Jack O'Leary Oral History

May 18, 2005 - phone interview

Interviewer: First of all, can I ask you where you were born and when?

O'Leary: I was born in Lynn, Massachusetts.

Interviewer: What were your parents' names?

O'Leary: My parents were Eugene O'Leary and Alice F. O'Leary.

Interviewer: Where would you say your hometown was or where have you lived the most?

O'Leary: Lynn, Massachusetts. That's where I grew up and went to school and so forth.

Interviewer: How long have you been in San Antonio, or Texas?

O'Leary: About 2 years.

Interviewer: Where and when did you enlist, Mr. O'Leary?

O'Leary: Where and when did I what?

Interviewer: Enlist into the armed forces?

O'Leary: Well as a matter-of-fact I have my discharge in front of me. Give you exact dates. I went into active service on 23 March 1943.

Interviewer: So that would have been the day you enlisted?

O'Leary: Actually my date of induction was 16 March 1943.

Interviewer: Do you remember where you were inducted?

O'Leary: Yes, I was inducted in Lynn, Massachusetts.

Interviewer: Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

O'Leary: Yes, I was drafted.

Interviewer: Did you have a choice as to which service branch you would go into?

O'Leary: No, well I would have preferred actually to have gone into the Navy, but I, at the time, was quite near-sighted. My vision without glasses about 2200. So the Navy wouldn't take me at the time, later they did. So after that, I said well if I'm gonna go in the Army I might just well wait for them to draft me. That's what I did.

Interviewer: Do you remember where you were on December 7th, 1941? Who you were with? What was their reaction? What was your reaction?

O'Leary: Well, as a matter of fact, I guess probably most people remember that. I was in a motion picture theater in Lynn, Massachusetts.

Interviewer: Do you remember who you were with?

O'Leary: I was probably with my brother.

Interviewer: What was the reaction of everyone?

O'Leary: Well, of course, people really didn't know how to react. We had never seen or heard anything like that before. First of all, I suppose disbelief and then secondly, consternation, that this could happen.

Interviewer: So you were inducted into the Army. Can you tell me a little bit about your training?

O'Leary: Yes, I first of all went into an anti-aircraft artillery battery, battalion I guess you'd call it, at Fort Sheridan, Illinois. And that was the 777th Triple A Automatic Weapons Battalion. Later and I did my basic training with that group. Later I was transferred into a new automatic weapons battalion, the 837th.

Interviewer: That was another anti-aircraft battalion?

O'Leary: That's correct.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about the equipment of that battalion?

O'Leary: Yeah, they used Bofor 40-millimeter anti-aircraft guns and .50 caliber machine guns.

Interviewer: So you get your initial basic training there. Were you trained as an infantryman and then given specialized training?

O'Leary: No, we were trained as artillerymen basically, but at that time I presume that all inductees received approximately the same basic training. That was weapons training and firing and firing for record and that type of thing. We were doing gun drills on the Bofor. I don't really remember what my position was at that time. But shortly after we had basic training, which I guess lasted at that time I think about 12 weeks. Shortly after that, there was a flood on the Illinois River and they sent us down into central Illinois. I guess we were down there 2 or 3 weeks sandbagging along the Illinois River on Flood Duty. And then we returned back in Fort Sheridan and it was at that point I learned, two things, number one that I had been transferred to the 837th and very shortly thereafter that I was being sent into the Army's Specialized Training Program (ASTP) very soon. I was

sent from Fort Sheridan to what they call a STAR unit; I think it was called specialized training and reorganization or relocation, which was at Michigan State in East Lansing, Michigan. And after taking various tests and examinations there, I was ultimately sent to Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in an ASTP Unit there.

Interviewer: Had you had any college before this?

O'Leary: No I had not, because I had graduated from high school, basically in '42. That is the summer of '42 and I was into the service in 1943. So no, I had no college.

Interviewer: So you were trained in anti-aircraft and what happened after that?

O'Leary: I was transferred into the ASTP and I went to college at Lehigh.

Interviewer: How long did that last?

O'Leary: Well, the college program lasted from June of '43 to April of '44. Actually, I guess you'd say one academic year, nine months.

Interviewer: How were you liking that?

O'Leary: How did I like it?

Interviewer: Yes.

O'Leary: I thought it was pretty good. I was getting a college education, which because of economics in our family, I never would have been able to afford. My parents couldn't afford to send me to college. So yeah, I was in college and I was pretty happy about it.

Interviewer: What did you study there?

O'Leary: Engineering.

Interviewer: Was it any kind of specialized engineering?

O'Leary: Well, no. Actually, they did have some fellows that they had put into civil engineering. At that point I think I was just in basic engineering. Taking the math and physics courses and chemistry courses and so forth. It would be basic to an engineering education.

Interviewer: Would this kind of engineering be used for construction work?

O'Leary: Yeah, I presume. As a matter of fact I believe that when cadets go to West Point, I believe they are usually taken into engineering as a basic background.

Interviewer: I think you are right. So you were doing that until June?

O'Leary: Until April of 1944.

Interviewer: April of '44. So what happened at that point?

O'Leary: Well at that point, the Army basically, for the most part, cancelled the ASTP program because they were getting ready, of course we didn't know it at the time, but they were getting ready for D-Day and trying to build up their forces for that and basically, I maybe shouldn't use the term, but they were looking for cannon fodder. And they found 150,000 of us in American colleges.

Interviewer: Some high quality cannon fodder?

O'Leary: Well, I guess, yeah (both laughing).

Interviewer: Do you remember what your feelings were? Your reaction when you heard that you were not going to be taking the college courses? Did you know you were going into infantry at that time?

O'Leary: Well, not immediately. I remember one guy in our section, I don't know what he did, but he messed up in some way and was dropped out of the program. And one of his buddies at the college got a letter from him and he was in, I think, Fort Bliss in an infantry outfit. I remember the rest of us saying "gees, he messed up pretty good, but I don't think he messed up bad enough to put him into the infantry" (both laughing). So that was very prophetic because little did we know that within three months that we were all. I remember the date exactly. It was April the 1st, 1944 that I wound up standing in the company quadrangle of Company E, the 334th Infantry.

Interviewer: 334th Infantry. Now was that part of any division?

O'Leary: Yes, the 334th Infantry was a part of the 84th Division. There in Camp Claiborne, Louisiana.

Interviewer: So, can you tell me about the process of getting your new orders and traveling to New Jersey?

O'Leary: To be perfectly honest, I don't remember a lot about it; about the train ride or so forth from Lehigh to Camp Claiborne. Obviously we got some orders but I think they put everybody who was at Lehigh University put them into the 84th Infantry. There were 3,000 of us I understand that went into the 84th at the same time. And there were probably maybe 1,500 who were from Lehigh University. And so they probably transported us on some kind of a troop train rather than giving us orders and having us travel by ourselves under orders to Camp Claiborne. It's really strange, I have no memory of that whatsoever.

Interviewer: Did the Lehigh soldiers, did they tend to stick together after they got to Camp Claiborne.

O'Leary: Well, of course we were put into various companies. Yes, we might have known one or two guys who were in the same company and another two or three guys that were in Company F and another two or three guys were in Company G and so forth and so on. We were fairly well distributed through the Regiment. What they did after they got us there because of the fact that some of the men who were in ASTP had never had any basic training. In the fact that they were in the Air Corps and the Air Corps basic training was nothing more specific than having these guys march up and down on Miami Beach with some wooden rifles or broomsticks or whatever. Quite a few of the people who went into the 84th and into that regiment did not have any basic training. In the regiment they created what they called, a provisional battalion, I guess you'd call it. And some of the non-comms from our companies became pseudo-officers of the new provisional battalion or regiment; I don't really remember what they called it. And then they proceeded to put all the newies, as we were called, through basic training again.

