

**Lawrence E. Bennett
Veteran**

**Mike Russert and Wayne Clarke
Interviewers**

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Newburgh, New York**

Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth place?

LB: My full name is Lawrence E. Bennett. I was born in the town of Newburgh, New York where we are now, and September 15th, 1923.

Q: what was your educational background prior to military school?

LB: High school graduate, and I had other courses when I worked for the [Dupont?] company I took extensive courses in management and so forth, but they were not toward a degree or anything they were just in company training.

Q: Where were you and what was your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

LB: well I wasn't a military agent I was only 16 or 17 but I was living in a little hamlet called Roseton, New York in the town of Newburgh, and it was on a Sunday afternoon and a group of us were playing touch football and I got home around 5 o'clock for dinner and that's when I first heard that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. And I had an Irish grandmother who was very optimistic, and never wanted to give you bad news and her reaction was, and her Irish broke "sure you'll hear nothing about that tomorrow," which did now prove to be true.

Q: Where you drafted, or did you enlist?

LB: I took what was called the voluntary induction. I was working for the Glenn L. Martin aircraft company in Baltimore, Maryland at that time, although I lived in the town of Newburgh, and I was eligible for a deferment, they used to give 6-month deferment, but I wanted to get in the Navy. I wanted to get into service and in the December of 1942, they stopped enlistments because they claimed the Navy and the Marine corps. were getting a disproportionate number of people so they had what they call a voluntary induction, they told you, if you volunteered to be inducted that they would see that you got the branch of service you wanted. It sounded pretty good to me.

My draft board was in Baltimore, station #5 Dundalk, which is a part of Baltimore, and I went down about 7 in the morning to start the induction process, and ended up about 11:30, and at that point I said, well my physical examination was for general service, I need a branch. I said, "I want to go in the Navy". And the gentleman said, "I'm sorry, the Navy took 34 [men] and they were out of here by 9:30 this morning, and the Marine Corps. Took 10 [men], and the

rest of you will go with the army". That was my first example of 'be careful before you volunteer for anything'.

Q: Could you tell us when were you finally inducted?

LB: On February 10th, 1943.

Q: Could you just tell us about your basic training?

LB: I went to Fort Meade, Maryland after I was inducted and shortly after that, about two days after that I got on a troop train, and of course everything was secret then you didn't know where you were going, but I knew we were heading in the general direction of South. We had gone to Cincinnati, Ohio and places I forget. I said this is great, I'm gonna go to Texas where they have a lot of army air core bases, and I'm gonna get in to the army air core. That didn't happen to be true. They also had a lot of other camps there that were training infantry so at about 4 o'clock in the morning, the train station pulled into this rail head and there was a very huge sign that said, "Welcome to the 86th Blackhawk infantry division". And I said maybe I'll get in the ordinance because I worked as a machinist for Martin, but I lined up and they said, "Company D, 341st infantry over here." That's how I started out. Our division took basic training at Camp Howze, Texas.

In the fall of 1943, [we] went into the Louisiana Maneuver area, which was the worst living conditions I had ever been under. It was winter and don't let anyone tell you it doesn't get cold and damp in Louisiana. We finished our advanced infantry training, we were sent to camp Livingston, Louisiana following the Louisiana Maneuvers. As I said we had been at Camp Howze, Texas previous to that. We did our advanced infantry training there, went onto short maneuvers again, and were sent to the west coast to take amphibious training, so all the indications were that we would be sent to the Pacific theater of operations, However the Battle of the Bulge occurred and that changed those plans. Some of our equipment was already loaded on ships in San Francisco, but we were shipped to Camp Myles Standish, Massachusetts and were sent to Europe and landed at La Havre, France.

Q: How did you go across, were you in a single ship or a convoy?

LB: We were in a convoy, and a very large convoy. I can't estimate the number of ships, but we were on a troop ship that carried 6,000 soldiers [6,000 G.I.'s]. And the division artillery commander was with us and his and his flag was flying before we left the port and we figured maybe we would get a better escort than some of the rest. The voyage was fairly uneventful for except it was the winter time and the North Atlantic as you know is very rough in the winter and when we [got] into the English channel you could hear depth charges being dropped because German U-boats were still very active at that time, in fact they were sinking ships all the way up to the last day of the war. None of the ships in our convoy were hit.

