RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM A. BIEHLER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA
AUGUST 18, 2007

TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with William A. Biehler in Palm Desert, California, on August 18, 2007, with Shaun Illingworth. Mr. Biehler, thank you very much for having me here today.

William A. Biehler: You're welcome, glad to see you.

SI: I should also say that this interview is made possible in part by a grant from the Rutgers Alumni Association.

WB: Okay.

SI: To begin, could you tell me, for the record, where and when you were born?

WB: I was born in Hoboken, New Jersey, and moved to Summit, New Jersey, before I was one year old.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents, beginning with their names?

WB: My father's August C. Biehler and he worked for Ciba--pharmaceuticals, fabric--in Summit, for the market research department. My mother is Margaret Biehler and she was a housewife.

SI: Do you know how your family came to settle in North Jersey?

WB: … Both of my grandfathers migrated from Germany in the 1890s and lived in the Hoboken and Jersey City area at first, and then, my grandfather moved to … Summit and my mother and father lived most of their life in Summit, New Jersey.

SI: Do you know how your parents met?

WB: No, I don't. [laughter] There was a large German-American community in Hoboken, as you probably know, and I assume that it was through--yes, I remember now. My mother worked for Janssen Dairy, which was owned by my grandfather, and so did my father. So, I guess they met that way. He married the boss's daughter. [laughter]

SI: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

WB: Yes. My sister is Ruth Hennessey and she's now deceased. My brother is Dr. Robert F. Biehler, who grew up in Summit, New Jersey, … got his Phi Beta Kappa at Syracuse, and then, got his PhD from the University of Minnesota. … He's retired as a full professor of psychology at Chico State College, which is now, let's see, California State University at Chico.

SI: You are the oldest of the brothers and sisters.

WB: Yes, that's right.

SI: What are some of your earliest memories of growing up in Summit?

WB: Summit was a wonderful community. It was wonderful, great schools. I went to Franklin Elementary School, and then, [in] Summit, they had one junior high school and one high school, so, everybody went to the same schools, but I had many good friends in junior high and high school, mostly centered around the Boy Scouts. I was an Eagle Scout. … Boy Scout troops in that area were sponsored by churches and I belonged to the … … Summit Lutheran Church, which was an Evangelical Lutheran church, not the Missouri Synod, and my best friends, probably, were in the Boy Scouts or in the YMCA, the Hi-Y Club.

SI: Was the church very important to your family growing up, outside of these social activities?

WB: Not really, no, no, but it was important because, … in Summit, there were three Lutheran churches, a Norwegian Lutheran church, a Finnish Lutheran church and a German Lutheran church. Now, believe it or not, they never talked to each other. [laughter] They were completely separate, but many of the people in that church still spoke German. My father and most of his friends could still speak German, when they didn't want us to know what they were saying. So, I began to pick up pieces of German early on, and then, … at Rutgers, I took two years of German.

SI: Were there other German traditions kept up in your household?

WB: Yes, pretty much. We celebrated Christmas on Christmas Eve and … my mother cooked a lot of German-American food, meat and potatoes and lots of milk. [laughter]

SI: Your father was a Navy veteran from World War I.

WB: Yes, that's correct. How did you know that?

SI: You wrote that on your pre-interview survey.

WB: Oh, okay, yes, yes. He was a first-class petty officer and a yeoman.

SI: Did he ever tell you any stories about his time in the service?

WB: He didn't. He never left the country. He was in the United States all the time, during World War I.

SI: Did either of your parents ever talk about what it was like being of German descent during World War I, about any prejudice they may have felt?

WB: No. I don't think they ever felt anything, because their friends were almost all of German descent also, and my relatives. I had an uncle and an aunt. … My aunt lived in New Summit and I saw her frequently and her name was Wieboldt and my uncle was a Janssen. He was the … only son of my grandfather, but it wasn't real [centered on the German heritage]. … My grandmother took a German newspaper, because she liked to keep up with the language, but nothing special.

SI: Can you talk a little bit about your involvement with the Boy Scouts? What kind of things would your troop do?

WB: Yes. Well, I've always liked the outdoors and … I was in Troop 69 in Summit, New Jersey. … The Scoutmaster was a very experienced camper and we did a lot of camping and hiking and overnight backpacking and stuff like that. So, that was very good preparation for being in the Army. And, believe it or not, in basic training, the first night we ever slept out under the stars, so many of the fellows came from big cities, they'd never done that before. They were worried about snakes and spiders and animals and everything else, but that was old stuff to the Boy Scouts. [laughter]

SI: Were there other things that you learned in the Boy Scouts that helped you in the service?

WB: Oh, yes, a great deal. I learned a lot of knots. The Army doesn't teach you how to tie knots. The Army doesn't really teach you how to use a map and a compass. They spent one or two days on it, but not very much, because the American Army is a lot built on specialists. In order to be a navigator or to find your way, you're supposed to be a specialist. … I also learned how to build fires in the rain and, a couple of times, I was the only person in our unit who could do that. So, I think it helped me a whole lot.

SI: What about your education in the Summit schools? What did you think of it in general? What were you interested in?

WB: In Summit, in high school? The schools there were excellent, because a lot of the teachers were commuting and going to Columbia to get master's [degrees] and PhDs. So, they had a wonderful music program. I played the clarinet in the high school band and I belonged to the YMCA. That was very active. That's where I learned how to swim and bowl and play pool, stuff like that, but Summit was a very friendly community. … I never really realized, but it was a pretty wealthy community. I would say eighty percent of my close friends in Franklin School were, which was the elementary school, [children of parents who] all worked at Bell Labs. Their fathers were engineers and, there, that was a heavy influence. So, I had friends. … Some of my father's friends showed me how to work shortwave radio and things like that, way ahead of the Army, and then, … it was a nice town to grow up in and the schools were very good, that I got good math training and English. I had trouble with foreign languages, but that smoothed out once you get to the real thing.

SI: Was there a particular field that you found yourself gravitating towards?

WB: No, not really, science in general. … I had an outstanding high school chemistry and physics teacher and I was interested in those two subjects. So, I started out at Rutgers as a chemistry major.

SI: How did the Great Depression affect both your family and the town?

WB: My father, both my father and my uncles, … my two uncles, they all worked for the dairy, in Hoboken, New Jersey, and that was a steady business, so, they always [worked]. … Every night, my father rode home on the Lackawanna Railroad from [Hoboken]. He worked for the dairy before he worked for Ciba. When Ciba first opened up in Summit, they opened up a large facility, a research and manufacturing facility, in Summit. He … always wanted [to work there]. He applied to work there, but he didn't get a job there for quite a while. So, he kept working in Hoboken and he'd ride the train with six bottles of milk and a pound of butter every night, [laughter] and that'd be all gone by the next day, yes. So, we didn't live extravagantly, but we were comfortable. … We'd keep a car a long time. My dad'd keep one car for ten years and we were a one-car family and that worked out fine, because, in Summit, you could walk to the New Providence Station, where he … caught the train, and that was about a mile. … We walked to school, or rode bikes, later on. There were no buses and my folks didn't take us to school in the car. …

SI: Did you have to work at all before you went to college?

WB: … The first job I had was working for the YMCA, setting up, as a group leader, for the younger kids, got paid ten cents an hour, and so, I got a Social Security card when I was about seventeen, I think, and then, … I went to camp in the summer. I went to a YMCA camp first, and then, a Boy Scout camp, later, but … I never worked during the summer when I was going to school, when I was in high school.

SI: Where were these camps that you would go to?

WB: Well, the YMCA camp was Camp Wawayanda. It was up near Andover, in New Jersey, Northern New Jersey, and the Camp Watchung was pretty close to the same area, up around Lake Hopatcong. …

SI: Did you get to go to any jamborees or any national events?

WB: No, I never did. … Our troop was very active in jamborees, but it was all within the council, within New Jersey, against other New Jersey troops. … We won a lot of ribbons and stuff, because … you do some very valuable things in the Boy Scouts. You'll learn how to build towers and bridges. I built a suspension bridge at camp … one summer. We spent all summer building a pretty good, about thirty-foot, suspension bridge, and, oh, I learned a lot of very valuable things in the Scouts. Have you ever been in the Scouts yourself?

SI: Yes, I was an Eagle Scout.

WB: Oh, good, yes, so that I guess the center of my life was pretty much the church and the Boy Scouts and high school. The school was very, very friendly. Everybody got along well. There were no gang fights or anything like that.

SI: Did you play athletics or any sports?

WB: … I grew very fast and I outgrew my strength, … but I was on the track team. I threw the shot put and the javelin. [laughter]

SI: How did your family feel about education in general and the idea of you going to college?

WB: None of them had ever gone to college. My mother and father never went to college. My mother went to secretarial school. My father just learned accounting pretty much in the Navy, and the Navy was pretty good about [training him]. … [Editor's Note: Mr. Biehler's dog entered the room at this point, causing a break in the interview.] The question was, again, please?

SI: How did your family feel about education and you going to college?

WB: They encouraged education. They made us do our homework. … I was the first one to go to college, but, then, my brother went, also graduated from college, and my sister took two years, and then, she got married, but they were very strong on education.

SI: So, at the time you graduated from high school, the war had already started in Europe.

WB: … That's right, yes.

SI: What did you think of the international situation at that time?

WB: … Most of the boys, you know, we just figured, sooner or later, we'd end up in the service. … I graduated from high school in '41 and things were started by then. Actually, I was a freshman at Rutgers … in December of '41, wasn't it? Yes, I had just started and we were home in December and it came over the radio that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. So, then, I knew then I'd have to [join the military]. [laughter] … [Editor's Note: Japanese forces attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, thrusting the United States into the Second World War.]

SI: Had you and your family or friends discussed what was happening in Europe in high school?

WB: My folks knew they had second cousins in Germany and my grandmother was the one who [kept in touch]. … There were Biehlers in Germany who used to write to her and one of them was an ardent Nazi and he sent her some postcards and things that were very, you know, "Oh, it's wonderful. Hitler is going to remake Germany a new nation and we're going to be powerful and run things from now on," but she, you know, … didn't like that. She thought that was pretty ridiculous, for little, old Germany to think they were that big. … She was from Northern Germany, my grandmother was from Hamburg, and my grandfather was also from [there]. He was from Stade, up close to Denmark. … My father's folks were from (Laupheim?), down there in the Bavaria [region], so that when I told people in Germany that my mother and father came from North and South Germany, "Oh, that can't happen. That never happens in Germany," for several reasons. One, the north was primarily Protestant and the south was all Catholic. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

WB: But, you're asking, I guess, whether my folks just didn't feel strongly--they were certainly not for Germany, if that's your question. I know some German-American people felt very strong on Germany, but my folks were definitely American-minded and they wanted to stay in America, and they did, and they thought that America was great.

SI: I was going to ask, being a part of this larger German-American community, were there some who were pro-Germany and some that were anti-Nazi?

WB: Yes. Well, it's possible that I was fighting against second cousins. [laughter] I never knew any of them, but they were in the German Army, I know that. We found that out later.

SI: How did you settle on Rutgers for college?

WB: It was the closest college and it was the most reasonable and it was one I thought I could get into, and several of my friends from Summit were going to Rutgers, too.

SI: You decided to major in chemistry.

WB: And I started as a chemistry major, that's right.

SI: What do you remember about your first days at Rutgers?

WB: … I enjoyed it very much. … The classes were good. They were small. At that time, I think Rutgers was only about fifteen hundred students, in '41. … You knew a whole lot of people on the campus. I belonged to the Chi Psi Fraternity. … I became a member there because my mother--first of all, the food was wonderful. … They were one of the few fraternities that had a housemother and my mother liked that idea and it was very convenient and a nice, very nice, group of people. … I enjoyed Rutgers right away and, in my freshman year, I became somewhat of a playboy, I'm afraid. [laughter] I got my first grades back and I got almost all "As" and "Bs." So, I thought, "Oh, this is a cinch. Guess I can relax and have a good time." [laughter] So, I was on the Rifle Team and the crew, the freshman crew, and a couple of other things, and didn't study too hard after my first [semester]. So, I had some trouble. I was almost on the verge of flunking out and I was on academic probation, I guess, at the end of my sophomore year, because I took some courses that were way too difficult for me. … I was having trouble deciding on what I wanted to major in, too. I figured out pretty quickly I didn't want to be a chemistry major. So, I changed to pre-med, and then, when I came back from the war, I changed to pre-forestry.

SI: Why did you switch to pre-med?

WB: … Well, I knew I wanted to be in science and I didn't know what else to go into, and then, I found out real fast I wasn't going to get into medical school with the kind of grades I was getting. So, I just coasted, you know. By that time, everybody knew you're going to be in the Army, [laughter] or in the service someplace. … I took the test for the A-12 Program, or the ASTP Program, and passed those, along with a whole lot of other guys from Rutgers, and so,

that's what I started out as in the Army, in the A-12 Program. They were going to make an engineer out of me.

SI: What else stands out about Rutgers in the pre-war era? From what I have been told in interviews, the University had much more control over students.

WB: Oh, yes, yes, that's right. … In my freshman year, I had to wear a little hat, the dink, and the green tie all the time and everybody did that and I understand that, … after the war, … the people who were sophomores and had done that up until then tried to enforce that to some of the veterans coming back and they said, "Nothing doing. Get lost. [laughter] I came to college to learn, not to play games." … A lot of those early traditions went up the river. … It was small, it was friendly, everybody … got along great. … At that time, there were very few black students at Rutgers, in '41. There were a lot of Jewish students. Almost everybody was from New Jersey. One or two, I guess; … I had a fraternity brother who was from Michigan, but he was on a football scholarship. … I think everybody knew a war was coming and that things weren't going to be the same, I think. That's about all I can say about it, but I enjoyed [it]. I had a wonderful time at Rutgers. I studied, enjoyed my courses and I had a lot of very wonderful professors. …

SI: Do any of those professors stand out in your memory?