Interviewer: How long did that training last?

O'Leary: Well probably it was about 8 or 12 weeks.

Interviewer: Was it pretty tough?

O'Leary: Of course it was more oriented towards the infantry. Including of course, you know, the rifle, learning how to dismantle the rifle and so forth and firing on the range for record scores and so forth to determine your level of proficiency with a rifle and a carbine. Actually, most all of us qualified with both a rifle and a carbine during our basic training. And at the expiration of this basic training, then we were literally integrated into the company. I happened to go into the 2nd Platoon of Company E of the 334th.

Interviewer: So how did that integration, how did that go? Was there any kind of resentment towards college guys, or guys from New Jersey?

O'Leary: Well yes, well I would say, not anything that I would consider to be serious; more or less of a friendly riding of the college boys and the newies and so forth and so on. One of the things I remember was that when we were in college and we traveled from class to class in a section; normally we would have a section, which would be about the size of a class, maybe 20 or 25 men in a section. And normally when we were on campus and going between buildings for our various classes we did so in formation and we marched. And normally we would sing when we were marching, and these guys in the regular companies; hell, they never heard anybody sing. Being in the infantry and singing at the same time (both

laughing), those two things seemed to be a little bit self-defeating. But any rate, they, you know, they rode us quite a bit as being newies and singing and so forth and so on.

And as a matter of fact, there is a very, I think, funny anecdote concerning that. When they were putting us through basic training, of course, one of the things that they did was the infiltration course which is of course where they have you crawl under wire while they fire live ammunition over your head and have some explosions occur around you as you're doing this. And then one of their favorite times was the Night Infiltration Course where they would bring trucks out there with water and hoses and wet the course down so it would be nice and sloppy. And then you would have to go through this infiltration course at night, which we were doing. And in order to ride us even more they had a man on a microphone in a German accent saying, "Oh, you college boys, why don't you sing us a song." And I don't know who began. I remember it was a beautiful moonlit night, a bright full moon and somebody up at the head of the line as we were going through the infiltration course, they stopped. And we ultimately, we turned over on our backs and began singing. After a while it was obvious to the powers-that-be that nobody was coming out of this infiltration course (laughing) and the more they threatened us, the more we just laid on our backs and sang with this guy in the German accent becoming more and more and more perturbed and telling us what they were gonna do to us. And we were all intelligent enough to know, "Hell, we're already in the infantry, we're laying on our backs, they're firing machine guns over us, what in the hell are they gonna do to us to make it worse (laughing)?" So we laid there and we sang, I don't know, probably for thirty minutes before somebody decided, whoever it was at going up at the head of the line, to continue and we went through the rest of the course. And moved off the course, but we had a little fun.

I believe that the whole situation was not prepared for intelligent, bright guys who had already been in the Army anywhere from eight to nine months to a year. In that, we were not a group of people who were easily intimidated by sergeants or anyone else as a matter of fact. And I think that the usual types of intimidation that they use when they're trying to put men through basic training, that is, try to scare them and browbeat them, just wasn't working with this group. And it was a little touch and go for them because I'm sure they didn't know exactly how to do it. We used to have a problem, when we were at college and we would stand in formation. At that time Bob Hope invented a kind of a saying, "Hubba, hubba, hubba, hubba."

Interviewer: I remember that.

O'Leary: And so when they would, when you would be at attention and then they would say, "At ease," which the order meant that you could stand there, but not speak. Then the order, "Rest", which meant that you

could speak. And so normally when they would say, you know, you're at attention…okay, "At ease" and then "Rest," then we would all go "hubba, hubba, hubba, hubba, hubba." Didn't have anything particularly to talk about (laughing). And so when we were training, we did that, and the sergeant who was in charge of our particular group. And one of the things that when you're in training like that, and anything that a non-comm makes you do, he has to do too. So, he didn't realize that we had just passed through a winter in the north, at Lehigh in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. And our…we did two hours of PE every day and probably one hour of PE was done nothing but running in place. So this sergeant would call us back to attention and make us run in place. Well, when he'd get a little bit tired and he'd stop and he'd say okay, "At ease, rest." (We would say) "Hubba, hubba, hubba, hubba." (Laughing) And I mean this poor guy, he never did get us. He never did get us to stop saying, "Hubba, hubba, hubba."

Interviewer: So just you Lehigh guys were saying that?

O'Leary: Well all of us, they called us guys, basically had about the same, similar experiences. And so, you know, they just had to cope with it. They had a little different kind of recruit on their hands, other than just taking a guy in off the street who'd been drafted and then try to scare the pants off of him and intimidate him and browbeat him while they were giving him basic training. That didn't work with us.

Interviewer: Where would you say that the 84th personnel came from? Were there certain states where they came from?

O'Leary: Yeah, they were more or less of a southern outfit. A lot of them were basically from Texas and other southern states, Alabama and so forth. There weren't too many, as I recall, there weren't too many northerners in the 84th when we joined them. Some guys were from California and a few from New York. I remember a few of the non-comms were from the Northeast, now that I think about it. But you know it was a fairly broad group, but I would say, it was a little bit of the majority of people from the southern states rather than from the north or northeast.

Interviewer: Did that present any kind of problems or culture shock or anything like that?

O'Leary: Not really. I think that by that time we had all been in the Army and had the experience of sleeping with, and working with, and training with, all kinds of men from all parts of the country. So there wasn't, for us, as much as there was when I went in the Army the first time. When I went through basic training the first time, we had a sergeant who was giving us basic training and he had such an accent that they were trying to teach us close-order drills, you know. He would give us orders and we wouldn't be able to understand the orders (laughing). And we'd go

marching in all directions, you know, because we just couldn't understand this guy's dialect. But in this particular situation we'd already been through all that so that wasn't anything new. I don't think it intimidated any of us or that we thought very much about it because we had already been subject to that by that time.

Interviewer: What was Camp Claiborne like? Just the base in general, your living conditions?

O'Leary: Well, Camp Claiborne of course was in the swamplands, I'd guess you'd call it, of Louisiana. The United States apparently owned a very, very large parcel of land. When I say large, I mean probably maybe even like fifty miles square. On one edge of this area was Fort Polk and on the other edge was Camp Claiborne. Camp Claiborne was on Route 165 that runs between Lake Charles, Louisiana and Alexandria. And maybe about 30 miles south of Alexandria on Route 165. And I think that the Army had and owned all of the land between that and the road that went up by Fort Polk, which might have been fifty miles to the west. Because we did share, it's where we normally did maneuvers, and we did share an artillery range with whatever division was at Fort Polk. And the nearest town at that time was Alexandria, Louisiana.

Interviewer: Did you ever get to go into town while you were there?

O'Leary: Yes, such as it was, because Alexandria at that time probably was a town of maybe 15,000 to 20,000 people, probably more like 15,000. And emptying into it, first of all, was Camp Claiborne that had 15,000 in the 84th Division and another 15,000 men in an engineering division. Just outside of Alexandria was Camp Livingston, where I think it was the 76th Division emptying into Alexandria. So on any given weekend the people of Alexandria just hibernated basically because in terms of girls. All of us guys were 18 years old and we're looking for girls. In terms of girls, anybody in Alexandria that had a girl that they didn't have behind bars on a weekend (laughing) when we guys were in town. I mean it was just; actually it reached the point where I wouldn't go to town, on particularly pay weekend I wouldn't go to town. Once in awhile we would send an advance party in. There was a very nice hotel in Alexandria called The Bentley. We'd send an advance party in and they'd get a room at The Bentley and then they'd come back and they'd tell us where the room was so that a whole group of us from our company would wind up basically sleeping all over the room on mattresses and box springs for a night.

