RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM S. BLAHER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with William S. Blaher on September 23, 2005, in Flemington, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and …

Edwin Robinson: Edwin Robinson

SI: … and also in attendance is Miriam Blaher. Thank you very much for having us in your home today. Ed, would you like to begin the interview?

Edwin Robinson: Yes. Mr. Blaher, could you tell us when you were born and a little bit about your background?

William Blaher: Well, I was born October 1, 1925. I survived a diphtheria epidemic six months later. I didn't know that until my high school friends told me about it. … We went to elementary school in Flemington, which doesn't exist anymore, and then, I went on to Flemington High School. In high school, I was in the commercial department as the only boy, … which was interesting. However, [in] my senior year, I had to take chemistry, because I didn't have enough … credits to graduate. So, I was forced to take chemistry, which I got mostly Ds [in]. … I'm very famous for that, because another friend and I made hydrogen sulfide and put it in the ventilating system of the school library. … That was the year the high school dropped detention hall and gave demerits and I found out [that] I got six demerits, but that's beside the point. Senior year, all senior boys had to take a course in Morse Code, and then, we had to go to Trenton State Teacher's College to learn how to swim with a pack on our back, because all the fellows knew, unless you were a farmer, [employed in a] war industry or 4-F, you didn't have much time. So, I graduated in June of '43 and went to photography school in New York City, went to work in New York City and, a little later on, I went to the woman in the draft board, who was the secretary, and I asked her, "How much time did I have?" and she asked me, "Well, when is your birthday?" I said, "October." She said, "Plan on it very shortly [thereafter]." … As a result, I was inducted [on the] 16th of December 1943. …

ER: Can you tell us a bit about your mother and father, where they came from, their families, and so on?

WB: Well, my parents were not born in the United States. My mother was born in Poland and my father was born in Russia and, in fact, my granddad came here in 1902 and came to Hunterdon County in 1904. Early [on], this was a very extremely rural area and my father came [over] as an itinerant peddler, which was common in those days. He came to the United States through Seattle, Washington, at first became a lumberjack, of all things, and went to night school to learn English, and then, he came and worked in New York, Staten Island, in factories. … Then, he couldn't make a living, and so, he became an itinerant peddler. … In those days, with the farms, everybody had what we'd call a route. You had a bread man, you had the Raleigh man, which always was the guy that had these syrups and all the condiments for cooking, and my dad sold pots and pans. That's how he met my mother. … Then, he opened a store in Flemington, what we'd call a variety store. He lost it in 1929, in the Crash, and he lost his house, lost everything. … Where our post office stands today used to be a four-story hotel, which was where my parents moved to after they lost everything. Then, a man lent him, at that time, a large amount of money, [the sum] of fifty dollars, which was a lot of money, and [he]

rented the old store and went to New York City and bought a lot of women's garments. … He opened up a ladies' store and we were in that location up until, ironically, December 16, … 1967, when there was a fire and the building burned down. I lost my mother, she had saved my life, and my dad survived. … I had been in my own business, so, I took my father in with me and he became my ambassador. When my wife and I used to go to Florida on vacation for two weeks, he would run my store, my wife still remembers that, … until, finally, he passed on. … We've continued on and I still stay in touch with my brother in Florida. … He got drafted right after the war ended, and so, he ended up in the Signal Corps. … He was part of the group that built the first microwave system between Washington, DC, and Fort Stewart, [Georgia]. … Then, he came back to Drexel and he switched from mechanical engineering to electrical engineering and he's really the only family [I have left]. Then, of course, I had aunts and uncles. At the present moment, neither my wife nor I have, … really, any aunts and uncles left anymore. We have become now, in our family, the matriarch and patriarch.

ER: Can you tell us a bit about your mother's family?

WB: My mother's family, my grandfather, on the farm he had, at that time, as we would refer to [it], the locals would refer to [it], you were either in the chicken business or the cows, one or the other. So, he was in the chickens. … Since he came from Poland, one thing he had, being Jewish, he had what we'd call, … I don't remember the word, oh, it skips me right now, but he was authorized to slaughter in the *kosher* style. … He built up a route in Trenton, which was a very large, populated area at that time, and he became famous for his chickens, if you wanted a goose, and so forth. He had fruit trees and twenty-five hundred chickens and he had eggs and he also had made what we call cottage cheese, butter, other dairy products. … Every summer, my brother and I had to go out, for a week, to the farm to help him. … The joke my brother and I still have today is, "Who took out the greatest amount of chicken manure to put on the fields?" but he was very successful in his business and a lot of farmers did the same thing he did, went somewhere and developed a route, and that's how you made a living. … As a result, my mother had two brothers and a sister. … My mother was the oldest and the other uncle was next in line, and then, another uncle next in line, and then, my youngest … [aunt], who was only seven years older than I was. … My mother died in the fire, and then, later on, the other two, the older uncle died, that'd be ten years ago, and then, my next [oldest] uncle died last year and my aunt died, now, must be three or four years ago. So, there's no one left in my mother's family, in that sense. … On my grandmother's side of the family, there is a few cousins left. There was an older member who just died this year, at 101, but the generations have changed. That's why I said we've become the matriarch and patriarch. We don't like the roles, but that's part of my parents' family. Now, ironically, my brother, being an engineer and all this sort of stuff, and he's computer-oriented, started doing research in my father's family and, through some connections and perseverance, made a connection in the City of Perm in Russia. … This past July, he went with my younger nephew and his wife and went back to Russia and … he personally met about twenty-five first- and second-cousins. … [He] discovered my father was the youngest of eleven, which was typical in Europe, because they always had children which did everything, unless they died, because there was no medical care. … One characteristic of all my cousins in Russia is what my brother and I have; we all have heart conditions. You know, doctors always ask [for your] family history. So, my brother stays in contact. Several of them are very, very versed in English and they're retired and they were so happy to see an American

cousin. In fact, there was a sister in Israel that flew back, she hadn't been back for fifty years, just because the American cousin was there. That was really something for everybody involved. So, we have a reconnection on my father's side. I didn't realize my father was the youngest of eleven and he came with three other friends. … My brother was researching the friends and there was one we could not identify until just recently. … He made a connection with somebody else through somebody else, through somebody else, and we find that the names are very familiar names that people use all the time, just like, in this country, … you meet somebody and he's … the second, this is the third, this is the fourth; his name continues on, in that sense. Other than that, the family was never large. … My mother and father had my brother and I and that was it, had a difficult time growing up, being in business. Flemington High School, where I attended, there was 116 members, seven killed in military service, and we still get together periodically. In fact, the high school, for Flemington High School, meets every year in February in Orlando and we're down to, approximately a little less than three hundred show up, anybody who went. My one uncle was the Class of 1929, my aunt was Class of 1934 and we all had the same teachers, because teachers stayed. There was no what we call the turnover that you have today, where somebody stays long enough for the contract and they go on to another contract, which I don't blame [them for]. In today's climate, I tell everybody that it's got to be onward and upward. … If you work for a business today, you don't work for twenty, twenty-five years anymore. Number one, the job may not be there, but, number two, you improve yourself. We're very happy with our younger granddaughter's husband. He graduated, I forget the college, Upstate New York, but he became a mechanical engineer and he'd been working on it, but he also continued on. … He got his MBA at Lehigh, and then, he started at Rutgers early this year and he got his professional engineering license. Now, he's changing his job for the third time in about seven years, but each level moves up. … Because he has his professional engineering license, he has consulting jobs and so forth. As we always joke, … my granddaughter, … she's what I would call, as a lot of young girls today are, a professional shopper. Okay, so, it's a standing joke that we have, but the delight is that we do have two great-grandchildren from her and our other granddaughter has given us, also, another great-grandson.

ER: That is good to hear.

WB: Well, go ahead.

SI: Did your parents ever tell you any stories about what life was like in Russia and Poland?

WB: In Poland, [it] was very difficult. … Being Jewish was not easy and everybody was poor. There was nothing, no medical help was available, and that's why they immigrated to the United States. I don't know too much more than that. My one cousin's husband, an attorney in Washington, had researched and got information. I just know [that] my grandfather's generation goes back to 1829; that's all that I can remember of what he told me. I have a whole bunch of papers. It's a lot of documentation, but he came with a brother, who both bought a farm here. They were settled by the Baron [de] Hirsch Foundation [Fund], which resettled many, many people in the United States. … That's why you found a lot of Jewish farmers in Hunterdon County, Ocean County, Monmouth County, all in the chicken business, primarily, but he also settled them in Missouri, believe it or not, in [the] New Orleans area and Seattle, Washington, someplace up in Montana. They were just resettled. They all were primarily farming people. …

My granddad, as I said, he was born in Poland and my other uncle, they both had a farm, but my other uncle didn't like the farming life. … He moved to Trenton and opened up a furniture business and they had four children, of which, right now, two are still alive. … So, when he used to go [on his route], my uncle in Trenton used to get him customers in Trenton, my grandfather. So, that's why I said he had a route. … Then, I used to go to Trenton myself, personally, for errands and I always stopped by my uncle's store. … To skip forward very quickly, when I came home from Europe, I met a fellow from a nearby town and we hooked up together and we came from Fort Dix to Trenton to take a bus home to Flemington, but I called my uncle. He said, "You stay there. I'll come over to the store and we'll give you something to eat and we'll take you back to Flemington. Don't take the bus." So, we waited, but I didn't know that my uncle called my parents and my parents ran to the local bank, got the sister of this other fellow and came to Trenton. So, the families were very close. Everybody looked after everybody. I don't know an awful lot about my grandmother's family, other than [that] a lot of the family settled in Elizabeth. … Of course, my grandmother died earlier. They couldn't treat throat cancer in those days and my granddad took it extremely bad. … My job was to stay on the farm for a couple of weeks to make sure he wouldn't commit suicide and … we then sold the farm for him, moved him [in] with my younger aunt in South Jersey. … Then, eventually, my aunt couldn't handle it anymore and my parents converted a part of our store to an apartment for my grandfather, but he was … lost in the "Old World" only, didn't talk too much. … My job, also, was to go to the local drugstores and tell them, "Don't sell my grandfather castor oil." He would drink two, three bottles of castor oil a day, because that was the European way of getting better. They didn't have aspirin, they had castor oil. … Then, the day [came] that my mother and my uncle had to go to county court, here at Flemington, to have my grandfather placed in Trenton State Hospital and that's where he passed away. … I do appreciate the fact that, and the congregation is still there, the rabbi, at that time, would visit the state hospital, all the patients, and visit and talk to them. I've never forgotten it, and they still do today, just like we do here in Flemington. If you're in a hospital, somebody's going to come and see you. … As I say, my father's friends, … when he left Russia, they left through Siberia, Korea, Japan and [over] to Seattle and, ironically, the boat they came [over] with, it was in 1917, was finally sunk by American submarines in World War II. That's how old the boat was. The main reason they left Russia [was], at that time, … they were about due to be drafted into the Czar's Army and the Revolution had just started and my father's parents said, "Get out." So, he, with three others, left and my father's family had also served twenty-five years in the Czar's Army. … What they did, they got what was called an internal passport and the Czar gave them a land grant in the City of Perm, which is six hundred miles east of Moscow. It's near the Ural Mountains. In fact, it was a major area, according to *National Geographic*, for a lot of Stalin's prisons. My father received a letter, in the early 1930s, from his sister, who said, "Please, do not communicate with us," because Stalin had a lot of purges. So, this is background, more or less, I guess, on both sides of the family. … My brother and I just heard these things, but, you know, we don't pay attention to these things until [too late]. It's always [that] you pay to learn in this world, so, you learn later on, and you're supposed to profit from somebody else's and your mistakes. … We make mistakes, lots of them. As my wife always kids me, she thinks I made a mistake getting married to her. [laughter] That's all right, the best thing I ever did. …

SI: When you were growing up, was there a sizable Jewish community in the area?

