VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Veteran's Name: Walter Blenko

Interviewer: David Meyer (O'Shea)

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Transcriber: Carol Slezak

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{The interview was interrupted twice so it is divided into three recordings. }

Intterviewer is David Meyer, son of Earl D. Meyer, Co. H, 379th, 95th Infantry. Interview occurred Aug. 6, 2011, in New Orleans.

{Recording 1: BLENKOWALTERPart1of3NOLA2011Aug650min.mp3

Interviewer: *What was your job in Company E?*

Blenko: I arrived there as a replacement in January 1945, and they looked me over, recognized my obvious talents, and said here, and said, "Here, give us the M1, here's your BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle]."

Interviewer: *So what crossing? Were you at the Ruhr? Where'd you go after the Battle of the Bulge?*

Blenko: The Company was in Fraulautern, east of Metz. We were there for about a week and then moved out and went north. We did an overnight motor trip. Hideously cold, trucks were overloaded. Everyone remembers that night.

Interviewer: *Overloaded – were you in the 2 ½ ton trucks?*

Blenko: Yeah, but there were not enough of them so we were just jammed in. You couldn't move in this bitterly cold weather. I just talked to Joe here; he talked about his feet getting cold. I did too. And I felt the effects of it for a number of years afterward. Then we drove up through the main street of Bastogne the next morning. My recollection is it was just like the place you've seen from contemporary times. The place was badly shot up. We stopped just to the north there for a day or two. Then we went further north, and we ended up in some small town in Belgium.

Interviewer: *Were you still with the 3rd Army?*

Blenko: No, we transferred from the 3rd Army to the 9th Army.

Interviewer: *Were you there when they were somehow attached with the British?*

Blenko: Yes, we were up there in the Netherlands – we were there for a week or so.

Interviewer: *What were you doing there?*

Blenko: Filling in for them while they did some reorganizing. We took over their positions. It was at the time that the Germans had blown the damns; the rivers were flooded. Nobody was moving very much. It was swamp land, really.

Interviewer: *And still really cold?*

Blenko: No, not as cold. It was still winter, but no so cold as that one night we made the motor trip.

Interviewer: *The night you made the motor trip – was that the very end of the Battle of the Bulge?*

Blenko: Well, we were south of there. The 95th was committed in the line, and so when several divisions of the 3rd Army were sent north toward Bastogne, the 95th spread out and didn't move. We held the 3rd Army…. When I saw "we," I just joined it after that. I think when I got into the division the Battle of the Bulge was officially over.

Interviewer: *When you joined as a replacement, how was it coming into this group of men that had been together for a while?*

Blenko: Well, it was a new and different environment for me, because we had moved very rapidly when the breakthrough came in the Ardennes, I'd been in Camp Wheeler, Ga. We came back in after two weeks in the field with the expectation we'd have one more week in our normal training schedule. And the day we came in was Saturday, Dec. 16, the day the Germans cut loose. And so within a matter of hours we were told to forget Week 17, pack and get ready to move.

Blenko: We did move. We had a 10-day delay en route to get to Fort Meade [Md.]. Checked in there on December 31. I can remember being told to fall out from the barracks, and we did. Rain, sludge, snow, and as we were getting ready to march off and draw equipment, we heard all kinds of whistles and bells. [laughs] Midnight, New Year's Eve. Then we moved on from there, and sailed on the 6th of January.

Interviewer: *What ship did you sail on?*

Blenko: USS Wakefield. It had been the Manhattan before the war.

Interviewer: *And how many do you think were on the Wakefield?*

Blenko: Well I've seen figures since, around 4,000 to 5,000; around 4,700. I'm not sure.

Interviewer: *You've just been in boot camp and training, you haven't even finished that. So do you have friends?*

Blenko: Well, the way these things work – I think everyone experienced this – every time there was a split, people carved off and went in all directions. You rarely would know people from three or four levels back, because they all just would split. Everyone's gone this way and that way and the other way. So you made [friends] as you went along, and lost them as you went along.

Interviewer: *How old were you then?*

Blenko: 18

Interviewer: *When's your birthday?*

Blenko: June 15, 1926

Interviewer: *Do you remember where you were when you heard about the Pearl Harbor attack?*

Blenko: Yep, I do.

Interviewer: *What was going on?*

Blenko: We were at home. Some friends, my parents had invited out for dinner. And we were sitting around the table, listening to radio.

Interviewer: *Did you know where Pearl Harbor was?*

Blenko: Well I assume I did. I had some idea I think of where the Hawaiian Islands were. I found out right quick if I didn't. I'm sure we had maps out.

Interviewer: *What were your parents' names?*

Blenko: Walter Blenko, my father. I'm a junior. My mother was Ardis Jones Blenko.

Interviewer: *What did your father do for a living?*

Blenko: Ultimately he became a lawyer and went into practice. I followed him in that. [Same firm.]

Interviewer: *Did any of your children follow you?*

Blenko: One became a lawyer, but he decided he didn't care for legal practice, and he went back to engineering.

Interviewer: *Well, his experience would always serve him well.*

Blenko: I think it does, yes.

Interviewer: *How was the trip across the ocean? Was it rough?*

Blenko: I had traveled at sea before; I'm not unfamiliar with that. But most of the people had not. And the ship had burned somewhere earlier, and they had to rebuild it, so it was now totally unlike its original design on the interior. There were bulkheads that went all the way up the promenade deck … so to get from one compartment to the next, fore or aft, you had to go all the way up the promenade deck, around the promenade deck, fore or aft, then back down the ladder in the next compartment. So my recollection is I was assigned to compartment D-4, which meant I was on D-deck, 4th compartment back. And to go to D-5, I'd have to go up 4, 3, 2, promenade, then back down to D-5.

It was a very sensible way to design a ship for wartime service, but we had one night where we really hit some heavy seas. Very interesting to me because the ship was not rolling at all that I can remember. It was just a pure pitch. What happened was when [a big wave] came, [the bow would dive down into it], and then as the next wave came, it would hit the bow and start lifting, and there was always a lot of shuddering. A ship works in a sea-way, that's just part of reality. So there was a lot of creaking going on.