WB: … Well, in my freshman and junior year, freshman and sophomore year, I can't really remember too many, but Prof. [John J.] George, in political science, was famous, and then, [Richard] Reager in speech was very good and I took two courses from Selman, Dr. Selman Waksman, in the microbiology. He was fabulous, … and then, Prof. [Frank G.] Helyar, I think his name was. Well, Helyar was in the Agricultural Department, but, … when I came back, I changed to pre-forestry, because I knew I wanted to go into forestry and Rutgers didn't have a bachelor's degree in forestry. So, I took the closest thing to it, which allowed me to get into Berkeley when I [applied]. … [Editor's Note: Dr. Selman Waksman was a microbiologist whose research led to the discovery of streptomycin and who coined the term "antibiotics." He earned his bachelor's from Rutgers College in 1915, a master's from Rutgers in 1916 and his PhD at University of California at Berkeley in 1918 and joined the Rutgers University faculty that same year. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1952.]

SI: During your first two years at Rutgers, you were in ROTC.

WB: Yes, that was compulsory for everybody in those days and it was Signal Corps ROTC, which was helpful, but it was only, what, one day a week? I think, yes, and you had to march and we learned close-order drill and everything, and I joined the Rifle Team. … The thing that was kind of fascinating, that sticks out in my memory, is [that] the ROTC professors wore civilian clothes up until the day of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The next day, they showed up in Army uniforms. That's really the first time we realized that they were Army officers and knew their rank and everything. We used to just call them Mr. So-and-So. … Is ROTC still required?

SI: No. I think they stopped requiring it in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

WB: Oh, yes.

SI: However, there is still a strong ROTC program at Rutgers, and the Air Force ROTC as well.

WB: Yes.

SI: They also have a joint naval program with Princeton.

WB: Yes.

SI: Given that the war loomed heavily over your Rutgers years, did that affect the tenor of the training? Was it more intense?

WB: … They all of a sudden required, I think in my sophomore year, … I think as soon as war was declared, they required physical education. … Until then, there was no requirement to take any kind of exercises, … but, because I was on the crew, I was exempt from that. … I enjoyed the crew a whole lot and enjoyed the people in it and I enjoyed the exercise and the competition and everything.

SI: Who was the coach at the time?

WB: Logg, Chuck Logg.

SI: Do any meets stand out as being particularly memorable?

WB: Yes. We beat Pennsylvania in my sophomore year, when, oh, Princess Grace's brother was stroke--didn't beat them by much, but we beat them. [laughter] [Editor's Note: John Brendan Kelly, Jr., an Olympic oarsman and bronze medal winner at the 1956 Olympics, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1950. His sister, actress Grace Kelly, became Princess Grace after marrying Rainier, III, Prince of Monaco, in 1956.] … We enjoyed [it]. It was a real experience to row at Princeton, on Lake Carnegie, because it's an old canal and it's straight, … but, later on, when I was on the varsity crew, the varsity always rows last. So, the drinkers on the shore are pretty smashed by the time the varsity race comes in. They're throwing bottles of beer at you or something, you know, [laughter] but that's about all I remember about the early days. … That's a long time ago.

SI: Did you have to choose to be in the Signal Corps training program?

WB: No, that's all that was available.

SI: That was all. There was no regular infantry.

WB: That's right, and I understand that's what happened. Certain colleges had engineers, some colleges--I don't think, I don't know, if any of them had infantry, because that's what they really needed. … The Signal Corps, it was good to learn the Morse code and practice it, something like that.

SI: You had had some experience before.

WB: Yes, right, yes.

SI: You enrolled in the Army ASTP Program.

WB: Yes.

SI: Was that because the opportunity came along? [Editor's Note: The Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), established in 1942, was an officer training program that serviced over two hundred thousand enlisted men in several specialties, including engineering, medicine and dentistry, psychology and foreign languages, at 227 colleges and universities. The majority of ASTP cadets were reassigned in the Spring of 1944, before completing the program, to meet manpower needs in other units, particularly in infantry, airborne and armored divisions destined for frontline combat.]

WB: That's right. I thought it would be better than being a foot soldier, which I ended up as, [laughter] but that program, I think, was just an aid to the colleges. The Army, at that time--you weren't alive then, so, you don't remember it--but, in the very early days, they had pictures in the paper of people training with broomsticks. They didn't even have enough rifles for people to practice marching with, so, they had them with brooms. [laughter] … Then, they ramped up the production rapidly, and then, made enough rifles and everything and other supplies. So, things improved very quickly, but the people who went in the service early just didn't have the right equipment or anything, but they got all the gravy jobs.

SI: Was there some sort of catalyst? Did you get a note from your draft board?

WB: Well, no, the draft board … had told me right away. … They called you in and you took the physical and everybody passed the physical. Have you ever heard about the psychological part of the Army physical?

SI: A little bit.

WB: They ask you, "Do you like girls?" [laughter] That was the end of it. I wonder what would happen if some guy said, "No, I don't like girls, I like boys." [laughter]

SI: I guess they would not be in the Army.

WB: I don't know. I doubt it, not in those days, because they needed bodies, but a few people failed the physical, but not very many. … The draft board told me that, "We will allow you to finish your sophomore year, but, then, you're going in." So, as I said, I thought that the ASTP Program would be better than anything else that was available to me. … I couldn't qualify to be an officer because my eyes weren't good enough without glasses. I have pretty weak eyes.

SI: Before we go into the service, did you see any ways in which the war affected Rutgers?

WB: The population dropped markedly. I think--well, we didn't see much of the girls' campus--but I think they had, still had, a pretty steady group, but I'm pretty sure that the number of students at Rutgers dropped quite a bit, as almost all other colleges did, too, I think. Like, when my wife went to the School of Music at the University of Rochester, there were hardly any men. … They ran out of tenors and baritones, because they were all women. [laughter] … I guess that was the only impact, and you saw many more soldiers around New Brunswick from Camp Kilmer, and that was supposed to be a very secret base, … big, big secret about Camp Kilmer, but you saw a lot of soldiers downtown and everything--didn't see very many sailors, didn't see any Marines--but that's the major thing that I can think of. … Supplies, well, gas was rationed, so, my folks couldn't afford to have the gas to drive and pick me up. So, I hitchhiked home or I took the bus a couple of times when I … had vacations, but, most of the time, I stayed right there at Rutgers.

SI: What about Civil Defense activities in the area?

WB: Yes, we had the blackout at the fraternity house and we had the wardens and stuff and we had to put the big curtain, heavy shades and curtains, on the windows and everything, but New Brunswick is pretty far in from [the coastline]. You can't see the ocean from New Brunswick, I think. I know, along the coast, the people who lived in Point Pleasant and Asbury Park and stuff, they had to be very, very careful and I'm sure there were submarines, German submarines, out along the coast there.

SI: What about part-time war work?

WB: … Let's see, I worked for a piston ring factory. At the end of my freshman year, I went home and I worked all summer for a piston ring factory, making piston rings for submarines and the aircraft engines. It was in Sterling, New Jersey. …

SI: Is that near Summit?

WB: Yes, near Summit, yes.

SI: What was that like? What did you do there?

WB: … I was a lathe operator. They taught me how to work a lathe and you just did the same procedure time and time again, and you were paid by how many rings you could make. So, it was piecework.

SI: How many hours a day would you work?

WB: Well, I worked eight hours a day and … it was the first time I've ever had shift changes. They changed shifts every week, like, you'd be on the day shift one week, and then, you'd be on the afternoon shift, and then, you'd be on the graveyard shift, from midnight until eight AM. That was terrible. [laughter] It was hard to get sleep, because … your body was faced with something different every other week, but a number of my college friends worked in the same place.

SI: Was it a fairly large facility?

WB: Oh, yes, yes, it was a couple of thousand people.

SI: Was there a union?

WB: No, no union. No, I can't remember any union activities at all there. It probably was non-union. Unions weren't that big in New Jersey in those days. In the big cities, they were, I think in Newark and … in Hoboken, Jersey City. Wherever there were longshoremen, they were big, or Teamsters, but that's a good question. … No, I don't remember any union activity.

SI: Your co-workers in the plant, were they non-traditional workers, for example, a lot of women? Do you remember that?

WB: There were women, but they worked in different sections. The place, the area where I worked, was all men and it was all machine operators and lappers and things like that, but two of my other friends, … my fraternity brothers, worked in the same factory. We rode in the same carpool. One guy had a special card, so, we'd meet him on the street and rode right out to Sterling, out in the middle of the country. [laughter]

SI: Were there any accidents at the factory?

WB: No, no, they were pretty good, pretty safety conscious.

SI: Did they do anything, like put up posters or have talks, to impress upon you the importance of getting this work done for the war?

WB: No, no, just a job, but they did have one of those "E" flags, whatever it was, for excellence. [Editor's Note: During the Second World War, the US government awarded over four thousand "E Pennants" to war plants with exceptional production records.] They produced everything from little tiny piston rings for pumps and things like that on an airplane, stuff, to big diesel [engines]. The biggest ones were about sixteen inches for diesel engines, for submarine engines.

SI: You said you were at Rutgers when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

WB: Yes. I was home. … I think it was Christmas vacation and we heard it announced on the radio and my father wanted to go down and sign up. He was in his forties. … So, he had to register for the draft, which really surprised some of my friends' parents, who were older than he. So, my father and my brother and I all had to go down and register for the draft at the same time. … He was four years younger than me, but, … still, I think he had to register when he was sixteen. Do you remember that? no.

SI: The draft? No, today, we just have to sign up for Selective Service.

WB: Do you realize that that law has never been rescinded?

SI: Yes, you have to sign up for Selective Service when you turn eighteen.

WB: Yes, but you don't have to register anymore, I guess, but Congressman Rangel from New York wants to bring it back. [Editor's Note: Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY) proposed reinstating the draft several times during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, primarily as a means of highlighting issues surrounding how the manpower to fight those wars was developed and utilized.]

SI: Yes, I saw that on the news.

WB: Yes, I don't think so. [laughter]

SI: Tell me about the process of getting into the military after you signed up for the ASTP.

WB: Yes, okay. I reported to--I'm trying to remember now. I think they told us to go to Newark, to the armory in Newark, and then, they all took us back, took us by bus. … When you took your final physical, they actually put you in. You were in the Army. You have to take the oath and … you take one step forward, and then, you're in the Army. … Then, they put us on inactive duty for two weeks, to say good-bye and write our will and all that jazz, and then, they … took us to take a bus to--vouchers, I guess they called them--to Newark and there was a big bus in Newark that took us all, in civilian clothes, down to Fort Dix. … At Fort Dix, we were given, taking, a bunch of tests that they gave everybody--the mechanical test, a Signal Corps type test, then, intelligence tests--and I passed all those with pretty high grades and, first, they wanted--oh, it's interesting. … When we reported down there, they said, … "You're going to go in the Navy CBs [construction battalions] and learn how to be an engineer," or build airports and stuff, and I said, "Well, wait a minute, … I have the papers with me. … I qualified for the Army A-12 Program." "Okay, so, you're going in the Army," didn't argue, didn't matter to them. … They had a quota, so, there, "You're in the Navy. You're in the Army. You're in this," [laughter] but, then, at Fort Dix, all we just learned [was] close-order drill and no weapons or anything, but didn't do much, just pretty much sat around. … I was on KP the first day. [laughter] … They just went through the alphabet and that was a real experience, because, when you get huge, huge pots full of potatoes to peel … by hand, and, later on, I'm sure they had machines and everything else to do a lot of that, but, then, … I got placed, we were on a work detail. They kept us doing little things, like digging ditches and things like that, and I got poison ivy. So, I missed the first shipment because I was on sick call with the poison ivy. I'm pretty allergic to poison ivy, and that first group went to California and went to the Pacific. So, a lot of my high school friends went in that group and they ended up in the Pacific and in the Army in the Pacific. I don't know what they ever did, but I think there was only one Army division, the First Cavalry, in that working. All the rest was a Marine operation and the Navy in the Pacific. [Editor's Note: The US Army committed over twenty divisions to the Pacific Theater. Mr. Biehler's comment reflects the lower level of manpower directed towards the Pacific as compared to the European Theater, where approximately three times the number of division were committed as a result of the Allies' "Germany First" strategy.] So, the second group that went, I went with that and I went down--I rode by commuter train, with a steam engine--all the way down to Tyler, Texas. [laughter]

SI: How long did that take?

WB: Yes, took about three days, [laughter] and it stopped periodically and pulled off into a siding and they had mess kitchens and things set up and rest rooms and things, nothing on the train. … You have your big barracks bag and you had all your clothes in there. … We just had enough, one set of clothes, to get to basic training, and then, we finally pulled into Texas, … all kinds of wild rumors about where we were going, you know, all the way along. Nobody tells you anything, [laughter] but, finally, I figured out, by the stars, that we were headed south. Nobody ever did any of that, either, but, so, we ended up at Tyler, Texas, at Camp Fannin, F-A-N-N-I-N, which was an infantry replacement training center, IRTC, and I had seventeen weeks of basic training there and learned to [be a soldier]. The Army has the--has anybody mentioned how crazy the movies were? They'd show you movies on how to dig a foxhole.

SI: Please, tell me about that.

WB: And it was graded for an IQ of forty. "You must take the shovel and you place it in the sand and in the soil and you pull it up and you put it over here and you slope the sides to prevent caving in," and they repeated everything fifty or sixty times. So, with this group, we're all high IQ guys, it was kind of ridiculous, but they had good [instructors]. The people doing the training were excellent. I think … they rapidly promoted some people who were in the regular Army and made them sergeants or lieutenants and they were excellent. They knew what they were doing and they knew how to handle a bunch of young guys without [incident], but … I think we got up at six o'clock and went until about ten o'clock at night. So, you didn't have a whole lot of time on your hands, [laughter] but, then, they issued us M-1 [Garand] rifles and with all the Cosmoline on it. You ever heard about Cosmoline? It's heavy grease. So, you had to clean all that off with gasoline and clean the rifles and everything, and we learned how to take them apart and, in the dark, you had to be able to take it apart in the dark, field strip it, and put it back together again and learn all the nomenclature. The Army's big on nomenclature, got to know the names of all the parts and everything. I don't know why, [laughter] but that's the way they do it, but it was a very, very complete [training]. … We learned the rifle first, then, the carbine, the grease gun [M3 submachine gun], mortar, machine-gun, hand grenades, bayonets and garrote, and they had firing courses. … Towards the end, every day, we'd march or hike. They … were basically building people's strength up. … It was kind of fascinating to see--some people were so out of shape that they really couldn't walk more than a couple hundred yards, but, by the time we were halfway through, we took a ten-mile hike and everybody made it. They were getting good food. Some of the people who had been, you know, pretty poor weren't getting the right kind of food … when they were civilians. … Everybody was on rationing then, you know. Have you ever heard about the meat rationing and the gasoline rationing and all that stuff? Yes, okay, but, anyhow, … the Army had first-class of everything--well, the whole service. They got the best meat and the best vegetables and milk--and no milk. That's the first thing, I thought about. [laughter] I asked for milk at the first meal, "No milk in the Army, soldier." Well, I would drink coffee. … Then, if you wanted water, you had to go way up, a mile away, to a faucet and get a pitcher of water. So, I learned how to drink coffee. At first, I ordered it up with milk and sugar, but, ultimately, I learned how to drink it black. … The basic training was very thorough, really. They taught you map reading and how to recognize enemy tanks and planes

and, by that time, they pretty much concentrated on Germany and the Germans. We knew we weren't going to go to Japan. … Then, the hiking, … folding the blankets so [that] you can sleep warmly outside and putting the tents up and the little pup tents, two guys to a tent, and … the best part of the basic training--the closest thing to [live combat], we fired the rifle and we fired everything, live ammunition, and at different ranges, but a big black bull's-eye isn't what you're really shooting at in combat. [laughter] So, the closest thing … in training that they had, the best part of the training, was right towards the very end, they had this course where targets would pop up for a short amount of time, and at different ranges and in different places, and that was the closest thing to real conditions.