WB: By comparison, yes, enough that we could celebrate our holidays. A lot of the old-time farmers had nothing to do with the Flemington people; it's just how it is. The old-time farmers, including my grandfather, were extremely observant and the people in the Flemington area were observant, but not extremely observant, and … it's always a contention, just like it is today. … We had a small building on Park Avenue, near a firehouse, and then, after World War II, we built our first … major building, and then, twenty-five years later, we expanded the building and, now, hopefully, by January 10th, we'll be in a brand-new building outside of town. … We have a congregation now of approximately, I'd say, about 250 families. … There's other congregations now, toward Clinton, and they have about 250 members, and then, the Orthodox movement, which you know is the *Chabad*, has just moved into Clinton. … They originally started in Basking Ridge with one person, one rabbi, and it's grown and grown and grown, which I can see because a lot of my non-Jewish friends were very active in the churches for many years. Being the only Jewish fellow around for a long time, I mean, … I really had no problems and we kid and joke, but I thought nothing of participating, … when I became a Boy Scout, for example, … once a year, on a Sunday, there was a different church or synagogue you went to, to observe whatever particular occasion it would be, Boy Scout Weekend, whatever. … That's where, for example, this one friend of mine, we're very close, he's a member of the Baptist Church, and the first time they ever passed the basket, … I said, "What the heck is this basket for?" He said, … "Bill," he says, "put a couple of bucks down," and I said, "Okay." … I got used to it. … As a Scout leader, we had primarily high school kids. When you're a Cub Scout, it's easy to teach. Boy Scouting is easy; high school boys, absolutely not. We weren't leaders, we were advisers and Scouting had been going through a lot of changes, in fact, toward the end, we became co-ed and it was an experience, … but, like I said, I'd gotten used to it. In fact, I remember, the Presbyterian minister was taking a course at Princeton Theological. … He would come back out of class and he said, "Check me out on my Hebrew." I said, "Well, okay, Reverend Creighton, it's okay." … We would go on and we always had the local priest, even though it was a turnover; I still remember Father O'Shaughnessy the best, over the years. … Let me put it [this way], if you're a minister, some are very quiet and some are very outgoing. … There's a retired minister, the son works as a waiter in the local restaurant, and I said, "How's your folks doing?" He said, "You know my father." I said, "I know, he's very laid back. … Does your mother still run around?" He said, "At their age, absolutely," and they are in their nineties. … He makes sure they get their medication. … He works a night shift at the restaurant, goes to school otherwise. … He has somebody come in to take care of his parents. … I got to know a lot of the ministers being, also, a professional photographer. I have photographed nine hundred weddings in my career, so, I got to know every minister and every church in this county. I knew all their things. In fact, there's a retired minister from Ringoes that is now moving to South Jersey. He's now ninety and he was a photography person. I had a couple more ministers like that, too. … Mind you, as I used to use the big press cameras, he says, "You stand behind the palms, no flash, but I know you can do it." I said, "Okay," and that's what I used to do and I used to use high-speed film and take the ring exchange and the kiss after the ceremony and so forth, … but the Catholic Church … didn't mind me using the flash. So, again, I'm part of a community and when you ask kind of a question like that, yes, it's no problem. … It's more joined today. There is a ministerial council and they have their own appeals, although their Thanksgiving ecumenical service now has not been too well-attended. They dropped it this year, but they all participate in all the other ones. … We're very, very compatible, just [one] problem that you see today is, either a person in your own religion is observant or they are not observant

and how many participate. When I grew up and I went into business and I spent my time here in Flemington, everybody participated, locally, in something. I got involved, because of the 1955 flood in Lambertville, with Civil Defense and what I had was a station wagon [that] I could throw stuff into. … A friend of mine says, "Bill, come on down. You've got to help me." Because of that, I became a member of the Civil Defense county group. I learned to become a radio ham. I became a specialist in communications and I was a member over twenty-some-odd years and I taught all the Civil Defense radio operators, I still have my radio downstairs. It's very valuable, I found out, but there was something that I did. … I'm a member, fifty-some-odd-year member, of the Lions Club, which is a service club. We raise money and give it away. … You learn charity, in that sense, and you learned what civil responsibilities mean. … I remember, we were the original sponsor of the Boy Scout troop and I was asked to be a committee member. … When I realized this friend of mine was overwhelmed with all the kids, I said, "Sam, I'll help you." … Our key thing, that the kids still remember about us, [is], in 1967, we went from Highland Park to the St. Lawrence for the Expo in Montreal. He went up with four boys, with a leaky sixty-foot motorboat, I went up with four boys … and I drove up, two days later, with the station wagon and I pitched a tent and so forth. We had a site. … Then, every day, we'd take a ride across the St. Lawrence to the island and these kids have never forgotten what it was. What they didn't like was, when one wanted something and I said, "No," they would go to the other leader, hoping he would say, "Yes." … You have to learn to be coordinated and they still remember that I was very stubborn about a couple of things. I'm a strong believer in ethics and I'm a believer … in doing things the right way. … One of the things was, I had a boy who was on a special diet, the parents told me about it, and I go past his tent and he has these big two-gallon containers of soda, not … soda, but drink. I said, "You've got to take them back to the PX." "Why? My parents are not here." I said, "No, but we are, take them back." Well, he mumbled and grumbled. Years later, when they come in my store, where I work, they say to me now, "Gee, thank you." Every year, for example, I used to take them to the Statue of Liberty. Now, there was no elevator in those days and I had to lead them up into the torch and, when we went co-ed, I was very fortunate. I have a cousin of mine who taught special ed in New York and I remember talking to her originally and I said, "Where can we go cheap?" because we used to go to Radio City Music Hall, for the Easter program, but, "Where else do you go?" "Oh," she said, "for seventy-five cents, you took the ferry across to the Statue of Liberty." Every year, I climbed that statue and I didn't think anything more of it, had a good time. … Then, one year, we had a problem when somebody spiked a punchbowl at a private party. The parents got upset. … We had a meeting and, at that meeting, we made a couple of decisions [about] what to do. So, when we went to New York for the Easter program, I went to a little Italian restaurant on, I think it was Second Avenue, near Bellevue Hospital. … I already knew the owner and, after dinner, they used to serve little ponies. … What he did [was], he put in three different liquors or wines, three colors, different vine weights, … just little ponies. … In fact, the Scouts knew, no hamburgers, no pizza. My friend's wife taught etiquette and … you had to use your knife and fork the right way. … At the end of the meal, they got all surprised by getting a little pony of wine … and it was nothing, but the parents and I, later, we discussed this. Of course, at the high school the following Monday, everybody heard we were in a drunken orgy in New York, but the commentary is, and what the lesson was, you can't say no. You have to think about the possibility of moderation, being flexible. … I would say half my kids all had emotional problems, even at that time.

SI: When you were growing up, did you often have to work in your family store?

WB: Yes, plus the fact that, I think in the sixth grade, I started selling magazines and I sold the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal* and *Jack and Jill*. … Then, there was another fellow selling magazines, too. He had *Life* Magazine and … I also sold *Collier's*, which, I believe, is no more, either. … Up until my senior year in high school, that's what I did, plus helping with my parents in the store, helping my father unload things. In fact, when I was a little younger, … I mentioned my parents [sold] ladies' wear, my mother'd be up all night [making hats]. … In those days, the farmers' wives all wore hats to church on Easter, which still prevails today. … I used to get up early, with my father, and we would go to all these farmers and deliver either a dress or a hat to the farmer's wife, so that they could go to church. That was when I was a little younger, but, otherwise, when I was in business, [we did] whatever had to be done, like, for example, we got a Cocker Spaniel dog. … Who do you think walked him every morning and every night? but my parents used to do it, because I started seeing now, in Flemington, a lot of the rejuvenation we've got, but people used to sit out on the porch and, as you'd go up and down Main Street, everybody would stop, "How are you?" and so forth and that was it. … Still, I run into people today, like, last week, … a woman said to me, "You know, when I got my first job, I went to your parents and she sold me a dress and other things, so [that] I would appear very nice when I went for my first job interview." … This girl must be, now, in her late forties and she was a young kid, but [she] remembers my parents. There's still one woman alive, she's close to a hundred, and I've seen her and she said to me, "You know, I've still got one of your mother's hats." One of my jobs [was], I used to go to New York on business on Wednesdays, for my own business, but my parents would order special dresses, special this, special that; I got to know the Garment District very well. … You go up to whatever floor it's on and ask for So-and-So. … Either they got a phone call from my parents or I had a note. So, I used to do a lot of [that], besides my own business, in New York City. [In] Flemington, … in the summer months, we closed Wednesday afternoons at one [o'clock], just like the barbers do. The old-timer barbers in this town still close [on] Mondays and what my barbers used to do, … when they were still around, they all went fishing. One guy used to go to Canada to fish for the weekend. I mean, he left … Saturday, they closed early Saturday, and then, he drove up with his wife and he came back Monday night, which people still do today. Our one son, well, he won't do it anymore, but, … when he and my wife were in business together, he left work around two o'clock in the afternoon Sunday, drove to Vermont, skied and came back Monday night. Now, since gas costs so much, he's only going to go up to New York. … He's not the only one doing it. [laughter] A lot of people are doing that, but I did a lot of odd things for my folks and we were a very, very close family. One of my early … memories of my father was teaching me how to ride a bicycle. He got so bruised and banged up, but I got pretty good on the bike and, at that point, that's when I started selling magazines. Also, at the end of World War II, I came home and he put in and got a 1947 Pontiac maroon-colored car and I got his 1939 Chevrolet. That was, as you all know, a big deal. It had so many miles on it, but I couldn't really go too far, because tires, you couldn't get. … I'll never forget, my job on my father's new car was, the maroon color in the car would fade in thirty days, so, I used to polish it often … and these were the things [I did]. My brother did things, too, but he was busy at Drexel at that time. … Of course, then, when my time [came and I] went in to go to the service, he continued on, because he got a deferment, … but, as soon as he finished, I think halfway through, he did get drafted. So, he came in just as the war ended. … That's all I can think about.

ER: Bill, could you tell us about what it was like for your family to go through the Depression?

WB: Oh, I still remember, I remember this, my father lost the store and the house that we lived in. … I remember that he sold off all my toys, because I had a wind-up train. What I was allowed to keep was a Maxwell House coffee can of marbles. Flemington Cut Glass used to make marbles. So, that's what most of the guys played, was marbles. … I got big ones, little ones and we're always shooting. It was the only toy, so-called, [I was] allowed to keep and he had to give [up] everything, in that sense. Other than that, they were very careful about me. I found out, from someone else, I was born in … 1925 and, about six months later, there was an … epidemic of about twelve kids, babies, and we all had diphtheria and they had just developed anti-toxin the year before and this family doctor really saved all twelve of us. … If I hadn't talked to this particular person, I wouldn't ever have known that, but I knew I just grew up in Flemington. … The "Flemington Boys," the "Borough," as they called it, hung together and everybody else was a farmer and we used to mix it up, periodically. The farmers are, of course, much stronger than us, [laughter] okay, but my brother had more fights in school than I did, but I will tell you that I had my share up into high school, even in my commercial class with the girls. I still remember, somebody said something to me and I knocked her out of the seat. … Then, the bookkeeping teacher made me apologize to her, then, made her apologize to me for what she said to me, but that was part of growing up in Flemington. It was, you know, just accepted. See, Flemington had the Foran Foundry, so, we had a lot of Polish people, Ukrainian people who worked in that foundry. They were brought to the United States, prior to the war, to work in the foundry, so that it was not unusual [to run into them] and some of the kids from those families were tough. … They lived in what we call, it was called Brown Street, which, … finally, in the last three years, the street was paved. You have to understand something, that it was never paved. The Borough [was] very frugal. Everything in this town has been frugal, still is. … They were forced to; two years ago, finally, after fifty years, they blacktopped all the streets in town, including little ones. It was a million-and-a-half-dollar bond on that, okay. So, you drove today on nice macadam, if you came up through town, but, for many, many years, [the] streets were never paved. They had what they called chip-and-stone, which was lousy, because it was cheap, and they hate to raise taxes, not … where I live, in Raritan Township. We keep spending, but that's beside the point. The growth in this area is really; … for older people, old-time people, the quality of life is not as it used to be. That's all. So, growing up in Flemington and things that I used to do, that was my timeframe and things do change, that's all, and they have changed. So, I have certain memories and a lot of memories that I don't even know what they are anymore. … The only other true thing I can still remember is, … I had a photography store, commercial stationary store, office equipment and so forth, … which I sold in '85, and this one old-timer … used to be a car dealer. He was originally, you ever heard of the Nash cars? Okay, Rambler, he was the dealer. … He's out of it and he was pretty up in years, but, every year in February, he would rent an adding machine from me to do his tax return. Nobody had calculators. … Everybody had slide rules. … We were talking one time and he says, "You know," he says, "you and Bobby Bush used to get into trouble." Well, Bobby Bush's father had a dairy in town, on East Main Street, and they were paving Main Street, courtesy of WPA, concrete, and we were told to stay off the steam shovel. Well, we're boys, so, we got on the steam shovel. So, he says to me, "His father came across the street so fast, got you kids down." I said, "So, what happened next?" "What happened next? He took off his belt and gave you

both a licking." … So, I said, "I don't remember this." "Don't worry," he says, … "you two kids cried." Okay, … in those days, it was not unusual, if you crossed your parents, you got whacked, … which never hurt anybody. I mean, it's not like it is today, … as they use the word child abuse and so forth. … If there was, somebody from the community, usually your church, … unless maybe [it was] the chief of police, might say something to you, because we had one [policeman], that was it, one, and he went to bed at twelve o'clock and you knew that. Also, in the very poor time, like in the time of the Depression, … [without] my grandparents' farm, my parents wouldn't have any food. … People were very giving and they might leave something, "Don't say a word," they just left and I learned to do that, too, and you learned to have, I use the word "heart." …

----------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE----------

SI: Please, continue.