Interviewer: Just for a change?

O'Leary: Excuse me.

Interviewer: Was it nicer than sleeping on base?

O'Leary: Oh yeah, of course. We were in, the type of barracks we had in the 84th, we more like a platoon size barracks rather than a…when I was in the anti-aircraft we had really big barracks. But in the 84th we had much, much smaller barracks. I would say that there would be maybe 20 men in each barracks in the company area. They had double-decker beds. You had your bunk and double-decker bed and weekends they'd do inspections and so forth and if you got gigged then you didn't get a pass.

Interviewer: Was Camp Claiborne; was it one of these rapid construction projects? Or had part of it been built before the war?

O'Leary: I don't think so. Mostly it was wooded except for the area where the camp was. I mean it was woods, of course they had roads running through this but that was all, except for where the camp was and where the engineering outfit was. You know it was all wooded, not necessarily swampland, not necessarily sloppy swampland, but you know, just low land all wooded.

Interviewer: How would you describe the facilities there at Camp Claiborne, just in general?

O'Leary: The facilities were as I said. We had barracks that would take about 20-25 men in each barracks. We had a mess hall; a company mess hall and every company had its own company area where you stood your formations. Normally you had a battalion area in the center and they would have four companies around that center for each battalion. For instance you would have the buglers who would do the bugles. Every afternoon you stood in formation and stood retreat. Every afternoon that you were in camp which meant you had to change your clothes and go and fall out and stand retreat. We had a PX, which was just across the street from where the barracks was so that if you didn't like what they had for supper and you wanted to go get something different you could go to the PX and buy something. You know the facilities were just regular Army I guess, you know, barracks and that was it.

Interviewer: So what else happened while you were at Camp Claiborne? The STP guys went through your basic infantry training.

O'Leary: Well, when they integrated us back into the company and shortly after that we continued to do training. That is, you know, we get up every morning and one morning we would have a couple hours of bayonet drill and another couple hours of field stripping weapons. And another morning we'd get and we'd do what I liked, strangely enough, nothing I liked better than about a 14 or 15-mile hike.

Interviewer: I've never heard a soldier say that before.

O'Leary: That meant you weren't doing something else. I don't know how much bayonet drill you've ever done but it doesn't take you long to

get enough bayonet drill. A lot of the other drilling was just not very nice. Hell, at the time I only weighed like a hundred thirty, a hundred forty pounds. I could walk as much as they wanted me to. And so we'd go out and walk around and for a hike, normally in the morning. If you left the camp at 7 o'clock you'd be back in by maybe 11, 11:30. You know it would be walking say about 3 and a half miles an hour with a ten minute break every hour. Hell, I used to think that was the least objectionable way to spend a morning or a day for me in the infantry was to just go for a nice walk or hike (laughing).

Interviewer: Well, you make it almost sound nice.

O'Leary: So, you could imagine how nice the other training was when I prefer to get out and walk fifteen miles.

Interviewer: With a heavy load I imagine.

O'Leary: Well some days, yes. Some days you would do a hike with a full field pack. Some days they would do force marches where they would hike you at a much higher speed. Some days even in, and of course Louisiana is very hot in the summertime and we got there in April. So we were there all during the real hot weather in the summertime and we were soaking wet all day long. From the time we get up basically and get out you'd get soaking wet. And sometimes they would make us even double-time with our gas masks on because they had certain days; every Friday was gas day. You had to carry a gas mask all day long because they could throw tear gas wherever you were; into a mess hall, into the barbershop or wherever you were. So on Friday you had to have your gas mask with you at all times. And sometimes they would take us out and hike us and even double-time us with the gas masks on. You know pretty soon you'd have to tip the mask up to let the sweat run out otherwise you'd drown inside that mask.

Interviewer: Did you ever see anyone fall out because of the heat?

O'Leary: Oh yeah. Oh sure. We would go on a hike and it would not be unusual for some guy to fall out and they would normally have a jeep coming along behind you when you're on a hike and pick up stragglers that had some kind of a problem. Yeah, the guys would drop out and they'd just pick them up. Whenever they speak about the Army, there so happened to be a man in my company who I didn't know prior to going into the service because he was slightly older than I, but my brother, who was two years older than I, knew this guy and you're not gonna believe what I tell you. This guy had a clubfoot and he was in the infantry.

Interviewer: Oh, my gosh.

O'Leary: Eddie Winiziak (sp). I can tell you what his name was (laughing).

Interviewer: How's his name spelled?

O'Leary: Excuse me?

Interviewer: How is the name spelled?

O'Leary: Winiazik, W-I-N-I-Z-I-A-K, I guess. Polish, a lot of people around Lynn were Polish.

Interviewer: I see, I see. And he was able to manage with his clubbed foot?

O'Leary: Well, yeah. They didn't give him much quarrel, but I don't remember him going overseas with us. I don't know what happened to him. But when we were at camp, they didn't give him much quarrel; he did what the rest of us did.

Interviewer: So what were meal times like? Was the food any good or awful?

O'Leary: Well, we ate what they call family style. If you were on KP, the first day you were on KP, you did normal KP. That is peeling potatoes and washing the pots and pans, the dishes. And the day after you were on KP, you were, what they call, a table waiter. Which meant you picked up the food in large bowls, family size bowls and you would carry the food to tables. Every table had maybe eight men, or ten men at a table. And that was the way you ate, basically family style. I didn't think the food was all that bad although growing up I was always kind of a fussy eater but I didn't think the food was terrible. The only thing I learned which I kept with me most of my life was I learned to eat pretty fast. Faster than I, you know, ever ate before.

Interviewer: And why was that?

O'Leary: Well, because you didn't have that much time to eat and plus the fact that if you had an hour for lunch and if you wanted any time to yourself you had to eat and leave the mess hall and go before the next formation you had to fall out for.

Interviewer: What kind of food did the Army serve you?

O'Leary: Well, you know, strangely enough, except for C-rations, I don't remember a lot about stew. I guess they would have beef stew occasionally and in the morning occasionally we would have what they call, "shit on a shingle." Which would be like chopped beef on toast. But most mornings we had eggs, like scrambled eggs and bacon and I thought we ate pretty good. As a matter of fact, we had a very, very good Mess Sergeant. People laugh when I tell them this. Our Mess Sergeant, he used to make us save sugar. And he would make us raised doughnuts. If we saved sugar he'd tell us, "You know you guys take it easy on the sugar and

I'll make you some doughnuts." Even when we were in the field, even when we were overseas; this guy made raised doughnuts on fuel kitchens.

Interviewer: Do you remember his name?

O'Leary: No, I don't.

Interviewer: So he went overseas with you guys and still managed to make doughnuts for you?

O'Leary: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Did he provide any other special treats when you were in Europe?

O'Leary: No, not really. Except we knew he was a good Mess Sergeant. I mean, he made the guys good food and nothing lax about him or anything like that. He was very business-like and he was very good at his job.

Interviewer: Well, that must have been a Godsend.

