it. Very few Germans came out of there. I think they must have been Gestapo people, they wouldn’t let their soldiers out.

INT: What rank were you?

WB: PFC, always a private first class.

INT: How often did you get replacements, if somebody was wounded or had frostbite?

WB: I know there were but I don’t know how many.

INT: For most of the time, were you with a single group of friends that you stayed with?

WB: Pretty much. The fellas in A Battery communications group we were a pretty tightknit group. We hung around with one another and we were always wondering where the hell is Johnny today or where did they send him, when do you think they’re coming back.

INT: So you were in a platoon-size operation.

WB: That’s right.

INT: After the Bulge, when you guys came off line, did you get any kind of break, any kind of rest?

WB: Are we still in February or are we in March?

INT: On the 4th of February you guys entered Germany and were attacking the Siegfried Line in the Schnee Eifel Forest.

WB: Not much of a break, no. The only break we got was when our teams were relieved from the observation post.

INT: So you guys just kept moving forward.

WB: Kept moving forward.

Barbara: Do you want to talk about the day you saw Patton?

INT: Was that after the Bulge that you saw Patton or during?

WB: He was on an intersection with all his officers and there was a small convoy moving up and he was directing traffic. [Uses arms to mime directing traffic.] He wanted to get out there himself because he wasn't satisfied with how fast it was moving. I drove right by him in the Jeep with the lieutenant with me. That was a great occasion.

INT: They portrayed that in one of the movies.

WB: Yes, they did. That was quite a deal. That was a nice relief, everybody got a big kick out of that.

INT: What about the battle of Coblenz, 15 – 22 March? Right after that, you guys crossed the Rhine River on 29 March 1945.

WB: In Coblenz we were pretty busy. There was a lot of resistance in that area. They were trying to stop us from getting to the Rhine River to get across but finally – what division were we with then? They started moving pretty fast.

INT: You supported the 11th Armored Division, the 17th Airborne Division, and the 87th Infantry Division.

WB: They started clearing that area and they were trying to get across the Rhine. The infantry division was spearheading the crossing of the Rhine at the Remagen bridgehead. We were south of the Remagen bridgehead and we were fighting like the devil and Germans just wouldn't give up. Eventually we got word that we were going to cross south of the Remagen bridgehead on a pontoon bridge that army engineers had built. We were going to be part of the group that was going to cross at that point. That's how we crossed. Our guns and so forth came later on but there was enough distance that we could get a couple of miles in so it wasn't really necessary to get the guns across.

INT: The next entry is 22 April: "Relieved assignment Third US Army, assigned First US Army."

WB: That was more or less a troop transfer. We never got any word of that, whatever Army we were attached to, until later on when we had a rest period and they said we were doing this with this Army, Seventh Army or Third Army, or First Army, now we're with so-and-so but it didn't change what we were doing, had no effect whatsoever on us.

INT: The next entry is 7 May 1945. You were in Stetten, Germany and there was a ceasefire?

WB: Did I tell you we were in Dachau?

INT: No, tell us about Dachau.

WB: We were attached to a tanker group and they were getting supplies and then they had an air drop for gas. On the way back we pulled into Dachau. An English doctor and his unit had pulled in there just ahead of us and they were treating these people. They were like toothpicks lying on these beds. Ninety percent of them were half dead. It wasn't a very pleasant sight and we wondered what the heck was going on. We were fighting and we find these poor people, these poor bastards are dying at our feet. So whatever rations we had, the doctor said to leave them and we'll distribute them, we'll try to treat these people. That was not a very pleasant sight.

INT: I heard there were boxcars with bodies in them.

WB: Yes, there were, up on the hill. In fact, if you looked up on the hill in the pine trees, there was a big pit where they would take these bodies and just throw them in there. They'd cover them up with lime. We took a little walk around there and then decided it was no place for us, we still had things we had to do. Boxcars, people were lying on the ground wherever they were when the Germans pulled out, they left everything there.

INT: 7 May was the Germany unconditional surrender.

WB: Flip to the map in the front. See where we were in Czechoslovakia, by your left thumb? There was a town called Zwickov. We were in Zwickov when we got word 'don't go any further.' The reason for us stopping there was the Russians were coming and we had to meet the Russians right there.

INT: I was going to ask if you met the Russians.

WB: We did, right there, in about two or three days. We stayed there not too long, maybe four or five days. Some of the officers and the rest of the battalion came over and they were talking to these people. They were passing vodka around and our officers were passing good old US scotch and rye around, drinking with these people.

INT: So the Russians were pretty friendly?

WB: Yes, they were. That's the first time I had a glass of vodka. I don't think I could talk for ten minutes, it burned all the way down. [laughs] But that's where we stopped.

INT: Do you recall hearing about the death of President Roosevelt in April 1945?