WB: Okay. … I remember, every town had a town drunk and what we used to do [was], we used to try to keep him out of the bars. … I'm working on him very hard. So, there was one and I went over to the chief of police and I said, … "Can't we get him a job, so [that] he can get some money, because he's bumming [from] everybody, … and keep him out of the bars, tell the bars not to sell to him?" I found out later, legally, you couldn't do that. So, he got him a job sweeping the streets. He went on the wagon and the chief of police, at the time, kept an eye on him. … All of a sudden, one day, [he] took all the money out of the bank … that the chief of police put away for him and bought drinks for everybody in all the bars in town, because the bars had changed hands in the meantime. So, we gave up, but he was harmless, I might use the word. … My parents had opened another small dress store on Main Street and had a couple of women running the store. … Every so often, we'd get a phone call and one of the women said, "He's sitting out in front." All he ever did was curse. So, I said, "Well, okay, I'll be down." So, I went down and I said, "Here's a dollar. Go to the hotel and get a drink." See, at this point, there's nothing that can be done. "No, they threw me out." I said, "Here, you go to Charlie's. He'll let you in," and Charlie let him in. So, every so often, I'd get a phone call and I'd go to my father's other store, because it was only women in the store, because, see, I learned a rule; there must be always a man around when you have women employees. So, when I used to go away at certain times, I, for example, would go next door, in fact, the fellow just passed away this past Friday, he was my neighbor, and I would say, "Sid, I've got to be out, I'm taking a wedding. Keep an eye on the kids for me." "Okay." … The women knew [that] next door was somebody, if they had a problem, because you still have to take precautions. There's always the story about the guy; it used to be, the thieves used to come out of Philadelphia. … We always tell the story, they held up the bank at the Main Street circle on a bicycle, but he also had robbed me of a couple of things, [was] at the same jewelry store twice, … but we couldn't collect, because the FBI wanted him, because he robbed the bank, because they caught him. That's something else about being here in town.

SI: Do you recall anything about the Lindbergh baby kidnapping trial from your childhood?

WB: Oh, absolutely. [I was] ten years old and I saw the *Trenton Times* in front of the store, which I eventually bought, many years later on. [I watched the courthouse] in all the weather

and I saw all the famous people. My hero was Lowell Thomas, very nice guy, commentator, very nice guy. I also remember that the other fellow, Bob Dreschler, and I, we had wagons and the photographers … used to hire us to haul the camera equipment from the parking lot up to the courthouse. … One day, they didn't have any money, so, they paid us off in Campbell's Marshmallows. He and I sat down on the curb and proceeded to eat all the marshmallows. Did we get sick, [laughter] okay, but I do remember; that's my part of remembering the [Bruno] Hauptmann trial. In fact, they have now finished the interior of the old courthouse. They're going to start, now, the reenactment of the Hauptmann trial, again.

ER: Have you attended any of those reenactments?

WB: The first one. The writer of it … was the head of the Fine Arts Department at [Hunterdon] Central [Regional] High School, also, a friend of mine. … He said, "You know what?" He says, "Come on, I'll get you a ticket." So, we went and the way it was done, everybody was a volunteer. There was a couple of troopers [who] volunteered, wore the old-time uniforms. … Now, it's more toward a professional type of thing, now, and they shut it down, because they were redoing the old courthouse. Now, it's going to be done in the courthouse as it was in the 1930s. … So, I do remember the Hauptmann trial, selling the *Trenton Times*, eating the marshmallows. … There was Gabriel Heater, Walter Winchell; I'm just trying to think who else, some personality. The only thing I remember is, a woman that I knew worked as a housekeeper at the hotel and she said, "After the day's work, all those people would come back, go to the bar and get drunk," which was not unusual, either, … but that I never saw, of course. Don't forget, I was only ten years old. That's the only thing I remember [about] the Hauptmann trial.

ER: Is that the hotel directly across from the courthouse?

WB: The Union Hotel, yes, but they haven't been able to use it as a hotel for years. Now, … they're doing business this year, … a lot of business. … They have dreams of reinforcing the second floor, so [that] it could be used as a banquet hall, but it was all hotel rooms. … There were no other places. There was no other places of where you could stay, [other than at the] hotel. … Flemington used to have corporate stockholder annual meetings often.

[TAPE PAUSED]

Well, you couldn't find a place to park, but, I tell you, a lot of people that did come lived in private homes and, as time went on, … a couple of the churches used to put out dinners; that I remember, just like later on, after the war. At one time, Standard Oil of New Jersey, which is now Exxon, today, this was the registered office for the company. They left Newark and I think they were paying the City of Newark, at the time, nine million dollars a year [in] taxes. They came to Flemington. … I don't remember the amount of money, but our tax rate was twenty-nine cents a hundred. … The big thing was, we had three railroads and they used to bring the people to stockholders' meetings, used to put up a big tent. In fact, that's how the theater, which has been closed for a long time, had the parking lot paved. They paid for everything. You'd see a lot of meetings here, over the years, but that was right after World War II. … I used to do a lot of business, in the photography part of it, but the Hauptmann trial, anything more than that, no.

SI: Were you interested in photography when you were younger?

WB: … I got encouraged in elementary school. It was a teacher, Mr. Conner. There were two of us and he encouraged us in photography. When I was thirteen, I got a present of a camera. … They bought this Argus camera at Macy's for twelve dollars and I learned to develop film. Now, I even had more exposure, probably in about fifth grade or sixth grade. … The teacher, I think we sent away to Kodak and we got, I think for fifty or seventy cents, a cardboard box camera, pinhole camera. … He would load the film in a dark closet. … We'd all take turns going outside and posing for a five-minute exposure. … Then, he had the janitor bring in water and he would mix chemicals and we would develop the film. … In those days, they used to have photo paper they had called printing-out paper. You exposed the film to the paper and the sunlight would turn everything red, but it was not printed. … If you kept on the sunlight, it would still fade to nothing, but that was my first exposure. … I think, a little later on, I got this camera and I asked the teacher how to use it and so forth. … There was another fellow, just like me, and so, I was encouraged in elementary school, and then, in high school, we did have a dark room. … In my freshman year, … well, I'm not going to go into detail, but we had a teacher [who] got sentenced [to] seven years at Rahway Prison … for what he was doing. … The high school took out the dark room. So, I learned to, … at home, use the bathroom and do this by hand and make pictures. … Then, as time went along, … this friend of mine, he was a year ahead of me, he was the photography editor for the yearbook for two years, and then, when he left, I became photography editor. … In my yearbook, which I don't have, but I borrowed it from a friend of mine, is a picture of what they draw [of] various members of the class and I'm hanging upside down from a tree, taking pictures. So, I'm known for it and I got encouraged and that's how my father said to me, when I came out of the service, "You want to come into my business? What would you like to do?" and I said, "I want to be a photographer." … We bought a studio and I got out in January of '46 and, July of '46, I was in business. … Then, I started taking pictures. … I have a couple of books that survived the fire, I have [them] here, that I've done over the years. … I used to photograph big concerts and I used to photograph graduation classes, never mind the weddings. … Also, what I used to do [was], when I was located up on Main Street, which is what happened this weekend, anybody returned from overseas to be buried, the various members of the veteran's groups, we made an alliance, which is still [in effect] today, and there was always, we were all young and strong, by comparison, only four pallbearers to a casket provided. … Across the street from my store was two brothers who ran a taxicab service and the one brother knew how to blow a bugle. … I probably did it about twenty, thirty times. … Then, eventually, … I moved at that point. I didn't have time anymore, but, then, everybody came back, … right after the war, to be buried, got what we would call a military funeral, which was, many, many times, very sad. That's how it is. …

SI: These were men from the community interred overseas who were now being brought back to the United States.

WB: Yes, yes. … In fact, it's, to skip forward, very interesting. One of the fellows in my group that I'm into up in Picatinny … worked in Flemington for quite a while and [I] got to know him. … He's part of my division and he didn't get captured. … Only this last couple of meetings ago, … I said, "Ralph, what the hell did you do in the division?" "Oh, I was a medic." So, I'm saying to myself, "In the set-up, there's four companies in the medics, just like there is in an

infantry regiment, and what they would do [was], they would assign one company to each regiment and the fourth one became what was called the clearing station. I said, "What unit were you [in]?" "Oh," he said, "I was in the clearing station." "What did you really do?" "Bill," he said, "you have no idea." I said, "Will you tell me?" He said he was part of Graves Registration, and I'll tell you, everybody went frozen, and Ralph says, "It's something that I didn't like to do, but," he said, "I did it." … As I read later on, [as the] years went on, every so often, a farmer, doing a garden or something like that, would find a body. … They continued on, but the military, they'd do that. So, this just came up when you happened to mention that. The fellows that fought in the Pacific had a different ballgame, but they took a tremendous amount of casualties. … Not only that, but, skipping forward, when I was back home in this new job that I had, … the sergeant I worked with came back [with], the terminology, it was called jungle rot, a terrible skin condition. … You didn't know what you were going to get into, as far as disease and so forth. … As I said, you talk to people at the groups and, every so often, [there will be] a little something [you] picked up, like this one friend of mine, … he's older than I am now, and he's a Merchant Marine and that's why I commented, earlier, he was on three ships sunk. … The winter months of that year, for those guys, was not very pleasant, but that's beside the point.

ER: You mentioned earlier that, when you were in high school, you learned Morse Code and you were taught how to swim with a backpack. Did you know, at that point, that you were going to be drafted? Was that the purpose in doing this?

WB: … Yes, to prep you.

ER: How were you notified that you were going to be drafted? Were you with some of your friends?

WB: … No, what you do, you got a postcard from President Roosevelt. It says, "Your country needs you." I'm being facetious, okay. It simply says, "You are to report to your draft board on so-and-so date," and then, you did, and then, you went to the front of the courthouse. Somebody made a speech. Red Cross [was] handing you out packages. … It's an abandoned building now, on North Main Street, we had what we called a railroad dinky and that took us to Flemington Junction, on the mainline. … Everybody said, "Good-bye," and then, we went to Newark and that was it. Then, [we] went to Fort Dix. There's an old friend of mine, I run into him all the time; he's not well, either. … We got drafted together and … I was trying to get into the Signal Corps, photography. … He tells me, later, [that] I missed it by one day, but there was a call for infantry, so, that's when I got sent to South Carolina. … He was there about a week later, and then, what happened, they sent him to cook and bakers' school in Fort Dix. … He was such a good cook and baker, they made him an instructor. He never left Fort Dix. There's another man that worked for me for many years. He ran all the movie theaters in Flemington for many years, but he had eye problems, but he got drafted, because the rule was, if you could physically do a job, you were taken in. … He ran all the movies at Fort Dix. He never left Fort Dix, either, but he could never have gotten into what we called a line outfit. We had a man in my unit, in my squad, prior to going overseas, and, mind you, he was our first scout, which is the guy that goes ahead of you. … They discovered, he had covered up, that he only had one eye, but he could fire a rifle. I'll never forget, the Captain said, "I ain't going to have anybody in my unit as a scout who can't see." So, they shipped [him out]. I don't know where they shipped him off to and he

was so unhappy, because he wanted to go overseas. Nobody was really happy about going overseas.

ER: What was your basic training in Fort Dix like? Can you tell us about that?

WB: No, Fort Dix was just a reception center. Basic training took place, it was called Camp Croft, Spartanburg, South Carolina. … That was tough, physically demanding. We were crowded; like, the rule of thumb was twelve men to a squad, [we had] eighteen men to a squad. Our bunks were like that far apart, just enough to get into your bed. That was it, your bunk. I had a tough Southern sergeant. … Training was pretty intense and [there are] certain things I remember in basic. … In fact, I failed to qualify the first time, so, I had to shoot again. … Toward the end, we had to go out into field maneuvers. … We all got trained in all the weapons, and … I think I was picked on, but [they said], "You're going to become a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] man." "Okay," but I still remember trying to; we disassembled the .30-caliber machine gun. [The] .30-caliber machine gun has a heavy spring in it, so [that] it returns the cartridge in the chamber, and you're supposed to push in and twist in a certain format. … I did not. That spring came out and missed a couple of guys and went about three inches inside a post of the barracks. … I remember catching hell for that, okay. Another incident is, I still remember this one, too, we were in maneuvers and we were getting food and they gave us chickens. Well, what they used to do [was], chickens used to come in a barrel, frozen. … If you got KP, you had a butcher knife and all you do is just cut that in half, twice. … I remember getting the rear end of a chicken. I said, "I ain't going to eat this." So, I complained to the Captain. … The Mess Sergeant said, "You can't. You've got to eat it," went to the Captain, he said, "No, tell him to give you another one, I said so." So, then, I got the neck of the chicken. I said, "The hell with this, eating this chicken," okay. Also, … in maneuvers, when you're ready to fire, live fire, … the rule is, with an M-1, it was lock and load; with a BAR, … you don't lock and load. Well, I had a loose safety on my weapon, because it was a very used weapon, they all are, and two, three rounds went off. Well, I did not know that the commanding general was there, watching us. … I still remember, it was myself, my squad leader, the platoon sergeant, platoon lieutenant, company commander, in a row, getting, what's a gentle word to use? comments about, "How come you let somebody fire when the order for firing was not given?" but it went down the complete line of command. … What happened was, this was not the first time, my job was to dig a latrine pit, okay, because it was two weeks maneuvers. … The two weeks maneuvers were really to toughen you up, so that I went home for a leave for a couple of weeks, joined … this division in Mississippi, which was like a hundred degrees, a hundred percent humidity, and checked in. … The company commander says to us, "You will join this Army Ground Force program this weekend, right?" Army Ground Force program meant, … the rule was, you're allowed one hour to march four miles, with full field equipment, which weighed about eighty-five pounds, plus your weapon. I didn't realize how soft we became in two weeks. I nearly died, but the company was very good. … I got stuck with a BAR and you carry an eighty-five-pound … backpack, fifty pounds [of] ammunition, a twenty-pound weapon and, instead of like in basic, where you did it in circle, no, in Mississippi, you had to go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. … Fortunately for me, … being new, the guys took pity on me and they all rotated carrying the BAR and we did four miles in thirty-two minutes and they handed us lemons to suck. They didn't have anything else, gave us lemons to suck on, because it was hot, but, … at that point, constant training, you're always in good shape. … I had problems in Mississippi. I

got my first time of blood poisoning. I dug too many foxholes, got broken blisters, and, the next thing I know, I spent time in the hospital. In those days, they gave you sulfa with sodium bicarbonate for your stomach and it turned out to be a good deal, because I got light duty, which meant I worked as a table waiter in [the] officers' mess, but maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.