O'Leary: Yeah, well it could have been a lot worse (laughing). Well, even after we were overseas, one of the mediums of exchange on the continent after the Americans went across France, etc. The main medium of exchange was cigarettes rather than money. What he would do is…normally you would get a ration of like a carton of cigarettes a week and sometimes they would bring you the cigarettes all at once and then gradually we told them…I smoked like everyone else did at the time…"Just send enough for the squad and keep the rest of 'em back in the kitchen." So, the Mess Sergeant would accumulate these cigarettes and then when the guys would occasionally get relief and get to go into Paris or something he'd give 'em two or three cartons of cigarettes. And that would be all you'd need when you went to Paris.

Interviewer: He was something like a banker, huh?

O'Leary: That's right. That's right. He kept the cache of cigarettes and gave them to the guys who were going into town.

Interviewer: I'll be darned. I've never heard that.

O'Leary: He was very good. You'd think I'd remember his name, but I don't. I'm not even sure that I could pick him out of the roster as I found your father cause I have a complete roster of his company.

Interviewer: So, let me see. I better change the tape.

Looks like we're going okay now. Let's see. Do you know about when your basic training ended there at Camp Claiborne?

O'Leary: Well, probably about 12 weeks after the first week of April. So about three months probably maybe a little less than that. Say two months. So if we went in at April 1st it would have been May, June, probably about June 1st or the middle of June is when we joined our companies and very shortly thereafter we went into the field for maneuvers and stayed in the field, I don't know, four, five, six weeks, something like that.

Interviewer: For a full stretch?

O'Leary: Oh yeah. Sleeping in pup tents. Supposedly they were doing war games where they would have like two sides and the guys would be vying against each other. Cause I remember once I had to go into the camp for a dental appointment. They had a truck that would pick us up and take us in. When this truck brought me back, the truck brought me basically to the enemy's quarters. And when they found that out then they of course literally made me a prisoner so to speak. Disqualified me then from the problem. They'd be afraid I'd tell them something. Hell, I wouldn't know anything to tell them. One tree looked alike to me. I didn't have a map or anything (laughing). So I just sat around. One time I sat around for about a week and did nothing. We used to have kids follow us selling watermelons and they would sell you a small watermelon for about a quarter and I loved the watermelons. And we needed the fluid anyway at that time of year in Louisiana. I spent a week sitting around doing nothing but eating watermelons (laughing).

Interviewer: (Laughing) That's not bad. So at the end of maneuvers were you considered ready?

O'Leary: Yeah. And shortly thereafter we were qualified and sent to the port of embarkation, which at that time was Camp Shanks in New York.

Interviewer: Before we get into that, did the 84th, the entire division take part in maneuvers and so forth?

O'Leary: Oh yeah. As far as I know.

Interviewer: And how did those go? Did the 84th do pretty well in those?

O'Leary: Well, I don't really know because I wasn't an officer or a non-comm so I didn't know anything except doing everyday whatever they told me to do and wherever they told me to go. I don't remember so much that we fired blank ammunition or anything like that at each other. And I don't even remember any real combat situations supposedly with the so-called enemy that we were supposedly working against. I don't remember a lot of that, we were just there that's all (laughing).

Interviewer: Do you know if y'all did any live-fire exercises?

O'Leary: No, the only time we had live-fire exercises was occasionally, I guess we did have some live-fire exercises on the artillery range where they fired artillery over our heads. And then, beyond the infiltration course, a grenade course, we threw live grenades.

Interviewer: Do you think your training was adequate? Do you think it had you prepared for combat? Well prepared?

O'Leary: Well, I'm not sure that anything really…Yes, prepared physically I would say probably yes. But I don't think anything ever really, I mean, you know, we knew how to run and fall down and get up and run again and so forth and so on. Yeah, all of that I think we were well prepared. We were in good physical condition. I was. I probably weighed a hundred thirty-five, a hundred forty pounds. I was wiry but good strong young man. But mentally I don't think anything, there's no way to prepare people for combat mentally.

Interviewer: After having gone through combat, was there anything that you would have done differently as far as your training goes?

O'Leary: Well, yeah. The main thing that I remember was that I got wounded. I was in the Ardennes Forest and it was impossible really to dig a foxhole. And the biggest problem you have when you're in a wooded area is the fact that shells explode on impact. And so if a shell comes in and hits a tree branch then it throws all of the shrapnel down on you. Basically we should have been told when you are in that situation and they are shelling you, "what you do is you stand up. You grab a tree and stand up beside the tree where you present a much smaller target." Whereas I was in a foxhole, not really a foxhole, just a little slit trench really, when we had a mortar barrage in our area. I got hit by about six pieces that came down from the mortar hitting the tree over our heads. One piece went right through me, right through my right chest.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh.

O'Leary: But we should have been, somebody should have told us at that point that if you're in that situation the best thing you can do is to grab a tree and stand as close to the trunk of the tree as you can because that way you present the smallest target for the shrapnel which is gonna come down.

Interviewer: So other than that advice, you wouldn't have had anything different as far as training?

O'Leary: Well, you never know. I mean it's possible in the area where I was if I'd have been standing up under a larger tree, that the shrapnel might not have hit me or it might have hit me and killed me because it would have hit me in the head rather than the chest. Who knows?

But here we were in the Ardennes Forest in the middle of wintertime and now and then you see pictures of guys where they issued like white sheets to them. We didn't have any white sheets. The equipment we had, our boots, didn't keep our feet dry. One of the biggest problems they had was a situation called trench foot. And frozen feet in the Ardennes because our footwear was inadequate to keep our feet dry and warm.

Interviewer: How big of a problem was that in your outfit?

O'Leary: It was a big problem, a big problem. We all had bad feet.

Interviewer: Everyone in your outfit suffered from trench foot?

O'Leary: Probably, yeah.

Interviewer: Any idea how many men in your unit were disabled because of that? Or made ineffective?

O'Leary: There was no such thing as being disabled. You're there and they're not gonna send you back because your feet hurt or you have a little problem with your feet. As a matter of fact, if you're running a temperature, you had to have over 102 to get off the line. They would send you back to Battalion Aid and they'd take your temperature and if it wasn't over 102 you went back on line.

Interviewer: Did you suffer from trench foot?

O'Leary: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was that like?

O'Leary: Well, your feet become blistered and swollen and sore.

Interviewer: Was it very painful?

O'Leary: It was fairly painful. Whenever I now see some of the things where we're even coddling prisoners and worrying about prisoners, hell, they didn't worry about us. We weren't prisoners; we were on their side. We had to be there. There was no place else to go and you had to be there and that was it.

Interviewer: You'd get in trouble nowadays for treating someone the way they treated you guys?

O'Leary: No question. They'd put them in jail.

Interviewer: Was anything done to relieve the trench foot problem?

O'Leary: I don't remember that because I got hit and I wound up in the hospital. And in the hospital there was a rule, in all hospitals, that there

could be no cover on a man's foot within the hospital. You laid in a cot in the hospital with your feet sticking out.

Interviewer: Do you know why they had that rule?

O'Leary: Well, yeah, because the covers would add to the problem. I guess when the feet were sticking out they could get a better look at them. I don't remember that they did any particular treatment. My feet at that particular point were the least of my problems.

Interviewer: We got a little off the timeline here. The 84th had finished its maneuvers. And where was your port of embarkation?

O'Leary: Camp Shanks, New York

Interviewer: Where is that in New York?

O'Leary: It's on the Hudson River, just a little north of where the George Washington Bridge crosses.

Interviewer: Is it near New York City?