We land at La Havre [at] about midnight and the harbor area was almost completely destroyed. It had been destroyed by the Germans before they left, before they evacuated. We had to go down in landing nests just as you would an invasion. We got into small landing crafts and went ashore and were put on these trucks, [which were] more like something you would carry cattle in. It was a trailer towed by a tractor and there was some straw in it, and you laid in it until you got to a camp. We went to Camp Old Gold, they had a number of camps there named after cigarettes and had a brief training period there before we went up to the front[lines] which was just west of the Rhine river at that time.

Q: when did you enter combat?

LB: We entered combat in March, early March of 1945. Generally, in the Cologne/Bonn area. [It] was actually a defensive position on the west bank of the Rhine, the little likelihood that the Germans could come back across the Rhine, but they were sending extensive patrols, you know to try and keep the American army off balance. We suffered some casualties there, not heavy casualties. Then our next phase of combat we went in across the Rhine River and into the general area of Siegen, Germany. At that time, they were attempting to seal off the Ruhr pocket and to make sure the Germans who were in the Ruhr valley could not break out and possibly cut off the spearheads which were further advanced into Germany at that time.

Q: Would you want to tell us about your combat experience?

LB: well, the first night when we were moving up, as we sat up on the Rhine we were subjected to some artillery or mortar fire but we had the river between the German army and us but then we were moving up and you could tell we were getting near a battle zone because you could hear artillery firing and see the fires in the distance.

Q: How did you cross the Rhine?

LB: We crossed the Rhine on one of the bridges. A bridge had already been established. The Remagen Bridge had collapsed but they had built a pontoon bridge just north of that.

Q: So you went over on a pontoon bridge?

LB: We went over on a pontoon bridge and as I said before we knew we were getting close [to combat]. That afternoon we had passed through this town and we saw dead Germans there and something that really amazed me, German horses that had been killed. They were laying alongside the road because the Germans had used a lot of horse-drawn artillery throughout the war to save on gasoline and so forth. And then that night, we were near a town where there were some snipers, and I'll never forget this there were several G.I.'s laying along the road, and they were covered with blankets, and all you could see were their combat boots, and the guy next to me said "sergeant, that's going to be us before tomorrow morning." I said It's not going to be me, I tried to be optimistic where I

think I was saying something I couldn't really be that sure of. I figured I'm not going to get covered at this early in the campaign.

Our objective was a town called Hagen, a large industrial town in the Ruhr valley, and we moved up into an attack position. The next morning, we attacked that town and there was about maybe about two days later the Germans finally capitulated there. what they were using in the Ruhr valley, there were more Anti-aircraft guns in the Ruhr valley than anywhere in the world because they used them to protect their industrial area and they were using them as regular field artillery pieces and they had a lot of ammunition. I'll never forget that one of our guys in the 86th [infantry division] later wrote a book about it. They later asked him "what do you remember about the Ruhr valley?" He said "88's, 88's and more 88's".

The Germans even at that stage of the war had a lot of fight left in them. [They] were still counter-attacking, you'd take a town and maybe lose it the next day. Finally, after about 10 days in there, the German army surrendered. There were just thousands and thousands of German troops coming down the road with their vehicles, their field hospitals, surrendering in mass. I remember that very good. General [Walter] Model was a German commander in charge of that and had a tremendous reputation as a defensive general. He had plenty of Americans wait in the Hürtgen forest just previous to that and didn't give up very easily. General Ridgeway had sent him a note days before this asking that, on a humanitarian basis, that he surrenders his forces in there to save Germany from further destruction of their infrastructure, their industrial buildings that were left and so forth, but he refused saying that a general field Marshal does not surrender. So, in the last two or three days in the war they [Germany] start discharging their soldiers. He wasn't surrendering himself and they would come down the road with a discharge pass, but they still had to be taken in as prisoners of war.

One of the worst sights I saw right near the end they [Germans] were surrendering at such a rate that they didn't have facilities for them. It was raining very hard and I was cold, and to see them in these large enclosures huddled next to each other trying to keep warm and no sanitary facilities, very hard to get food to them. Even though they were the enemy, I thought of myself in that same situation. They were just helpless and there was nothing they could do. And they'd have their own Red Cross representatives try to help them, they'd have some of their officers trying to organize them, but it was a very pathetic sight. It shows you what happens when you are not successful in a military operation when somebody else has your fate in their hands.