ER: While you were in basic training, as you were exposed to men from all over the country, did you ever encounter any anti-Semitism?

WB: Oh, yes.

ER: How did you handle that?

WB: Well, I either ignored it or I confronted it. I had a problem with one guy. His reputation, when you went out to the field, you had your rifles in a rack, and what he would do [was], he would never take his own rifle; [he would] take somebody else's rifle. Now, your rifle barrel had to be cleaned every night. He did it to me, and what I did [was], I turned it around and I took his rifle and went out and fired it and didn't clean it, either, like he did to me. So, he comes … [up] to me. See, nobody else bothered. So, we had what was called an altercation, that's all, simple as all that. I did have it, but it wasn't that, how do I describe it? Looking at the service, you really … didn't see a lot of it. Some of the people that I know had a lot of it, depends on the outfit, the officers. Luckily, the officer I had in Mississippi, a pleasure, he was a West Pointer. West Pointers take care of the men first, no matter what. I learned that. … I had a problem with a guy there. … It was so hot, they had these little huts; we didn't have a stitch of clothes on. That's how hot it was. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

On this occasion, it seems that I attacked the guy with a bayonet. So, they put me in for summary court-martial and went before the Captain. I told him the story. He says, "Forget it, just go back." [He] transferred that guy to another company and that's the two. The other thing, I will skip forward, is, when I was in prison camp, the Germans were trying to find out who was Jewish and so forth. The men from my platoon knew I was Jewish and somebody's going to say something to the Germans and he was told, if anything happened to me, something would happen to him, because … we happened to have gotten along. In my whole platoon, there's just two of us guys that were Jewish. The other fellow was killed during the battle. I didn't see it too often, but I would say it was probably there. You'll find that most of the prejudice was from the Midwest and South.

ER: Did you ever have any trouble with food? I do not know if you were observant or not.

WB: I was observant. Let me explain something to you, I was observant; we were *kosher*. I spoke to my rabbi at the time. … You always have to go back to the Bible and he quoted; … I don't know what it was, but he quoted from it. It said, "You can and, if you have to eat non-*kosher*, you can eat it." I never had bacon, never had ham. He said, "You may eat [those foods]," something about as a warrior. So, you have to go back, because, in our tradition, you may have the five books of Moses, but there's an oral law and … [it is] always being updated.

There's always something else and there's got to be an answer for something somewhere and you have to go looking for it. … I mean, in our way we do it, we read the whole five books of Moses every year. Now, it's going to end very shortly. The holidays are coming up. There's a major service tomorrow night, which is the Parade of Repentance, and it's going to come a week later. … Then, we start all over again and, every year, you learn something new and different. So, there's always an argument, like, … I forget the answer now, but we never start over again on page one.

ER: Basically, your rabbi said that you could eat non-*kosher* food if it came down to that.

WB: That's correct. …

SI: In general, how did you react to meeting people from all over the country?

WB: I found most people [to be] very nice. … I'll tell you what, when you share certain experiences, you develop, I guess you'd use the word bond. … You really had all kinds of people that you would run into, and then, you would learn them. You learned who you could trust and who you couldn't trust. One thing you do learn, if you don't trust the guy you're with, get away, because, see, I know, from that era, I learned the basis of teamwork. If you're a team, you're a team and you stay with the team and you take care of each other. … If you don't have that trust, then, I used to avoid them, that's all. So, if you shared something, that's when the bond would start. So, if you had to climb a rope, … run and jump over a fence, climb this wall, go through mud when they're firing a machine gun over you, I hand you a hand grenade and say, "Throw it;" … you learned a lot about personal health, personal hygiene. I was, I will give credit to the Army, very picky about personal hygiene. Real quick, we had a guy in my squad, in basic, he never took a shower and we all complained to the Sergeant. He said, "I don't want anything to do with it." He says, "You know what to do." … We were ignorant. So, we went and talked to, believe it or not, the Mess Sergeant. He said, "Give him a GI bath." I says, "Oh." So, they had this yellow laundry soap and we got a scrubbing brush; the guy got a shower. There and after, every day, you come in from the field, you had to take a shower, because you stunk. … Even today, my wife complains, I take two showers a day, one in the morning, one at night. Cleanliness was very, very important, clean your barracks. Of course, in basic training, we were smart, you learned to use lye, to make sure that the boards look white. [laughter] You pick up certain habits. You also learn, if you go through the mess line, don't … overload your plate; take enough to eat, not that they would give you a lot. If there's food left over, you could get seconds. In fact, … one of the first advantages I learned about the 106th Division, and I got very close to this Ericsson, my assistant squad leader, the first camp I ever went into, when you had dinner, when you ate, everybody had to get firsts before you got seconds. So, it went around, with the potatoes and whatever else was being served. … Then, of course, … you always had medical exams and that's one of my stories, also. When I came back home, I went to Asheville, North Carolina, and I had seven teeth drilled and filled in thirty minutes, no Novocain. You just knew that they were there, even though the only time we regretted is, when we're ready to go overseas, they lost all our medical records. So, we had to do all our shots all over again, and then, what they did [was], they ran us around the camp to work it into the [blood], because the medics didn't necessarily know how to give you an injection. So, yes, in that sense, you got to know people and everybody has idiosyncrasies. You just knew what to do. … I became a BAR

gunner because, in the division, when I joined the unit, the first and second week I'm there, we go out in the field on maneuvers all the time, always raining; this is Indiana. … One day, the BAR gunner came in and he got the trigger assembly rusted. Now, on a BAR, if you do anything like that, you've got to turn it in to Ordnance and they take care of it, but you get into trouble for that, which means you're not doing your job, theoretically. So, I sit down. I said, "Give me the oil." I stripped the whole thing down, put it back together, fine. A week or two later, they put up promotions on the board. [I said], "I'm not going to go down. I'm new." No, they come back, "Bill, you're a PFC." "PFC?" So, I go down and look at the bulletin board and, sure enough, I'm a PFC. [I] found out, I'd been made the BAR … gunner and, years later, when I met my platoon sergeant, I said, "How the hell did you do that?" He said, "When you came into the outfit, you said you didn't know it, and then, I see what you did for this guy, Squirrel." He says, "I figured," if I can use the word, "[you were] a wise ass from the East [and I needed] to fix you." So, I became the gunner and this guy, Squirrel, became my assistant gunner and he was a short guy, yet. … The ones, by the way, that I took pity on is the guys drafted up to the age of thirty-eight. They had a terrible time in basic training, terrible time, and we were all eighteen. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

ER: You mentioned that the older draftees, the thirty-eight-year-olds, had a hard time.

WB: Physically [had a hard time], … that's correct. … Prior to joining the 106th Division, … moving, after basic training, to this division in Mississippi, I do recall [that] we were called out one night to be MPs. It seemed [that] we had a group of Japanese-Americans being trained in the camp. … [A unit], I guess it would be a battalion, came in who were in … Alaska and, they used the word, they "mixed it up" at the PX. … They wrecked the PX and my company was called out to be MPs and simply break it up. … I still remember that, too, but that's a different category. Things are flashing back to me and I'm trying to remember. … As I said before, I had gotten blood poisoning from digging too many foxholes. I also remember, we used to go out on maneuvers in Mississippi and I got a job as outpost and I would have worked [by] a highway and trucks were always going by. One day, a big truck stopped, … had a load of watermelon. … So, what happened [was], every day, I would buy a watermelon. … The mess sergeant was complaining [that] I wasn't coming back to the group to eat lunch. So, I remember the platoon lieutenant came out and he said, "What the hell are you doing?" and I showed him, because I used to store the watermelons in a creek, to keep them cool. … So, he said, "Well, let's not worry about it." He said, "You got an extra watermelon?" I said, "Yes." So, he took out his bayonet and he also ate watermelon. So, I did that for about two, three weeks, until, finally, they caught on. …

ER: While you were in the South, did you ever encounter any segregation? Did you observe it down there in that period? How did you feel about that?

WB: Well, I wasn't used to it, but, then, again, you can't argue. When you have that expression, "[When in Rome, do] as the Romans do," you can't say nothing, you can't do nothing. That's just how conditions were. That's it. So, you saw that on buses and I saw that in theaters. We really had no black people in the training, at all. I understand that came later, but I'm a

Northerner and I … just wasn't used to it. That's all; other than that, really, nothing else. We didn't get to town that much. Now, when we did get leave, you get in this town of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and there would be five thousand GIs on weekend leave and, ironically; no, this came later. That was something else. Well, I'll tell you about this one, too, then. This is after I came back and I was assigned to the hospital in Jackson, Mississippi, and a couple of us went to New Orleans, had to take a train and a bus and we got there. … What I finally had to do [was], after three days, … we had to come back, I had to send a Western Union telegram to my father, "Please send me money, so [that] I can get home, back to the base." … So, that was my one and only experience in New Orleans. It's very easy to spend money as a GI, just like, when you get overseas, the first thing you learned in England was [how to] play cards and shoot crap, because you had no place to go.

SI: You mentioned that one of your officers was a West Pointer. It sounds like you had a lot of respect for him.

WB: Absolutely, yes.

SI: In general, what did you think of the NCOs and officers above you?

WB: By and large, most of them were pretty good. A couple of them, maybe, [I] had a problem with. By and large, I would … tell you that I was treated fairly and, if I screwed up, I paid for it, like I mentioned about my platoon sergeant in the 106th. We landed on a terrible night in Le Havre, terrible, stormy night. We were exhausted, soaking wet. We pitched a tent in a muddy field and we went to sleep. Now, we didn't know [that] we were called for guard detail. Well, the platoon sergeant came over the next morning and said; … oh, and part of your gear was, you either had a pickaxe or a shovel. Well, we both had a pickaxe and a shovel, between the two of us. He says to me, "Well, you're going to dig a garbage pit." A garbage pit is much bigger than a latrine pit and there we are and we're digging this pit. Then, he comes over and says, "Fill it up. We're moving out." That's all. Now, I don't consider that anything prejudicial. It just was typical [punishment], if you got into trouble. Even in England, every day, we went out for a twenty-five-mile hike. That took care of eight hours. … One day, I went on sick call and I hung back, to make sure everybody [had] left. [The] First Sergeant came by, he said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I was on sick call." He says, "You know what?" He says, "I'm looking for somebody. You go report to the battalion commander." I [said], "What the hell did I do now?" So, I reported to the Colonel. All he said [was], "Do you know anything about farming?" I said, "Yes, I do, sir," because, normally, I broke a rule, you never volunteer. Well, he said, "You've got a new job. You see that old English soldier over there?" I said, "Yes, sir." "That's your new boss." I became the battalion gardener. You've got to remember, England was trying to raise food and they had the English Land Army, which was mostly the girls, and my job was to cultivate and take care of the garden. So, every day, they would go out on a twenty-five-mile hike and they would go by me and I would be leaning on a shovel. I did that deliberately. The Platoon Sergeant, madder [than hell], … he says to me, "I can't go against the Colonel, but," he says to me, "how the hell did you do this?" I said, "Well, it just happened." "Okay," and that's what I remember. … My platoon also was reassigned to the Port of Barry, in Wales. We unloaded ships containing the division equipment. They didn't have enough men in the port battalion to unload all the ships coming in and we developed a routine. … The five-gallon cans

were strapped five together, in one bundle, and I had to unload them off of, you learned [that] they're not called freight cars, they're called goods wagons, and you would have to unload them, stack them, and then, … the easy part was driving these trucks off the ships. I never knew what double clutching meant, and I even drove a crane, because there was only thirty-some of us in the whole group. … It was a good [detail], but it was hard work, but, every night, you could do whatever you wanted. … Then, we would go into the Port of Cardiff, the big city, where I found a very nice welcome from my Jewish community there. … In fact, I met someone there and she corresponded with my parents when I was missing-in-action, [offered] a lot of words of encouragement. … Many years later, … we met on a boat in New York Harbor. She's married, had children. [Her] husband transferred to Australia; we got together.

----------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO----------

SI: This continues an interview with William S. Blaher on September 23, 2005, in Flemington, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and …

ER: Edwin Robinson.

SI: Please, continue.