O'Leary: Yeah, pretty near New York City. Just a short distance across the George Washington Bridge to where Camp Shanks is.

Interviewer: Do you remember the 84th being transported from Louisiana to New York?

O'Leary: Yes, I do. I remember some of that. We were put in a troop train, which you might find a little bit strange. They loaded this train up through Canada and we came down through Canada at Niagara Falls. They stopped the train and they let us march out and see the falls, Niagara Falls. It was typical troop train; it didn't have any bunks or anything. I think we were probably on the train for 3 or 4 days from Louisiana.

Interviewer: What are you guys doing to pass the time on the train?

O'Leary: They played cards, sleep, try to sleep, and that's it, read.

Interviewer: So, you finally get to Camp Shanks. Did you all pile on to a ship right away? Or did you have to wait around awhile?

O'Leary: We were probably at Camp Shanks for less than a week and we went and caught a ship in the New York Harbor someplace.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. So Camp Shanks was like a ….?

O'Leary: Port of Embarkation, P-O-E, they called it, port of embarkation.

Interviewer: So, it was a place just for you to stay until your ship was ready for you to board. Do you remember what ship it was?

O'Leary: Yes, I do. A ship called the Thomas S. Barry.

Interviewer: Do you remember what kind of ship it was?

O'Leary: Yes, I do. It had been a cruise ship. Someone told me that it had been called "The Orienta" and it had been a cruise ship. Normally, a ship like that would only hold a regimen, no ship that would hold 15,000 men. A regiment is about 5,000 men. So normally each regiment went on a different ship, but our regiment went on the Thomas Barry. And I mean, you were jammed in there. I remember the section I was in was section 6F which was like the 6th deck down and F was the rear and the bunks were maybe 6 high. So you really couldn't even turn over without the cooperation of the man above you on the bunks. After we got out into the ocean, I was afraid of torpedoes because I was sure we were below the water line, I wouldn't stay down there. I slept up on deck at night.

Interviewer: I don't blame you. So you got on board ship and can you describe moving out of New York Harbor?

O'Leary: Not really, I don't remember much about it. Just going out in the harbor. The ship was packed; so many people on the ship. Basically it would take all day long just to feed the men. Normally a ship that size would have taken maybe 1000 passengers and we had 5000 men on the ship. So they even had the swimming pool covered over and had bunks in the swimming pool.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh. Do you remember passing the Statue of Liberty or anything like that?

O'Leary: Well, not specifically because I had been into New York Harbor some years before when I was in high school on the ship. So I had seen all that before. I don't have any specific memory of that. That is not as memorable to me as the first time I saw it.

Interviewer: Do you have any other memories about the ship itself, like how it was onboard?

O'Leary: Well, except for the fact that it took all day long. You stood in the chow line for breakfast for maybe 3 hours and when you'd get your breakfast, it would be time to stand in the line again for your lunch. Basically that is what you did all day long, stood in the chow line. Unless you found a way to buck it and I was very fortunate that I found that way.

Interviewer: How was that?

O'Leary: Well, apparently because my company was in such a terrible part of the ship that they put the whole company on KP so they wouldn't be down there in that part of the ship. They would be up on the; in the mean time, as I told you I was sleeping up on deck, so apparently when

they came down to put the company on KP, I wasn't there. And so later that day, I went down to my bunk and one of the non-comms in the company said, "O'Leary, you're not on KP?" and I said, "No". He said, "Well, come with me I have a detail for you." I was on a detail where I was on a job twice a day to clear the decks and we had hoses and we would wash the decks down. And because I was on that detail, they gave me a special tag which allowed me to buck the chow line so I could go eat with my special tag anytime I wanted to and go to the head of the chow line with that tag. It worked out fine, purely by accident and wasn't by any intelligent decision that I made.

Interviewer: Was your ship part of a convoy?

O'Leary: Yes, it was.

Interviewer: Do you remember anything about the convoy? How many ships were in it? How many warships? What kind of warships?

O'Leary: Not really. I would say probably 6 or 8 ships and we would see destroyers. We had destroyer escorts as we got out into the Atlantic.

Interviewer: Were you guys given instructions about "light" discipline? Like not lighting any lighters or anything?

O'Leary: Not really, but if they might have, I don't remember.

Interviewer: How long did the voyage last? While I'm thinking of it, seasickness, was that a problem?

O'Leary: Well, it wasn't for me because I was brought up on the water. Not that that's any protection against being seasick but fortunately I was never a person who got seasick because I lived on the water and had been out many times in boats. Other people got sick and I never got sick. So I didn't get seasick, but yes, seasickness was a big problem for a lot of the guys. It made the chow line a lot shorter (both laughing).

Interviewer: Another thing to your advantage.

O'Leary: Yeah, right.

Interviewer: So, how long did the voyage last?

O'Leary: I would say probably 8-10 days. I don't really remember.

Interviewer: Was the ship zigzagging a lot?

O'Leary: I guess. I don't know. When you're on a ship that large, you don't know unless you make it a point to watch the wake. You really wouldn't know if the ship is zigzagging or not. It wasn't doing any short

zigzagging. It might have been doing long zigzagging. Each zigzag might have been a mile. The whole convoy might have done them. I don't know.

Interviewer: Were there any scares on the voyage?

O'Leary: Not really. You mean when somebody said they sighted a submarine or something like that? No, nothing like that happened.

Interviewer: Do you remember when you made landfall and what port it was?

O'Leary: Yes, we were supposed to have gone into Cherburg, France, but one of the ships that had one of our regiments on it was in a collision in New York Harbor and had to go back. So we were actually traveling with two regiments instead of three of the division. So they put us into Southampton England and we went to Winchester and stayed in what was the original barracks of the Black Watch Regiment in Winchester, England. We were there for about a month I guess; while we were waiting for the other regiment to get themselves straightened out and get caught up with us. After about a month in England, they put us on a landing craft and took us across the channel. Landed us I think into Omaha Beach.

Interviewer: What did you guys do for a month while you were waiting on the other regiment?

O'Leary: Well, not a lot, to be perfectly honest with you. Well, we did stand in a formal parade almost every afternoon. Where we would have British officers and a band and (they would) inspect us. Did a lot of cleaning our weapons. Otherwise, not a lot. I probably had some classes on aircraft recognition. Something like that, but not a lot.

Interviewer: Did you get to go into town?

O'Leary: Yes. They basically allowed about 1/3rd of the regiment at a time to go into town. Every third night you could get a pass maybe to go into Winchester. They had pubs. Of course they were all completely blacked out.

Interviewer: Did you get to go anywhere else in England?

O'Leary: Yes. As a matter of fact, while we were there they gave us like a three-day pass and a group of us went on to London and spent a couple days in London.

Interviewer: Do you remember anything about that trip?

O'Leary: Not too much. I remember Piccadilly Circus and all the prostitutes standing around Piccadilly Circus. I didn't go in for that stuff, but I remember very vividly what they would do for about 2 pounds. At that time the British taxicabs were tall, you could almost stand up in a

British taxicab. They put the guy and the prostitute in a taxicab and drive them once around the block. The guy's been in the Army for three or four months or six months or a year; it didn't take him long.

Interviewer: Not a whole lot of time for that.

O'Leary: No, but I remember that was the system for about two pounds. I remember some of the guys did it and I didn't, and they thought maybe I didn't have the money and said they'd pay for it. "It's not the money." I just couldn't see; that just wasn't part of my way of thinking really.

Interviewer: Did venereal disease then or later on the continent; was that ever a problem?