And then our troop departments were what I refer to as "Robert Hall" style. Plain…racks. [laughs] They were rectangular, pipe frames with a piece of canvas slashed in there. So when we went down the weight of the body always caused the creaking. We had a number of people who I think felt they'd seen their last sunrise on earth. Scared to death. But I finally gave up listening to the moaning and groaning and went up on deck. Met somebody else up there who also had some ocean travels before and knew exactly what was going on. [laughs]

Interviewer: *People told me the worst thing was just to be in the room with the sick people.*

Blenko: Well, it was their moaning and carrying on more than anything else.

Interviewer: *So you landed in England?*

Blenko: In Liverpool.

Interviewer: *But unlike the rest of the 95th, you stayed some time in England. Did you just shoot across England?*

Blenko: We were on the ship for some hours before our group was unloaded. They were unloading steadily, but they had to have trains alongside. So when our group unloaded we went on the train, and then went across England to Weymouth, and then we got in there one afternoon, marched down from the station to the harbor and boarded a group of LCIs [Landing Craft Infantry] that were there, than travelled across the English Channel overnight on the LCI.

Interviewer: *How was the Channel?*

Blenko: It was rough, you know.

Interviewer: *How many men were on an LCI?*

Blenko: Well, they were calculated to carry an infantry company, so 250-300. I'm not sure what the exact number was.

Interviewer: *And where did the LCI take you?*

Blenko: We went into a floating dock at Le Havre. We didn't have to walk ashore through the water. That was nice.

Interviewer: *Do you know where you're going? Has the news come out that the Bulge is as bad as it is?*

Blenko: Well I'm sure we were aware of it at the time. I'm not sure that was the biggest thing in our minds, as ours was a day-to-day operation, going back to Camp Wheeler. We got in Saturday night, by Sunday we knew things were changing. We were supposed to start cleaning out, organizing, turning in equipment, accounting for it – that kind of thing. And then we were to get orders. Well we got a 10-day delay in route to get from Camp Wheeler to Fort Meade, Md.

Someone had decided, and I think correctly so, that if they turned us loose on a civilian transportation system it would have totally collapsed. And so they arranged for the Air Corps to provide transportation. And this meant we would fly – but then things happened there, too. So the orders which I got ultimately provided for a 10-day delay en route. But we spent about three days of that amount in Camp Wheeler, because we were waiting for aircraft. And we went out by truck; we left there one bright sunny morning. We went to Warner Robins Air Force Base [in Ga.] and spent the whole day there. But there was bad weather north of there, so after dark probably 8:00 p.m., it was announced that because of bad weather we couldn't go.

Blenko (cont'd): So they sent the trucks to Camp Wheeler. This was Christmas Eve. So we got back and we were about as welcome as the plague because nobody was expecting us. The mess sergeant didn't have rations for 250 men coming in like that. [laughs] And the ultimate end of the thing is we did go back out and I got on a plane, left there around four in

the afternoon on Christmas Day. We got as far as Richmond, pulled in there, and the pilot said there's bad weather north of here, and that's as far as I'm willing to fly the plane. I didn't complain about that.

Interviewer: *Had you flown on a plane before?*

Blenko: No. That was my first experience.

Interviewer: *And how was it?*

Blenko: Well, it was not civilian standards. This was a DC-3, but the military side of it. It didn't have seats; it had benches that were shaped with metal on each side. A little uncomfortable. But it got us as far as the plane was going to go. And we got checked in there. Got in the mess hall and they I guess were used to the idea that they might have big groups coming in unexpectedly, so it was the first hot meal that we had seen in about 36 hours. So Christmas dinner that year was hot dogs and baked beans.

The officer there, I thought, did a very competent job. He was checking [to see where people were going] and then they got us into the station in Richmond. And he was the head of us there. They had maybe four ticket windows open, and he'd taken over all except one of them. [He'd say] if you're going to Pittsburgh, go to this window, and I went there and the guy had tickets for Pittsburgh, I paid him, just like that. But the train got held up outside of Washington. We missed the connection there. Finally got in too late. Spent the night wandering around Union Station, and then the next day we got a day train into Pittsburgh. So I got in, maybe six in the evening. It now has to have been the 26th of December. [laughs]

Interviewer: *You must have been exhausted.*

Blenko: Well, you didn't notice it so much at that age. You get by on youth more easily. Anyway, that was the way we got there. And I left there on the night of the 30th to get to Baltimore on the 31st.

Interviewer: *When were you assigned to the 95th?*

Blenko: That happened I guess when we got to Metz.

Interviewer: *So when you got to Le Havre, you're still unassigned?*

Blenko: Well, we're just part of a movement.

Interviewer: *So you're part of a repo?*

Blenko: We were part of the replacement system. I don't know how that worked. I don't think anybody ever figured out how that system worked. It was a haphazard kind of thing, from everything I can see and hear.

Interviewer: *People would talk about "Repo Depos." That sounds like it's a place. What is it? Is it just barracks where you are?*

Blenko: Well, I don't think I could give you a categorical answer on that. We left Le Havre by 40 and 8, we were three nights on route as I remember it, and people got off at various stages, stretched their legs [etc.], and some of the French engineers would toot their whistles – toot, toot – and some would toot as they were moving out of the station [laughs].

And I think we must have lost about 10 percent of our force on that movement. They got left behind when they got off the train. Those people would just find the nearest MV, there would be some, and report in, "Here I am," and get reassigned. But then we got someplace near … I think it was a French Army post, and we were there for a day or two. Then we did another overnight run to Metz, and then we ended up there in a French Cavalry post there.

Interviewer: *When you're at Metz, can you tell there's been a battle?*

Blenko: No, because we're just in this one place. We didn't have a tour guide to take us around or anything. We were at a French military post, I think it was the cavalry, I'm not sure of that, and there were permanent barracks. And they were done in the European style, which means there's no central heat, there's stoves in the various rooms, and our group wasn't used to that sort of thing and didn't know how to make it work. And it was cold, it was wintertime.

But we were there a day or two, then got loaded on trucks, and went forward to some place, I don't know where. We got off, I assume it was at or near division headquarters, and we got off the trucks. We were reassigned by name, got back on the trucks, went up to another place, and again there were reassignments there.