WB: Okay. … I had the capability of getting [my] hands on a three-quarter-ton truck and I used to put coal in it. You couldn't get coal and it was rationed and the sergeant that I worked with, he did the same thing with somebody else that he met, with a family. … I remember buying this girl's father Charms Sour Balls. He loved them. … I didn't smoke, fortunately, and cigarettes, I tell you, [were] very valuable. … We finished in two weeks, got transferred up, and then, we got word [that] we're going to be moving. … At that point, I got a phone call from my uncle. He was in the Air Force, up in Scotland. I said, "I can't tell you anything on the phone, but can you get here as soon as you can?" … I'm told, later on, … by him, I was the last one to leave the post and he tells me, an hour after I left, he finally made it through, got there. So, we never did connect. … Then, we went on a train and went to, I forget what port we went out of, but we got to the Channel and we went over the Channel, during a storm. I'm just trying to think [of] what else in that category. The landing was very bad. … We were on an LCI and got soaking wet. So, you had to hold on to [each other's] hands and pass everybody's barracks bags. Everything was soaking wet and, if you weren't careful, you could be swept out into the Channel. … I never dried out until I got to prison camp. It's one of the reasons why … I had trench foot, but everybody had trench foot.

SI: What day, approximately, did you land on the Continent?

WB: We landed December the 9th and we got on trucks and we stayed on trucks all day, and then, December 10th, at the end, in the evening, we came in and we relieved the Second Infantry Division.

ER: What year was that?

WB: That would have been '44. … The [combat] timeframe was very brief and, the first night, I always tell people that I was extremely nervous, along with everybody else, and I almost shot my … squad leader and he started cursing at me, … but I didn't hear his password. … What it was, duty was one hour on, one hour off, one hour of sleep. … What finally happened [was], after a couple of nights, my sergeant and my assistant squad leader [said], "You know what? Let's volunteer for a patrol." It's four hours out and four hours in and off; you get four hours of sleep. … This [way], we continued on until the 16th, when, all of a sudden, you could hear, off in the distance, they attacked the other regiment first. In the meantime, there's buzz bombs going overhead, heading towards London. So, you got used to the, "Putt, putt, putt." If you don't hear a putt, get somewhere fast, because it means it was going to come down. That really was very … quiet until the 16th.

SI: What was going through your mind as you were heading towards the line in those days before the attack?

WB: The unknown. I wondered what we were getting into. It was supposed to be a quiet sector. That's why the Second [Infantry] Division was being relieved. They were in the line a long time and they were a crack outfit, but we went into [the line]. The objection I had was, when I reflected [on] it, we really went into the line with [only] a very little bit of ammunition. I had one belt of ammunition. That was it. The riflemen had one bandolier, which is, I think, six clips. [For] our new bazookas, we had no bazooka ammunition. The mortarmen had six rounds. We were supposed to be re-supplied. What we actually did [was], we bought, from the Second Division guys, hand grenades. We didn't have it, because we were fresh and new and [the] Quartermaster [Corps] wasn't going to catch up to us for a while and it was quiet, cold but quiet.

SI: I have never heard of a soldier buying hand grenades. How much would you pay for one?

WB: I have no idea … what we did. You would find out, and all sorts of deals would go on. There always had to be something in exchange.

SI: What other kinds of deals went down?

WB: Well, if [the] Quartermaster needed something, he'd make a deal with another company, another regiment; the same thing with the mess sergeants, you know. How many times can you eat out of a can of peaches? … We didn't really have C rations. In fact, the best thing to happen was, one of the men in the company was a butcher from Perth Amboy and some of the patrols shot deer, because we were in the woods, and he was able to slaughter and cook up meat. We didn't have meat. We didn't really have hot food. The kitchens weren't set up. It's hard to tell you, but I do know, … in my squad, two [or] three of the guys made the deal. … I saw, the next thing you know, they had the grenades on them and the Second Division guys could care less, because they were going back.

ER: Did you feel that you were trained adequately for what you were going to do?

WB: I was.

ER: You were.

WB: That doesn't say that for anybody else, depending on what experience you had. The noncoms were experienced, okay. Some of the men in the squad … were some of these Air [Force] cadets and ASTP guys, so, they didn't really get the training. I mentioned before, I thought I was lucky, seventeen weeks of basic and I had about, maybe, eight or ten weeks of the advanced jungle warfare training, so, at least I had an idea of what would be, what to do and how to do [it] and how to react. … For example, I commented, if you are in a firefight, you go for the one with the automatic weapon. You knew that. … You also knew about, well, I use the word maneuvers, where you've got to follow the sergeant, or your platoon lieutenant, and you have to know what they're saying, even though they may not be talking to you, because there was a lot of hand signals. They didn't have communications. You know, it's like my friend that just passed away; he was a radio operator and he had this huge, heavy radio pack. … He and his officer used to go into the German lines to capture somebody or lay out a grid for the artillery or whatever. That was not, you know, a very simple, little thing, because it's very easy to become a casualty. … I think what you worried about more than anything else is … what we called the unknown. That's all. It sounds simple to say that, but, if you don't know what's going to [happen, it is frightening], and you have to learn. You've got to make your mistakes and you've got to learn. So, I made a lot of mistakes as I went along and, every time, I got a little more knowledgeable. … You have to have confidence in who you are with and, as I probably told you earlier, if you don't have the confidence, stay away from that person.

ER: You went through that area in December, the wintertime. Did you have adequate clothing?

WB: Absolutely not.

ER: What did you have?

WB: Well, you did have a long, big overcoat, which was totally inadequate, in the sense that you couldn't move around with it. So, what you had was a sweater and a field jacket and you had a wool cap and your helmet, because, when I went [out] on patrol, you couldn't possibly go out in what we called the long coat, okay. Some of the guys put on their dress uniform, dress jacket, and we had the typical Army boots. They weren't waterproofed. I understand, … background, the Quartermaster didn't deliver winter clothing and material until just before Christmas. They had it, but they never delivered it, because, if you read; what's his name? He wrote the book. The Quartermaster, [the] general in charge, was told by Eisenhower, "Stay out of Paris." He didn't. He came into Paris and they're more worried about setting up their own quarters than making sure the stuff got out to the infantry. You have to remember, too, the average division, I think my division had twelve thousand people. Out of the twelve thousand people, approximately thirty-five hundred were infantry. The rest were all support troops. … You have to look at those numbers. So, you have Quartermaster [Corps]; … it's divided. We had the medics. … Everybody had a particular job, like, all band members became stretcher-bearers, okay, … but they didn't count as infantry. So, the infantry [was thirty-five hundred men] and we were at full strength. … We were the first new, green division, supposedly for the spring offensive of 1945. That's why we were put in the line, to get experience. … The Germans were surprised. When you talk to others, and … they've talked to the Germans, they thought we

would all run and they were surprised that we fought back. … Among the men that I talked with and worked with, … what we did [was], we bought what's called four days, which screwed up their, the Germans', schedule, because, see, tanks can only go on roads. They cannot go off the road in the winter. … St. Vith, [which] was the division headquarters, was a main road. The whole key was, the Germans would have to go to [St. Vith] to … make it to Antwerp. When you go back and you read other articles and you read about these things and you see the theory, like, for example, they still resent the fact that we notified our headquarters of all this truck activity and everything else and nobody paid any attention, but that's after the fact. … You hear this at [veterans'] meetings.

SI: Were there any incidents that, looking back, you felt were a precursor to the attack, such as an increase in patrols?

WB: Yes. The initial patrols I went on with my sergeant were what we refer to as reconnaissance patrols, which means you're only looking, and we used to run into German reconnaissance patrols. Now, they were mostly old men and young boys and, all of a sudden, … maybe about the 14th, 15th of December, we encountered combat patrols from the Germans, looking for a fight. … I don't want to go into a lot of detail, but our companies formed what we called a ranger group and, what we did [was], we continued our regular patrols. Everybody knew the German patrols, where they would go, and [where] the American patrols would go and we know what's happening and we just went on regular patrols. … It seemed that we drew … a German combat patrol into this ravine and we got out of it. … We had just walked out of the ravine. The Germans had come into the ravine and, what we didn't know is, this so-called ranger group was on top of the ravine and the Germans walked into a trap. My sergeant and I didn't not like the fact that we were bait, but they didn't tell us.

ER: What was the result of that trap?

WB: There were no survivors. You know, I haven't talked about that for a long time, but I broke a rule which you're supposed to have, that you're not supposed to get too friendly with anybody in a group, but I happened to be very friendly with this one assistant squad leader, who's from Minneapolis, awfully nice guy. … I guess I would have learned this as time went on, if I'd continued on into action.

ER: They did not take prisoners at that point.

WB: No, not in a firefight, no, no. When you get into a firefight, it's whatever. It wasn't a large combat patrol, but, … [for] most of the recon patrols that I was on, there's only two people. That's all. One watches the front and one watches the rear and that was it. That's my first, I usually say, action, if you want to use the word loosely. … When I became rear guard, that was another ballgame. That was not really pleasant, and then, we got the order to move out. … We moved out, ended up in this big hill, surrounded and getting fired on by "88s," from the Germans. You cannot fight against a Tiger tank, period.

ER: Was this on the 16th or later? Do you recall?

WB: No, that was on the 19th, yes. We stayed put … in our position. See, we were the Bulge; we were in the Siegfried Line. … In fact, our regimental commander asked division for permission to pull back and make the line straight and division says, "No, don't bother." That was another mistake, because, when you're in combat, … that's what we did; we got caught in, … they use the word pincers. … We didn't move until the 18th. … The night of the 18th, and then, the morning of the 19th, we had gotten near St. Vith. … Then, that's when we realized what was going on and [we] had the letter from the regimental commander of why he made the decision [to surrender], because, when you have no ammunition, no food, nothing, what's your choice?

ER: Your regimental commander made the decision to surrender.

WB: … Yes, both regimental commanders. I was 422 and the other was 423. They both made a comment, because I have a letter that … the regimental commander had written. He made a report of what we did, how we did [it] and so forth, and that we were all to be given a Combat Infantryman's Badge and that the medics get a Combat [Medic's] Badge. … Later on, I found out, I haven't done anything about getting one, but I'm entitled to two Bronze Stars and other medals, but all I ever got, believe me, [was that] I got a certificate from the French Government.

ER: What can you tell us about how that command was carried out? What was the actual surrender like?

WB: The actual surrender, well, we were bunched together in woods on top of a big hill. … Something was passed on, from the Colonel down to what we called the runners, the communications [people]. So, they sent runners down to, … actually, the platoon lieutenants, really. There were no real companies, depending on where you were and how you were, but it was a large group of us and, see, we had to destroy our weapons. I buried my dog tags. Then, we were marched into St. Vith and we spent the night in the church, Catholic church, there. … Ironically, this past winter, a group of about a hundred guys went, as guests of the Belgian Government, to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge and one of the fellows took pictures. … In the town of St. Vith, the church built a community hall and [the pictures] show people giving everybody flowers and so forth. … I'm looking at the church and I said, "Oh, my God," I said, "I was up in the pews upstairs." They just jammed us in. Then, we had to march fifty kilometers to Gerolstein, in Germany, and spent the night in a brewery. … Next morning, … [they] jammed us into what we called boxcars, forty-and-eights, except they put more than forty men in. You had to take turns standing and sitting and they made a hole in the boxcars, so [that] if you had to go, you had a place to go. It wasn't [good], had no food, no nothing, and then, Christmas, we arrived at the prison camp. They were overwhelmed with so many Americans.

SI: What was morale like, both yours personally and the men you were with, during the surrender and when you went into captivity?

WB: Morale was okay, I would say. How would I describe it? We didn't know what was going to happen next. … You can probably say morale was probably low at that point, because you just didn't know what was going to happen. … It continued on until you got to prison camp,

until you got settled in and you realized [what was going to happen]. Then, we started getting organized and the organization turned out to be predicated on six men [assigned] to what we called a bread group and that was the organization. … A couple of guys who knew German very well and knew how to talk became the leaders in the camp and, what they did [was], they had about five thousand Americans; first, they ship out all the officers, then, they ship out all the noncoms, [which] left about three thousand privates and PFCs. … There were other prisoners in the same camp. The Russians were there, there were Serbs there, the French were there. The worst thing to be in that camp was to be Russian. … They were terrible [to them], but we were lucky. They didn't really bother us. My guard was an old man. [He would] come in, sit on a bench in the barracks and go to sleep. You see, a lot of the German guards, we were near a German … hospital, and what they were [was], they were recovering patients. … If they can get around and hold a rifle, they got a job guarding us, until the very end. It became *SS*, but, until that point, we had no organization. … In the six-man bread group, since I smuggled in a mess knife, I became the official cutter and that was a tough job, because I had to be [fair]. I usually ended up with the end piece. … Then, periodically, we would … be called out and we had to clean up the cesspools. … Otherwise, you just sat and talked about eating, other things, and there's other instances which occurred, but no [easing of the tension], because you have no control over what's happening. My feet were so bad [that] I really couldn't march or walk and there was a guy from Kansas City [by] the name of Brown. He carried me practically the whole fifty kilometers. There's where I was fortunate. I was in a nice, close-knit group. Everybody watched out for everybody else and, gee, I haven't thought about that in a long time. … Then, you settled into the routine at the camp.

SI: Was there any kind of interrogation when you first got into the camp?