O'Leary: Well, yeah. As a matter of fact, after we were at Camp Shanks, Louisiana there was one guy in the company who everybody knew from seeing him in the shower that he was very much under endowed. After we were out on the ship going overseas, he came down with the clap. He had apparently caught it in New York City while we were at Camp Shanks. And everyone wondered how he got the clap (laughing). That was the only one I knew about. I think he was actually in my platoon.

Interviewer: So finally the 3rd regiment arrived. How long after that before you knew you were going to be heading for the continent?

O'Leary: Well, we landed in England, as well as I remember, on October 1st, and landed on the continent on November 1st or there abouts.

Interviewer: And that was 1944?

O'Leary: Yeah. And they put us in trucks and they began transporting us east.

Interviewer: Oh, before you get into that, can you tell me what Omaha Beach was like and how you landed on it?

O'Leary: Well this was way after D-day. I mean this was in November. I don't really remember. I think that these ships had like a big ramp on the front. We didn't wade ashore in the water or anything like that. They put us ashore in a dry fashion.

Interviewer: Was it real busy on the beach there?

O'Leary: Well yeah, more or less. I think they took us from the main ship to a landing craft and then took us in, but I don't remember that, that well.

Interviewer: You don't know if you used one of those artificial harbors they built do you?

O'Leary: No, I don't think so. I think that they might have had some portable piers there, but as I remember, I think they landed us right on the beach.

Interviewer: After you landed on the beach, I guess it took awhile to get everything sorted out?

O'Leary: Well, no. They had trucks there and we just walked off the ships and basically for a short walk and going through some of the hedgerows there, up to a point where we loaded on the trucks and started to go east on the trucks. And they drove us through Paris on the way.

Interviewer: What was that like?

O'Leary: Well, it was just riding through. They didn't even slow down. We didn't get out and see anything. We just rode through Paris and saw the Eiffel Tower and whatever. And while we were going, the division was ultimately assigned to the 9th Army, which was up in the north section where Germany and Holland had come together more than Germany and France. And so up near where a big battle had occurred maybe a month before we got there, Aachen, was a big battle. But we got there after that.

Interviewer: Did you guys have any idea what you were going to be doing or where you'd be going?

O'Leary: Not really, beyond the fact that we knew we were going to be in combat.

Interviewer: So, they drove you up to around the Aachen area? Is that right?

O'Leary: Well, yeah, in that area. The city that we went first into combat in, which was on November 18th, 1944, was, where my regiment was in, was the city of Geilenkirchen.

Interviewer: Okay, that's a German city I take it?

O'Leary: Yeah, right.

Interviewer: What was that like, your first combat?

O'Leary: Well, we went in with tank support. They were shelling us, but I didn't realize my company, we got out ahead of the rest of the battalion. We were basically out on the salient all by ourselves because they were getting shelled and the rest of the battalion was pinned down in back of us. But there were pillboxes and of course they were firing from the pillboxes. Our tank support was very good and quieted down the pillboxes by firing their cannons at the pillboxes. Then we went in behind the tanks and as soon as we got up to; normally a pillbox would have a communications trench around it. So, as soon as we'd get to the communications trench;

the tank couldn't depress its machine guns down to shoot anything in the trench. So, normally when we would come to the edge of the trench, the Germans would surrender.

Interviewer: So, what was it like seeing your first German? You might have seen some before that, but like taking one prisoner or seeing one shoot?

O'Leary: I don't really remember any big cultural shock or anything like that. We knew what they looked like. We knew they had gray uniforms. They would normally, when we would get them into a situation like that, they would come marching out of the pillboxes with a big red-cross flag.

Interviewer: Did they seem like, were they old or young?

O'Leary: Yeah, many of them were older than we were and most of them when we would capture them would claim that they were Polish or Czech and they'd speak in English.

Interviewer: Is there anything to it you think, to their claim?

O'Leary: Yes, probably was.

Interviewer: How were you armed and equipped?

O'Leary: Well, I had an M-1 rifle and hand grenades and we used bandoliers of ammunition, which were in cloths. Probably would hold about 8 clips. A cloth thing rather than have the clips in our cartridge belt. We just put the bandoliers over our shoulder so we'd have our clips.

Interviewer: About how many rounds did you carry with you usually?

O'Leary: Well, we probably carried; I think a clip would hold 8, and we'd probably have 8 clips, so we probably had about 64-65 rounds.

Interviewer: And how many hand grenades would you take with you?

O'Leary: Well, you picked whatever you wanted. Normally you'd just have a couple hand grenades.

Interviewer: What was some of the other equipment you typically had with you.

O'Leary: Well, the most important piece of equipment was our shovel.

Interviewer: Why is that?

O'Leary: Because that's what you're gonna dig a foxhole with whenever you stop. Whenever you're in an attack and you take some territory you know immediately that the Germans are gonna shell that territory with

their artillery. So, the first thing you need to do the minute you stop is dig a foxhole.

Interviewer: Did you get to be pretty good at digging foxholes?

O'Leary: Oh yeah. I could dig a foxhole pretty good.

Interviewer: About how fast can you dig one?

O'Leary: I would say a couple guys digging a foxhole could probably dig a foxhole in twenty or thirty minutes.

Interviewer: Did digging foxholes ever save your life do you think? Or save you from injury?

O'Leary: Oh, no question about that. Sometimes you even had to start out digging the foxhole while you were on your belly because they're firing over your head. The first thing you do is you're on your belly and you got your shovel and you make a little wall of dirt in front of you and start digging.

Interviewer: So how would you say that your battalion or your company did in their first combat?

O'Leary: Well at first, the first day I thought we did well. We had British tank support and I don't remember even firing that many shots because the guys around the pillbox gave up, although we suffered a lots of casualties, like my platoon sergeant, a guy by the name of Clemente. They had stripes on the back of their helmets; the officers had a vertical stripe and knock-offs had a horizontal stripe and the Germans would have snipers behind you after you went up and they'd pick out the non-comms by their helmets and shoot them. I remember seeing Clemente, my platoon sergeant, just laying there dead with a hole in his head.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you felt?

O'Leary: Well, no. I don't mind telling you, I was scared, scared to death. You see him and other guys and you say boy you better get where I'm going and start digging a hole.

Interviewer: Did you feel like you were invulnerable somehow being young or if you did, did that feeling go away?

O'Leary: Well, when I said, "Nothing prepares you for combat," is that the first time with all your training and everything else; the first time that they start mortaring you or shooting at you with a machine gun and it dawns on you all at once, "That son of a bitch is trying to kill me." And it's a cultural shock really. You know it's a thing that most people, thank God, have never had when they realize that somebody is really trying to kill them. And when you see two or three guys fall down dead beside you,

you know for sure somebody is trying to kill you. And it's a big shock and then of course every minute that you are in combat you are scared to death. That's the only way I can put it.

I mean do you get used to it? Yeah, you get used to it. But the problem is, when you're in the infantry, if you don't get hit today, you're gonna be there tomorrow and if you don't get hit tomorrow, you're gonna be there the next day. So the only way out really is to get hit.

Interviewer: Did you become fatalistic at some point?

O'Leary: Not really, no. Just doing whatever I could everyday to stay alive.

Interviewer: Tell me, do you think your equipment was adequate?

O'Leary: Well, not really. The rifles wouldn't fire if you laid around in the mud with them. The cartridge belt, even a simple thing like a cartridge belt, if you laid around in the mud in a cartridge belt, you know something, you can't open them, it punctures. You just can't open them. Most of the German equipment was leather.