SI: Were they made to look like people or targets?

WB: They looked like a soldier, you know, as a target. It just shows us head and shoulders, which is what you see from a foxhole, and, if somebody's in a foxhole, they'd pop up and fire, and then, go back down again. … That was excellent training and not very many of us hit very many targets on that, but they tried it again, and then, we did pretty well. … Then, you fix bayonets--and the rifle's hot by that time, so, you have to be real careful where you grab it--and charge and wipe them out in the foxholes. … Then, one of the exercises they did was, you had to dig a foxhole with only your helmet in half an hour. They said, "In a half an hour, a tank's going to come out here and run over you guys," and so, you had to dig a foxhole deep enough to get your head under, down, crouched down under there. … It was a very light tank, but it ran over everybody, and so, that night, I wrote my folks a letter and said, "I got run over by a tank today," and I forgot to tell them--and I said, "But, I'm okay." [laughter] … That's the most part I remember about basic training. It was good and it was thorough, but they really didn't do [much else]. They didn't teach you any first aid, they didn't teach you how to tie a knot or light a fire or do anything like that, which I thought were pretty important to living in the outside, but the Army does it their way and their way was pretty efficient. … Then, we had to all see the "How We Fight" series. It was produced by Ronald Reagan, Captain Ronald Reagan, [laughter] and that was so patriotic. You know, oh, we had patriotic music and everything, "These are our enemies and we have to defeat them to save America." … It was very, very dramatic. … I think most of us knew why we were there. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Future President Ronald Reagan, then an actor serving in the US Army, appeared in many instructional films used in training and indoctrinating service personnel during World War II. Mr. Biehler may be mistaking some of these films for the seven-part "Why We Fight" series, directed by Frank Capra and narrated by actor Walter Huston.]

SI: The movies were kind of superfluous.

WB: Yes.

SI: Was this the first time that you had really met people from all around the country?

WB: Yes. It's the first time I'd ever been in the Deep South. Well, my folks had taken us as far as Washington, DC, but I was amazed. … From the train, you'd pull into a station and there'd be a white bathroom and a black bathroom and I just couldn't believe that, first time I saw that, and the South was heavily segregated at that time. A black guy couldn't walk into a restaurant, had

to go around the back door, and they couldn't walk on the right side of the street. … I couldn't believe it, but that's the way it was, and, at Camp Fannin, they had some German prisoners who had been taken in Africa. … So, they were doing road repair and stuff, but they were singing and marching along there. They were a happy bunch of campers, I'll tell you. [laughter] They were out of it, getting good food and not working too hard. … That was the first time we ever saw any German soldiers. They still had the Germans uniforms on, yes.

SI: What did you think of the enemy at that point? Did you have an image in your mind?

WB: It wasn't … personal to me at that point. It became very personal later, but it wasn't at that point, no.

SI: In general, how did you adapt to going from the freedoms of civilian life to the discipline of military life?

WB: It was pretty easy for me, yes, because I'd had the Boy Scouts--in a certain way, is a discipline--and my folks, I couldn't get away with a whole lot when I was growing up. I was never beaten or anything like that, but I respected and obeyed my parents, and I thought everybody else did, too. So, that wasn't a problem for me. It was a big problem for some people.

SI: Yes.

WB: But, the Army has ways of fixing that, too--they just teach you--or the military. They have a good system.

SI: At the end of your training at Camp Fannin, did you go on to an ASTP training center at one of the colleges?

WB: No, I left from there and went to Fort Meade, Maryland, and then, up to Camp Kilmer. … Camp Meade, we were only there a couple of days, and then, we were right away to Kilmer, and then, we knew we were going overseas, and so, they gave you, I think either a week or two weeks, I guess it was two weeks, of final leave. … You were told to write a will and take care of all your personal effects and they told us, "Don't bring anything valuable with you. Like, if you've got a good gold watch or a gold ring, don't bring that with you, because you're going to Europe."

SI: I am a little confused. At which point did they tell you that you would not be going into the ASTP Program?

WB: Oh, well, that, at Fort Meade, they just announced that the ASTP Program--I was supposed to be going to the University of Pennsylvania and take engineering training--and then, all of a sudden, they said, "The whole ASTP Program is wiped out. Everybody's in the infantry."

SI: How did everyone react to that? How did you react to that?

WB: I figured it was probably coming, [laughter] although some guys were very upset, "This is a promise." That's one thing that you learn about the military, very quickly, that you can never believe any promises that they make, because things change too much.

SI: Were you able to leave Camp Kilmer? Were you able to go see your family one last time?

WB: Yes, yes. I took a bus and I called my folks and they met me at Rutgers, at the fraternity house. … It was funny--everything was very, very secret. You weren't supposed to tell anybody where you were, … what was happening or anything. … So, then, my dad takes me down to Newark, to catch the bus back to Kilmer, and here's this guy, "Camp Kilmer, everybody for Camp Kilmer over here." [laughter] … You want to keep on going?

SI: Yes.

WB: Okay. … We were taken from [Kilmer]. I was at Kilmer, I guess, after that two weeks, just about three or four days, and then, we were taken, by bus again, to New York, got right on a ship from the bus. … It was a huge convoy, more than a hundred ships by the time we got out into the ocean and could see everybody, but I was on a British refrigerator ship that was converted to a transport. The food was terrible. [laughter] The British can't cook worth a darn, and the thing I mostly remember about going over was the ceiling seemed to--how tall are you?

SI: About six-foot-two.

WB: Yes. Well, I'm six-[foot]-four and, in Army boots, that makes you six-[foot]-six. So, I learned--there's things sticking out of the ceiling all over, valves and faucets and stuff--so, I just kept my steel helmet on all the way over there, because it was dented by the time I got to England. [laughter] … It was a huge, big convoy, all we could just see. … We were all happy to see an aircraft carrier that was in the middle of the group. … A lot of Liberty ships, there were a lot of ships carrying troops and a lot of ships carrying supplies, … and there were about four destroyers, or destroyer escorts, I guess they were, zipping around the outside all the time, but we were never attacked. … It was interesting to me that they had these long-distance flying boats. You know, when you really think it out, from Newfoundland and from Greenland and from Iceland, where we all had bases, there was only a couple of hundred miles where you weren't covered by flying boats and they could see submarines. … As far as I know, nobody on that convoy was ever attacked by submarines and we landed at Liverpool.

SI: How long was the crossing?

WB: Boy, almost two weeks, because Liberty ships can only go eight miles an hour, eight knots, … and they were zigzagging, too. I couldn't understand how nobody ever ran into anybody. [laughter] I guess they all zigged at the same time and zagged at the same time. … This is a funny story. The captain of the ship was British and, just before we got off, he felt he'd better say a word to the Yanks. So, he gave a patriotic speech, saying, "We're glad you're here and we welcome you to England to help us fight the Germans and good hunting, Yanks," and some guy on the back says, "Who's hunting?" which isn't a very British thing to say. [laughter] … The Brits were a tough people. I mean, they'd been at war, what? four years already at that time.

They got kicked out of France twice. Boy, they got a really tough time, but, then, we were taken by train, all blacked out and everything, and headed south. We're on the train for a day-and-a-half and we ended up in Wales, … close to Barnstaple, on the south coast of England, and we were there for--that was a big infantry replacement depot. … We all knew we were going in the infantry and we didn't have any weapons when we went over, but they issued us M-1 rifles there, and have you ever seen an M-1 rifle?

SI: Yes, I have seen them in museums.

WB: Okay. You want to hold one? I've got one.

SI: Sure.

WB: Before you leave, I'll show it to you. They're heavy--they're nine pounds. [laughter] … We zeroed them in on a one-thousand-inch range, which was an interesting piece of engineering. At a thousand inches, … it's the same as if you're zeroing in at two hundred yards and the target's about an inch. So, we're each zeroing the rifles in. That, by the way, is one of the biggest advantages that the Americans had, was the M-1 rifle, because it had quarter click adjustments for windage and elevation and the German had a bolt action rifle. … We could fire two shots while they were working the bolt, because an M-1'll fire eight shots as fast as you pull the trigger and the Germans didn't have any windage adjustment. Hitler made that decision himself. He says, "Germans are such wonderful shots, they don't need a windage adjustment. They can take Kentucky windage." In other words, if the wind is blowing, you aim to the right or to the left to make up for it, and that saved my life at least three times, because, at least three times, I know, a bullet went by to the right or the left, but it was right at the right elevation. …

SI: Were there any other things that they taught you at the "repple-depple," any tactics or anything that they had learned in the field?

WB: … The repple-depples were terrible places, because nobody belongs to anything. They had the second-rate or third-rate officers that were no good for anything else, the misfits. [laughter] Most of those officers were Coast Artillery officers and they don't need any more Coast Artillery. They hadn't needed Coast Artillery since World War I, but they still had that specialty and that's why, I guess, they had to find a home for them or do something, but they should have made some of them something else, something more useful. … You're just staying alive, really, until you know you're going to get some action or belong to some place … at some time. …

SI: Had the invasion already taken place when you were in the depot?

WB: No, … I landed there in May, about the middle of May. … We were in the camp, in the Southern England camp, on the day that the invasion took place, [the June 5-6, 1944 Allied landings at Normandy]. … They gave us a copy of Eisenhower's famous letter to all the troops that were going to start and we saw huge numbers of planes flying over, and so, we figured everything was going on. … Then, about three days later, we all left that camp and went to Plymouth, England, which is on the Channel, and, almost immediately, just got on different ships. They just lined everybody up and said, "You go on that ship," and I got on a British

converted--it looked almost like a ferryboat. It was a pretty good-sized ship, but, then, [laughter] we sat in the English Channel on that ship for about four days, during that huge, big storm that knocked out the mulberry, the docks and everything, and finally landed in Europe. [Editor's Note: Two artificial harbors, codenamed Mulberry A (off Omaha Beach) and Mulberry B (off Gold Beach), were used to offload supplies at Normandy shortly after the June 6, 1944 invasion. Mulberry A was destroyed in violent storms between June 19th and June 22nd, but Mulberry B remained in operation until the port of Antwerp was opened for Allied use in December 1944.] I think, … we waded ashore on Utah Beach, trying to remember what day it was, I think on June 20th, and then, … we had our big barracks bags full of clothes. … I figured this out later on--this was a very smart decision that somebody made. Everybody there had their own clothes, and so, you were supplying your size to the Quartermaster Corps there. We climbed down these rope nets to a landing craft, a [landing craft] vehicle, personnel, the kind with the bow … that drops down, and got down there with your rifle, lots of ammunition, hand grenades--no, no hand grenades then--and this big, huge barracks bag that must have weighed thirty-five or forty pounds. … You landed with that darn barracks bag, but, right away, somebody said, "Put the barracks bag here and keep everything else." That's the last I saw of the barracks bag. So, I had a Bible in there and a trench knife that my dad had given me, that I never saw again, but that's the [way it went]. It was a very smart way of making sure they had the right clothes for everybody. Then, we walked up. There was still some sporadic artillery fire from the Germans. A shell would land once in a while. … We walked up to another repple-depple that was pretty close. We got off the beach and climbed up the bank and got inland about a couple of hundred yards and there was a big camp there and we stayed there the first night, maybe two nights, and then, a bunch of trucks came up from different outfits. … So, they just had lists there, "And you guys get on this truck. You guys get on this truck," and off we went. So, that's when I knew I was going to be in the 90th Infantry Division, and shall I keep on going? … [Editor's Note: In a written account attached to his pre-interview survey, Mr. Biehler noted June 23, 1944, as the day he joined the 90th Infantry Division.]

SI: What were you thinking and feeling as you were going towards the line, into combat?

WB: You don't think very much until you get there. [laughter] Well, all right, it's a couple of funny little things. We're on this truck and nobody had a loaded rifle yet. In basic training, you never do anything until they tell you. So, some guys says, "I hear guns going off. I'm going to load my weapon. Nobody's telling me to do it." We're all privates, and I guess there was one or two corporals, but they didn't [say anything]. So, we all loaded, decided to load. We had the ammunition, live ammunition. So, we loaded up, and are you familiar with that M-1 rifle? You put--this is a lock-and-load.

SI: Put the clip in.