WB: Yes. You got registered and photographed. … As we found out, the Germans had Germans [posing] as Americans, dressed up and trying to find out what your unit is, what you did and so forth, but, after a while, you got used to these guys, so, you did nothing, but they didn't [try to kill us]. There was too many of us. I mean, like, nobody talks, … anymore, about Malmedy, where the *SS* lined up [prisoners], they were mostly medics and MPs, lined them up and shot them, you know. That was about sixty, seventy people. So, that was not a large group and [your treatment was] depending on the officer-in-charge and so forth, but, with us, they just had too many of us. That's all. So, the only … [information] you gave was name, rank and serial number. "Where's your dog tags?" "I lost them." "Okay," which was dangerous, because, if you didn't have a dog tag, they assumed that you're a spy, okay. Eating, as I said before, you got a so-called coffee in the morning, you got a liter of soup … in the afternoon, you didn't know what it was, and, [in the] evening time, you got … tea and it came out to about two hundred grams of ersatz hot bread and about ten grams of ersatz margarine. Once, the other prisoners in the camp gave us their Red Cross parcel and it was one parcel per bread group, supposed to be one [per] man. … You got a lot of stuff in that parcel, but most Red Cross parcels were found downtown in Bad Orb, never got to the camp. … Then, things got bad when they ran out of food, basically. They started giving us three little baby potatoes. … Every day, you tried to keep clean, every day, you tried to do something … and you would talk. Every night, you get undressed and go through all your clothes to kill all the lice, because that's this business about trying to stay clean. There were fleas and lice, mostly lice, and there was a tentative outbreak of meningitis. So, we had to walk outside, open up the barracks, lose all the

heat, and that's all the Germans could do. They put us back in the barracks. Guys did die and they were put into a cellar, sprayed with lime, and then, on the weekend, whoever they grabbed would be burial detail and the ground was frozen. They weren't buried too deep, from what I understand, but a couple of doctors stayed, a dentist stayed, a chaplain stayed, with the men. … Different things happened which involved me. Actually, it was two men raiding the kitchen for food and [they] got surprised by the German mess sergeant. … What they did [was], they hit him over the head with a butcher knife. … What happened is that they brought us out in the morning, out in the cold, made us stand out there until we gave up whoever did it. … The chaplain prevailed upon the commandant, "Let us go in and we will find [out] who it is." So, they searched all the barracks and guess what? in my bunk was the food that was stolen. Well, fortunately, my group, they all vouched for me and I found out [later that] there was two guys and, at the VBOB [Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge] meeting … in August, the fellow that was in this slave labor camp [Berga] said, "Bill," he said, "Guess what?" He said, "They didn't execute them, but they didn't make it back to the United States," but we stayed out[side]. I mean, you're talking about [very cold weather]. The month of December that year, there was only eight days above thirty-two degrees, because it was the coldest winter that Europe had had in years. … The average temperature, even before I got captured, [which I know] because one of the fellows asked me where I was and he was into this stuff, he said, "You were probably at eight degrees, because you're at high elevation," because my position, as a gunner, was a firebreak down a long mountain. … So, it had to be below thirty-two, because the prison camp was up in the mountains, too. It was extremely cold and that's the main thing that you used to battle. So, two guys used to sleep together in a bunk and you got a crazy, thin piece of cloth called a blanket and that was it. We all ended up with dysentery. In fact, it got worse. When we were liberated, they gave us C rations, the worst mistake we could've made. It made us so sick, you have no idea how sick we were. So, since I lived in a stone barracks, I was not relieved, taken out, until three days later. … They put me on warmed up salmon, because … a C ration was too rich, too good a food, and I know people died from eating the good food. … At that point, then, they flew me out to this Camp Lucky Strike, near Le Havre, and they changed the food on us there and gave us uniforms and, as I tell everybody, that's where we read [in] the newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, that President Roosevelt died. … I had chronic dysentery, along with everybody else, diarrhea, and [I] had a parasite, but I learned, from the records my father kept; when I came home, we had only two Flemington family doctors. I went to both of them and they said, "I can't help you." I only weighed about one hundred pounds. … My father had a friend in New York who had a doctor in New York. He said, "I think we can help you." So, I went into Post-Graduate Hospital, [now NYU Medical Center's Tisch Hospital], spent three days there, [had] all these tests and he said, "[There is] really nothing to do but watch your diet, but we're going to quarantine you." I said, "You can't. There's too many of us in the United States now." So, he wrote me a letter to give the Army doctors, but what's funny [is], all these tests that I took at Post-Graduate, my father paid cash and it probably was very expensive at the time. It was seventy-two dollars, all the tests. I have a copy of the bill that he had. … Then, I came back to duty and went to the hospital in Asheville, North Carolina, for R&R. I took a test. I wanted to be a clerk/typist, but my test was a little bit too good for that and, next thing you know, I went to Washington and Lee College. … I was pretty depressed at the time and my main instructor was a staff psychologist from National YMCA and he counseled about six of us, … because, in order to be in this program, something had to be wrong with you. It sounds kooky, but that's the way it worked, and [they had] about twenty women from the other service forces. … In about two

weeks, I snapped out of it. In fact, I celebrated V-J Day there, … but what the job turned out to be was, I worked in an Army hospital and I took care of your personal problems, which sounds [strange], and, [after] reading my letters, it must have bothered me an awful lot, because I always had work; I was always worried. The chaplain didn't handle what we handled. … I had a good deal and the sergeant I worked with forced me to learn how to box, play basketball again, get me into a rowboat in the middle of a lake and row, and I physically picked up. I also had to eat liver once a day and the dieticians always tried to find something for me to eat with liver and I don't eat liver today. By that time, I started building up my strength, … but I never truly gained my total strength that I had when I was younger, … when I was with an infantry unit. [It] never came back. … Most of the guys had the same thing that I did, depending [on] what you did and how [well] you did, but the Army bent over backwards, as a POW, to try to get you a good job. … First thing you see, "You want to go to a line company?" I said, "No way. I want to be a clerk/typist." "Well, where do you want to do it?" "Boy," I said, "I want Second Service Command," which was New York, New Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania. "No, we're filled up. We'll give you a service command out in the West Coast." I said, "Oh, no." So, he said, "Well, let's see what else we can find for you." Next thing you know, they cut my orders. [I] took a bus to Lexington, Virginia, and checked in and started taking courses. What the course was, really, [was] an American Legion service officers' course, condensed, but the psychologists have to teach you psychology. In fact, at the time, I had to laugh, but I got two credits for psychology. … Ironically, when I was in Jackson, Mississippi, at the hospital, I was approached by the Veterans Administration in Gulf Port; Gulf Port or Biloxi, I forget which. … They said, "You've got the qualifications. We'll give you a job." I said, "No, I want to go home to New Jersey." Like everybody else, I wanted to go home. So, I got promoted to corporal, assigned to Jackson, Mississippi, and I applied for discharge in September of '45. I was declared essential. Then, the Army made an approach to me and said, "If you stay in one year, you're up for buck sergeant and we'll guarantee [that] you're going to come out a master sergeant in one year." I said, "You can't do that." I said, "It's six months in grade." "If you enlist [for] one year, you'll be a master sergeant." I said, "No." The other fellow I was with, he took it. It turns out, he ended up in Atlantic City, at an Atlantic City hotel which was converted to a convalescence center, and he spent one more year [in], and then, went back to North Carolina. … What he used to be was a professional boxer, but, then, he went into the moonshine business with his father. Then, I've lost track of him, but that's the tail end of me. So, I had to stay on, and then, finally, I got transferred to, it's called Fort Story, Virginia, which was originally a Coast Artillery base. It was a convalescence hospital … next to Virginia Beach and my sergeant and I got transferred there. … See, I was based at the War College in Washington and I kept bugging them, "I want to get out." … Finally, they relented and, somewhere in December, they sent me a WAVE and they said, "You teach her everything you know." I said, "You've got to be kidding." … She was not up to what the job [entailed], but, see, what's happened [is], at that point, very few people [were] coming back to the United States as a convalescent. … I think, eventually, after I left, … probably, the hospital's closed down and, since I was next to Norfolk, they gave me a WAVE. It's not too far to bring her back and, finally, in late January of '46, [I got out]. … Even there, I had a problem with the Army, because, by that time, I was too smart with Army regulations and they made mistakes on my discharge. I found out, to my chagrin, that when you become a prisoner of war, your Army pay is suspended. You don't get it. What you do is, you file a war claim, which I did, took five years, against the German Government and you get the same pay as your rank equal [to what] the Germans got. It wasn't much, but that was a hold up

and there were mistakes on my discharge. I stayed three days longer and I realized I was butting my head against a wall. I said, "All right, give me my papers. I'll go home." … It took me a long time to get the corrections made and I still didn't get all the corrections made to my discharge form. One of the things I was doing, when I was in the hospital in Mississippi, one of the powers, I [will] use the word, that I had was, with the people who were patients, I could get you points to get out, both the sergeant and myself and the two officers, but, see, officers took care of the officers, enlisted men took care of enlisted men. So, I had to give [the patients] a talk, and then, I had to give you a personal interview and, depending on the circumstances and so forth, I said, "Well, how many points are you short?" So, I could be flexible. That's one of the good things that I did. The worst thing there, at that post, was when they brought back Japanese prisoners of war and, even though I was in Class A uniform, a German POW, they don't [care]; you learn not to trust anybody. … They only weighed sixty-five, seventy-five pounds, worked in a coalmine in Manchuria, caught in Manila, … but I did do some good and that was my last job before I got out. … Then, I came home and joined the 52/20 Club, … because that was a lot of money. [laughter] That was a lot of money in those days.

ER: When you were in captivity, were your parents made aware of the fact that you were a prisoner of war?

WB: … No. They didn't know until February 1945, when my postcard came through.

ER: How did the liberation take place? Can you tell us anything about that?

WB: Well, we got an inkling in this respect. They brought in an armored car driver, badly burned.

ER: The Germans?

WB: No, no, he was an American, badly burned, and I'm listening to the conversation, because they brought him to my barracks. He was a lead scout for Patton and he said, "Oh, we crossed the Rhine fifty kilometers back." So, you know, the guys started thinking and I guess, maybe, about two weeks later, we heard a firefight down in the town of Bad Orb. You could hear German guns, and then, you heard American M-1s and BARs and so forth, and machine gun fire. The next morning, it was called the 106th Cavalry Group, which is not related to the division, it's an armored unit, … they came through the gates of the camp, knocked it down. [In the] meantime, the German guards ran away. … I do remember, they opened up the tank and the guy handed a pack of cigarettes to one of our guys who were POWs. This guy got up on the tank and yelled, "Guys, look, Lucky Strikes." You have to understand, a cigarette, in the camp, was worth a buck. That was the currency in the camp. … Then, what they did [was], the British came in, along with the Americans, and they started moving [us] out. There'd be a truck of British, a truck of Serbs, a truck of French, a truck of Americans, [which] was rotated out of the camp. … Then, the 44th Division came in and they took over the logistics. They put up a field hospital. … So, when you did leave the camp, we went down to the hospital, got a quick check by the doctor and [they] gave you some food, I remember, it was warmed over salmon, and [I] slept, that first time, on a stretcher. Next day, you got on a DC-3 and you flew it to Le Havre, in France, to Camp Lucky Strike and, there, you got your uniforms. … They started giving us

what's called paregoric, to stop you from running to the bathroom, but we were averaging twenty, thirty, whatever times a day. You have to go to the latrine constantly. Diarrhea was absolutely [unstoppable] and, in fact, when I got onboard the ship, the *Argentina*, I got on the ship with my bag, I put it down, I saw the chaplain. I said, "Chaplain, where …" He said, "Down around the corner, to the left." … They have to dilute the paregoric, because it wasn't good for you. … It just, I think, took about three, four days before it could take effect. I started to slow down. … Then, we arrived [on] V-E Day to the music being played over the loudspeaker of the boat, the Andrew Sisters singing *One Meat Ball*. … We landed and went to Camp Kilmer, transferred to Fort Dix, as I said earlier, and then, we came home. … That's in the simplistic form. [I had] never flew a DC-3 before; well, it flew and landed. That's all. We weren't very happy about it. I never flew in an airplane, so, we did. … Most of my group, we hung together. We hung together.

ER: When were you finally able to get back to New Jersey?

WB: You mean in the United States? …

ER: Yes, after you came back from overseas.

WB: … Oh, actually, we arrived V-E Day and we were taken immediately to Camp Kilmer.

ER: Did your family reach you there?

WB: No, no, no. That occurred when we … went to Fort Dix, and then, we were released from Fort Dix, took the bus to Trenton, take the bus home, and that's why I commented about my uncle getting us to his place and calling my parents. … I was probably home four days after I arrived in the United States, because you have to figure I was probably overnight at Kilmer, by train to Dix, go through paperwork, go through the altering [of] your uniforms, because they just threw it at you, what you got in Europe, and gave you money and gave you orders. … A lot of people went to Asheville, North Carolina, R&R, and that was afterwards [for me], but, then, no, I was home about four days after arriving in the United States. … That was it, and then, the whole town celebrated, believe it or not. They were all out to come … and see me. In fact, [when] I think about it, I realized, in one of my letters I wrote, that somebody's aunt says, "Look, I've got a niece in Asheville. You look her up," which I did.

----------END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE----------

SI: Please, continue.