Interviewer: *When you get to Metz that's when they say you're with the 95th?*

Blenko: Hadn't the slightest idea. We got futher up and we were at … regimental headquarters, I think, and we're off the trucks again and again they did some reassignment. And there was one particular slob who'd been in basic training with me. And we meet so many men over here and I saw him and I went the other way. [laughs] On such choices are the fates of lives in this world determined.

Anyway, that got me into E Company, and we went forward, made another transfer. And somewhere they issued ammunition to us. And we got up to a place where we're now ready to cross the river on a well-known bridge. And somebody said to whoever was there, "Will somebody tell us when we're supposed to load ammunition?" And [the response]: "Jesus Christ, you haven't got your &^%$ gun loaded?" [laughs] He probably said "rifle," but… Then a lot of loading went on rapidly there. [laughs].

Interviewer: *So now you get into Fraulautern. What's it like? Are there Germans still around?*

Blenko: Oh yes, we were almost neighbors there. There were streets and they had some houses, and we had some houses. And we were very, very touchy because it was a firing zone there.

Interviewer: *Were you up in the front line?*

Blenko: Well, this was the front line. The Germans were sometimes, I think sometimes, why, the two sides were one party while separated.

Interviewer: *That's where my father was. My father was Company H, 379th. He was a radio man in Fraulautern for a couple of weeks up there. He talked about the first time he heard a bullet going toward him. He said, "Dave, I thought to myself, 'Oh Lord, oh Lord, they're shooting at me.'" Do the bullets sound like whizzing?*

Blenko: Yeah, I think so. It depends how close they were.

Interviewer: *If they were far away, how do they sound?*

Blenko: I don't remember hearing them far away. I remember hearing them close. Makes a "ssshhhwwit" sound. I'm not sure I can give you an accurate representation. [laughs]

Interviewer: *Do you remember anytime you felt nervous, or a close call? Or concerned?*

Blenko: I think that was always with one. You also got pretty fatalistic about it. This was a job, there we were, we were doing it. Pick up and go, get it done. You could sit around and talk, a couple people did that – they were groaning all the time. But what good does it do you, besides get on your nerves and be a pain. Most of those people I thought were the least effective ones in the lot.

Interviewer: *So you were able to concentrate on the job you were doing?*

Blenko: Concentrate is not a word [I would use]. We just went ahead and did it. [laughs] Whatever it was, we did it. You had to. If you didn't do that, you were really going to be out of … left behind. You gotta stick with your group.

Interviewer: *For people who have no idea what it's like up there, what sort of jobs would they have you do?*

Blenko: Well, I was an automatic rifleman. That means you were standing guard, running patrols, trying to stay warm.

Interviewer: *And how would you stay warm?*

Blenko: With difficulty. I remember a couple of things. We used K-rations to a large extent. These were the field rations. And the breakfast one was preferred because it had a little foil package of Nescafe. And those who were addicted to coffee, well that was pretty great. Breakfast, lunch and dinner was the way they categorized it. And the dinner one had a chocolate bar in it, and it was sectional – probably five or six sections in it. I discovered somewhere along the line if you were standing guard, in the middle of the night, good and cold, and bit off one of those sections and just let it dissolve in your mouth, and pretend, it provides some warmth.

And then after a while I'd do another section. And if you did it right you could get through your whole stint on guard, still fueling the energy.

Interviewer: *How many hours is a typical guard? Or was there a typical guard?*

Blenko: Well an hour would probably be routine, because in a squad of 12 men that would cover 12 hours.

Interviewer: *And who was your squad leader?*

Blenko: Victor Fidel.

Interviewer: *How'd you like him?*

Blenko: I respected him, I thought he was a fine man.

Interviewer: *How many years difference was there between you?*

Blenko: He must have been 20 years older than I was. Maybe less.

Interviewer: *So he had been regular Army?*

Blenko: No, he got into the Army on a part-time basis.

Interviewer: *So when he joined he was one of the older ones.*

Blenko: Yeah. I came into the division as a replacement. And … the reality of it was, I was never in a group this large. Very rarely. Because we were broken out by squad and half-squad units. So we got to know a few people, work with them. But getting even the whole platoon of 40 together was something else again. It didn't happen very much.

Interviewer: *So pretty much you were with a squad of 12? A half squad of six?*

Blenko: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: *And are you just staying in one of the rooms of the building, in one of the buildings in Fraulautern?*

Blenko: Well at that time we were in a house, and I think we might have been in two. I'm not sure of that, I don't remember that detail. I think maybe our squad was in one house. But I did get another platoon sergeant there. And I knew some of the people, but not as well. It just wasn't that kind of environment where you're sitting around drinking beer … or anything of that sort. That didn't happen.

Interviewer: *Were you a smoker then?*

Blenko: No.

Interviewer: *So you stayed not smoking. That's an effort. I know people who were non-smokers, and as soon as they got up to the front line they became smokers.*

Blenko: No, I didn't do that. I got a ration, I was able to give those away. Go ahead.

Interviewer: *So you were popular.*

Blenko: Oh I don't know if you can buy popularity that easily. [laughs]

Interviewer: *Someone said when replacements came in there was some reluctance to get to know them, because they didn't know if you guys were going to last. Did you feel any of that?*

Blenko: No, I don't think I remember that. That might have been on the other side, but I didn't feel that way. We were on the first floor of the house we were in there, and we were sleeping anyplace we could find a spot – it might be on a couch or a chair, whatever you will. I got to know three or four people there right quickly, and found them congenial, I liked them. There was one of them at least I had no use for, but the other were, I thought, quite nice. They were helpful. We found ourselves, chatting, talking to one another. Saying, "Here you'd better do this, here's what you want to do," and so forth.

Interviewer: *So they were always helping you. You're new, there's a lot you don't know.*

Blenko: Exactly.

Interviewer: *Just like they didn't know to load their ammunition.*

Blenko: [laughs] Exactly.

Interviewer: *Was there anything you didn't know at the time that almost got you into trouble?*

Blenko: I don't think so.

