

Brewer, W.E. Interview 5-16-90

[Speaker 1]

This is Stan Tinsley. This is May the 16th, 1990. I'm interviewing Mr. W. E. Brewer of 5501 Newberry Road in Knoxville, Tennessee. The next voice you'll hear will be that of Mr. Brewer. Thank you. Mr. Brewer, when did you join the service? I was inducted July of 43.

Did you volunteer? No, I was drafted. My mother and dad wouldn't see to that.

Why did you join the branch of service that you did? I was asked, when I was inducted, if I wanted the Navy or the Army, and I chose the Army. What do you remember about leaving the Army?

Well, it was the first time I had been in a distance from home. Right. And it was a brand new experience all the way around.

How old were you? Eighteen. Eighteen.

Was anybody else in your family in the service? No, I was the only one. Describe the places where you trained and where you were sent from there.

Well, the first Army camp that we went to was Fort Benjamin Harris in Indiana. And from there we went to Camp Fannin, Texas. That's about eight miles out of Tyler, Texas.

It was a new camp. In fact, they didn't even have any grads growing up at the time. And there was about, as I remember, about 28 of us boys from the same county.

And some of them I went to school with. We were all together. And fortunately, we stayed together.

Went through basic training. And we had 17 weeks of what I would call some of the best basic training that you could have. And when the 17 weeks was up, it was getting close to Christmas.

And we had 14 days leave from Camp Fannin to get home. We spent about seven days at home, I think. And the rest of it on the road to Fort Ord, California.

And we stayed at Fort Ord just a short while. And they moved us from there to a little island out in the bay from San Francisco called Angel Island. Surrounded by Alcatraz Highway in between.

You can see the Golden Gates. We stayed there, I suppose, about six weeks, something like that. And they loaded us up and took us to 17 weeks on the water to Brisbane, Australia.

From Brisbane, they moved us by a railroad with engines about the size of one of our big automobiles. Wooden cars. Two or three days up through Australia to a place called Rockhampton.

And then it was kind of in the backcountry in there. It took about a month's jungle training there. And they loaded us up on a ship again and took us to New Guinea.

A place called Prince Haven. Which had already been taken by my division that I was in until then. Rockhampton, they put us in the 41st Infantry Division that they pulled back out in New Guinea.

It was all diseased and shot up and we were replacements. What were you trained to do? Rifleman.

And we stayed at Prince Haven, I guess, maybe six weeks for more jungle training. And then the real thing came up. It was an island called Hollandia.

And that was DDHI, first wave. And it was quite a little battle with them for a while and we secured it. And Don't Guess was there over a couple of months and moved us on to this island called Biak Island.

And it was much worse than Hollandia. So they had three airfields there that they needed to bomb the Philippines. This is a coral island and the airfields were made out of coral.

And they worked us over there for a while. We hit the beach and we drove about eight miles down the beach to the first airfield called Maltema. And you had about 300 feet on the beach before it was a cliff that went up about 100 feet.

And to the left was water. And we got the 3rd Battalion in on the airfield and they drove a wedge between them and my battalion, which was the 2nd. Went back behind us and drove another wedge, cut us off completely.

Finally got the 3rd Battalion back out. And they was closing in on us like casualties, real heavy. It was real heavy.

And they brought in three Sherman tanks to get the 3rd Battalion out. Of course, I happened to be with the 1st Platoon of F Company that was up front. And my platoon had to follow the tanks in to try to get them out.

Of course, trying to knock the tanks out, they knocked most of my platoon out too. And we got them out, but they had us cut off behind. And they had to come in and get us for water.

Downed Peter's truck, the alligators, everything that floated. And A-20s and B-25s, everything, get in there to cover our retreat, I guess you'd call it. So we went back where we made the initial landing.

And it was three days back across that island on foot by foot. And most of the time, you know, we were fighting snipers, delayed action. We were trying to delay us from this side and the other.