WB: Yes, lock-and-load, and it takes eight cartridges, and so, we got to Division Headquarters and that's when I knew I was in the 90th Infantry Division. I saw the "T" and the "O," which stands for Texas and Oklahoma in World War I, [in the division insignia], and then, they broke us up, saying, "Okay, you guys, go in this truck. You guys, go in this truck." So, I ultimately ended up in Company K of the 357th Infantry Battalion [Regiment], which is a rifle company, and, by the time I got there, I was hungry and dirty and [had] wet feet from wading ashore,

[laughter] but there was a lull in the fighting, fortunately. So, the company commander met us and he says, "Okay, you guys are in Company K of the 357th Infantry. Welcome, I'm Captain So-and-So," and so, I ultimately got led to a foxhole and meet a guy whom I'm going to be in the foxhole with--always had two guys to a foxhole and one was always awake. We were two hours on, two hours off; they told us that much. We ate K rations for--you know what K rations are? They're like a cracker box, like a crackerjack box, and there's three different meals. You got breakfast, lunch and dinner and one of them has coffee and one of them has a chocolate bar. Those were the two highlights, [laughter] but, okay, so, we get to this foxhole and I asked … the fellow who was in the foxhole with me, "Who are those guys over there?" on the other--this is hedgerow country. We're only two or three miles from the beach. So, he says, "That's the German parachute troops." [laughter] So, then, I knew that that's it, that's the front line. So, that's when I really got a little nervous, but nothing happened. Somebody'd fire a shot and somebody else would fire a shot, but it was just mostly snipers. The Germans had a lot of snipers and they were very good, and then, about two days later, they said, "Okay, you guys in the First Squad of the First Platoon;" that was me. There were four of us. A squad should be twelve people, but I was in the first group of replacements that Company K had had since the landing and they were down to--a company should be, like, two hundred people--I don't think they had more than thirty.

SI: Really? Wow.

WB: Yes, and so, we go through the [hedgerows]. In each hedgerow, there's a door or an opening in the hedgerow at each corner. So, we went through that and the first two guys were hit by an "eighty-eight" [the German eighty-eight-millimeter artillery piece, an antiaircraft and antitank weapon] and blown to smithereens and some guy yells, "Medic," and I says, "I don't think a medic's going to help them." When I walked past them, both of them had blood coming out of their mouths. That's the first time I've seen a dead person, or somebody in that kind of condition, in my life, because my folks had--oh, we'd always driven past traffic accidents and things like that. So, we, a couple of us, got out in the middle of the field. … We're always taught, "Keep on going past the wounded people, so [that] you can guard them, so [that] somebody can come and help them." … The machine-guns were firing and … here we were, in the middle of this field, just three guys left. I guess five of us went, the first two were killed and there's three left out there. All of a sudden, I look around--there's nobody else there but me. So, I got up and ran back. [laughter] That was my first combat experience. We lost two men and one of those [left] was wounded. So, two guys come out of it without getting hurt, out of five. I said, "This is no good. [laughter] We [are not] going to last very long," but we were fighting against the Germans, a unit of the German Army, the regular German Army, and they were paratroopers who were very highly trained. They have excellent equipment. … They were in Africa, they'd been all over the place. … They had tanks--we didn't have tanks. So, all we had was one bazooka per platoon. … The American tanks hadn't come ashore yet and the American tank destroyers hadn't come ashore yet. So, all we had was artillery, but they did bring our artillery right in and they sat upright, they were behind us. … The thing that really saved us in those early days in Normandy was the P-47s [Thunderbolts], which we could call in. They had … a guy on the radio who could talk to the airplanes, or he could talk to somebody who could talk to the airplanes, and he said, "At coordinates so-and-so and so-and-so." They had pretty good maps of Normandy, that was one great thing, … but [he said], "We got a big piece of

artillery that," or a battery of artillery, "they're shooting at us from about in here. Can you [help]?" So, they'd do counterbattery fire on them and, right away, we could see that the Germans had very accurate artillery. … That eighty-eight was so fast, you couldn't hear it coming. Have you heard this from other people? … How many people have you talked to who were in a rifle company?

SI: I am not sure, but several dozen at least.

WB: Okay, okay.

SI: You can repeat it.

WB: Yes, okay.

SI: Please, tell me about your experiences.

WB: All right, good. … That was my first experience. About two days later, the Germans attack us and, at that point in time, there were only about five American divisions on the line and the Germans had begun reinforcing. Their orders were to just drive us back into the ocean, because they could see that more and more American troops were landing behind us, that they had no place to go. They'd have to stop landing them until we could get in some ground. So, our orders were to try to, at any cost, pick up some land, but the Germans attack us and that battle lasted for three days. [Editor's Note: Mr. Biehler is referring to the Battle of Beau Coudray, fought by the 357th from July 5th to July 11th. The German counterattacks and loss of Companies L and I described here took place in the first three days.] My company, Company K, we were in a line with the Third Battalion. Company K's in the Third Battalion, there's four other companies in that count. Two of them got out in front of us and were--Companies L and I were--cut off by the paratroopers and captured, taken prisoner. We didn't know that until later on, … when we looked over to our left and found out that there were Germans over there. So, we had to spread out. So, here's one company and the remnants of a couple of others spread out over maybe half a mile, and so, we were pretty far apart. There's about a hundred yards between each foxhole and two guys to a foxhole and … we had fought off fourteen counterattacks. In one of them, the Germans, the paratroopers, put their dress bayonets on, chrome bayonets. I don't know where the heck [they got them], I don't know if they brought them with them or not, but they had these fancy chrome bayonets that shone. It was a daylight attack. They came marching across there, with martial music playing in the background. I don't know if it was a band or a record, I guess it must have been a record, but they came marching--they were running--towards us and we just fired until we almost ran out of ammunition and, finally, they went back. That was the closest. Some of them got almost up to our line before they quit, but we must have killed half of them, I don't know, and we were almost out of ammunition. … We were almost out of food by that time and, finally, the division commander released the reserve troops that he'd been holding back, a whole battalion. Our first general was no damn good at all, which we later found out. [laughter] He was running the thing from his foxhole two miles [back], almost on the beach, … but he finally released the guys that were guarding his headquarters and that saved us, saved the day, and then, we did move forward and, finally, captured the town of Beau Coudray, which was on the corner of [the area]. I've got a couple of books there … about the division. It

tells about this in more detail, but the other two regiments in the division were attacking Mont Castre [Foret de Mont Castre], which was the last observation post that the Germans had of the beach, and that was defended by, also, the Sixth German Paratroop Division. … They had a heck of a time, but they finally captured that and, after that, that was the last real [battle in that area]. The Germans finally pulled back, and then, we had some room and more divisions came in, and then, about two weeks later, they had that big carpet bombing, when they bombed in front of the troops and we started, but [we] got down there, we could see flat country. All up until then, we'd all been in hedgerow country, but, from the top of the mountain, we could see that the rest of the land was flat and open and the tanks could work, because, in the hedgerows, they were no good at all. The roads in the hedgerows were sunken, so, you couldn't even fire from them. … Over all the years, I guess, … with heavy loads of vegetables and everything else, the roads were way down, beneath the hedgerow. So, a tank couldn't fire to the side and they were trapped. So, anyhow, we finally got out of the hedgerow country, and then, that carpet bombing that they did, that killed General McNair and a whole lot of the 30th American Division, because have you heard about that? [Editor's Note: In Operation: COBRA (July 25 to July 31, 1944), the Allies broke out of the Normandy hedgerow country at St. Lo. The attack commenced with a massive strike by nearly three thousand fighter-bombers, medium and heavy bombers. Miscommunication between the ground and air forces led to some US Eighth Air Force aircraft bombing Allied positions, resulting in hundreds of casualties, including US Army Ground Forces commander Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair.]

SI: Yes, at St.-Lo.

WB: The short drop? Yes, well, it's well described by Ambrose in his book [*Citizen Soldiers* (1997)]. … The Air Force wouldn't go across the line, because they wouldn't go parallel to the front line. They insisted on coming over and dropping perpendicular to the line, which was pretty darn dangerous, and the smoke started drifting back. So, the last bombers coming over were dropping them, dropping their bombs, on American troops.

SI: Was any of the 90th caught in that?

WB: No, they're not. We weren't assigned to that. We weren't in the middle of that, where all the bombs were dropped. … Well, we ultimately got all through that and we got to the breakout. So, at that time, the 90th was assigned to the--we were in, I think, the VII Corps of the First Army. After the breakout, Patton got activated and we were one of the first divisions in the Third Army. [Editor's Note: The 90th Division, though nominally assigned to the Third Army, was attached to VII Corps, First Army, from the Utah Beach landing on June 6th to June 19th, when it was assigned to the newly activated VIII Corps, First Army. On August 1, 1944, the 90th was reassigned to the newly activated Third Army and remained there with the exception of a brief assignment to the First Army from August 17th to August 25th, during part of the Falaise Gap operation.] So, we headed south to Le Mans. …

SI: Before we get into that portion of the combat phase, do you remember any of the actions you were a part of during the hedgerow fighting, any stories about your movements?

WB: Yes. Well, we weren't moving--we were trying to stay. [laughter] We were in a defensive position during most of that battle, but, then, … once the [German] paratroopers finally retreated back, then, we attacked. We counterattacked, because he had reinforcements by then, and we did gain. We had to do it hedgerow by hedgerow, with one at a time, and we took heavy casualties. … The 90th Division had one hundred percent casualties before we got out of Normandy and was kept alive by replacements and, in my platoon of forty guys, I think about eight were still there after the end of the battle.

SI: How often did they get replacements after you came in?

WB: They got replacements almost every other day. They came constantly, pretty constantly, after they got things organized, yes. That was pretty well done and they'd just merge them in and a new guy'd come up and you'd meet him, … but, see, in that kind of situation, you don't know. All you know is the guy to the right of you, the guy to the left of you and that's maybe a couple hundred yards, and then, finally, as we got more replacements, we were able to bring the foxholes closer together. … Every night, two men had to go back to company headquarters to get water and more ammunition, … when we weren't being attacked, night and day. Well, that first Beau Coudray battle, … I'm almost sure that lasted three days and three nights. You just had to [fight constantly]. You didn't have time to eat. You tried to eat a chocolate bar or do something when you weren't fighting, but … we were real worried about ammunition, like, we had to take ammunition from the wounded people and the dead people and just keep on going. The guns got so hot, you could almost light a cigarette on them, the barrels. … You know, the thing I have to remember is, … that Battle of Beau Coudray was so fierce that the night after it was over, when we finally [had a break], the Germans … stopped attacking, three guys in the company shot themselves in the foot. You could just hear it down in the foxhole--and they never told us that, but the word got around. Rumors fly pretty fast in the Army, [laughter] yes, and I never considered that, because I just … don't want to damage myself. I think that's just the coward's way out, but there were some guys who went to pieces, too, just, once in a while, some guy'd just say, "I can't take it anymore," and just start crying or sobbing and wouldn't get out of his foxhole. We had one lieutenant who wouldn't get out of his foxhole. We never saw him again. He went back to Company Headquarters and … never heard what happened to him.

SI: What was the attitude of your officers, and the military in general, towards those who had mental breakdowns or similar problems?

WB: Well, we had a very experienced platoon sergeant at that time, a tech sergeant who was the platoon sergeant, and, at the end of that battle, he just says, "I've got to go," and walked back to the first aid outfit and we didn't see him again. I guess he came back about two months later and lasted about another couple of weeks, and then, he was gone again--never was shot, never wounded, but he just couldn't take it mentally. … Nobody ever told us what happened to these people. We don't know whether they [returned to duty]. … I really don't know what happened to them, but they were no good in the infantry, that's for sure. …

SI: Did the tactics for taking a hedgerow improve during that period?

WB: They developed the tactics as they went along. What we finally had, tried to do, we found out that they had, the Germans had, machine-guns in each corner. So, you didn't want to go through and they had everything zeroed in on those two openings. So, we decided to make new openings, which is hard work, because some of those hedgerows were three feet thick. They had rocks in them and everything else, but we'd dig around from the back until … we had two or three new openings, and then, when we made an attack, we would try to get artillery as close as we could to the machine-guns. … These hedgerows were almost all maybe a hundred yards between the walls. So, you had a hundred yards to cover, but that's pretty short to bring in artillery, a hundred yards from you, but our artillery was very good. … The Piper Cubs were fabulous. They were amazing, because they directed the artillery and they could be extremely accurate and the Germans didn't have those. So, that was a huge handicap for them. They just kind of were shooting blind with their artillery and we had more artillery than the Germans. They had more mortars than we did, which is interesting. They had tremendous numbers of mortars, especially the paratroopers, the little, tiny sixty-millimeter ones, but they had one for about every other three soldiers and we had about one for every twenty-five or forty. … The rifle company had no mortars at all. They were in a mortar company … and they were behind us. …

SI: Which do you think was worse, artillery or mortars?

WB: The mortars were the worst. Artillery makes a lot of noise. … A couple of times, artillery got very close to me, but … the mortars would land all around you all the time.

SI: What would you do during a mortar attack?

WB: Well, you just have to get down. … You don't hear them coming--that's the dangerous thing about a mortar. It just goes up and it drops and you don't hear anything. Sometimes, you can see them, … in daylight, but, in the dark, you're useless, but, so, that's why we were at such a disadvantage in Normandy, because the Germans had everything [zeroed in]. They had the distance down. We found maps. They'd had everything marked for precise yards, to this tree, to that box, just amazing how thorough they had prepared everything, but, then, once we got them on the run, they couldn't do that. Then, that was our advantage, because they were running away and we were chasing them.

SI: Were there many mines and booby-traps?

WB: Yes, especially at Beau Coudray, where the Germans had been there for a year-and-a-half, two years, so, they really knew the whole [area]. They knew where all the farms were, they knew where the chickens were. [laughter] They took them all--they took all the chickens with them--and the cattle, they left the cattle, but they knew where to get the milk and where the wells were and everything like that. So, they left a lot of booby-traps. So, they booby-trapped bodies, sometimes, and GIs were big souvenir collectors. So, if you saw a Luger sticking out … in a box or, you know, laying on a table someplace, you learned, "Don't go pick that up, because it's probably booby-trapped." So, some guys would. They'd even have them fixed up, so [that] you could tie a string on the thing, … whatever your target was, a rifle or a Luger or one of their fancy pistols, and then, have a foxhole close by. They'd booby-trap the foxhole. So, you know,

the nearest thing, … you'd usually go to the closest protected place, and, if you got down there, you're gone. The *Schu* mines were very bad, because they'd bounce up about three feet and explode and they were real dangerous. [Editor's Note: Mr. Biehler confused the German *Schu* mine 42, a wooden mine matching the description in his next response, with the German S-mine 35 or "Bouncing Betty," which fits his description here.] Guys were worried about their private parts. … Normandy was the first place we had a lot of booby-traps, and then, later on, when we got into the city fighting, up by Metz, there was a lot of booby-traps, but, in the open fields, then, when we're chasing them all the way across … France, they just didn't have enough time to [plant them]. They weren't in one place long enough to set them up, but, when [they had time], they were very clever with them and they had a lot of them.