Interviewer: *What sort of stories – do you talk about it much to your children, or your grandchildren?*

Blenko: No, I haven't. I put together a very lengthy letter to each of the grandchildren a couple of years ago, trying to answer them the sort of questions that I've asked that involved family history, army experience, and what I've done since then – education and legal practice and so on. The things I told about – where we are and where we were – I don't know if you can really adequately tell people about some of the other experiences where you were moving around, where you are under fire, or that sort of thing. It's there, and what do you say about it? I don't know.

Interviewer: *Who do you think was the most important person to you when you were in the service? The most important people.*

Blenko: That's pretty hard to answer because I think a number of people would qualify at different levels. Among the ones -- I start close in, move out – a couple people in the squad. Strong people, I knew them, they had been very outgoing and helpful to me.

Interviewer: *Can you say some names?*

Blenko: The one I remember in particular was Joe Brewer. I stayed in touch with him for a few years afterwards, then we somehow lost contact.

Interviewer: *What did Mr. Brewer do?*

Blenko: He was a rifleman.

Interviewer: *And what qualities [did he offer]? Did he take you under his wing?*

Blenko: Oh, I don't know if he did that. We got along well, we enjoyed talking. We could converse back and forth very comfortably. And he certainly had some suggestions, "You want to do this, you want to do that." He was a little bit older than many of the others. That might have been part of it. I don't know.

But it was a congenial arrangement, and when we came back from Europe we were turned loose at Fort Dix, N.J., for 30 days. I took a train home and he gets on the same train. So he stayed overnight with us, then went on from there the next day. But I'd seen him in Chicago a couple times afterward when I was traveling there on … after I was in the workforce, and that had to be eight or 10 years after we separated in the army. Then somewhere in there our letter of communication broke down, and I don't know where he went from there.

Interviewer: *So you pretty much stayed around Fraulautern until they called you north?*

Blenko: We were there about a week after I arrived, maybe a little less. And we were relieved by I think the 26th division, and we loaded onto trucks and had this bitterly cold ride until … came out the next morning in Bastogne. We went a little north of there and then unloaded. We [hung around] there for a day, maybe two days, then we moved further north and we were up into a small town in Belgium. I've never been able to identify it, but it was in a strip of land between the Albert Canal on the one side, and the Meuse River on the other.

When I give you some of these names, they're subject to correction. [laughs]

Interviewer: *When you were in Bastogne, and you were there for two days, were you patrolling? What sort of work were you doing?*

Blenko: That was a real echelon at that point. The battle had gone through. But it still looked just like the photographs I've seen in some of the army history. Then we were just up north there, I think at Champs, or alternatively Longchamps. I know we went through one to get to the other. I think it went Longchamps, then Champs.

And I know I wrote a letter back to my parents there. My mother preserved all the letters so I've been able to go back and read them. And they had – I remember commenting there, I read it in the letter – the wealth of the local farmer seemed to depend on the size of the manure pile outside his barn. At least it was indicated that way. [laughs]

Interviewer: *Before I forget Joe Januszkiewitz's book is a lovely book.*

Blenko: I have a copy of it, I picked it up yesterday.

Interviewer: *And also, sometimes he'll have the official history copy of it in boxes. So that might answer some questions. So after you go through Longchamps, do you just go into the Ruhr Pocket?*

Blenko: No, that was a long way off. This was in late Jan. or early Feb. We got up to Belgium and we were there for a short period of time. And I think from there – don't hold me to this chronology – we went up into the Netherlands, and the British Second Army was doing some reshuffling and reorganizing, so we took over part of their zone while they went through that. That was a few days.

Then we went back to the – I'm not too sure about this part. We had another spot where we stayed – I don't know where it was, I've never had a very good fix on it. Then we went from there, pushing up to the Rhine and trying to get a bridge across the Rhine.

Interviewer: *Was that the Adolf Hitler Bridge?*

Blenko: That was the Audubon Bridge, yeah. *{Adolph Hitler Bridge?}* And it was intact, but we couldn't get there, and the patrol from, I think the 379th, went across in the middle of the night, got to the far side and came back. They were groping for wires in the dark and

cutting everything they could find. But they got on the bridge, got all the way across, were successful in getting back out again. [But] either they missed wires or the Germans re-rigged. Anyway it was blown the next morning. If we had been successful, that would have been the famous crossing the Rhine, because that was three days before the Remagen Bridge was taken. … The fortunes of war.

Interviewer: *Did you see the Adolf Hitler Bridge intact?*

Blenko: No, I saw it the next day.

Interviewer: *So now the bridge is collapsed, you can't go over it, what did they have you do?*

Blenko: Well we went up to Rhine house and stayed up there for a time. It's a little difficult to remember without a journal and I don't have a journal. It was a few days, a week, who knows? But we were there, and we were running patrols around the town at night in particular. Then I think we went back to the same place we had come from – which is undetermined – I can't remember where it was. The company CP [command post] was in what had been a school or a convent – I can't be sure which. The mess hall was there – the kitchen was there. So we used to walk over there for meals and back through a little village.

And then from there we left again. And this time we went across the river. We didn't force that crossing. Somebody else had done that. But we crossed the Rhine on a truck convoy on a pontoon bridge. That was Easter Sunday, April1 of '45.

Interviewer: *Oooh, well Happy Easter.*

Blenko: [laughs] Yeah, right. And we went through the afternoon I think well into the night – these things just merge together, it's very difficult to sort them out. But I put this together through more maps and history I've seen, we ended up out near Hamm, and then drove back to clear the Ruhr Pocket. We were one of the divisions that did that.

Interviewer: *The 95th Infantry is in the Museum of the Holocaust. They liberated a small camp that started, I think, with a "W." It wasn't mechanized, but it still was a death camp. Were you anywhere around that?*

Blenko: Not to my knowledge at the time. We must have been from what you say, and I've seen other references that same thing. But our unit was not the one that did that.

Interviewer: *Did you hear any rumors or references to that?*

Blenko: I can't really recall anything of that sort. I think what was just in general circulation, I may have been aware of that. I don't remember hearing anything specifically in the army context.