Q: Were you aware of the concentration camps?

LB: Yes, we went into none of the large ones, but we saw some small concentration camps in the Ruhr. We also saw a field hospital where they had German and American wounded and I would say at that point the Germans were doing the best they could for both their own wounded and the Americans who

were being liberated. They were short of supplies, short of medicines but some of the people we liberated were in pretty bad shape. We also saw a large number of slave labor camps where these people worked in these various factories in the Ruhr. [these people] were from Russia, from Poland, from anywhere, [there were] Thousands and thousands of them, and I guess it was that source of manpower that kept the German armament going because they had drafted so many of their own people that they depended on this slave labor. Some of the factories were underground and they [slave laborers] had come out of these shafts. It was pretty pathetic.

Q: Were you in the occupation army then?

LB: After the fighting in the Ruhr valley we were transferred to the third army and we joined the third army just before they went into Nuremburg in about the last 15 days of the war. When you're with Patton's army you move pretty quickly. In that operation we were involved in 4 river crossings. The Altmühl which is a fairly large German river, the Inn, and the other one that I remember most is the Danube, because by that stage of the war we had lost quite a few men. The medical aid man that was with our platoon was a very very good friend of mine and lost his life about 10 days before the war ended. We had crossed the Danube river and there [was] a place called Vohberg and we were told earlier that the German garrison may have pulled out, but it was a hornet's nest of SS troops who made up their mind that they were not gonna surrender. Our battalion that was in the initial assault was hit pretty heavy and we were very surprised. We just thought all we were going to see was white flags, but it was just the opposite. I was in the 2nd story of a building with my machine gun squad and the medical aid man was in that building and we looked out on this field where the Germans were dug in, after we had cleared them out of the village. At that point an officer of the B-company, the Rifle Company we were supporting walked right in front of the window and I could see it like it was happening today. He raised his arm like that [in the air], and a bullet went right through his sleeve and he said, "look at that, a souvenir", he said "I'm gonna keep this shirt". In two minutes, he was down. So, the medical aid man left that covered position, and went out to assist him. There was several wounded at the time and several people yelled "medic, medic, medic over here." And there weren't enough medics to administer first aid to each one of them. So, our medic got about half way between the house and where this officer lay and he got hit, but he tried to get up. When the officer got hit, he just laid there like he was dead, and he [medical aid man] got hit again. So, me and one other fellow left the building, went out and brought him back. When we got him back behind the building, a [new] medical aid man had arrived by the time and said, "you guys wasted your breathe, this mans already dead". We didn't know, but we also went back out and got the officer and he survived. I remember this so clearly, we got him behind the building, and they administered blood plasma, and he was as white as a sheet, and as he started taking that plasma you could see his color start to change a little bit. He survived [but] I never saw him after that. He had [Unclear] and his thumb was almost shot off, and the last I saw

of him was, the Germans had a lot of these, particularly in the Ruhr, they had these wagons that they hauled wood and things on, and they had steel wheels on them, and they had him laying on this. They were taking him back down towards the river to evacuate him. I heard since he had survived the war, but I didn't see him since then.

Q: Now, you received the Bronze star for that?

LB: I received the bronze star for that with the oak leaf cluster because my bronze star was not just for meritorious but was also for what they called heroic. I don't want to try to prepare to be a hero, but I was there and I'm lucky I'm here. That same day I could've lost my life. Our battalion lost about 25 or 26 [men] killed and 40 wounded in practically one day which is a large loss for that period of the war when you thought "hey, these guys are done, we're going to see white flag". The Wehrmacht regular German army were more ready to surrender, the SS were not. I could never understand what was in their minds. They thought "we're gonna turn this thing around." You know, like a football game. "We're behind but we're gonna win". I could not understand their psychology, but I guess it was part of their indoctrination.

Q: Did you ever get to see Patton?