And we finally got to the edge of this airfield, and it was a drop-off. A big cliff went down. And G Company, I believe it was, went down that night in the edge of the airfield.

And we were up on the cliff. Of course, they attacked G Company all night long. It just went on all night long.

And we carried the wounded out and had to take a rope down that bluff because we couldn't use them lights, you know, and stretch it all the way back. Fall that rope down there and get ahold of it. It would take about six of us on the litter to get one of them back out of there.

So the next morning, we moved through where G Company was. And it had really been a battlefield, you know. You got to step over.

And we had one machine gunner. I don't know how many they got. Must have got 40 or 50.

And they just scattered down this little path as far as that 30-caliber machine gunner was affected, you know. And some of them were still moaning and groaning. They were all very wounded out that night.

Well, we moved on through and got down, moved into where the runway was. Of course, it was knocked out because two or three days before, our B-29s would come over there and polarize it, you know. And we'll forget the first time it hit us, it would hit the ground.

And I looked over to my right. There was a skeleton laying there, a Japanese skeleton. He must have been an officer because he still had his leather boots on.

He was laying there, you know. Well, from there, we moved on. You mean he'd been there long enough to be hit?

[Speaker 2]

He'd been there long enough.

[Speaker 1]

I don't know why they hadn't got him, but he'd been there long enough that he decayed. There was nothing but the skeleton and his boots on. So we moved on from there toward the center of the airfield, and that's when they unloaded on us, pinned us down.

It was one of those things you just couldn't stick your head up. This went on all day long. Did you all take any prison?

Yeah, we took prison. This went on all day long. About 11 o'clock that day, an airburst, an anti-aircraft gun had up on a hill somewhere back in there.

They was firing at overheads and exploding. You'd set those shells, you know, and they were firing overhead and exploding, trying to get us up. And one of those airbursts got me in the back of the left thigh.

And it was one of those things that there's much going on, you know. We couldn't have lived. Our medics were so busy with so many of them that were wounded worse than I was.

Finally got some help. Got my pants laid, all made of carpentry. I was bleeding pretty bad.

And right before I got wounded, this bomb crater that I passed up when we come through there because I didn't want to get in it. Some more boys did. But as far as I was concerned, it was the wrong place to get in.

They'd rather leave it laying out in the open. Well, the worst happened when I figured it was because I heard the shell come in. I looked, and it wasn't right in the middle of that big bomb crater.

All you could see of them was caught up in their arms and legs. Well, that was about 11 o'clock, and that's when I got hit. Had to lay there most of the day until that afternoon late and finally eased off.

All the firing did. And I crawled back to the help of a stick, I guess. One leg knocked out.

I hollowed back to the company CP and stayed there in a hole with another boy until way in the night. They started moving us back toward the beach. About before daylight, I made it to the beach.

And we were short on supplies because we'd been on foot for three days. And the amphibious alligators and trucks were trying to make it in. And they was throwing mortars on them and running back.

But finally they succeeded in coming in and unloaded their rations and ammunition. And right after daylight, we headed out of there. We had a wounded on these amphibious vehicles in a circle.

Got out in the ocean, and this long-gapped zebra cut his motors off, come down over these hills, and glided right in over us and dropped a 500-pounder. But luckily, he didn't get a direct hit. We got a lot of shrapnel hitting the sides of him.

And we had about eight miles to go back down to the beach where we came from. And had an evacuation hospital down there. And I got treated down there for my wound.

They cleaned it up.

[Speaker 2]

They cut his motors so you wouldn't hear them coming? Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

Cut them back off and he was gone. Oh, good. Yeah, you couldn't hear him.

He was just like a cat, you know. Yeah. Go ahead.

So they dressed my wound, stayed there all night, and the next day they moved all us wounded out to a hospital ship out in the bay. And what else saw me up? They had these cranes that went down and picked us up, took us downstairs, and I got cleaned up.