WB: Oh, okay. … I remember, at Asheville, of course, I mentioned earlier that I had seven teeth drilled and filled in thirty minutes. I also remember, one night, I went to visit this person. I'd gotten a ride out there. I couldn't get a ride back and [this was] later on in the evening. … It was country. I get picked up by the MPs and I told them my story. He said, "Okay, we'll drop you off at the hotel." I also remember that I went to a show at … the convention center and it was Helen Forrest and what was the orchestra leader? [Editor's Note: Helen Forrest sang with Artie Shaw's orchestra.] I can't remember the name of the orchestra leader, but it was a popular

band and Helen Forrest was the lead singer and we enjoyed the show. … Then, by that time, I had gotten moved over to Virginia, … but they did do their best to take care of us.

SI: How did you react to seeing your family for the first time? Did you see any changes in them?

WB: My mother turned completely white; am I right, Miriam? My mother's hair turned white and my father's turned very grey and he gave up smoking a cigar. See, they didn't know … where I was and I was just considered missing-in-action. Until they got the postcard, they had no idea I was a prisoner. In fact, the story on that one is, the mail came in and Flemington's a small town, at that time. The mail came in and the mailman saw the card. He dropped everything. He yelled, "I'm going over to the Blahers'." … He ran over to my parents' store. He says, "Here, you just got this in from Bill," and that's when they knew that I was a POW, at that time. In fact, I don't know if they changed the website, but, if you go to [the] Flemington website for the *Hunterdon County Democrat*, it will indicate, … my name is in it, "William Blaher was a POW." … I would tell you this, that for weeks, people came over and, I tell you, I got a lot of thank-yous. I wasn't the only one, but, personally, … because I knew a lot of people, they all came over to shake hands and I never forgot that, because, you know why? you can get lost in the shuffle. What was the toughest part of all [was], the whole thing when I came home, I mentioned before, a fellow from Quakertown, nearby, was killed by one of our own airplanes and, for me to go over and talk to the family, I'm nineteen years old, not feeling good, what do you tell the parents about the son and how he died? … In essence, I told them, "He just died in action," but it bothered me for [a while]. It was one of the few things that I wasn't happy about. I knew I'd have to talk to the family. That's very tough. It's just like, the chief of police we had at that time, Jack Walters, I'll never forget, he said [that] the worst thing he had as his job, during the wartime, was when he had to deliver a telegram to a family indicating that somebody was killed-in-action. So, the town was [appreciative]. I was one of the townspeople and, therefore, when I would run into somebody; in fact, I was home a day and I was sleeping in my bed for the first time and a classmate of mine came to see [me]. He was a Marine … pilot. In fact, their family has the farm just up the road a couple of miles and we got [to] talking, "How are you doing?" and so forth, and so forth, and so forth. After he saw me, he was assigned to Okinawa. He got assigned [overseas] and, in a major tropical storm, he and four Marine pilots went down, never found. … I hadn't thought about George in a long time. … [His] older brother was [born with?] a deformed hand. He could never have gone into military service. So, he's the one that got the deferment to stay on the farm. Another fellow was in Italy and he was a tanker. I don't know whether he was a driver or not, but he was in armor. … When we went into Africa, I never realized how many men were captured at that pass.

SI: Kasserine.

WB: Yes, I had no idea and we were outnumbered, outgunned. The Germans had far superior tanks. We had a clumsy, old tank and, of course, … in my era, the tanks had gotten bigger, but they hadn't come in with the new Pershing tanks, but that's besides the point.

SI: In the camp, was there anyone who had been captured earlier in the war or were they all men who had been captured during the Bulge?

WB: No, no, no. In the camp were Russians, were Serbs, there were some French and, in fact, a little bit later, they brought in about two thousand British, mostly Africans. They were caught at Dunkirk and they'd been working in coalmines in Poland. Now, you know how far back Dunkirk went, pretty far back, and they came into the camp. So, it was a mix in the camp, but every compound was separated. You couldn't talk to anybody else. … You can only stay in your own camp. … Then, you had barbed wire between you and the fence. You could not go over that wire. If you did, you'd get shot. So, everybody walked around, even though it was cold, but you walked around. We had to. I did a daily walk around the whole camp every day with some of the other fellows. We had to get exercise. Also, you got warm.

SI: Did you do anything to keep yourself occupied or entertained?

WB: There really wasn't entertainment. All we can do is sit and talk, mostly about food, that's exactly what you did, and sleep. … Then, there were guys who really moved around; you would call them the wheeler-dealers, and [they ran] the business with the cigarettes and so forth, and certain fellows volunteered for certain jobs. They did hold Sunday services, … because there was one chaplain, and … we really didn't do anything. We really didn't. You didn't want to stay outside too long. That's why I say, if you walked around, you walked as briskly as you can and, more than once, I would have to duck into somebody's barracks to use the bathroom, because that's how it was. You just weren't up to it. … Every night, the bread would be distributed and I'd get a loaf, set it on the floor and all the other guys [would] sit around me. … I'm looking and I'm trying to gauge [the size] and I start cutting the six pieces of bread, but you went to the kitchen, had to walk down the hill to the kitchen, and you had a little pot they gave you. Not everybody got a pot. I got a little pot and, hopefully, you see [some solid food]. You don't ask questions. You took whatever's put in the pot and you ate that soup. Everybody called it grass soup. Yes, that's right.

SI: Were there any escape attempts while you were there?

WB: No, not really. Nobody was willing to do it. The only ones who always got in and out were the French. They sort of ran, like, an underground. They came and went. How they did it, I don't know. There were just too many barbed wire fences and you physically wouldn't have had the strength and the clothing to have endured it. No, there was no attempt. It was complete boredom. That's what we had, boredom.

SI: Some POWs recall that the Germans tried to sap their morale with propaganda.

WB: Oh, yes. You had a radio broadcast every night and the standing joke was, they always said, "Budapest Castle, still defended." Well, it was captured much earlier by the Russians, but that broadcast, every night, said, "Budapest Castle, still defended." You didn't get too much information. We knew it was propaganda, so, you didn't pay no attention, but they broadcast over the loudspeakers, every night. Yes, you're right. That would be the only way, nothing else, and, unless somebody had a connection, we really didn't know what was going on outside, until, like I said, that one burned driver from the recon car said, "We've crossed the Rhine," and I think we had no idea where the Rhine was. So, [it] did nothing. … There were so many of us

that other people were in other camps and they're working on farms. One of the fellows from my company, he lived in a circus tent, but he worked on a farm. I asked him, "How the hell did you do that?" He said, "That's just how it was." What happened [was, depending upon] what particular German unit got you and wherever they took you to, … that's where you got transferred to. You're talking about a whole regiment of whatever [was] left … of a regiment in one fell swoop, a lot of us. I have no idea of the numbers. So, we all went to Bad Orb. Some didn't … go to Bad Orb. The Germans had a tremendous amount of prison camps. Some ended [up], like I said, working on a farm. One guy worked in a railroad yard and he lived in a railroad shed and, again, until I run into somebody else who may tell me [something new], I have no idea. So, Bad Orb was a very well known [camp], and then, there's Moosburg and there's a few other camps a lot of the men were sent to. … Even they had problems. They were bombed a few times. You have to understand, the train that I was on traveled only at night and a lot of food that was designed to come to Bad Orb, we found out, too, was shot up by American [aircraft], probably P-51s, because any German rolling stock was a target. … They did know where the camp was and they did know [where] the German hospital was. … I'll tell you what was very impressive, is to watch these thousand-plane raids going overhead. That was impressive. … In fact, I might as well tell you the story about the plane that shot at us. I was in my barracks and, [as] I said, my barracks was stone and you could see the bullets, where it hit behind the building. Well, on top of the hill, we also had a latrine, a huge pit, latrine, and you can see the metal perforated [by bullets]. … When the guys were up there, they went into the pit, but they survived. I just remember, I ducked behind the wall. … It wasn't expected, but you could hear the German plane flying over the camp and this fighter pilot, an American pilot, was chasing it and he didn't realize where he was at. So, in today's world, it's called friendly fire, okay. It's not the first time it ever happened. It always will happen, okay. Again, like I said, I'm coming up with things I haven't thought about in a long time. I know, I'm going on and on and on.

ER: That is quite all right.

WB: … I'll take another question.

ER: In that particular camp, the Germans took some Americans away for slave labor. Do you know anything about that?

WB: Oh, yes, oh, absolutely. When I said to you before [that] they were trying to find out who was Jewish, they did get a group of guys. We don't have numbers. We were guesstimating eighty, a hundred, a hundred-and-fifty, … we really don't know, but they needed three hundred-and-fifty people. … What they did [was], they put them on a train and everybody was told they're going to another POW camp, because they had transferred some of us. Well, it turned out [that] what this camp was was not a camp. The town is called Berga, on the Elster River. … They were digging underground tunnels, twelve hours a day, for the mineral designed to be changed into heavy water, because what people don't realize [is] how close the Germans were to developing an atomic bomb. What they did [was], they worked twelve hours a day [on] very little food. They didn't get any medical help. In fact, … one of the fellows that belongs to the group I belong to now, he's written up here in … our POW magazine and [was] giving the stories and it was not a pleasant experience. They lost about eighty men [who] didn't make it back. Toward the end, they were … probably all going to be shot. It turned out that the

Russians were too close. So, they left everybody and everybody ran like hell. That's what I understand. In fact, that's one of my references that I have in here. There's a fellow named Norman Fell. He had a shoe store up on Route 22 in Union. He's now in a wheelchair up in Bedminster or Bernardsville; I lost track. … Here it is; this talks about Berga. … For example, the guy who acted as a medic, he said, "When they brought back an escaped prisoner, they wanted me to certify that the man was killed by rifle shots in the back as he ran to escape, but he'd been killed by a shot in the forehead. They used a wooden bullet, so [that] there would be no exit wound," you know. …

SI: POW MedSearch.

WB: Yes. … We belong to the American Ex-POW Association and there's a [local] chapter and [we have] our own medical research going on and they come up with these commentaries. So, the only man I know in here, personally, is [a man by] the name of Myron Swack and he's very large, heavy, needs a walker today. Yes, I have Myron Swack and this is his story and [it] talks about his experiences and so forth. … In talking to him personally, we met a few years ago in Washington and [it was] the first time we ever talked, because the one thing I'll talk about, the guys who were at Berga, they are so close, they are wound so close to one another, they don't talk, but this one guy started talking and he was giving [me information] about the conditions and he says, … "And you know who ran the operation?" I said, "Who ran the operation?" "BMW," but you don't hear that. … Then, at the very end of the article, and it's true, when they got liberated, the Army made them sign an affidavit that they would never tell anybody about it. The Army never wants to admit mistakes, just like, we found [out], on Long Beach Island, which is now honored by the Coast Guard, was an Operation: TIGER; … are you familiar with Operation: TIGER? [Editor's Note: On April 28, 1944, during Operation: TIGER, a training exercise off the coast of Slapton Sands, England, in preparation for the amphibious assault at Normandy, German E-boats sunk several LSTs, resulting in over 750 Army and Navy deaths.]

SI: In England.

WB: In England, yes. Nobody realizes [it] and, not only that, but, from what I read, … the people onboard were never taught how to use a life vest, tremendous amount of casualties. Army will not admit to mistakes.

ER: You mentioned earlier that, later on, the *Waffen SS* took over the camp.

WB: The last two weeks, yes.

ER: How was that different from before?

WB: Well, the [earlier] guards used to come into the barracks and goof off. We really didn't worry about them, but, when the *SS* came in [and] took over the camp for a little while, toward the end, you didn't dare go anywhere near the wire of the fence. They were very nervous, ready to shoot. The other guys, eh, they're up there, they're just watching you. As long as you didn't go over the wire, you're all right. … That's the only comment I can make, okay, because, when you saw black, you knew they were *SS*.

ER: What happened after you were discharged? You mentioned that you went to college at that point.

WB: No, I didn't go to college. I went to college in the Army.

ER: In the Army?

WB: In the Army.

ER: Did you then establish your photography business?

WB: That's right, discharged in late January '46, was home, went to see [my] doctors, started eating a little bit better, and then, I talked with my father, "What are we going to do? Am I going to go into his business or what would I like to do?" and I said, "I'd like to be in the photography business." … So, I bought out a studio, 136 Main Street. I'll never forget that. Today, now, it's a restaurant. … Lo and behold, I had some equipment [that] I had bought before and I bought the studio and I still have, downstairs, my original studio camera. … My dad helped me with money. What I cashed in was, they used to have a ten-dollar savings bond, war bond, and the money [that] I used to send home for my parents, they put in a savings account. So, I had money to buy the business. It cost me twelve hundred dollars. I had the same real estate agent … then, [he] wanted to sell it to me for five thousand, but I went to high school with him. I said, "No, no," I said, "Donald, don't play games with me. What do they really want?" … We bought it and, the next thing you know, … the local newspaper called me for work and people started coming in and … they knew I was a photographer. … I started doing weddings and ID pictures and it just simply grew more and more and I got involved with more and more things in photography. … I have a joke that I always tell, because I was reminded about it recently by this one particular person who was involved, "Never book three weddings one hour apart." … See, everybody knew me and I knew, see, if I did formal pictures only, the rule of thumb is, you do the bride alone, the bride and groom, then, the best man [and the] maid of honor with them, then, the ushers and the bridesmaids, and then, the parents on both sides and their aunts and uncles, which usually took me about a half an hour, unless you had problems. … It was at the Presbyterian church and … three blocks up was the Methodist church. The third one was the Catholic church on Park Avenue, which is another street. … I was so happy that the Catholic … wedding was late and the fellow [that reminded me] was in the Catholic wedding and he said, "You know, we were all pacing up and down, but it wasn't because of you," and I said, "What happened?" He said, "Somebody forgot the marriage license. So, somebody had to run back home, get the license. So, you arrived back just in time." … Everybody knew what I [did], a typical, structured picture, because that's what they wanted, that's what you wanted. … The other thing I still remember, a fellow had gotten married, he was a GI, they were so poor. He had no money. He hadn't gotten a job yet and his fiancée came to the store. My minimum charge was twenty-five dollars for four pictures, which were the bride and groom and so forth. … She says, "Can I pay you out?" … with her job, but she said, "I can give you a dollar a week, but I can give you five dollars down." "Okay, we'll do it." So, it was in Whitehouse Station. They rented the, it's either [the] Polish Hall or the American Legion Hall. The music was a record player. The girl and her family made all the food. They did all the decorating. They got

married. That's all, got married in the Catholic church on [Route] 523 and they went over, and then, I followed them over and I took the pictures. … You know what? every week, like clockwork, she came in and she paid that dollar. See, that's part of the knowing; if you're a person who lives locally and you happen to be cognizant [that] people have problems, you bend a little bit. … Then, later on, they got married, he got a good job, and then, I started taking baby pictures.