SI: Were you ever nearby when somebody tripped a booby-trap?

WB: Oh, yes. I had several close friends that were hit by booby-traps or by mines. They had these small mines … that they just could bury so [that] you couldn't see them. They were wood, so, you couldn't detect them with a minesweeper. Our engineers were awful good about taking care of the big mines, like, for the tanks and stuff. …

SI: Coming in as a replacement, did you have trouble fitting into the unit? Was anybody standoffish towards you being a new person?

WB: No. I pretty rapidly found out that, in a combat situation like that, that the best people were the ones who were hunters or who were farmers. They were used to being outside. The city bred people just had a terrible time. Rain, "It's raining. What do I do? I haven't got a raincoat." "So? You get wet," [laughter] and it rained a lot. That summer of the invasion was the wettest summer in France in a hundred years, but we didn't have anything. We had the clothes on your back and that was it and we didn't carry raincoats. … Later on, as we got up closer to Paris, some of us started carrying a shelter half, half of a tent, because you could fold those up and loop it over your belt and everything. You had an awful lot of stuff on your belts [laughter] and, at that time, they didn't have these suspenders like they have now. … You had hand grenades. Hand grenades are heavy, but most of us carried two hand grenades and you could put those in your pockets or hang them on the belt or someplace. … The other question was about?

SI: How you fit in with the group.

WB: Oh, yes, okay. Most of them fit in pretty well, because we'd all had infantry basic training. The early replacements we got all have basic training. They knew how to fire their weapons, they know how to take care of themselves and they all did pretty well. [laughter] Again, it takes individuals--some individuals are good, some are no good, [laughter] just like life--but most people realized that they had to do the best they could in order to just stay alive or to keep up with everybody else, yes.

SI: When you were in the hedgerow country, was it often the case that you were firing and you could not see where the enemy was?

WB: Yes, lots of times, because … they were excellent at camouflage. So, you fired at everything that moved. … Sometimes, you could just see a helmet or a flash or something. So, you'd fire in that general area, but it was pretty hard to get a real good target in that country. So, you fired, a lot of times, just at something that was moving.

SI: It sounds like you were pretty close to the enemy when you were firing.

WB: Yes, and then, there were some guys who didn't want to fire their weapons, too, because we have one guy who says, "I'm not mad at him. He's not shooting at me--I'm not going to shoot at him." So, that was his philosophy, and so, he hardly ever fired his rifle, but he was there. Ultimately, when it came to push or shove, he was firing his rifle, but he wasn't the kind who was going to just fire at nothing.

SI: You initially went out in very small squads. As you got more replacements, were you able to build up to regular squad size?

WB: … In Normandy, we never had more than half strength, more than fifty percent of our total strength. As fast as they brought in replacements, people would get wounded or die.

SI: Did you feel as though people were getting wounded just as the result of normal combat or were they doing something wrong?

WB: No, it was almost all combat. We didn't have anybody--nobody shot themselves or there were no injuries.

SI: What I meant was, were new men making mistakes that green troops would make, whereas a veteran would not make the same mistake?

WB: Yes. Well…

SI: I know Stephen Ambrose writes a lot about replacements.

WB: Okay. … The most dangerous time was when a new replacement first got to the frontline, because he's curious. He wants to [see], "I'm going to get up. I want to get up and look out." "Don't do that. If you put your head above that wall, somebody's going to shoot you," because … they're watching all the time and they have snipers in the trees and everything. … That's hard to remember, and some guy'll decide, "I have to go to the bathroom. So, I'll just go over here," in the open. You don't do that, because they're going to shoot you anyhow. … Somebody said one time, "If a replacement makes it through his first three days, he's got a pretty good chance of lasting several months or a year," but an awful lot just did something stupid. You're absolutely right, when they first got to the frontline, they can't realize that your whole life changes. You have to be constantly thinking of what's going to happen if you do this or if you do that--smoking, too. A lot of guys were violent smokers and they'd insist on smoking at night, and that was one of the best parts of basic training, by the way. They took us, marched us out into a field, in the dark, and they had bleachers set up. So, everybody got up on the bleachers and they said, "Okay, your eyes are used to the dark now." Once we got on the bleachers, then, everybody, all

the lights were out, everybody got used to it, no flashlights or anything. They said, "There's a guy in the foxhole, two hundred yards away, and he's down in the foxhole, but he's going to light a cigarette," and it was just like a flare went off. He's trying to shade it with his helmet and everything else, but you could sure see it in the dark and you could see each puff he took, because, … even if he's down in the hole, it makes enough light that, in real dark conditions, that you could see where he is--and that rang. I never smoked anyhow, but that was [persuasive] and I always sought out foxhole buddies who didn't smoke, either, and the non-smokers always wanted to be together and the smokers wanted to be together, but I saw, oh, I guess I saw ten or twelve people killed because they had to smoke at night. That's totally useless.

SI: The new guys were doing this.

WB: I'm sorry.

SI: They were replacements who were smoking at night.

WB: No, some of the older guys, too. … Smokers are funny. I think they just seem to feel, "I have the need, I have to do something," or people get nervous, very nervous and jumpy. You'll see guys trembling. … That's when personalities really develop. [laughter]

SI: You got pretty close with the person in your foxhole, right?

WB: Yes.

SI: Would you try to have the same person for as long as possible?

WB: Yes, yes. I had the same foxhole buddy until I was wounded and I was very fortunate. He was a very smart cookie. He was a mobster from Detroit, [laughter] but he was a smart, smart guy and he didn't smoke and he didn't talk unnecessarily. That's another thing. … The Germans sent out patrols all the time and they're just trying to find out where you are. So, at night, we just didn't talk much. One guy was asleep, usually. … That gets into your blood almost, that you're two hours on, two hours off, and Bic (Nell?) was the guy who was my foxhole buddy. He never fell asleep on me and I never fell asleep on him, but other people did and that's real bad. When the guy's on duty, he's not supposed to fall asleep because everybody else's life is dependent on him. Some people didn't realize [that]. They didn't … want to face that. I'll tell you one story of [that]. We crossed the Moselle River at one time, when we got way up north, and a guy in our platoon, who was always sleeping--he slept on duty. He slept when he was … supposed to be on guard and everything. So, we got the orders to pull back and get out of [there]--we were all alone on the German side of the river. So, the 90th Division was over there for about four days and, finally, they just said, "Okay." … Patton said, "Bring them back." He said, "We can't reinforce them. We can't build a bridge. So, tell them to come on back over," and the whole … group together said, "Well, if Joe's asleep when we go, don't anybody wake him up." That's what happened. They just left him there. So, he was taken prisoner or killed or something--and nobody cared, because he was no good and that's life. You have to be able to depend on the people who are with you or they're no good to you. [Editor's Note: The 357th Regiment's history contained no reference to a brief crossing of the Moselle and retreat. Mr. Biehler may be

referring to his unit's occupation of Uckange, France, on September 12, 1944, where the 90th faced heavy artillery shelling from the east bank of the Moselle as they prepared to cross and repel the Germans. The division was suddenly ordered to abandon those plans and leave the city to relieve US forces to the south at Homecourt, France.]

SI: I have heard from many veterans that you are really fighting for the people around you.

WB: Yes, that's right. You're dependent on them and they're dependent on you. That's right.

SI: Going back to the breakout, can you tell me a little bit more about that actual operation, the day of the bombing, what you did to move out?

WB: Okay. We could see the planes, because the heavy bombers came over first. They're way, way up there. Man, they played it safe--they were six miles up [laughter]--but they had accurate bombsights and the early ones did a lot of good damage, and then, the German antiaircraft shot down one or two of the very early planes. Well, right away, the little Piper Cubs were zeroing in on where the artillery was coming from and all the American artillery was all ready to go, behind the line. They were dug in. They had their guns zeroed in and everything. So, five or six batteries of artillery, American, would fire on this one antiaircraft outfit and obliterate it. So, after that, the German antiaircraft didn't even fire, because they knew they were going to be blasted. There were so many artillery pieces on the American side. We had more artillery than the Germans did by probably twice, twice as many artillery pieces, but, then, the breakout was; well, we didn't get into the very first part of it, but we were in the second group that went down, and then, we went in a different direction, like a lot of them went up towards--get a map.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You were saying the 90th went in a different direction.

WB: Yes, we went south instead of going west, … towards Le Mans, and it was a task force and we were supposed to, they set up--by that time, we got the armored divisions. So, the Fourth Armored Division was going, was first, and the 90th and the Fifth--I don't know whether we got the Fifth at that time or not--but, anyway, this was the very beginning of Patton's Army and I think we were in the XII Corps at that time. So, about three divisions, one armored division and two infantry, and I forget who the other one was, went down to Le Mans and the 79th Infantry Division, part of Patton's Army, also went down around the back of Le Mans. [Editor's Note: Le Mans was liberated on August 8, 1944, by the XV Corps, consisting of the 90th Infantry Division, 79th Infantry Division and Fifth Armored Division.] So, we were supposed to meet them in the middle of Le Mans. Well, that was my first experience of friendly-fire. The 79th Division didn't realize that we were Americans and started firing on us. So, we just dug down and stayed quiet and didn't fire back and, finally, … the word got to them who we were, so, but, then, we went. The 90th was part of the small group, along [with], at that time, we had the Second French Armored Division, which was a really good outfit. They were all, mostly, French Foreign Legion guys who were outfitted by American [forces]. They had American tanks and everything else. So, they were fighting with us then and [this was] the first time that they had been … allowed to fight in their own homeland. So, they were a busy bunch of guys. [laughter]

They weren't around at night. They were over with the French ladies [laughter] and they also were notorious for building big bonfires at night, which the Germans loved to fire on. … Finally, Patton got them to cut that out, but that's when we headed north from Le Mans into Chambois and that was called the Falaise Gap. We closed the Falaise Gap. [Editor's Note: The Battle of the Falaise Pocket (or Gap) took place between August 12 and August 21, 1944. The plan called for Patton's Third Army to capture Argentan, which it did on August 13th, and the Canadian First Army to capture Falaise. However, fears of friendly-fire incidents led Allied commanders to halt the Canadians, which allowed much of the retreating German Army to escape, although the Germans suffered heavy casualties, ten thousand deaths and fifty thousand men taken prisoner.]

SI: How much resistance did you meet between the breakthrough and the Falaise Gap?

WB: All right. What happened is, the Germans, they had set up roadblocks. They were very skilled at retreating. At that time, they were retreating, but they would have a couple of tanks and maybe a company of infantry, just set up several machine-guns on there. … So, they would fire, the tanks would fire a couple of shots, and then, the machine-guns would fire, and then, they'd pull back, but some of the infantrymen would stay there, shooting their rifles at the first guys that come. So, we had to go around them and find [a way]. … That slowed us down, but we always kept going, but taking casualties all the time, too.

SI: You were wounded earlier in the war.

WB: Yes, way up at Metz.

SI: Was there another time?

WB: I got a small wound. I got a piece of shrapnel in my knee … in Normandy, early on, but that was during the Battle of Beau Coudray and nobody [recorded it]. [laughter] … We got the company aid man, said, "That's not serious. They're not going to [send you back]." He just pulled it out with a pair of pliers and it kind of self-cauterized. Where the heck is it? can't even remember which knee it is. There it is, right there. [Mr. Biehler shows the interviewer his scar.] …

SI: Yes, it is about an inch.

WB: Yes, but … he says, "I haven't got time to write you up for a Purple Heart." Later, he got killed, so, nobody, no witnesses, or I could have gotten out of the Army about two months earlier, with another medal. [laughter] … Okay, what else do you want?

SI: In that period between the breakthrough and the Falaise Gap, were you riding on a tank?

WB: Oh, I rode on a tank part of the time and we were with tanks. We were walking and driving as fast as we could. Some of the time, we rode on trucks, but we were trying to go as fast as we could to gain ground, because, at that time, the Germans were extremely disorganized. … Once we'd broken through that crust, there were just a few outposts of people and, several times

during that rout, we'd capture a town or a little city and, just as we were coming into the town, the Germans would be coming in the other side to reinforce it, … but we'd already had the town. So, we were able to capture them. We captured a lot of prisoners in that, right along in that area, because some of the rear echelon German troops didn't want to fight. The infantry were the guys that did the fighting. We'd capture a lot of people who were paymasters or quartermasters or, you know, this, "I'm not a fighter. I'm not an infantryman. I don't fight," but … we'd capture guys who were Russians and Hungarians and that's about … what I can mostly remember, but they had whole groups of these people that the Germans had put in their army and they weren't really willing fighters. So, they took the easy opportunity to surrender whenever they could and most of them couldn't even speak German. I don't know how the Germans ever got them to do anything. [laughter]

SI: At that point, would you take them back or would you just disarm them and send them back?

WB: … We always had prisoners, had a prison cage, at the Regimental Headquarters, and then, … they'd take them in trucks back to the division cage, and then, they'd go to a bigger cage, but we had … temporary prison camps all over the place at that time.

SI: Going back to Normandy, had you taken any prisoners in Normandy?

WB: Not very many, no. I can't remember--no, we didn't take any prisoners in Normandy, because we didn't have a place to send them, and the paratroopers took no prisoners, either. … I don't know what they did, but they didn't take prisoners and the first time we really began to take prisoners was after the breakout, yes.

SI: You mentioned that the main form of resistance was these roadblocks.

WB: Yes. … You'd hit a town--the Germans had troops stationed in almost every good-sized city or town, that were regular occupation troops--and, sometimes, … they'd fight and, sometimes, they just gave up, but, you know, when they see tanks coming at you and a heavy [force], most of the Germans were not that [fanatical]. The *SS* were different, but, if you ran into a pocket of *SS* guys, they'd fight every time, but most of the *SS* were … up fighting in the frontlines and they weren't in the little rear areas. So, these were service troops and things like that and most of them didn't offer much competition. …

SI: Do you remember what it was like to take one of these towns when there was some resistance?