Mud, blood, and everything else, you know. We got cleaned up. So we was, I guess, two or three more days or longer going back to French Haven, that area of New Guinea where we'd come from, where they had a hospital.

So I stayed there three months and got better, and they sent me back to my outfit. Sent me back. Sent me back.

Same outfit, you know. Back on Biak Island. They were still there.

And we've been there. The outfit stayed there about eight months, I guess. And when I got back, we were still running patrols, which I got in on more patrols, mopping up operations.

So there's so many on there, strays and this, that, and the other. Sometimes they just come in, you know. Hard to get.

Yeah, and somebody came up on the side of the road and made a bulldozer. When you got wounded and got in the hospital, did you have any hopes of getting back to the States, or did you know pretty well you were going to go back to the States? I thought.

Of course, at the hospital, they told me I'd never see combat again. But once you had combat experience, if you could hobble a little anything, they'd send you right back. I see.

So I ended up back in the outfit, and after I got back to the outfit, it wasn't long until they sent us into the Philippines, and we're now on another major campaign tour. And that went on for several weeks. The island was a pretty good side of the island.

We cleaned up one side of it, and the rest of them headed to the other place over in there called the bow. So we had to go by water up as far as we could to a place called Cotabato and up to the bow river. We were about, I think, getting to where we were going, pretty close to the bow, by foot, as far as the kids with trucks and water and this, that, and the other.

We was on foot three or four days, and caught them again back in there while they got away from us, and engaged them for quite a few days back in there, hit and run, any way we could get them. So we got out of there, and they sent us back to where we made the initial landing, near Zamboanga. And from there on, it was a mopping up operation.

We had problems all over the island, you know, where they was showing up in pockets, and terrorizing the Filipino population. There's one place down there called San Ramon. They had a prison there, and it had a bunch of collaborators in it, that worked for the Japs.

So, the Japs was coming out of the jungle back in there, and coming in there and getting their women, and girls, and raping them, killing them, and whatever they wanted to do, you know. So they sent my company down there to clean up this mess. And we found them back in there, and we stopped what was going on with them, and we cleaned them out.

Got back to the original place where we made the first landing, near Zamboanga. And, of course, the war was winding down. And the campaign was winding down, so I came down with malaria.

And when the war was over, I was in the hospital with malaria. Of course, I was fixing to get out, I was getting ready. Went back to my outbed, wasn't there long, until they loaded us up, and sent us into Japan as occupation troops.

Place called Kiri, 20 miles from Hiroshima. I was in Hiroshima right after we got there. And our job was, as you know, to clean it all up.

We were in charge of the naval base. We had some destroyers and submarines out there. And at the time, I was sergeant of the guard there, I guess a half dozen times.

And all over the area. And the Japanese people's population was, I found to be real nice to us. Yeah, really?

Yeah. Of course, there wasn't friendly around Hiroshima. Yeah.

There wasn't at all. A lot of the population around that, where the bomb blasts were, still had bandages where they'd been burned. I guess they died later on.

Yeah, there's just numbers of them that I encountered that had been badly burned. They were still going. So I stayed there, and we cleaned it up.

And I had enough points to head home, so I got on, got on the train and headed for Yokohama. I think that's where we got on another ship and headed for San Diego, California. Was on the water 14 days going to San Diego.

From there we got on a troop ship, and every time we went through the train, the only time they'd ever stop was to change engines and cruise, and the Fort Knox, and that whole group. I was discharged there.

[Speaker 2]

When were you discharged?

[Speaker 1]

Fort Knox. Yes, it was January the 14th of 1946. You know, you being like most of us, there hadn't been much of any place until we were in the service.

You had a lot of guys from this part of the country in your unit, but you had a lot of other people too, didn't you? What did you think of the guys from the other part of the country and how'd you get along with them? Got along fine.

We had, it was really an education to be with so many different nationalities. And we'll forget this little Jewish boy. He wouldn't weigh a hundred pounds wet, and his pack was about as big as he was.