ER: Speaking of getting married, how did you meet Miriam?

WB: [laughter] How did I meet you?

Miriam Blaher: How did we meet?

WB: … My wife used to come out, every summer, to a farm. Her uncle had a farm here, in Ringoes, and it's not too complicated and we used to have a summer group of kids.

ER: Was this before the war?

WB: Before the war. Well, her parents came out because everybody did. You had to escape the polio epidemics in New York. She has a cousin [who] had bulbar polio, who has a little problem, still, talking today, but does very well. … We met and that was it. … After the war, we got together again. Now, she did marry someone else. My wife has been married before. The children we have … [are] her children, not my children. … I was a bachelor and we were re-introduced thirty-one years ago by good friends. Am I right, dear, so far? okay, and it was, … I don't know for her, but for myself, a major decision. She didn't know if she wanted to get married again or not. I didn't know if I wanted to get married, [laughter] but we got married. … My wife, I give her credit, in her in-between period of getting divorced, my wife went to school in East Brunswick, whatever, on Route 18, to a school and she became a physician's assistant. … It turns out [that] she got a job in Hopewell, a family practice doctor there who [had] just come out of Korea. … Of course, we were dating and she spent thirteen years driving Route 31 to Hopewell every day and I had my business, so, I kept working. … My wife is a very good wife, a very good mother. … We were joking about our parents, because, when our holidays [arrive], coming up now, you will light a candle in their memory. … We actually went out to the cemetery [on] Wednesday, in Long Island. … I always tell the joke, I lost my mother in a fire in '67, and so, I lived with my dad until I married Miriam. Well, every day, I would practically pick up my father, pick up her mother in her apartment, come home and we'd start supper for her, and then, she would come in and she'd have to finish up, get a whole meal ready. This was every night and the joke that I always talk about is, we had a cat [that] I inherited from her oldest son. [The] cat's name is Freddy. … Her mother used to sit in the kitchen there and, all of a sudden, Freddy would start biting her ankle, which meant she was hungry, "Feed me now," and I used to pick up the cat and I would go get the food out and I would feed the cat. … My wife spent thirteen years as a physician's assistant. She's actually the first one in the county, and then, now, it's been twenty-five years ago, our younger son wanted to buy a coffee shop in town. So, my wife quit her job as a physician's assistant. She became the cook, he became the front man. The place was open seven days a week. My wife did it [for] twenty years and, finally, decided, "We've got to get out of here. … You can't do this anymore." … Her son wasn't very

happy about it, but, if you don't have a cook in the kitchen, you've got nothing, … even though my daughter-in-law is a very good cook, but I'm very proud; my wife is one of the best cooks you could have had. There are still people that we run into [who] remember the type of foods that she used to make. … I sold out my business in 1985, and then, he sold out in … 1999, 1998. … Then, her son ran a very large restaurant in Bridgewater Commons in Somerville [Bridgewater], … until they closed down. … He discovered, at his age, he was too experienced and too old, because the corporate places that run food places want young people, not too experienced and [who] don't want too much money. That's how it is today. … Our son has ended up, he's now a school bus driver for the high school and he does lawns and landscape [for the] rest of the year. … That's how he makes a living, plus, his wife still works and he has … two lovely daughters and we have grandsons and we have great-grandsons now. My wife's other two boys, the oldest is a CPA in East Brunswick, has remarried, has two children. The middle son has two boys. One is now married, the other one's going to get married next March. The oldest grandson is our genius kid. … You know, you run into people periodically that are really sharp and bright. Well, … I couldn't believe it, at the age of thirty, he has his PhD, … but he's a specialist. … His specialty, in the University of Rhode Island, is manufacturing and something else engineering, a highly narrow field, and [he] became an expert in eye movement … as far as automobiles are concerned. … He's with this Age Lab, as they call it, at MIT now. … He goes to these meetings and so forth. … [He] went to the BMW and Volkswagen plants earlier this year with his professor. … They just set up a consulting thing and the assembly line's going to be changed, [the] construction's going to get changed. He's in automobiles. His grant is now with Ford, Ford Company. The other one, he … handles software, does very well, getting married. … As I said, my wife's other son, the younger one, the older daughter went to FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology] and her specialty's merchandising. FIT is a tough school to get in. … She didn't have it academically, but they don't look at academics, or, rather, academics that greatly, in a sense. They look at other things and she has what's called leadership and the first job she got, … when she went to the school, is, "You're now in charge of this group of kids. You've got to take care of them all," but she said, "Well, I've been to Pierre Cardin, I've been to Polo, I've been [to] all of the name designers." … She was in the fashion business. Now, she works; she's quit full-time. She likes to sell what we call boutique children's clothing. She's an expert in that and she knows all these stores. My wife used to buy from a chain of stores in Florida called Jacobson's and she's telling me, "They're going to go bankrupt, maybe. Buy whatever you can now," okay, because they … did things there in that store [that] they wouldn't do up here in the East. … The younger daughter went to Rutgers, got two degrees, one in accounting, one in psychology, and is a CPA with Deloitte & Touche, up in Parsippany, and she just had a baby, which is seven months old. So, we're very content, … at least I am. I don't know about my wife. [laughter] … Today is her younger son's birthday. … He's going to be fifty-two years old. … This is … the status as of now. Life is very interesting, though, and I've never really talked this much about some of these subjects ever before, … but you guys have asked me good questions.

SI: There is one thing that I think we missed, unless I am mistaken. Do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

WB: Oh, I was listening [to the radio]. We had a Philco radio and we were listening to John Gambling, Sr., on WOR. … That's when we found out, and then, we actually sat and listened to

Roosevelt talk to the country. … My father was extremely, extremely upset, probably because he figured I would be drafted, because … I got out in '43. This is '41 already, '42, really; yes, '42, really, because it was December. … I guess he might have been concerned about that. My mother didn't say anything. My brother didn't say anything. He was just going to school, because his Drexel program was five years. He had one of these, you know, work-study things, class first, and then, you go out and work in industry and come back again and go back out to industry and so forth. He's the only one that ever really ran into anti-Semitism, at college. … I never could figure out why he wouldn't do anything for the alumni [association] and it seems the professor, whatever he had in his mind, got him only the lousy jobs, and then, it reached a point where he didn't have a job for him. … He told my brother, "Go get a job, on your own." My brother belonged to a fraternity in Philly, … at the school, and he talked to somebody there at the fraternity. He says, "Wait a minute," and called somebody … who had graduated from Technion [Israel Institute of Technology], in Israel, and, the next thing you know, my brother, … he has a job with Bell Telephone in Pennsylvania. He comes back to the professor and says, "I've got a job. You couldn't get me a job, I got a job." So, the professor says, "You can't take the job." Now, in academia, it's only the professor. So, my brother, at that time, had a problem and his viewpoint, today, is carried on; once he has a grudge, he has a grudge. He'll do nothing as far as alumni is concerned. Meantime, Drexel made a major change. I didn't know it had a medical school, okay, but, in the meantime, it has always been a good school. One of my classmates went there and she became the first female aeronautical engineer graduating at Drexel, at that time. She's now in California, retired and so forth, I found out, but life, as it comes to you, you adjust accordingly and you act accordingly. That's all.

ER: Where were you when you heard of the death of FDR and what was your reaction?

WB: FDR, I found out, … maybe I mentioned [it] before, I had just flown into Camp Lucky Strike and they gave me *Stars and Stripes*. … In *Stars and Stripes*, it says, "President Roosevelt died." So, that would have been about, maybe, mid-April '45. In fact, the guys gave me this copy; … this is a copy of *Stars and Stripes* of December 25, 1944, and it talks about this and this, [the battles], but this also covers a lot of other areas. For example, because of the war, they stopped horseracing, you know; I mean, depending on what you get out of it. … "Travel routes swamped for the US as they celebrate the holiday." There is National Hockey League scoring, cage results, questions, cartoons, which is *Lil' Abner*. I still remember *Lil' Abner*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Dick Tracy*, okay, and *Popeye* and, still, *Blondie*, *Dagwood*, okay, and there's a couple of cute cartoons in here. There was one that they showed last month, last meeting I was at, and what it is is, they always had the sloppy GI [Bill Mauldin's Willie and Joe] and everything else and he's meeting his young nephew, young and small, and he's a bomber pilot. So, he says, "What are you doing, Uncle?" I mean, just like that, or when the same GI … went to the medics, he [the medic] says, "I've got a Purple Heart for you." He says, "I don't want a Purple Heart. Do you have an aspirin?" You have to have [a sense of humor]. I'll tell you one thing, the cartoon people did very well. In fact, the first reunion of the 106th Division, right after the war, was in Indianapolis, where we came from. I went [for] two years, and then, I couldn't do it anymore, but I remember, … also, that Joe E. Brown came and he talked to everybody. … Then, the following year I went after that, I was there, and then, we had to get out of the hotel, because President Johnson was there, … but these are the … cute little things you do. … It's humor, but you've got to understand the humor behind it, because, … like, when you're at roll call in prison

camp and it's cold as heck out, … the standing joke is, "Get these men out of this hot sun." Okay, I mean, you had certain commentaries, I guess you'd call it, according to the particular situation, … [like] when you say, "Oh, let's not get screwed up." … Going back to what you said before, some of the men that were shipped to Berga were considered, by [the] Germans, as screw-ups, or the name would be some kind of crazy name, but not Jewish, but they figured, "Well, he must have been Jewish," and that's how they got the three hundred-and-fifty. … That comes up every so often. Most people, even today, when I mention it, don't believe it, … you have no idea, or anybody [that] was a Japanese prisoner of war. … When I read my Ex-POW Association publication every month, you have the back section, [which] says "Taps," you're finding that more people from the Far East, who were Japanese prisoners of war, are dying faster than GIs from the European Theater. … Also, statistically, … the majority of German prisoners of war, Americans, came home, but only thirty percent of Americans who were prisoners … of war under the Japanese came home. Then, you have to read … about the ships they were on and [that were] sunk by American submarines and so forth and my exposure, in Mississippi, to these guys from Manchuria. … I remember, we had a reunion in 1994, in Rapids City, South Dakota, and this man was part of the division. In fact, at that time, he was the mayor of Rapids City. … He was Dutch and it ended up that he was a Dutch Royal Marine and he was captured and he escaped. … He was lucky, in the sense that he was picked up by Americans and they moved him to the Air Force. … He stayed with the Air Force and ended up in [South Dakota], because there's a big bomber base there, and he became an American citizen, but he also … would go out with American infantry on reconnaissance. … We had them ourselves. He was a very good assassin and this was the first time he ever told anybody about it, at the dinner. … Some of the women couldn't stand it and walked out, but that's why I said, everybody you may talk to, everybody's experience's the same but different.

ER: That is right, unique, in your own special ways.

WB: … Like I said, I get together with friends and we sit and talk and kid one another, but everybody had their whatever-it-was. … Just like this friend of mine, Joe, he wouldn't talk about nothing, then, about seven, eight years ago, I got him the join the American Ex-POW Association, but he wouldn't join the one here at Lyons. He joined the one at Fort Monmouth. … All of a sudden, about three years ago, he showed up here for the Memorial Day parade in Flemington. I said, "What the heck are you doing here, Joe? You're usually at Fort Monmouth; … you march in Red Bank." "My grandchildren." "Oh." So, now, he's in the parade, very proud, wears his cap, has trouble walking, like I do now, but he's still silent. He's still silent, won't talk about it, but he acknowledges [it] and, now, he does it. … This year, in the Memorial Day parade, I was kidded; … I have arthritis in the knees now, so, this year, they put me in a convertible with the Merchant Marine guys. … They always … tease the hell out of you and they kept saying, "How come [you are] an infantryman and you've got to ride in a car?" You want to change tape? Go ahead.

SI: We are almost done.

WB: Okay, whatever you want to do.

SI: This concludes our interview with William S. Blaher on September 23, 2005, in Flemington, New Jersey.

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

Reviewed by Edwin Robinson 11/8/05
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 1/4/06
Reviewed by William S. Blaher 1/10/06