Interviewer: Was what?

O'Leary: Leather. Every piece of equipment that the Germans had was better than every piece of equipment we had.

Interviewer: There were no exceptions?

O'Leary: I can't think of a single one.

Interviewer: Was there any German equipment in particular that you really envied or would have liked to have?

O'Leary: Not really. All their weapons fired faster than ours. Their artillery; the German 88s and artillery was very accurate and they had plenty of it. I didn't find any fault with anything they had.

Interviewer: So, how did we beat them? What was it?

O'Leary: Numbers, sheer numbers and the fact that they were fighting on two fronts. And one of the facts that I'm sure of, is that like on the fourth or fifth day we were in combat, we had a company commander who had just become a company commander because our company commander got run over by a tank on the first day. He literally took this company level and we were marching, literally marching, across a sugar beet field like three abreast and a company deep and marched right into a pillbox, where they had pillboxes and so forth. So ultimately we got pinned down on this field and quite a few of our guys got killed that day and dug foxholes and even had a sniper behind us up in, like a hay tower or something, in the

farmhouse behind us; killed one of my best friends from behind. It was stupid. Apparently, our officer didn't know what the hell he was doing. We at least should be spread out. If we're attacking, we should be spread out company-wide rather than three men deep for a whole company. Those guys that were in the back got pinned down, they were like a hundred yards from the guys in the front, three deep. I'm sure that part of what won the war was the fact that the Germans would figure out whatever a good soldier might do and prepare for that and never be prepared for what our guys would do (laughing) because one thing, they (Germans) didn't have any idea what they (our guys) were doing.

Interviewer: So, you have a low opinion of your officers?

O'Leary: Well, yeah, basically. They had never been in combat either. I'm not blaming them, but they had never been in combat either, but they should have known by reconnaissance or whatever, when they are about to march a company across a sugar beet field like we're on a parade round or something.

Interviewer: What about the NCOs? Were your NCOs in general; were they okay?

O'Leary: Yeah. And, of course, a lot of guys became NCOs very quickly because the NCOs that were there got killed or wounded and the first thing you knew you were an NCO. The first thing I knew I was a sergeant.

Interviewer: Would you say that the quality of the NCOs or the officers became better perhaps?

O'Leary: Everybody was doing the best thing that they knew to do at the time. I'm not saying that anybody that did anything had any malice in their soul or anything like that.

Interviewer: They were just in a terrible situation.

O'Leary: They were just plain inexperienced, that's all. They made mistakes.

Interviewer: So as the 84th became more experienced, would you say that the professionalism got better?

O'Leary: Of course, sure. We started out with twelve men in a squad and three days later, four days later, we had three and then we three men lasted, I guess, about another two or three weeks before one of the three got hit and then I became a Buck Sergeant. And then we lasted about a month, I guess, before myself and the squad leader got hit by the same shell.

Interviewer: Those don't seem like very good odds?

O'Leary: Well, no. Like I say, if you're in the infantry, and you don't get hit today, you're gonna be there tomorrow, that's all.

Interviewer: That almost sounds like a death sentence the way you put it?

O'Leary: Well, the number of infantrymen who were not killed or wounded are infinitesimal basically. I know a couple of guys that went through. There was one guy in my platoon and my squad. This man was completely without fear. I mean, he was a real soldier and completely without fear. And he never got hit.

Interviewer: Is that a good thing or bad thing to be completely without fear?

O'Leary: Well, I don't know. He didn't get hit. I'd see him sloshing around in Belgium and walking around where he shouldn't have been. He was like a kid playing Cowboys and Indians is the way I can explain it.

Interviewer: Do you remember his name?

O'Leary: Yeah, I remember him very well. His name was Bill Lumpkin. He had no fear that I could tell whatsoever. He was having the time of his life. He was just like a kid playing Cowboys and Indians (laughing).

Interviewer: So, Mr. Lumpkin was the name of the fearless soldier. Did he survive the war that you know of?

O'Leary: Yes, he did. As a matter of fact I saw him at a reunion in Williamsburg Virginia probably seven or eight years ago. Occasionally, I talk to him on the phone. I think he has Alzheimer's disease now. I remember he was at this reunion with his brother, who happened to be a doctor from Georgia; I forget the name of the town, in Georgia, where he was from. I had a long conversation with the doctor. His brother, the doctor, was a chest surgeon and because I had been wounded through the chest, he was very interested in talking to me and we had a long conversation. But Bill I think, if he's still living, I think he has some Alzheimer's.

Interviewer: Tell me, do you remember anything about replacements?

O'Leary: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: Can you talk about how that went?

O'Leary: Well, it's probably the worst nightmare that any young man ever could have had, was to have been; I remember one of the replacements that came in. Ultimately he was killed in two or three days. This is in November, and in June he was going to his high school prom and still talking about his high school prom. These guys that came through what they call repo-depots, replacement depots. I mean they show up; they

have no friends; they don't know anybody. Suddenly, they're brought up to the front line and they introduce them to the sergeant and say okay, this is sergeant so and so, you're now in the second squad or the first squad or what have you. We would go through the guy's barracks bag that he brought up and take anything out of it that he wasn't going to need and that we wanted. Some replacements, we didn't even know their names. They came up and they were dead.

Interviewer: How did you feel about them? Did you feel anything towards them at all?

O'Leary: Oh yeah, I felt very sorry for them. At least we were with friends, guys that we knew and had known, but these poor kids they come up there; I say poor kids, some of them were old. I remember one guy came in and he had like five kids. They were getting, certain draft boards were getting down to the point they were drafting fathers. We had a guy come into our platoon who had been a Mess Sergeant and a cook for a general in Iceland. We had another guy come in who was with the band in Iceland and now he's in the infantry. Something else that I remember and I resent very much, I probably shouldn't tell you this, but one time they brought up a guy who was in chains. They had him in handcuffs and turned him over to us and took the handcuffs off. Basically these were guys who had committed some kind of a crime and had apparently been given the choice to either go into a combat outfit or stay in jail and some of them chose to go into a combat outfit. And I figured, I looked at this guy and I said this son-of-a-bitch is a criminal and he's here. What I wanna know is what in the hell am I doing here?

Interviewer: Criminals and law-abiding citizens are getting the same punishment basically?

O'Leary: Absolutely.

Interviewer: How did that guy turn out? Do you remember?

O'Leary: I don't remember. He wasn't in my squad, might not have even been in my platoon.

Interviewer: So, by the time you became a sergeant, I guess almost all the men under you were (replacements)?

O'Leary: They were all replacements, except the squad leader. He and I were the original men in the squad, in the 2nd Platoon squad. And we both got hit on the same day. So, now a couple of the replacements moved on up.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh. So guys who were replacements just a short time before were now sergeants?

O'Leary: That's right. The guy that had my stripes was a guy named Carl Stuebing, who came in as a replacement.

Interviewer: Do you remember how his name was spelled?

O'Leary: S-T-U-E-B-I-N-G

Interviewer: So, from the time you went to Camp Cleburne and the time you became a sergeant, and so forth; how different were you by then? How had you changed?

O'Leary: I was combat experienced when I became a sergeant and knew enough to try to stay alive and try to keep my men alive.

Interviewer: Had you become more of a leader, would you say?

O'Leary: Well yeah, you do. That's your job. That's your job.

Interviewer: Was that a terrible responsibility?

O'Leary: Not really, because you are doing the best you can for yourself and you're gonna do the best you can for the guys that are with you in a very bad situation.