WB: Yes. Well, the very first town was Argentan. … Avranches was one of the first ones, that we were the first Americans that they saw, and that was, oh, a town of maybe fifteen, twenty thousand people and they'd been very badly treated by the Germans during the occupation. … That was the town where the French girls all lined up and they wanted to shake hands with every American going by, [Mr. Biehler becomes emotional] and the Mayor always wanted to make a speech. … Somehow, they got some wine someplace that they'd been saving up, but we just wanted to keep on moving. … I can remember going by and a lot of pretty girls wanted to shake your hand. We were dirty, we were smelly, but they still wanted to be free. … They realized, at

that time, that the Germans were on the run and the Free French weren't very active in that area, but, when we got over towards north of Paris, there, the Free French were a big help to us and they were extremely active down around Marseilles and the southern part of France, out in the country. I heard that the Germans had to travel in groups of ten in Marseilles, because that's a tough port town and the Free French were very strong there.

SI: At the Falaise Gap, what do you remember about that battle?

WB: That we were just firing away. It was almost like a shooting gallery. We were up on an elevated area and the valley was full of Germans. … They would get in the trees and there were a little bit of woods there, but they were just milling around, trying to find a way out, and the only way out was between us and the British. … We were told that the British were going to seal their end of the Gap. … We were under orders to only go as far as the City of Chambois. We couldn't go any further even if we could. So, for a while there, Patton gave our division--no, we were the only division, American division, that was on that plain--and he supported us with eighteen batteries of artillery. So, here's our general, our division artillery guy, had all this artillery to shoot. So, he's sitting there saying, "Okay, fire over there. Fire. Let me have some big guys, the eight-inchers [eight-inch howitzer M1]." Eight-inch artillery is a shell like that and 240s [240-millimeter howitzer M1] is almost that big, but he had all this artillery firing on people who had no defense. They weren't even trying to shoot back. They were just trying to escape. … The German infantry, which would try to come charging up against us, … with all this artillery, they really couldn't do much. We suffered casualties, but we took tremendous [prisoners]--we killed at least ten thousand people in that battle and took something like fifty thousand prisoners, unbelievable. We didn't know what to do with all the prisoners, but, so, that was one of the big points of the 90th Division, was Falaise, and then, finally, the people who met us were not British, but Polish. They were a Polish brigade fighting for the Brits. The Brits always loved to have somebody else do their fighting for them [laughter] and, when they got to us, that's a fascinating story. It's written down in the history there. They didn't have any ammunition left. So, one of our captains, who is a retired judge from Los Angeles now, he says, "Well, what did you do with all your ammunition?" "Well, we used it all up." "Well, how come? Why are you giving me these hundred prisoners?" "Well, we can't shoot them." He says, "You can't shoot prisoners." He says, "Sure we can. That's what we've been doing. We're all out of ammunition." … So, he said, "But, the rules of war say you can't shoot prisoners." "They shoot my countrymen, I shoot them." … The Poles had a tough time. They really had. They were banged up by the Germans for years and years. It's unbelievable, yes.

SI: What was it like being under that kind of direct infantry attack, where you could see the enemy coming towards you? You had already seen that once, with the bayonet charge

WB: Well, that was almost [safe]; … we were close together. We were fighting as units there. We had our foxholes dug deep and we had machine-guns and we were set up, like, in a perfect defensive position. We had machine-guns set with enfilading fire, so that they could cross, and … we were really fairly safe until it broke up. Sometimes, a small group of tough, maybe paratroopers or *SS* guys, would break through in small units, and then, we had to get them isolated and either shot, killed or captured, but, most of the time, it was just like a shooting gallery. … We had unlimited ammunition. We had plenty of ammunition, plenty of food, we

were in good shape. … The pictures that you'll find in that book, people don't realize, … we didn't really, until later on, that the Germans used horses, so many horses. Almost all their supplies were delivered by horse and wagon and Americans had all the trucks. The Germans didn't have anything like an American two-and-a-half-ton truck and that was one of our real secret weapons. We had thousands of those trucks and they had six-wheel drive, so [that] they could get out of mud and anything, most of the time. Sometimes, mud gets awful deep. [laughter] Then, it just grinds it up, but the poor horses, you know, when one horse is wounded or killed, the others can't go anyplace, because he's just laying down there, stopping the whole thing, and it was just an unbelievable mess. That whole … Falaise Gap was just terrible, but, you know, we were happy that we were doing our job and holding the line, because Patton had taken the rest of the Third Army and gone up toward Paris. … So, he left us, the 90th Division and the Second French Armored Division and I guess that was all, to hold that pocket.

SI: After so many months in combat, did you find yourself becoming desensitized to everything you were seeing?

WB: Yes. You get used to seeing dead people, you get used to seeing people in [pain], with terrible wounds, but it still hurts, but you do get desensitized, you know.

SI: While you were in France, was the German Air Force ever an issue? Did they ever attack?

WB: They strafed us about a total of about four times, but their planes were so fast that--you know, in Hollywood, you see the pictures of the bullets every two feet. They're about one every hundred yards, because the German planes were very, very fast. They were very bad, hardly any good at all, at strafing, but, on the other hand, the P-47, which could slow down and it was a fighter-bomber that we had, they were deadly on the Germans, because … the Germans didn't have fifty-caliber machine-guns, either. They had thirty-caliber machine-guns. So, there's a big difference. A fifty-caliber is a much bigger bullet and it's faster and has much more power. So, the P-47s had four fifty-caliber machine-guns in each wing and one five-hundred-pound bomb and a five-hundred-pound bomb is bigger than any American artillery piece. So, they could blast a tank sky high and they'd skip bomb them. They'd try to fly low and hit the bomb in the side, rather than in the front or on the top. … They were very, very accurate. … That was really one of our bigger defense items. … The German Air Force … didn't support the infantry. They just occasionally came out. … They tried to bomb American airbases more than anything else, but, by that time, that was one of the more successful things, that the Eighth Air Force, I guess, went after all the German manufacturing facilities and, pretty much, they went underground. When we finally found them in Germany, they were underground. They had all the slave labor dig underground factories for them.

SI: What about German armor? Were you attacked by German armor, German tanks?

WB: … Oh, yes, oh, yes, lots of times. [laughter] Yes, their tanks were pretty ferocious. … All of them had eighty-eight-millimeter guns, which were much faster and such a high velocity, you couldn't hear it coming, and it was highly explosive. … Well, the one time that I was [shelled], when we were coming down towards Le Mans, we hit one roadblock where I was off a tank and we were down, in the infantry, along the side of the road. A tank fired on the road in front of us

and it must have been maybe forty or fifty feet away from me, but it was enough to lift me up out of the ground and slam me back down again and I couldn't hear anything. It just blew my hearing and, to this day, I have nerve damage from that. It just killed the high frequency nerves. I can't hear high frequencies at all. … The VA [Veterans Administration] did give me a hearing aid, finally, but I still can't hear people with high voices or I can't hear the high notes of a violin or a bird singing, even with a hearing aid, because the nerves are dead. … When I was discharged, I told them that and they said, "Okay, we'll put it in the record, but there's so much of that, we can't do anything about it." … It's almost pitiful, you know, how they had aircraft mechanics working on engines with no protection at all for their ears, no earplugs, no earphones, no nothing, and that just didn't happen in those days. Now, you see, just in the ground crew, you've got these guys with the big ear protectors and everything else, but not then. The German tanks were--they didn't have as many tanks as we did, but the ones they had were bigger and much more powerful, but they also were noisier. They had the steel plates instead of the rubber treads, so [that] you could hear [that] they were clanking along, but a tank, for an experienced infantryman, is not all that big of a problem, unless you can't move. If you can maneuver, you can get away from it. Once they're buttoned up, if you fire at them enough to make them get out of the turret and close down, all they have are these little periscopes. They can see very little and they're vulnerable from the back and from the sides. …

SI: Would you ever try to attack one yourself or would you just call in a P-47 or wait for a tank?

WB: Yes, the P-47s saved us mostly from the tanks. The bazookas were hardly worth the trouble, unless you could get into the sprockets. The only way you could get a German tank with a bazooka was to shoot the sprockets or the wheels that turned that thing, and then, the tank would be [stuck]. Once they're disabled, they're going to get out of there, because they're trapped inside, and so, they had escape hatches underneath, but, sometimes, we could catch them coming out of there, … because all they had were, usually, machine pistols, which would fire a lot of bullets real fast, but they weren't very accurate. … Against a rifle, they wouldn't want to fight, but the tankers were some of the toughest German soldiers. They were a breed of their own, just like the *SS* and the paratroopers. They were pretty elite troops.

SI: Did you ever use a bazooka or did they have a separate team for that?

WB: I never fired one in combat. I fired them in [training]. We had bazooka teams, but that wasn't my specialty, no. We just had one per squad, I think, yes, but, most of the time, you couldn't find them. … When we got into the city fighting, they took the bazookas away, … but, see, mostly, once we got out of Normandy, we were just in these [pursuits], all the way up until we ran out of gas at Reims. We were chasing the Germans. They weren't attacking us, except for little roadblocks, and they weren't much. So, that was a pretty easy part of the war.

SI: After the Falaise Gap, when Patton took most of the force south, you were left with the Second French Armored Division.

WB: Yes.

SI: What happened after that?

WB: Okay. Once we finally closed the Falaise Gap and they … took all the troops prisoners and got everybody out of there, that took about a week. Then, we went on a forced march to rejoin the rest of the Third Army and we rode on trucks part of the way. The tanks were all up above. So, we were just by ourselves, but we marched a hundred miles in two days, three days, or kept going day and night. … Almost everybody had blisters after that, but … we caught up with the rest of the Third Army at Reims and that's where they had to wait. They ran out of gas. … There were about five divisions that were fifty miles ahead of all the rest of the American Army and just sitting out there and Patton wanted to keep going. [Editor's Note: Reims fell to the Third Army on August 29, 1944. Logistical issues kept Patton's Army there until the second week of September.] He says, "If I can keep going with [my force], you keep supplying me and I'll be in Berlin." [laughter] He probably would have been. I don't know how long he could stay there, but it's a shame that they didn't let him at least get through the Siegfried Line, because we could have just walked right through to it. They didn't have any people in the Siegfried Line at that time, but we ran out of gas in Reims and that was a nice place to run out of gas. … I had never drank champagne before. So, I drank--they issued us, they gave us each, a bottle of champagne the first night, free, taken champagne from Reims. So, I drank my whole bottle that first night and woke up the next morning pretty smashed [laughter] and the first mortar attack, I got smashed some more, but, then, they started charging us twenty-five cents for a bottle, … but we drank more. We were there, I think, a week until they finally got enough gas and brought the rest of the [force up]. They had to make a big show of going through Paris, you know, and taking control of Paris, and so, we'd gone around to the east of Paris. [Editor's Note: The liberation of Paris began with actions by the French Resistance on August 19th and ended with the surrender of the German garrison to the Second French Armored Division and the Fourth US Infantry division on August 25, 1944. The next day, the Second French Armored, its commander General Jacques-Philippe Leclerc and Free French leader Charles de Gaulle led a parade down the Champs d'Elysees. Another parade of Anglo-French forces along the Champs d'Elysees was held on August 29th.] Reims is north of Paris, yes, and then, from Reims, from then on, the Germans started. They got reorganized, okay, [had] the time to get reorganized, and then, we were fighting again.

SI: I read, in the write-up you sent in with your original survey, where you quoted one of the books one of Patton's staff officers wrote on how, during this period, you basically flew over the ground that World War I had taken place on.

WB: Yes, that's true.

SI: What took them four years took you about a week or so.

WB: Yes. Our division went through, we crossed the Marne, the Aisne--and what was the other? [the Vesle River]--and got into Verdun in, I think, two days, yes, and then, when we got to Metz, then, we had to go into city fighting again. … I was wounded in Maizières-lès-Metz, which was one of those cities that was an anchor for the Siegfried Line, and it was a fortified city and [the Germans had] foxholes and/or, you know, gun emplacements all through the city, in buildings, in basements of buildings, and it was just really weird, but I was wounded on the second attack on the city hall. Four, five of us … attacked this city hall. They didn't know …

how many people they had. They thought they had a platoon of troops in the city hall. It turned out to be a whole battalion, a thousand men, and four of us, five of us attacked this building. We ran across the open space and got into the first parts of the building and we killed a couple of Germans in that room, and that's as far as we could get, because they had machine-guns at the end of each corridor. It was a concrete building with machine-gun emplacements behind a barricaded [area], you know, just a little slit [was] all you could see, and they could control every corridor. So, we finally said, "We've got to get out of here. This isn't going to work." So, we went back to our company and they said, "Okay, you guys are the experts now, so, you're going to go back again tomorrow, but with more people," and that's when. … They sent a platoon that time. Well, that's still nowhere near enough and they didn't do anything about the machine-gun. We wanted them to shoot a bazooka or bring in an antitank gun to shoot at the machine-gun that was at the end of this corridor, but they didn't listen to us. So, that's the problem, sometimes--you can't get it [across]. It was almost a suicidal attack, but, like, running across that same area the second time, I was hit by a mortar and it just went in here and it came out there.

SI: In your left arm.

WB: My wallet was in this pocket and it went through the wallet.

SI: Did the wallet stop it from going anywhere else?

WB: No, it didn't, kept on going. [laughter] So, I was carrying a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] at that time. So, here I am, with blood dripping off my arm. So, I told the rest of the guys, "I've got to go back," and another fellow was wounded, too. … The rest of the platoon went on and got into the building, but that's all I know. … I went back and the company first aid man guy took care of me and the other fellow. We all had these first aid packets. You know about them, with the …

SI: With morphine.

WB: Yes, and a big bandage and it had the sulfadiazine powder. We sprinkled that on it. The Germans didn't have any of that. As a matter-of-fact, they used to gather those from the dead American bodies, because their medics wanted that medicine so much. The sulfadiazine was something they didn't have, and then, … they took us by jeep to the battalion surgical department, where I knew a couple of the doctors. … He says, the captain there said, "Okay, I think you're going to be okay, that you're not going to lose the arm. I'm pretty sure they can save it, but you're going to have a nice rest and sleep in some sheets for a while." That's the first time it hit me--[laughter] I wasn't going to be in a foxhole for a while. So, I went to … an evacuation hospital in--can't remember the name of the town, but further back towards Paris--and they operated that night and they gave me pentothal, sodium pentothal, and the anesthetist said, "Count to ten." I say I think I got up to three; that's all I remember, was three. … So, I woke up about twenty-four hours later and saw an American nurse walking by and I said, "This is pretty good." [laughter] … So, she said, "Oh, you're finally awake." … My arm was all bandaged up, I couldn't see anything, but it was painful, … but they gave me morphine and they had put a penicillin pack [in]. They cleaned it all out and packed it with penicillin crystals. I'd never heard of that before, and they were giving me penicillin shots every two hours, night and day, but you

got good, warm food there and I was just there two days. They gave us the Purple Heart the next morning, all three of us, and then, they took me to--the other two guys, I never saw them again. … They took me and a couple of other fellows to a hospital in Paris and did another operation there and they took us by troop train to Le Havre and across, via hospital ship, to England and I was in a hospital in Kidderminster, England. That was a real big one, huge hospital, a lot of guys from the 90th Division there, and they did a third operation there. … By then, I could see how big it was, but I was considered "walking wounded" by that time. I could go to the mess hall and everything. The food was wonderful and I regained the use [of my arm]. They gave us exercises and everything, did fine then, and, right away, I was able to see the fingers still worked, everything still worked. So, I was very, very fortunate and, as a matter-of-fact, I even rowed on the varsity crew when I got back to Rutgers. [laughter] So, I was very, very fortunate.