Interviewer: *What did you think of the German soldiers? Were they just like you? Or did you even think like that?*

Blenko: It's a little hard to sort out what I thought at that time with what I would think today. They obviously were a resourceful group. Many of them I think were caught up in a social and political system that was not very sound. It's hard to fix an individual conduct and standard of behavior. Some of them we know were pretty nasty people. We had problems. I know I've told people that I've been fired on by civilians. German civilians.

Interviewer: *In the Ruhr Pocket?*

Blenko: Somewhere up there, I think.

Interviewer: *So not like they're Wolfpacks. But civilians themselves firing.*

Blenko: Some of them were doing it, yeah. I know in one particular place I know we had to get in, and we had to get through a very narrow passage. So we went through one at a time, running and dodging. When we got back into the town there was a residence there, and the woman who was pointing out how fervently she disliked Hitler, she only did it because she had to, carrying herself a copy of Mein Kampf there. But the windows were wide open and the room smelled like gunpowder. So I'm sure she was shooting at us.

[INTERRUPTION: Beginning of Business Meeting 50:58]

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Blenko: [Regarding] the people who had a great affect on my career and all that, I mentioned our squad sergeant who I respected very highly [Victor Fidel]. Then I had a platoon sergeant who also was very low-key, I thought very effective. He always impressed me as having his head screwed on right. He was Roger Baldwin. And I think that you went up the line you saw other people. The platoon leader, who was an officer of course; he I thought was very competent.

Interviewer: *What qualities made a good leader compared to those that made a bad commander?*

Blenko: I would think that knowing what you're doing is part of it. And I would put in with that consistency. I don't mean they shouldn't change their mind if circumstances change, but people who just flip back and forth without anything except a moment of panic or change of heart are not very good leaders because you don't know what they're going to do.

And finally we got up to the company commander. Again, I had a pretty high regard for him. I think most people in the company did. He was much more reserved. I wasn't nearly as close to him. I can't remember his first name. I think it was Joseph. Last name was Quinn. Captain Quinn, he was always known as. He was a guy who met those standards in my mind. Just had a sense that here was somebody who was on top of things. He knew what was going on, knew what to do, and would make the best of any situation.

Interviewer: *But your day-to-day experiences, you said before, is pretty much just your squad. So aren't they the people you depend on?*

Blenko: Well you got into the larger units, of course, all the time. We weren't totally divorced from that. We were part of it. But the daily contacts with people were within the squad level. And somewhat to a lesser extent within the platoon level, which is three squads. Then you went from there up to company level. And from there on up to battalion level. We were aware of these things, but I didn't have a daily interaction, for example, with the company commander. But I did with the other people in the squad.

Interviewer: *For people who don't know what it's like, can you give an example of an order that was given your squad, and what you did? What's a day in your squad's life?*

Blenko: That's a hard one to answer because I don't think there were any two days alike. But we were obviously trying to… The long-range objective was to win the war. And to do whatever it had to do. That meant Berlin or Bust, or something of that sort. But realistically it didn't always work that way. And at my level we didn't have the slightest idea of what was going on outside what we could see. I know that a lot of us are going back and reading some of the histories, the official history of U.S. Army operations, WWII; a book on the history of the 95th Division.

I now can see that what we were doing, let's say in the last phase of it, was the reduction of the Ruhr Pocket. We had crossed the Rhine by truck and went out on the north side of the Pocket and got out to the eastern end. And then one of our units, I think, closed the 1st Army, and then there was a complete pocket there. Now we worked our way back towards the west. But I had no idea of any of that at the time. I knew we did this, we did this, we did this. But fitting it into a larger picture was totally impossible. I didn't have any way of knowing that.

Interviewer: *Were you one of the youngest in your squad?*

Blenko: Yes, yes I was.

Interviewer: *Did you have any nicknames? What did they call you?*

Blenko: I can't recall anything specific except for my first name. Sometimes my last name.

Interviewer: *How was the food?*

Blenko: Oh my, that was catch as catch can. Much of the time we were working on emergency or field rations. We were on the move. I think that was something that typified an organization such as ours. We're not set up on a basis that you march methodically ahead and this, this and this will happen. We were really winging it. I think in a way our conduct was a little bit like a monkey swinging from tree to tree: "Where's the next branch?" [laughs]

Blenko (cont'd): And you went where you could go. We knew where we had to get to overall, but at my level that was pretty far out of my sight and arrangement. I could see what was around me, but which way we were pointed, what our part was in the larger objective of the division, the corps, the 9th Army, I hadn't the slightest idea. We traveled back and forth by truck, I got to see a lot of things multiple times. I know we went through the city of Arnhem, and Julip (?) was another one that had been chewed up badly. We went through there several times, by truck. Got to know them almost like a dairy cow going back down the lane to the barn. [laughs] That was something I saw, but fitting them together in a larger sense was just a very dicey thing. Because I just do not know those things.

Interviewer: Was there a lot of mud?

Blenko: I don't remember that in the sense that I've read about in the fall campaign approaching Metz, or in the WWI stories. We obviously ran into some of it, but we were not pulling our feet out of 6 or 8 or 12 inches of mud.

Blenko (cont'd): I don't remember any of that. We had cold and then wet weather, and it was pretty late in the day before we'd see something I'd start calling warm.

The one recollection I have is when we were on the way back to the United States we stopped in Normandy for a couple nights, and we were really civilized. We had tents and we had folding field cots. I remember thinking at the time it was just about as cold as anyplace I'd been in the world. Because it got blistering hot during the day, and then during the night it cooled down a little bit like what I've read about the desert. But we were focusing on that sort of weather all the way through. It gradually got warmer. We left Germany in the area of Munster in mid-June. I think we sailed out of Le Havre on the 22nd of June, '45. So this is a week or ten days earlier, I supposed. By that time, summer weather was there. But it was not a weather pattern that would be like our Southwest, for example, where it would go up over 100 and stay perilously hot. It was a much more temperate climate. And again, it was more a subjective thing, because I didn't carry a thermometer with me and there weren't banks that [posted the temperature on a sign]. [laughs]

Interviewer: *Did you have any contacts with the natives in either France or Germany?*

Blenko: Not very much. We were constantly on the move and so we were running across them steadily, often just coming into their houses. I remember – and some of this is reinforced by letters I sent home, I've re-read them – coming into houses and looking for a German. We were clearing the houses as we went down the street, to make sure there wasn't a bunch left behind, shooting at us from behind. And it meant going into a house. They had locked the external doors and internal doors. And we made them open them up. I don't remember anyone refusing to do it. They were obviously very uncomfortable with us. I don't think anyone ever mistreated them that I saw.