WB: The word spread pretty much around the battalion. The word came down from headquarters, everybody was notified. FDR (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) and [Prime Minister Winston] Churchill did a wonderful job.

INT: Once the war ended were there rumors that you guys might be sent over to the Pacific?

WB: Yes, there were rumors. We heard that there were different infantry units that were being shipped out, but it didn't affect us in any way. We were told to stick to our business and we would start moving out little by little back into Germany. They took a group of us, the motor pool sergeant picked a few guys that some idea of mechanics, I was one of them, and we were given two-and-a-half ton trucks. They told us to go over to this area and take these people back to Poland. They were all Polish women that were doing prison labor work for the Germans. And we'd load up the trucks and take them back maybe 30 – 40 miles back to the Polish border and we'd just turn them loose. Two and a half ton truck, maybe a week or 10 days along with three or four of my friends trying to get these people back to Poland and out of these labor camps. Coming back we stopped in some of these German towns and occupied them for a while and the headquarters would set up a switchboard so we could keep in touch with headquarters because the battalion was spread over an area of maybe five or ten miles depending on where we were. So they had communications all the time.

INT: How were you treated by the German people when the war ended?

WB: I didn't have any problem. They were glad to see me and called me *Landsmann* [fellow countryman] – I still had a lot of light blond hair. The kids wanted chocolate, that's to be expected. I never had any problem, they never bothered me. You always had your carbine on your shoulder no matter where the hell you went. Nobody ventured out at night, everybody's inside. They were assigned houses in these towns. The mess sergeant had set up kitchens and there was plenty of hot food during that time. That was pretty much the way it wound up until we went back to ship out.

INT: Before you shipped out did you see any USO (United Service Organizations) shows?

WB: Yes, Bob Hope in Nurnberg while we were waiting. He had these old golf clubs and what was the name of that gal? She could sing and dance, it wasn't Dorothy Lamour, it was a gal he had with him all the time. That was a great show and it was mobbed. If you didn't get there soon enough you were back in the hills, some guys had binoculars to get a good look at Hope and he never stopped talking during the whole period. That was a big treat, that was great.

INT: When did you end up going back home?

WB: They had a point system set up and I didn't have enough points to go back for a while because I didn't have much time in the States and the higher point people they started shipping them out. So I did some occupation duty maybe for a month or so in Germany and then they shipped us out to France, near a town called Avignon, where the palace of the popes is. We did a lot of small things, duty around there, talking to the French people and just keeping out of trouble. They warned us if we wanted to get out of

here and get on that boat pretty soon, you guys stay out of trouble. So wherever you go, you go together. There's at least two. Nobody out alone, not even in France, because some of the French were not the best people as far as the Americans were concerned. They'd pat you on the back and then a minute later you wouldn't know what happened. Those things did happen. Then we finally got on the boat out of Marseilles.

INT: Do you recall when you left France? When you left was the war in the Pacific over?

WB: It was still going on.

INT: That ended in August of '45 so I'm guessing you came back to the States in June.

WB: Maybe June or July.

INT: You were discharged from there?

WB: Yes, out of Fort Dix, New Jersey. I was discharged in a matter of days. It was a big depot and they were trying to get everybody out. They were trying to get everybody to reenlist, of course. You had to go listen to an orientation program and this and that. We need these people, we need those type of people. It fell on deaf ears.

INT: Did you get on the train and head for home?

WB: Yes. A train into New York then a New Haven train which was Grand Central to New Haven. One of the stops was Rye and there one of the local police officers met me when I was getting off the train. He worked for my dad who was the chief of police. It was a bittersweet thing: It was Officer Ellingham and his son George was killed, he was a medic at the Battle of the Bulge, he was a pal of mine. And here's his father standing waiting for me. I got the biggest bear hug you've ever seen from this big tall cop, Dick Ellingham. That was very emotional.

INT: Did you make use of the 52/20 club?

WB: Yes, for a while. I think maybe through the summer and then in the fall I managed to get into college on the GI Bill, at Kent State University in Ohio. I only went two years but I went to courses later on after my girlfriend and I were married in Connecticut. What the hell's the name of that college? It was a division of Connecticut College about 30 miles northeast of Rye along the coast. We'd drive up there and take courses.

INT: Once you finished your schooling, you went to work?

WB: Yes. I worked for the New York Telephone Company.

Barbara: Didn't you work for the bus company first?