SI: You had no lasting damage from it, besides the scars.

WB: … Well, it nicked the muscle, but muscles can be rebuilt, and it just barely missed the bone. So, I was very, very lucky with that. Several doctors have told me, "You couldn't have done it better," but that kept me out of the Battle of the Bulge, but that was a fascinating thing. … They kept us at Kidderminster, kept me there about a month, I think, and then, it was no longer bleeding and it was healed, pretty much healed over. So, they sent us to a hospital down in Carmarthen, Wales, which was a smaller hospital, but … that was what I guess you might call a rehabilitation hospital. … We marched, we took hikes and everything, just tried to get your strength back up. … I got my first pass there. They gave me a three-day pass to visit the City of Carmarthen and it was a very interesting old Welsh city, with nice museums there. So, I stayed in a bed-and-breakfast with an English lady who was a widow of an … English officer and she fed me and took care of me and I went to the museums and everything. I saw the sights, and then, I went back to that hospital, and then, the Battle of the Bulge started. … Some smart guy figured out, "Where do you get experienced infantrymen? In the hospitals." [laughter] So, they went through the hospitals and everybody that had a Combat Infantryman's Badge, … that wasn't bleeding that day, they started them back to combat--left everybody else alone, just took the infantrymen. … By the time I got back to the 90th Infantry Division, the Battle of the Bulge was all over and we were on the outskirts of Frankfurt and, going [there], you know, you go through, you get closer and closer to the front, you hear artillery again. I didn't like the sound of that, [laughter] said, "I don't think I like this." So, we got to the Division Headquarters and some officer says, "Can anybody speak German?" So, several of us said, "Yes, we can." So, he asked a couple of questions and we answered them. He said, "Okay, you guys are going to be in the MPs." So, … the rest of the war, I was in the 90th MP Platoon and we were a small group. We had a group of three people in the civilian control department. We had a jeep and a machine-gun and we would occupy a town, go into a town or a city right after the infantry had gone through, and just try to maintain order and keep things going until the military government would come in and take over, which would be anywhere from a couple of days to a couple weeks. … In the biggest city, we had the City of Hof, way on the border, almost on the [Czechoslovakian border], you can see it there, I think that was a city of two hundred thousand people and there's only three GIs running this city. [laughter] … We could hear some of the German people saying, "Is this all there is, after the big bunch that went through?" but, still, trucks would keep coming through, bringing supplies up to the front lines and everything, but there was almost a rebellion there. … That was the place where one of us was always awake. We took the muffler off the jeep and we

ran around and there was supposed to be curfew--they weren't supposed to have any lights showing after ten o'clock at night. So, Patton kept all these rules. He says that, "The Germans like rules and, since … they expect to have instructions, so, we'll give them instructions. Everybody on the eastside of the street washes the sidewalks Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and, on the other side of the street, on the other days." They thought, I could, you could, hear the Germans saying, "Boy, these Americans, they're really organized." [laughter] They loved that and, later on, … after the war was over, we'd give them passes to move from one town to another. Under Hitler, you could not leave your own city unless you had a pass from the *Bürgermeister*, as a civilian. Now, that's pretty hard to think of, but he had that much control over the civilians, but we ended up the war in Czechoslovakia. The 90th was the first division to enter Czechoslovakia and … that was completely different. Czechoslovakia was in pretty good shape. They had stuff in the stores. They weren't anywhere near as bad off as the Germans were. … They were more of an agricultural society and they hadn't had as heavy fighting. So, I was on the outskirts of Pilsen when the war ended.

SI: You wrote also that your division liberated concentration camps. Were the MPs involved in that at all?

WB: The Flossenbürg?

SI: Yes.

WB: No, I never saw that, but they did liberate Flossenbürg, yes. [Editor's Note: The 358th and 359th Infantry Regiments of the 90th Infantry Division liberated Flossenbürg on April 23, 1945. They found over fifteen hundred prisoners there, those whom the *SS* had not been able to force to march to Dachau between April 15th and April 20th. Of the more than sixteen thousand who started out, over seven thousand died en route.]

SI: They would not call the MPs in for that.

WB: Which was a political concentration camp. … They didn't have too many Jews, but they had political people, people who Hitler had locked up because of politics, a lot of Lutheran ministers and a lot of rabble-rousers, in other words, that he thought were. … Quite a few were still alive, but the guys who went in there said it was really ugly, really a mess, but the 90th also captured the Merkers gold horde. Have you ever heard about that? [Editor's Note: The Third Battalion of the 358th Infantry Regiment, 90th Infantry Division, captured Merkers on April 4, 1945. Several days later, displaced persons alerted the American occupying force to the presence of the gold and stolen artwork stored in the nearby Kaiseroda salt mine.]

SI: Not really.

WB: Okay. I have a book over there that was written by one of the 90th officers and it's kind of fascinating. There was a huge amount--the entire German gold reserve and so many of the paintings that they had looted from all over Europe--were in this deep German salt mine at the town of Merkers and the 90th captured that and kept it from being recaptured by the Germans.

SI: Did you get to see any of that?

WB: I never got down into it, but … this book is fascinating. …

SI: I am going to pause the tape.

[TAPE PAUSED]

WB: Let's put this on the record.

SI: Okay.

WB: … This is a quote from Ambrose, on page 468.

SI: *Citizen Soldiers*.

WB: Yes. [Reading from Ambrose's book], "'Our infantry suffered over 250 per cent casualties. There was not a single company commander present who left England with us, and there were only a half a dozen officers in the whole regiment who landed on Utah Beach.' [The preceding quote was attributed to Lieutenant Colonel Ken Reimers of the 357th.] The 90th Division had been in combat for 308 days--the record in the ETO," but the sad part was that Montgomery kept demanding that he get control of American [forces]. Some of the very best divisions in the First Army, like the First and Second Armored Divisions, were under Montgomery and he'd never fight. He wasn't fighting. He loved to fall back and regroup, that's his [tactic]. [laughter] … In the [(1970)] movie *Patton*, which was pretty accurate, by the way, there's that one scene where the British air marshal said, "Well, don't you think you should fall back and regroup?" and Patton told him, "No, my men don't know how to do that and I don't want to teach them." [laughter] They were too busy. That whole Bulge system, if they had been fighting the way Patton was, that never would have happened, because … have you ever heard of the 106th Infantry Division?

SI: Yes.

WB: Is something you don't hear about, because they were in the wrong place when the Bulge started and they were wiped out, almost, or they just ran away and gave up. … The Army never reconstituted that division, because they figured … that's an unlucky number, but, … when a new division came into the line in the Third Army, Patton would mix them in with some of the other divisions and go on patrols and find out how to run things. … Then, they were experienced, but, in the First Army, he'd just put them in the frontline, and that was really almost criminal, I think.

SI: It sounds like you had a pretty high opinion of Patton.

WB: Oh, I did. Yes, I saw him personally about at least three times, pretty close up, and he was a soldier's soldier. He always wanted to know, "You guys got enough food and enough ammunition and is everything okay?" I mean, he got to know everything you need. … When we were in the Third Army, we were put on ammunition rationing, a couple times. "You can only

fire five shots today," and that's stupid. [laughter] If you've got eight targets, you're going to shoot at eight targets or, if you're being attacked, you're going to stop firing after five shots? … I can't believe that, but some genius in the supply department says that's the way it's got to be. So, that's just not right. Okay, did you have any other questions that you wanted answered?

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about those other times that you saw Patton?

WB: I saw him first when he first took control of the Third Army, down on the road to Le Mans, and he was so happy. … He was just riding around in his big, fancy jeep … and he liked to talk to the guys. … Another time, he got out of his jeep and he hiked along with some of us for a while and he's just talking, "You guys getting everything you need?" and, "You guys are good soldiers. Keep going. Move as fast as you can, because the faster you move, the better off you are," and that was his theory and I think it worked. The third time, I think, was, he came to give a speech to the 90th, after the war was over, in occupation. We were in the City of Widen. … Always, they put the Third Army close, right next to, to the Russians in occupation. … We were in the extreme northern part of the Third Army zone and … it went all the way down to Munich and into Austria and that was where the Russian contacts were. … It [the war] was an event. I was glad to be there and glad to survive, but it's kind of fascinating. … You never realize how things work out, but, when I was discharged, one of the doctors told me, "You should file for disability," and I said, "Well, why? My arm doesn't hurt me." He said, "But, it may sometime in the future and it's just a good thing to have on the record." So, I did. I filed the papers, and so, the rest of my college years, I was under PL-16, rather than 346, which is more liberal, and I started getting a pension, VA pension, which was tax-free. [Editor's Note: The Veterans Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1943 (Public Law 16) assisted wounded veterans in advancing their education in a manner similar to the GI Bill (Public Law 346), but with additional benefits.] The first couple of years, it was thirty-five dollars. Now, it's 205. So, people say there's no inflation? [laughter] but that's another one of the things--these generals all managed to get themselves on disability, because it's not taxable. Have you interviewed "Fritz" [General Frederick J.] Kroesen? Do you know him?

SI: Yes. I did not interview him. [Editor's Note: General Kroesen, a Rutgers College Class of 1944 alumnus, was interviewed by the Rutgers Oral History Archives in 1998.

WB: Somebody has interviewed him. … He was on the varsity crew the year that I was a freshman and he's really one of the very few non-West Point guys that made four stars. …

SI: What did you think of your officers, the junior officers, the guys that led you in combat?

WB: Most of the officers that we had in my [unit], that I was in contact with, were excellent. The people who were in the original division and came from within the division were very good. The 90th was kind of famous for having the first two or three, at least first two, generals we had, were terrible. The division trained with one general, and then, just before they went overseas, he got promoted. So, they put somebody else in and he was no good. Then, the second one was no good, and then, we got Earnest, who was very, very good. We had five total division commanders during the war and three of them, the three who were good, were all promoted to corps commanders. Van Fleet was one of them, was our last general, and he, of course, … had a

famous career after the war. [Editor's Note: During World War II, the 90th Infantry Division was commanded by Major General Henry Terrell, Jr. (March 1942 to January 1944), Brigadier General Jay W. MacKelvie (January to July 1944), Major General Eugene M. Landrum (July to August 1944), Major General Raymond S. McLain (August to October 1944), Major General James A. Van Fleet (October 1944 to February 1945), Major General Lowell W. Rooks (February to March 1945) and Major General Herbert L. Earnest (March to November 1945).] I have a lot of souvenirs that I brought home. My son's got a lot of swords and I got him a beautiful, two beautiful, twenty-two-caliber rifles, a Walther and a Mauser, both civilian type rifles there. The Germans did beautiful arms work. Are you familiar with guns?

SI: Not really, a little bit.

WB: Okay. … Their guns were beautifully made.

SI: I know many GIs had arms sent home and took them home. They always wanted a Luger.

WB: Yes, oh, yes. Everybody wanted a Luger or a [Walther] P38, yes. … I had quite a few, but I sold a couple of them while I was in college, because I needed some money, [laughter] but those two twenty-twos I kept, because they're beautiful.

SI: When did you come back from Europe?

WB: Let's see, my discharge was … December 30th. I came back with the Division Headquarters. We rode in jeeps and trucks all the way from Eastern Germany, or from the eastern part of Germany, almost by the … Czech border, down to Marseilles and we got on the old SS *Mariposa*, the last journey it made. … We sailed. He made that voyage in seven days, I think, and landed at Hampton Roads, Virginia, and then, from there, went up to Fort Monmouth and I was discharged from Fort Monmouth, December 30th. So, I was in the Army for two years, six months and one day, but almost all that was overseas, had almost two years overseas.

SI: Does anything about your time in the Army of Occupation stand out, any interactions you had with the Germans?

WB: Well, yes, on one of our patrols; part of my job was to patrol some of the secondary roads, where a lot of the [former] German soldiers [traveled], who were the *SS* guys especially. They didn't care about the ordinary guys, Germans, but the *SS* ones, … they kept them in special prison camps and they were guarded by combat troops. So, one day, we were rolling along and we caught, found, three guys walking on a road and one of them ran. The other two just stood and we took them prisoner and the other guy, I fired a couple of shots, but he went running across this field and I didn't want to [pursue]. The guy with me was new, so, I didn't want to leave him with the two prisoners. So, we took them back and they were both *SS* and they went in the [camp]. … My old regiment, the 357th Infantry Regiment, was guarding about ten thousand *SS* troops in a big prison camp near Landsdam.

SI: Was that after V-E Day that you captured these *SS* troops?

WB: … Yes, yes, this was after. This was about a month or two after. They had this point system. You've heard about the point system, I guess, yes, but … are you aware that some of the foreign governments awarded medals to people who fought in Normandy, and so forth?

SI: Yes, the French government, particularly.

WB: Yes. Have you seen them?

SI: Some.

WB: Are you done recording?

SI: I will pause it.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Before we leave the war in Europe, I just have a couple more questions.

WB: Okay.

SI: You talked about the action when you were wounded in Metz. How far into the battle was that?

WB: That was the second day.

SI: The second day of the battle, okay.