Blenko (cont'd): But it meant chasing up the upper floor and clearing there, and looking into each room, sometimes checking a closet and that sort of thing. And then out, we were leapfrogging over other crews. There were probably three men working together. And so house, house.

Interviewer: *Did you do any mouse-holing?*

Blenko: No, never got into that.

Interviewer: *In the latter days of the war, did you have any experience taking on prisoners?*

Blenko: Yes. They were around. This was in the Ruhr and things were starting to collapse pretty quickly there. The uncertainty was there was not unanimity of opinion among the prisoners. Some were quite unwilling to fold, others wanted to just get out of it by any means they could. I can think of at least one time when some of them came out on a hedge just a short distance from me. I think they were scared to death, and I think reasonably so, because until their intentions were known, they were at risk. So a gesture from a rifle, they got that very quickly. We had some very rudimentary German that we could use; I think even English they understood to that extent. [laughs]

But we were constantly on the move. I think the thing that distinguished most of that campaign is that it was not static, it was a moving one. And the more that we could keep moving, the more we could keep the other side off base and off balance, the better off we were.

One of the other things we did was to go into the city of Dortmund one night. It was I think the 9th largest city in Germany, and the rumor was that the Germans were maybe trying to make a stand there. So we go orders to move in there, just on very short notice. I can remember we went piling in there. There was a long summer twilight, we were undoubtedly May 1, more or less, and that far north, why the twilight was starting to get pretty long. And I think a lot of people were of the view that it was a time of peace all of a sudden. There were a lot of them out on the street for an evening stroll. And we came down, we were moving as hard and as fast as we could to get down the street, and to take the territory.

And the thing we were doing there was insist they get behind us. We didn't want them to run ahead and telegram what we were doing. They were upset but there wasn't much argument they could put up. We went in and I don't know where we finally stopped or why we stopped, but we finally did come to a stop in the middle of the night and stayed there.

Interviewer: *And most of the Germans left, so you didn't run into the resistance?*

Blenko: Our company did not. I think some other companies did. We were fortunate, we did not come into that.

Interviewer: *So that was April?*

Blenko: It would have been late April, or early May. Probably late April.

Interviewer: *Do you remember where you were when you heard about Roosevelt's death?*

Blenko: Yes. I have to start by saying at the end of that year I was back home. That was a long story. But I was reading the new issue of World Almanac, and the story there caused me to break out in laughter, because the news had been flashed around the world, according to World Almanac, and American forces sat down and cried [etc.], or stiffened and [vowed to carry on for the President]. I'm laughing because that was not my experience. We had been traveling from one point to another. We were clearly looking for trouble, because we were out on a road with two flags, one on each side of the road, and five yards back of the man ahead. And not directly the man in the other file, so it would be staggered.

In that formation [imagine] a rifle company of 200+ men, and there'd probably be 1/3 of a mile from the head to the rear. So we had some radios that by today's standard would be bulky, almost prehistoric. But at the time they were a backpack type of thing with a whip antenna. And the word came in by radio. So it was I guess, "The President has died, pass it back down the line." So we were moving as hard and fast as we could. We were all carrying a pretty good load. I had an automatic rifle which I think officially is 19 pounds, and then enough ammunition, I had to carry that for a while. I used to carry some extra ammunition. I had a couple hand grenades, a canteen for water, emergency rations, a poncho, a half-pound block of dynamite [if you had to dig a foxhole in frozen ground…it would blow the hard surface area so you could get down to softer dirt and start digging]. And of course the blasting cap I had. I calculated I was probably carrying not less than 40 pounds of baggage. That was routine. That was every day.

So we were traveling down the road where we were headed and moving as fast as we could. So we were running short on breath. Nobody had a lot of wind to start talking. So the word got passed down. That was that. A moment of silence. And then we had two guys on the other squad on the side of the road from me, and they were a pretty irreverent type. One of them was very much a bantam rooster, always fast and on the attack, whatever it was. So he finally said, "So the old son of a bitch finally kicked the bucket." And his friend who was much more phlegmatic – soft spoken and deliberate – said, "You shouldn't talk that way." The reply was, "What's the matter, I didn't know you were a Roosevelt lover." And the reply was, again, very slow and deliberate, "No, I'm not. But you shouldn't be talking that way about the dead." That's all I remember hearing that day.

Interviewer: *Coming back from the service to your regular life, did you have to watch yourself? Watch your language?*

Blenko: I don't think that I did. I don't think I ever got into the habit of using the vernacular. I think there are some places and times where it's appropriate, some stories that require that. But I think language and speech can be fitted to allow different circumstances.

Blenko (con'td): Things I'd be perfectly willing to say one-one-one, or one-on-three, would not fit into a larger meeting and … not a major conference. I've never gotten carried away with the misuse of language. It seems to me to demonstrate a weakness if you can't state the fact with words of long-time standing. I don't think you state it more effectively by departing into the scatological and so on.

Interviewer: *When you got back, how was it readjusting to civilian life?*

Blenko: Well it came in stages. I think for the 2nd Infantry Division to leave the European theater, we were headed for Japan. We sailed, I believe, the 22nd of June. We sailed from Le Havre, we docked in Boston about the 28th, and then we had a 30-day furlough. Actually we were the day or two when we got back to the U.S., and got squared away on new uniforms, replacing the pretty tired clothing that we had. [laughs] And then we were dispersed to various locations. In my case Fort Dix., N.J., outside of Trenton. Then I was on my own to get home to Pittsburgh. … In that way the division got reassembled, and we ultimately ended up in Camp Shelby in Mississippi. We were scheduled – I've seen the plans since then – to be in the landings in Honshu, just north of Tokyo. As it happened V-J Day came while we were at Camp Shelby, and we didn't go to Japan.