LB: I didn't get to see Patton, some of our people did. The 342nd infantry regiment of our division approached a city called Ingolstadt, which was a fairly large city in Bavaria around the Danube River. Again [there was] unexpected resistance, and Patton came up and asked the Regimental commander how things were going, and he said, "we're not making as much progress as we thought, and our casualties are fairly heavy, I don't know if we'll get to cross the river." And it's reported, I wasn't there, Patton said "Listen, I want you to cross the Danube River by 7 o'clock tomorrow morning, I don't give a damn if you have to swim across." I guess all army commanders are a little egotistical. He wanted the 3rd army to be the first army across the Danube River. You know, all blood and guts. His guts and my blood.

Q: Were you in the army of occupation then?

LB: Well, when the war ended, we were in Austria. We could have stayed there, but after about 10 days in Austria we moved back to Mannheim, Germany, and I guess it would be called the army of occupation. Very good duty, very light duty. Within a short period of time we were given orders, our division would return to the United States to prepare for service in the Pacific which would have been, if the war continued, the invasion of Japan. So, we got back to the states at furloughs, rest and recuperation, whatever that meant, and then we were sent to Oklahoma for a brief period of time and then shipped to the west coast at Camp Stoneman and proceeded to the Philippine islands. So, we were in the Philippine Islands just as the war ended. We were in the occupation there.

Q: So, what was your reaction to the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

LB: Very happy because coming back on the ship, we were briefed on what possibly could happen and when they started to give the casualty estimates for our division, and any division that would have invaded Japan. I wouldn't be here talking to you today if that invasion had taken place. Because based at what had happened at Okinawa, when the casualties were horrendous, it would have been Okinawa 10 times that scale. The Japanese had five to seven thousand aircraft hidden in caves, they had, I think still 5 million men in the whole army in Japan, and they had equipped civilians with spears. They were not gonna surrender if the atomic bomb had not been dropped. That would have been a horrendous campaign that could have gone on until 1946. The casualties had been horrendous. Thanks to Harry Truman, who I've always admired, I'm here today, and many G.I.'s that were scheduled to be in that operation will say that.

Q: How long were you in the Philippines?

LB: I arrived in the Philippines in August 1945, and I left late January 1946.

Q: Were you then discharged at that time?

LB: Yes, I was discharged at Fort Dix.

Q: What was your opinion of the German soldier?

LB: Even though we had met the German soldier and German army when they were on the decline, I would say they were good. They were well trained, their officers led them well.

Q: At that point in the war, did you notice the soldiers being a lot younger, maybe 15 or 16 years old?

LB: At the very end in Bavaria that was the case, but in the Ruhr, German army group B, was the largest army they had still intact, I did not particular see a lot of young people. Maybe 19 or 20. The age of some of us, as the war got near the end as the Germans had done in Berlin, they put kids in. They were young. Having said that, some people fail to realize these kids, they trained since 10 years of age. They knew how to handle weapons even though they were only 15 or 16 years of age. I remember saying to a German major who had surrendered, I said jokingly, "You have kids in your army now" He said "yeah we have kids, but those kids that you call" and he could speak English, "are better trained than many of your soldiers, because of what we hear of your army, you take your people in and train them for 17 weeks in infantry training camps and then you send them to a division." He said, "These kids you're calling have been training since they were [10]". And they were particularly good with the Panzerfaust. Which was a German bazooka. We met some of them in the Ruhr, they would be in the wooded area. They would attack a convoy and some of them would seem to disappear. But that was a very lethal weapon. They could knock a tank out with that [or] a truck full of G.I.'s. One of the regiments in our division was going to a town in the Ruhr valley which they thought might've been secured. Just before they got in there,

they passed a wooded area, and they were attacked. About 15 or 20 G.I.'s were killed in this truck. The Panzerfaust just hit it and blew it to smithereens.

I would say the [German] leadership was good. They knew how to take advantage of hilly terrain, they knew how to defend rivers. That continued right through the war. They were first rate soldiers. The fact they were able to carry on a war against major allies like England, the United States, France, Russia, and survive proved they were good soldiers. I didn't agree with their ideologies, but they were good soldiers.

Q: were you involved in some street fighting or city fighting?

LB: The most street fighting we were involved in was in two towns, Ludenscheid [and] Hagen, which was a large industrial city. Street fighting in Vohberg, and the 342nd were heavily in Ingolstadt, that was house to house fighting there, mostly against SS troops.