WB: Yes, and the fellows, some other guys, came into the hospital that night and said that they had finally sent the whole battalion, the Third Battalion, into that and they captured … that city hall, which was the last point of resistance in Maizières-les-Metz, but they finally shelled the heck out of it with big, heavy artillery, and then, sent in [the battalion]. That's ridiculous. Here, you go four guys in one attack and a thousand in another. So, they took it. They captured it then, but, you know, when artillery shells a concrete building like that, it just vibrates everything and everybody's disoriented. So, that gives you a break. … So, they pulled the American troops back and shelled it with heavy artillery, and then, they sent the whole battalion in and that's enough men that you can [overwhelm them]--can't shoot everybody, but that's nasty fighting. … I'd rather fight in countryside, like Normandy, where you have places to get out. In a city, you're so hemmed in and every window is a potential sniper. It's much nastier to fight in cities than it is in the countryside.

SI: Did you find that even in little towns you would go into during the race across France?

WB: Yes, yes, and, in the city, bullets bounced all around. Everything bounces, bounces off of concrete, bounces off of buildings. Ricochets are terrible, because they're usually whipping around and make a terrible wound.

SI: When you were crossing the rivers, the Meuse and the Marne, was there any resistance during that period? Did the Germans put up a fight when you were crossing the rivers?

WB: … No, no, sometimes at bridges, but that's where the Free French helped us. When we were crossing those three rivers, the Free French had that part of the country pretty well under control. They had taken control. … The Germans had little, small groups of defenders at each of those bridges over those rivers and they're supposed to blow them up when they saw the American Army coming, but the Free French were able to cut those wires. They got in at night and cut the wires, and then, they killed the German people, one by one, so that we had a free ride over those bridges, but you could still see the old, real old, shell holes from World War I that were all grown up with grass and shrubs and things. … What a crazy way to fight a war, to be in trenches, and then, to get out, charging the machine-guns, gee, but that was interesting.

SI: Since you spoke German, you were able to communicate a bit more with the Germans during the occupation.

WB: Yes.

SI: How did that go?

WB: Pretty well. The Germans liked having order and the occupation brought order, … and especially in Patton's area, where he had a lot of orders. … Slowly and gradually, we would release [them]. … For the first week or two of our occupation, you had to have a pass from the MPs. We took over the *Bürgermeister's* office and we had the city stamp. That was power, man. You could requisition whatever you wanted with that stamp, [laughter] and so, we'd stamp the passes for about a week and, after that, he says, "You don't need a pass to visit your relatives." They thought that was marvelous, because they could never see why that was necessary, and they went to see relatives that they hadn't seen in years, most of the time walking. … Very few Germans had cars or they had bicycles, a lot of bicycles, and, as a matter-of-fact, the Germans had several divisions that were mounted on bicycles. One of the divisions that tried to come, and came down from Germany, to relieve the troops on the Falaise Gap came riding in on bicycles. Then, we captured them all, because they didn't know. They were looking for the German commander. "He's a prisoner--come see him." … The Germans, they liked to have things running smooth. So, you know, that was really very smart, that we'd go into a city and say--well, to the *Bürgermeister*, we'd walk in, the three of us, with our guns and our uniforms--and say, "Okay, you're still *Bürgermeister*, but, now, we're the *Oberbürgermeister*. Yes, so, we'll tell you what to tell the people and you tell them and put it out as the city manager," but most of the *bürgermeisters* were pretty quickly replaced, because they were almost all political appointees of Hitler, … but they were used to having [order]. Patton was smart. He says, "Keep things [as is], don't upset things right away. Do it slowly and just let them take over. Let the Germans be taken over slowly," and that worked very beautifully.

SI: Did you have to help remove party members?

WB: No, the military government did that, yes. No, some of them were put in prison, if they were important enough, but, no, we didn't do that. We were strictly just checking--temporary custodians, you might say. [laughter]

SI: Did the Germans seem defeated in their personality?

WB: Yes, yes. They were tired of war, they were tired of all the [fighting]. It was pitiful that some of the guys who we saw, you saw so many men with one leg and one arm. They just lopped arms and legs off a mile a minute in the German Army, because they didn't have the medicine. They didn't have antibiotics, didn't have penicillin and they just didn't have the time to do good surgery, I guess, but it was really sad. You saw so many people who had lost arms and legs, unnecessarily in some cases. … Every once in a while, you'd find some disgruntled veteran, German veteran, who thought he wasn't being treated fairly by the occupiers, because, "I didn't surrender, I'm victorious." "No, you're not. [laughter] You're here and we're here and we're in charge." … Sometimes, that's the way you had to put it to the Germans. They were an aggressive people. It's kind of fascinating--I went back to Germany after the war, in 1947, for the summer, with the Rutgers Crew. We went to Holland and we spent most of the summer in Holland, and then, we traveled a little bit. We weren't allowed to go into Germany. We traveled through Germany on the way to Switzerland, but we weren't allowed to stop there, for some reason. That was 1947. The war was pretty new then, but, when we got to the German border, the German guards were very officious and, you know, "Got to do this, got to do that--right now," and I could speak a little German. I said, "Calm down. You're not really in charge here," because they still had occupation troops, … but they had begun to let the Germans run things somewhat their own way by then, but it was a very interesting experience.

SI: How do you think the occupation troops--not so much the policy, but on a one-to-one basis--treated the Germans?

WB: That went very well, I think. … It's kind of interesting, if I start talking with somebody, they say, "Oh, your name is Biehler. You're a German," and I said, "No, I'm an American of German parentage, descent." "But, you're half American, you're half German," [laughter] and that made things good as far as they were concerned. They liked that, but the German people, … they were very, very tired of being at war for that length of time. … They didn't have food, they didn't have gasoline, they didn't have very many pleasures, they'd had nothing in the stores to buy, but the GIs had cigarettes and the cigarettes were money. Do you know that we were issued free cigarettes, a carton a week?

SI: Yes.

WB: Someday, I'd love to find out who paid for those, whether the government paid for them or whether--I think the tobacco companies probably gave them to the government and wrote off a big tax write-off and got everybody hooked on cigarettes, because I would guess that eighty-five percent of the people in the service smoked, tremendous high number. … Are you a smoker?

SI: No.

WB: Good for you. It's a dirty habit, I think, but, during the war--I mean, even the movies, those old movies that you see--everybody's smoking, all the time, yes. … Even now, when you travel, have you traveled to Europe?

SI: No.

WB: They smoke heavily over there, very heavy, France, Germany, especially, and I guess Italy.

SI: Yes, I have seen that in other countries, too.

WB: Yes.

SI: Many people I have interviewed say they did not start smoking until they went in the service. They had these cigarettes when they were in combat. They thought it would soothe their nerves.

WB: Yes.

SI: What about drinking? Was there any drinking?

WB: … Prisoners?

SI: Alcohol?

WB: Oh, well, the Germans all drank beer and most of them could handle it pretty well. … They didn't over drink, very little hard liquor at that time over there, but that was a problem for the GIs in the occupation. So many of them had been used to the 3.2 beer … in American PXs [post exchanges], which is pretty low. The German beer is about twelve percent alcohol and they wouldn't get smashed, but they gained a lot of weight. … That's why I never really started to drink beer over there, because I didn't want to gain a hundred pounds. I saw people gain a hundred pounds, because they weren't doing anything. That was a problem for the Army. They tried to sponsor a lot of trips. … They'd take people to the various scenic spots or the famous castles and stuff and let the Germans give them guided tours and stuff, but they'd take guys in two-and-a-half-ton trucks and they had so many accidents with the trucks that I didn't want to go on any of those trips, [laughter] because I had access to a jeep. I was very lucky. Being in the MPs, I could use a jeep whenever I wanted to. So, I went shopping for china and I got some. … This is all German china, from Rosenthal, cost me cigarettes. …

SI: Yes, these are foxes, dogs and a goldfinch.

WB: Yes, these are all from [Germany]. … That part of Germany where we were in the occupation is the center of the ceramic manufacturing, Rosenthal, Hutschenreuther, (Choosenroyce?), Mitterteich, all of those guys, yes.

SI: What was your first step after getting discharged from the military?

WB: Okay, I came back, I got discharged just before Christmas and, as soon as I could get settled in, I think within a week, I went down to Rutgers and tried to get back into school for the spring semester. … Because I changed my major--I changed into an agriculture major--it took me … one semester to catch up, and then, I graduated in 1948, and then, I applied to the School of Forestry of the University of California in Berkeley and was very, very fortunate that they had just built a new building and were looking for students. … I got in there and I spent two years there and didn't quite finish the master's degree, and then, I decided to get married and go to work, but I never went back to New Jersey. My mother kept saying, "When are you going to come back to New Jersey?" I said, "I don't know. It's pretty nice out here, Mom. I'm going to stay out here." [laughter] … You're not a faculty member.

SI: No.

WB: You got a master's degree.

SI: Yes.

WB: You can teach in … one of the junior colleges out here.

SI: Yes, I think they have that in New Jersey, too. I like my job.

WB: You're happy in New Jersey, huh?

SI: Yes, I am happy in New Jersey.

WB: That's great. Is your wife from New Jersey?

SI: Yes. Both of our families are there.

WB: Okay.

SI: However, California is a very nice state.

WB: It's a wonderful state.

SI: Where did you get the idea to go into forestry?

WB: I just liked it because … you're out in the outdoors and it's a fascinating scene. To study forestry, you have to have almost all the major sciences--you have to have pathology, entomology, all kinds of botany, taxonomy, lots of stuff--but, once I got working, I worked for the Forest Service for a year-and-a-half and, at that time, they were having one of their budget cuts. So, they said, "Well, we can't hire you full-time until we get our next year's budget. So, go down to Sacramento and get a job." So, I went down to Sacramento and … started working for the Air Force at McClellan Air Force Base and got promoted so fast out there, by the time the Forest Service offered me a GS-5, I was already a GS-9. So, I stayed in personnel work and ended up working for the state. I was a staff services manager for the State Personnel Board and

a fascinating job. I had a group of consultants who worked with all the cities and counties in California, fifty-seven counties, and it's a tremendous state. California counties go all the way from Alpine County, which has 176 full-time residents--and it's a county [laughter]--to Los Angeles with more than ten million.

SI: Where is Alpine?

WB: Yes. Do you have any idea what the present population of California is?

SI: Fifty million?

WB: Thirty-eight million. … If it was a separate country, it'd be the eighth largest economy in the world. It's a fascinating area. We just love it. So, our first retirement was to Lake Tahoe. We lived there for nineteen years, and then, the snow got a little bit too much for us, so, we moved down here. … We like it here. This is nice.

SI: Yes, a very nice desert atmosphere.

WB: Yes.

SI: Yes, it did not seem so hot.

WB: And this is the hottest month. The winters are ideal. We wear shorts all year round. [laughter]

SI: Actually, I have a couple more questions about Rutgers after the war.

WB: Okay, sure.

SI: When you came back, where did you live?

WB: At home, in Summit, New Jersey.

SI: Okay, you commuted.

WB: … No, once I started Rutgers, I went back to the fraternity house. I lived at the Chi Psi Fraternity, … 114 College Avenue.

SI: What was it like coming back as a veteran and having to mingle with kids that had just come out of high school and had not been in the war? Did you interact with them at all?

WB: Not very much. … The courses I was taking were all upper level courses and I didn't run into too many people who had--I ran into a lot of veterans and quite a number of people who had not been in the war, but we got along all right.

SI: In general, did you have trouble readjusting to civilian life?

WB: No. I had trouble … adjusting to military life at first, [laughter] because it's so regimented. You have to have a pass to do everything, but that's control. It's a very controlled existence. I couldn't live with that.

SI: How did you see Rutgers change from when you had been there earlier to when you were there after the war?

WB: Oh, it rapidly got much larger, much more, I think more, commuting students, many more students period. At that time, it was still just one campus. When did they go to a second campus?

SI: Probably around that time.

WB: 1950, something like that?

SI: The big influx of GIs pushed them to expand.

WB: Yes, but it was kind of fascinating. One of my fraternity brothers had been a meteorologist in Algeria, through the whole war, and he took a geography course and the professor was talking about Algeria and this guy says, "That's not right, Prof." He says, "Well, what do you mean?" He says, "Well, I just spent four years there and this is the way it is." So, he said, "Okay, well, come tell us about it," because he'd never been to Algeria, and that happened quite a bit, I think. …

SI: This was a case where the veteran knew more than the professor.

WB: Yes, yes, but, also, I will say this, that I found no difference at all in the difficulty of classes at Rutgers and the University of California at Berkeley. They're both equal--they're the same. … They've just got more Nobel Prize winners, that's all. Have you been to that campus?

SI: Berkeley, no. We might visit it when we are up there.

WB: Well, you've got to go to Berkeley. … It's a fabulous campus, just beautiful.

SI: You mentioned that you took some classes with Selman Waksman. Was that before or after the war?

WB: … Yes, that was after the war, yes. "Soil Microbiology," he was fabulous, a wonderful teacher. … That's a complex subject, but he'd be talking along, all of a sudden, he'd see a bunch of blank faces. He says, "Okay, where did I lose you?" [laughter] He was a genius, yes. He's not active any longer. He's probably dead by now.

SI: Yes, he is deceased.

WB: Fascinating man, very interesting man.

SI: One of Rutgers' greatest alumni and faculty members.

WB: Oh, yes. Well, he's the only Nobel Prize winner. … Have they had another one since then?

SI: I am not sure. They may have had more. I am not sure if there were any who were both alumni and faculty members.

WB: Yes.

SI: Is there anything that I skipped over that you think we should add to the record?

WB: No, I think you've done very well. I admire Rutgers a whole lot. I think it's one of the very best state universities that there is and I can compare it to California, which is [very good], but California, … the size is unbelievable. The state college system started as the teacher's colleges, but they're not allowed to give a PhD. … There's twenty-two state colleges in California and there are ten campuses of the University of California. Now, that's a heck of a lot of public education. Then, you've got Stanford and USC that are both private colleges, … or universities, that are every bit as big, or bigger, but I think you've covered almost everything I can think of.

SI: Okay. Thank you very much.

WB: Thank you. I'm glad you got here and I hope you have a wonderful remainder of your trip.

SI: We are going to enjoy looking all over California. We have already enjoyed the trip so far.

WB: Good.

SI: I also want to mention, for the record, that you also hold the Combat Infantryman's Badge, the Bronze Star and four Battle Stars on the European Campaign Ribbon.

WB: Yes, right. …

SI: Thank you very much. …

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Stephen McNulty 10/17/07
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 1/15/13
Reviewed by Randy Biehler 4/1/13