Interviewer: *When V-J Day came, what was the celebration like? Do you remember?*

Blenko: Yeah, I do, because we were all restricted to camp. [laughs] Well, if the whole camp had descended on Hattiesburg and gone wild like on Market St., San Francisco, we would have overwhelmed the town. No, that was the right decision to make at the time. So we were able to [relax], have a beer, and that was the extent of the celebration. But I think the thing I remember about it more than anything else was that we were all grateful that we had returned from Europe. I don't think any of us were at all optimistic or had any certainty that we would have equal luck in getting out of Japan. It was almost a fatalistic approach, but I think most of the people there saw it as a situation. That's where you were, that's what was going on. So when our orders to Japan were cancelled, that was a great sense of relief. As a matter of fact, for some period after V-J Day, while the order still stood, people really exercised upset at that point.

Now I didn't have enough points to get out of the army at that stage, so I ended up being assigned to Camp Atterbury [Ind.]. So I got to Camp Atterbury and that was a very civilized place. At the separation center all we were doing was to process people coming back from overseas for discharge from the army. So I shifted from being an infantryman. I suddenly found myself in the finance department, in an office, and going over service records of people who were there for discharge, to try to make sure that their pay and benefits were all updated and all in proper order. And they were going through the circuit there and we had what we felt a pretty effective operation.

Blenko (cont'd): I remember going into town one night, and coming back on a bus. Another soldier got off and I started to walk where my barracks was and he hailed me so I stopped. He wanted to know how long we'd be here, two or three weeks? I asked if he had a little slip of paper. He said yes. I said, "Where is it?" He pulled it out and we went under a streetlight and I said, "Alright. There are two numbers there.

The first one is the date of discharge, that's tomorrow. The next is your roster number which is so-and-so." He asked, "So I'll be discharged tomorrow?" I said, "Unless there's something wrong, yeah, you'll be out of here." I said, "Where are you going?" He said, "I think I'm going to Columbus, Ohio."

I said, "All right, say all your good byes to your friends. Pack your barracks bag, take it over to Final Ceremony where you get your discharge. As soon as you get it, get out of there. Head out to the bus station, and you'll get a bus at such and such a time. It will drop you off at the railroad station. There's a train that comes through – I happened to know the schedule because I used to go back and forth myself that way [laughs] – you should be in Columbus by this time tomorrow night." He couldn't believe it. But anyway, it was sort of a gradual compression to civilian life.

Interviewer: *I've realized one of the differences between WWII and the later wars like Vietnam and things is there was more time for decompression. At least you traveled back together. While in Saigon you could be hit and then you're on a plane to San Francisco the next day. And at that time there might be two or three days of debriefing, then you're on your own. When you were in the camps, did you talk about what you saw over there?*

***B*lenko:** I think a lot of that always goes on. Where we were, who did what. I was less and such. I found it here. Talking to other people in other companies, "Well here's where we were [etc.]."

Interviewer: *Did you know about reunions before this one?*

Blenko: Yeah, I did. But I never got to one. I always seemed to have something else on the schedule. I never quite made it.

Interviewer: Have you been having a good time?

Blenko: Oh yes, very much so. I particularly want to see the museum here.

Interviewer: *Everyone was happy when you came. They always appreciate someone new.*

Blenko: Oh, okay. [laughs] New Blood.

Interviewer: *And so the next few questions are from three or four years ago when you were in Oklahoma City. Jennifer Cotton, who is now I think on the board, gave me a slip of paper from the 95th. I think she had come back from Afghanistan. And she said here are some questions that the new 95th asks of WWII veterans. One was, "What advice would you give from your perspective to the soldier of today in the 95th?"*

Blenko: Well, I think I can sum that up in a couple of different ways. I'm not sure that they tied together but they're all thoughts that come up.

One of the things that I'm afraid too many people forget is where they stand in the whole society and in the world. About 200 years ago now, there was a dinner in Norfolk, Va. And Stephen Decatur proposed a toast there which was something of this sort: "Our country, in her course of foreign nations, may she always be in the right. But, right or wrong, she's our country."

And I think you have to recognize, or you're going to be forever conflicted, that human nature is pretty raw and brutal. And that civilization I think is a pretty thin veneer on that. And if you start chipping away at that it isn't very long before you start to see a whole collapse of that civilization. We were talking a little earlier about current vernacular among a lot of people, and I think that is a problem and an indication.

The other side of that is what I read about and what I see in the movies and that sort of thing, I never run into in daily life. People do not act that way and do not talk that way. Some do. But the vast majority of people I run into do not get into that sort of thing. And I don't care what station of life they're in. Whether you're talking about corporate boardroom types or you're talking about people who are ordinary tradesmen or even laborers. That's not the way most of them act. Or talk.

Interviewer: *I know from being on a jury four or five times, the actual climate of the courtroom is so unlike anything I see on television. And Vietnam veterans have said the only movie that caught any of their experience was a movie called The Hamburger Hill. And in that movie they have to take a hill. They don't know why, they just do it. And …. a lot of it is trying to protect your buddy. And that comradery is what I keep discovering [in these interviews]. From my very first time, seven years ago in Baton Rouge, a man came and said, "I don't want to talk about myself. I want to talk about Moose Mannoy. He was a good man, and nobody remembers him. So I want to remember him now." So I realized this is about love at a level and depth that a lot of people may not know.*

Blenko: Well, that might be one word. Another is respect and affection. That people will do the right thing. I think most of us have others that we have seen, we admire and respect their behavior and their conduct, and when something happens to them there's a real loss there. You may never have met them. But they are people who support our values, and what those mean.

Blenko (cont'd): So I think that ties into it. If somebody is in the service today, I would hope that they would have in mind that they are there for their country, and what it stands for. That it is and ought to be a very proud heritage.

I think that when you see how other people react, the constant denigration running down the United States by people within the United States, I just despise it. And I've seen that in some fairly intimate situations, that do not leave me at all happy. If you get away from that, and get in the idea that every man is his own and can do anything he wants to, there are no standards of right and wrong, that right is for you what you think is right, you've lost it.