And of course, you know, certain days they'd all eat a certain food. So, I liked him. There was nothing that any of us could do or would do that that little fellow wouldn't do too.

And I traded my... my C ration that he would eat to some of his that he wouldn't eat, you know.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

We used to do all that on Thursday. I... A lot of boys out in New York City, it's got a lot of those from all over.

But I suppose that... the Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia boys, Mississippi, outnumbered them. Mm-hmm.

It was an experience, isn't it? To meet those guys. Oh, yeah.

Where'd you go to high school? Knox Central, but I was built in Kentucky. Okay.

From Kentucky. Yeah, from Kentucky, yeah. Did you ever keep in touch with any of the fellas you served with?

Ah, some of the boys, you know, that... What? One of them was up at Dean Station.

Mm-hmm. I talked to him every now and then. Mm-hmm.

And there's another one in Morristown. Ah, there's... two in the Cincinnati area.

One is still around in Barbados. And I could, I suppose, contact some of the rest. Mm-hmm.

Some of them got banged up pretty bad. Mm-hmm. What do you remember most about your time overseas?

Well, some of the... combat experiences were quite outstanding. If there's one...

it was actually already... landed on... made invasion of Netanyahu.

Had a problem across the bay, about 20 miles over there, something like that. I don't know what they called it. It was a battle.

So they loaded up... the company of us. And we rolled into this little village, and the Japs headed for the...

They'd run from us. Mm-hmm. They did a lot of cleaning up.

And there's one... island that we'd run into up in their headquarters. And out back, they had a guillotine.

It was the first one I'd ever seen. It had a hole dug behind it. That's the way they were bringing in these Japanese, you know, that they'd catch that were working with us.

They'd put their head in and drop that blade down and cut it open and let it roll over into the hole. That was a good army. Who was catching the Japanese?

Was the Philippines catching the Japanese?

[Speaker 2]

No, the Japanese were catching the Philippines.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, they occupied it. Yeah. The ones that were friendly with the help of the United States.

Yeah, yeah. The guerrillas. Boy, when they get a hold of them, that was a threat.

Mm-hmm. How were your relationships with the civilians? You know, starting with Australia and all that, where you'd mix with them and all.

Australia didn't have much. Didn't have any time there to mix with them, but what it did, they were wonderful people. Mm-hmm.

Going over on the boat, 17 days going over, a boy died, his family never got it. So when we unloaded at Brisbane, they quarantined us in a baseball park called Aztec. Mm-hmm.

We were in there for two weeks. And on this train, when they'd stop going into Rockhampton, there's always a bunch of, a lot of women, bring out the molasses, grab this, that, and hand it to us. Real nice people.

Mm-hmm. They were moving so fast, we really didn't have time to... Didn't get to...

Yeah. And you said in the, other than the Air Force, in Japan, the people were pretty nice to you there. Well, when we got off the, when we got off the ship in Japan, to Occupy, part of it was on Occupy, going into the islands, we, uh, they were so heavily manned that they wouldn't, they'd stop the ship late in the afternoon.

Mm-hmm. And the boys would go around that with small boats all night long, keep the mines floating in there. I got an ace pilot to take the ship in.

And when I got it in, we got off, and, uh, got us out of it on rope ladders. That's the way we got on, between them, these rope ladders. Mm-hmm.

We got on these, uh, L-shaped rafts, little landing craft holds out in front of the other side of us. That was pretty rough. So when we got on the ground, on, first, when we stepped on the Japanese soil, it really was, really, uh, a peculiar feeling.

Like that. Uh, these Japanese, uh, I guess, the police officers, they'd line up through there. There was a column of twos.

Of course, we walked in between them, and all of them had their backs to us. And this, there's quite a few of them, you know. Mm-hmm.

And this was strange, too. We, uh, we had ammunition, but we didn't have our rifles loaded, so we didn't know what we was gonna run into. It was a way that, uh, letting us know that we were superior to them.