Q: would you rank the SS troops much higher than the other German soldiers?

LB: I don't know if they were higher, but they were very fanatical about defending. They just didn't give up easily. I don't recall seeing a large group of SS groups give up where with the German army the Wehrmacht would. They [Wehrmacht] would hide in basements, attics and so forth, and the first chance they got when things quieted down you would see them come out, throw their weapons down or put a white flag in the window.

Q: I noticed after the war you joined the National Guard

LB: I was in the National Guard for two years, the 170th field artillery of the 27th infantry division. I enlisted for a year and I was extended for a year, but our division was not called up. Some guard divisions were but the 27th was not. I was in the field artillery then.

Q: Did you ever make use of the G.I. Bill?

LB: No, I did not, I should have, but I did not. I came back and went to work for the Dupont Company in Newburgh which was one of the largest employers we had. Worked with them for a good number of years and they were purchased by another company called the Stauffer Chemical Company, so between the two companies I had 31 years of service. While I was working there, I was elected as a member of the town board. Sort of a miracle in this republican town to have a democrat elected, but I was, and I went on to become supervisor and later on elected to the New York State Assembly and served there for 12 years. I served on the veterans committee and I was very proud that I was able to pass the first studies bill to get long term veterans care for New York State. It just seemed the language, nothing was happening. But since then, we've had several opened. One in queens, [and] one in Batavia. That was one of the things I was pleased I could be in a position, as a G.I. [as a veteran] to have some influence on legislation later on in Albany.

Q: Did you join any veterans' groups after the war?

LB: Yes, I joined the American Legion, the veterans of foreign wars, the Catholic War Veterans, and I'm a member of the combat infantrymen's association as well.

Q: Are you active in all of those?

LB: I'm not active in all of them but I am probably more active now in the Veterans of foreign wars. Now also, some years ago in 1985 our division formed an 86th Blackhawk division association, I joined that immediately. For 6 years I was the Treasurer and at that time we had over 2,000 members so that 6 years was like a full-time job. There was something coming across my desk at home every day. I enjoyed it and we have reunions every year.

Q: have you attended reunions?

LB: Yes, I have, I have attended almost every reunion.

Q: Have you stayed in contact with anyone that was with you?

LB: Oh yes, before our division association was formed in 1985, beginning as early as 1948, our company D, 341st infantry have held reunions. In the beginning, it was every 3 or 4 years or whenever a group of us got together. Then, starting in the early '80's, we started meeting every 2 years in Indianapolis. The last one we had was 3 years ago. Our numbers are really dwindling. We're talking about having another one but it's hard. When we have our division reunions, some of the fellows do attend. We've had as many as 18. The last reunion in Cincinnati last September we had 7. With the age and so forth it's hard to get guys together. The spirit is there.

Q: How about the replacements that came in to your unit, how were they treated?

LB: Since our casualties were not as heavy as some other divisions since we arrived later in the war. I remember two. One who came in came up at night and he was obviously very nervous as anyone would be. He said to me, "I don't think I'm gonna be alive by tomorrow morning". I said you have to stop that talk. Just worry about getting through the next hour. I remember he survived. Another member of my company, fellow by the name of Jim Kelly from Pittsfield Mass. He came over as a replacement and joined a division in the Ruhr valley. He trained with a guy named Paul Holland. Paul Holland died the first day in combat. They [Kelly and Holland] struck up a real friendship on the Troop ship coming over and of course we're assigned to the same division, and he only lasted a day.

Q: How do you think your service has affected or changed your life?

LB: Going in as a teenager, it made me suddenly a more serious person. One thing it made me value is every day I live because I could have been in one of those military cemeteries overseas or in a local cemetery here. I have a different attitude about life. Doing the best, I can every day and not looking too far into the future or worrying about what happened. I think that experience of being in combat and possibly being killed does leave you a different perspective on things. You seem to be able to put things in their place. I think G.I.'s who have been

exposed to that can do it better than many other people. Don't look too far down the road, don't worry about every little thing that happens. Just thinking how lucky I am at 79 years of age to have gone through the second world war as an infantryman, seen some combat, and still alive and in good health to talk about it. It's a blessing.