And I know there's been a lot of educational thought that's gone in that direction. I know our children were exposed to it. And I did my best to persuade them that was dead wrong

Interviewer: *Suppose this is listened to by your great, great, great grandchildren, 150 years from now. What would you like to say to them?*

Blenko: I think it would be basically that of the true libertarian, and I mean before the word was hijacked before the political left. That the proper society is one in which each person is free to do what he wants to do, subject to not infringing on somebody else. In other words, saying that I can do anything I want to doesn't mean that I can walk down Bourbon St. and swing a sword back and forth to clear the way in front of me. That's not what I'm talking about. But it does mean that I can be free to walk down Bourbon St. without anybody telling me, "You're on the wrong street. You have to go over to the other street because we don't like people that are wearing white t-shirts on this street." Or something of that sort. Because my view is that is where we need to go. Once you lose that – and we've all lost it in every society to some extent – you're that much further away from a free society into a totalitarian society, which I do not admire.

I remember one of the things that astounded me about Germany when we were there in 1945. That it was interesting how civilians would all be lined up, almost in quasi-military fashion. They weren't just haphazardly walking down the street. They might instead be formally lined up there. I think you could see some of this in reading the accounts of the war. One of my interesting one there, a couple of them really, Max Hastings, a British historian, did a work on D-Day, "Overlord." And one of the amusing comments to me – I think he was perfectly sincere about it – was that the American tanks had been fitted with steel tusks. The original problem was the hedgerows.

The tank would go up, the bottom would be exposed and the very thin metal wasn't armor plated and they could be shot up from underneath because they were going almost vertically up in the air because of the hedgerow. So somebody started getting what I call jacks – 5- or 6-feet tall pieces of steel – and you could use a welding torch and just weld a couple of those on the front. And that got to the hedgerow before the tracks and dug right in and lifted the hedgerow out of the way, so they didn't have that problem.

Blenko (cont'd): Anyway, Hastings was commenting on this and said how fortunate it was that some senior officer had been willing to try this unproved experiment and see if it worked. Well that isn't the way the American Army worked, they just go ahead and do it. Nicholas Monsarrat, who was a British naval officer, commanded a corps of men in the North Atlantic, wrote a number of books.

One of them – I think it was a series of sketches – he tells of a British naval officer who's commander of a ship. And his ship was in a U.S. yard for some repair work. So he said, "I'm a visitor." And the U.S. navy officers who were there tried to make him feel welcome, and they become acquainted and do all that. One of the officers said his ship was going out for some trials the following day, and would he like to go along? He said yes.

So he's on the ship. Of course he's an honored guest. He's on the bridge, along with the captain. And the U.S. captain is talking. He asks the helmsman what course he is steering. The helmsman gives him that. He continues talking. Then another minute or two he absentmindedly turns back to the helmsman and says, "What course are you steering?"

And the reply was, "Jesus Christ, Captain, I just told you." [laughs] If it were the British that would have been lese majeste. [laughs]

But that was an indication I think between the two services. The Americans I think were just free-wheeling, get the job done. I read one account by someone who's name I don't know. He's not a well-recognized historian. I think he might be British, I bought the book in London. An account of the Battle of the Bulge. And he ends up by saying that the one quality which made the American soldier a perfectly terrible soldier in garrison was the thing that made them absolutely unbeatable in battle.

Interuption to sign an apron for a Victory Belle. 46:34

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Interviewer: *Here's a question I sometimes ask at the end. Ken Burns put together the series The War. And when he was promoting it at UCLA, I got to go and sit with a group of veterans. I asked Burns' producer afterward what her favorite question was. She said, "My favorite question is, 'Tell me a story you've never told anyone before.'" I said, "Well, you're Ken Burns, people are going to tell you their stories." She said, "Here's what you do. Ask the person to close their eyes, take a deep breath, and say the question one more time. Then have them open their eyes and say the first thing that comes to mind." … So, if you don't mean, tell me a story you've never told anyone before. All you have to do is close your eyes, take a deep breath... … Now Walter, if you would please tell me a story you've never told anyone before. Open your eyes.*

Blenko: It's difficult to be sure that I've never told anyone else this before. I'm going to go back to the WWII experience. I've had a lot of others of course outside of that… But I guess one of the things I remember – I've told a few people this story, not too many – was that after V-E Day, we were around the area of Munster for a while. And we had been to Bremen and provided security up there, and we came back to Munster and were for a short time in army occupation.

We were out there one day, marching. We were in close formation. We were obviously showing the flag, not looking for trouble. One of the things that existed there was the enormous number of people who had been picked up and transplanted by the German regime. Displaced persons, or DPs as they were called. And as we went down the road there were a couple of men off to one side in a slightly wooded area. They were pathetic looking people. They were obviously DPs. God knows where they had come from. As our column came along, they came to their feet somewhat unsteadily. They'd found some food that they were either cooking or eating there.

As we came along, they did stand up. The one who looked to be the leader, and I say that purely by force of personality, he had a big overcoat that looked like it might have belonged to the doorman of the Roxy in earlier years. [laughs] I would think it had to be an Eastern European military uniform of some sort, but God knows what or where. And he very tentatively and slowly raised his hand in a salute.

And it was an open-hand salute, with the palm of his hand outward and the back of his hand against his forehead. And Captain Quinn, who I mentioned earlier, who was the company commander, saw this. And he was a very shrewd and astute guy. And he immediately called, "Eyes left." And he returned the salute. And it's fascinating to watch these two guys suddenly change from being broken people, just floating around. The one of them in particular straightened his back, must have gained three inches in stature as he held that salute and he was recognized by the officer at the head of this column carrying an American flag.

Interviewer: *Thank you for that story. And this is David Meyer, son of Earl D. Meyer, Co. H, 379th. It's now August 6th of 2001 and we're in the Ramada Hotel, Bourbon St., in New Orleans, La. And I've had the great privilege of talking to Mr. … will you say your surname?*

Blenko: Walter J. Blenko.

Interviewer: *And what Company?*

Blenko: Company E, 378th Infantry Regiment.

Interviewer: *And what was your final rank?*

Blenko: Well my final rank in the infantry was PFC [Private First Class], after I got into the finance department. I went up to T/4.

Interviewer: *Thank you very much for your time.*

Blenko: Well, thank you. I enjoyed it. I hope I was helpful to you.

End of Part 3 – 7:31

End of Interview – 1 hr 45 min -