Mm-hmm. That's right. But the strange thing about it, after that inland, it got set up, you know.

There was no civilians. They went and killed them, everybody left. They gone to the inland.

They'd been told that we was a bunch of animals. Yeah. Kill them, rape them, anything else.

But after, we got to know each other. Mm-hmm. They followed you all the time.

Yeah. Everything they could do for you, no matter what. Mm-hmm.

Real time people. About the same world over there, I guess. You got home on leave except that one time after your training, didn't you?

Yeah, that's why. That's the only time I got home. Did you, uh, get many letters back in 4,000 for mail service?

Well, when we were in combat, uh, we would go out of our way to the main to get mail. It was there, but it just wouldn't get you mail. I know one time my parents got so worried about me that they got a congressman to run me down.

Mm-hmm. And, uh, got a letter from him, you know, about moving so fast to New Jersey. So at the time I was spinning up in the hospital on the run, uh, man, I didn't mail a long time.

And I got 40-some letters at one time. Ha, ha, ha. Oh, my God.

Ha, ha, ha. I had a, yeah, I had a lot of music kids have.

[Speaker 2]

Forty-seven letters at one time.

[Speaker 1]

At one time. Tell me what you did after the war was over. You were, uh, what were you up to?

I come back home, went to school for a couple of years, and, uh, went up north, worked up there, come back, my bank utility company for a couple of years. And, uh, my wife was over here. Family, most of her family was here.

Of course, I had a lot of relatives in this country, too. My grandfather came out of Sneedler. That's where I met her at St. Mary's Hospital. I had a brother-in-law come over there for surgery. I met her over there. I learned to visit him.

[Speaker 2]

Ha, ha, ha, ha. I want to hear this.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. My wife.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, you already? Right. How did you meet him?

[Speaker 1]

So, uh, this fall, a year over, didn't it? Yeah. Got married, and I come over here.

Who'd you work for over here? Uh, in my first, I worked for Commonwealth Life Internship. Yeah, that's right.

You tell me. And then, from there, I got into the service state, and then I spent a couple years with, uh, Hulled Ops Ford, say I learned. I referred to it as a university and I went back in the insurance business and stayed in it for about 22 years.

That's it. Hulled Ops, that was quite an outfit.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, thank you.

[Speaker 1]

I referred to it as, uh, Hulled Ops University. You learned plenty, didn't you?

[Speaker 2]

He got several degrees.

[Speaker 1]

Did you have any feelings about the people of draft age that, uh, were in the service? Uh, I wondered why a lot of them, some of them wasn't in, that, uh, that I knew was capable. it stung some.

Yeah, it did.

[Speaker 2]

It did. I heard him refer to that as, you know, that was the brave man.

[Speaker 1]

I had a fellow of mine who was a dentist and, uh, he managed to stay out. He was back here making all that money when I was in and I was in the service. it stung.

How did the war affect you and how did it change you? I grew up real fast. You did?

Real fast, yeah. I had a lot of more understanding and respect for freedom. Mm-hmm.

A lot of respect for our country. Mm-hmm. Yeah, I knew what the sacrifices had to be to keep our country the way it was, strong and free.

How did things change when you got back here from the time you left? Well, you know, I guess like most other soldiers, that, uh, Where were you when you were discharged? I was discharged, uh, January the 14th of the 46th.

I asked this question to Tom here, What could we have done better during the war?

[Speaker 2]

Well, I guess everything could have been done better.

[Speaker 1]

I really don't know of any area that wasn't covered as good as it could have been covered. In fact, that amazes me to this day how that we um, got so strong so fast. It was a really quick build-up like it was.

What they're going to do in conjunction with this, they're going to do the home front too. Women, you know, that went to work, Hickory Gardens, the whole thing, apparently they're right with this other thing. That's really interesting.

I guess you've had more actual combat experience than anybody I've talked to. Just from one place to the other, to back and forth.