WB: That's right. In the New York City and in the Bronx area, there were still trolley cars and busses. There was a bus company called Surface Transportation and I went to work for the Yonkers Railroad which was part of Surface Transportation, it was a trolley

car company. I started working for them as an investigator, checking on accidents, things of that nature. Then the Surface Transportation decided that they were going to team up with Fifth Avenue Coach Lines. It was called Mabcosa[?], Manhattan Operating Bronx [trails off] it was a big joint. It was a good company to work for, Surface Transportation. They had a big building on East 126<sup>th</sup> Street and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, a huge barn, bus depot. And the Claim and Legal divisions were upstairs. I worked out of that building for a couple years before I went over to the phone company. We were on trial on a big case in the Bronx and we were co-defendants with the telephone company and I was called in to testify on some of the investigation statements I had on the case. It turned out we did very well and the phone company won the case. This big heavyset Irishman by the name of Donohue, the trial lawyer for the telephone company, came over to me after the trial and said, "We can use you. We need a guy with your experience." So that's how I wound up at the telephone company about three weeks later after I had taken all their tests and their physicals and so on. As it so happened, two other fellas that I worked with at the bus company transferred with me in a couple of weeks. One of them is still alive over in Rockland County. We've been good friends for a long time.

INT: Did you end up retiring from the telephone company?

WB: Yes, around 1980. I had 28 years with them.

INT: I probably shouldn't ask you this because a lot of guys don't remember but do you recall when you got married?

WB: The hottest day of the year, July 2, 1950. Every two years for a while we planned on having children. We have five and Barbara's the oldest. We lived in Rye, we had a nice house and everybody got along. It was down the street from Rye High School, the parochial school was another block away, and the church was behind that so everything was accessible to whatever you wanted to do. And Playland, a big amusement park on Long Island Sound was about a mile away.

INT: I imagine you have a whole slew of grandchildren?

WB: How about eleven.

INT: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

WB: Yes, I belong to the American Legion Post 128 in Rye, NY.

INT: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

WB: Prior to the service, I think there were times when you got a little carefree with things that you did or wanted to do, and you became respectful of what you have and appreciate it more than you did before.

INT: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Barbara: Who was the best driver in your battalion?

WB: There were cats that were pulling these guns and he worked mostly out of the motor pool. His name was Jim Golden and he didn't have a right thumb which was pretty unusual for a guy handling these big cats and huge trucks. He was from somewhere out in Pennsylvania and he was a great friend during the time I was in the Army with him. If we needed something I knew to go to him for anything for our Jeep. He was a good guy but I'll always remember that he didn't have a right thumb. I kidded him one day, I said, "How the hell did you manage to get in the Army?" He said, "They were going to draft me but my father knew the head of the draft board and even with this missing they took me because the old man wanted to get rid of me." [laughs]

INT: Thank you so much for your interview.

WB: You're welcome.

Barbara: What about the guy from the Bronx that was in your unit?

WB: Oh, McDonnell, he got wounded one day in the shelling. We took some shells in the battalion area and he happened to be out running for cover or something like that and he caught a piece of shell right over here [points to left eyebrow area] and the side of his cheek was all cut up. He still had part of the scarring when I ran into him a year or two later at an amusement park in Rye called Playland. He liked to come up there and walk with his two kids and we'd stop and talk every once in a while. I haven't seen him in a number of years.

INT: You mentioned joining veterans' organizations. I forgot to ask if you ever went to any reunions.

WB: No, our organization never set up a reunion. There weren't that many people around that area where I lived in Rye. They were out to the Midwest, to Tennessee and those areas. Some of these fellas couldn't read or write when it came to payroll. The first sergeant would take their hand and give them a mark and then shell out the money so who knew what was happening. We had a whole gang of those people. We had one fella who used to run around looking for aftershave lotion. He would drink the aftershave lotion. There were all kinds of characters in this battalion but they weren't in our communications group, they were cannoneers.

Barbara: Didn't you say that your group when you went to basic training, you were all mostly replacements? That's why they got so spread out.

WB: Yes, they'd send us out to different places, like I went to Chaffee with the 81st.

Barbara: Did anybody from Rye get drafted?

WB: Yes, but not with me. They were mostly older, I was one of the youngest guys around.

Barbara: Do you want to tell about the time you got a little cut, a little injury on your forehead?

WB: That was near the end of the war, that was just a band aid. Somebody threw a grenade and knocked my helmet off and I had a little scratch here [points to left forehead]. It was after the war was over, they were fooling around, some guys were horsing around and the medic just put a huge band aid on here and said, "See ya later." [laughs] I tried to cash in on it later on and they had no record of it. They checked into the records of A Battery, 81st and no mention of it. What the hell, I'm fine. Forget it, I'm home.

Well, thank you for your time. I hope I was a little help to you.

INT: You were excellent, nice job. Thank you so much.

WB: If you get time some time, there's a little paragraph in there that says "Friend of the infantryman" in one of those commendations we got from the colonels and the generals and so forth. We had a lot of commendations, we were a pretty sure-fired group, dependable.

INT: Thank you again.