Interviewer: Do you think that your squad members; were they confident in you and were you confident in them?

O'Leary: Not really. I don't even remember to be honest with you. At that time we probably only had like six men in the squad.

Interviewer: Really?

O'Leary: Yeah. We never did get a full squad of replacements after we went into combat the first day.

Interviewer: And you did strictly infantry-type work?

O'Leary: Yeah.

Interviewer: How was your squad armed?

O'Leary: A squad would have a B.A.R (Browning automatic rifle) man. And the B.A.R.-man would have a couple of ammunition bearers who carried carbines and carried clips for the B.A.R. The other guys carried M-1s.

Interviewer: What did you think of the B.A.R?

O'Leary: The B.A.R was a very good weapon. It was probably the best weapon we had. It was probably the only weapon we had that was

comparable to what the Germans had. It was an automatic weapon and it fired pretty fast and you could carry it.

Interviewer: Did you ever have fire it?

O'Leary: I never did fire a B.A.R. Well, I did fire a B.A.R. just for experience back at Camp Claiborne when they would make us fire all weapons just to fire 'em a couple times, like a .45 and a B.A.R. and so forth. Normally, Lumpkin, when our B.A.R.-man got killed in our squad; Lumpkin said, " Give me that mother, that's what I want is some firepower." So Lumpkin took the B.A.R. Normally when the Germans, the attack we were doing; we were attacking the extension of Siegfried Line. These Germans had been there. They were ensconced there. We were attacking well-fortified positions. While we were right in the middle of a beet field, they were in pillboxes and well-concealed and well-fortified positions.

Interviewer: So, how tough was that taking that portion of the Siegfried Line?

O'Leary: Well, it was kinda tough. As a matter of fact, they brought up another general. He made a name (for himself) in the Korean War or Vietnam War. I think his name was General Church. He taught us how to take pillboxes, after we'd been in combat about a month I guess. Then when we began taking pillboxes the way that they taught us too, we'd take some pillboxes and never have a casualty.

Interviewer: Wow! How did you do it?

O'Leary: Well, it would be a coordinated effort between your heavy weapons platoon that carried mortars and normally the pillboxes would be staggered. Like one forward and two back. The first thing they would do is you'd take the pillbox that you wanted to attack, and then you had the chemical mortars throw phosphorus mortar shells and then make smoke to smoke out the other two pillboxes. Normally, the ones that were in front, we would smoke those out and we would attack the one that was in the back.

Interviewer: By "smoking them out," you mean?

O'Leary: First thing you do is you'd smoke out their vision, so they couldn't see you. Then when we would take a pillbox they would issue us two bandoliers of ammunition, each man. You were instructed to fire all your ammunition at that little hole where the guy had the machine gun. So, you have a company of guys firing as fast as they can with their M-1s at that little hole and the other two pillboxes couldn't help because they couldn't see because they were fogged out with smoke. Then after we got the rear pillbox, it was a matter of going in the other ones from the rear and throwing a grenade into their ventilation system and those guys would

come marching out with their red-cross flag. But these guys, we'd take pillboxes and it was around Christmastime, these guys they had the pillboxes all decorated for Christmas and they had Christmas presents around. I mean, they were there.

Interviewer: Must have been kind of nice to take them over for a while?

O'Leary: Well, no. We didn't get to stay there (laughing). Go around to the other side of the pillbox and dig yourself a hole.

Interviewer: Oh, no. So this was still near Geilenkirchen?

O'Leary: Yeah, it was around Geilenkirchen.

Interviewer: How long were you in that area?

O'Leary: We were in that area, basically from November the 18th to December the 18th.

Interviewer: How many battles or engagements were you in from the time you arrived until December 18th?

O'Leary: I don't know whether you can say battles. I mean how many times did we take pillboxes? We took pillboxes a couple of days, a couple of times. How many times did we get pinned down and get shot up by pillboxes? A couple of times, until we learned how to do it. There were no major battles so to speak. I never met a German face-to-face that I had to kill. These guys were always in foxholes and you'd be shooting your weapon at them and they'd be shooting their weapons back at you. I never was face-to-face with one.

Interviewer: Did you ever hear, during combat, their voices?

O'Leary: Not really, no.

Interviewer: I guess you saw a number of dead people, both allied and German forces and civilians?

O'Leary: Oh yeah. When you go into one of these towns, little towns in that area, the stench of, not so much dead people, but dead horses and cattle was pretty strong. You never forget that smell if you smelled it.

Interviewer: Did you get used to seeing corpses and things like that?

O'Leary: Well, you never; you know they didn't allow corpses to lay around the battlefield very long. If some guys were killed and you continued on and did your thing and dug your hole, then Grave Registrations would come along after you and pick the people up. We never had to do it.

Interviewer: What were the civilians like that you were encountering?

O'Leary: We didn't see any civilians. The town that we were in, in Germany, I never saw a civilian.

Interviewer: Really?

O'Leary: Really. Never saw a civilian.

Interviewer: When you were in Germany, you never saw a civilian?

O'Leary: No. I saw a few civilians in Belgium.

Interviewer: Very interesting. Did the fighting become worse when you got into Germany or were you fighting in Germany from the very start?

O'Leary: We were fighting in Germany from the very start. Afterwards I learned basically what we were doing. The Siegfried Line extension was a line of pillboxes that extended up from the original Siegfried Line, which I guess ended in France, over these staggered pillboxes. Basically that line went north and south. You would think that if they had a line of pillboxes that went in a line running north and south and you were attacking them east and west, that after three days you would be through the pillboxes and on the other side. I discovered that we were attacking them north and south.

Interviewer: Well, that seems strange.

O'Leary: Yeah, it does (laughing).

Interviewer: So instead of just trying to get through, they were trying to knock out all the resistance?

O'Leary: I guess. That was why, no matter where we went, there always seemed to be some pillboxes in front of us.

Interviewer: That doesn't make a lot of sense. I would think you would go through and then come from behind or just ignore them?

O'Leary: That's right. We were attacking the pillboxes north and south, down the line rather than across.

Interviewer: So, by December 18th, how far had the 84th been?

O'Leary: At that point, we were on high ground, probably ten miles from Cologne because we could see the twin towers of the famous Cologne Cathedral from where we were.

Interviewer: Wow.

O'Leary: And then, that was when the Battle of the Bulge happened, and they pulled us back off the line. Took us back to the kitchen, gave us a hot

shower and a change of uniform and put us in trucks and took us down to Belgium.

Interviewer: So, how fast did all that take, pulling you off that line and sending you to Belgium?

O'Leary: Like one day. Two days maybe at the most.

Interviewer: What did they tell you? What did you all know about the situation?

O'Leary: They didn't tell us. We thought that we were being relieved and we were going to have a break. We were back at the kitchen and they were issuing us ammunition and grenades and telling us, "Take plenty of ammunition and plenty grenades because where you're going, that's all you'll have." And we thought, "Bullshit, we're not going anyplace. We're going back for a rest." We didn't know. They didn't have a meeting and say, "Look fellas, the Germans broke through in Belgium and we're going down to Belgium and we're gonna get down there and see if we can't stop them." Nobody ever told us that. And even when we went into this Belgian town we stopped along side of this road and there were some village houses beside the road and the civilians came out and they said "boche - boche," which is the word for German. I said to the other guys, because we didn't know where we were; we'd been in trucks riding all day and we didn't have any idea where we were; and I said, "I don't know where the hell we are, but these people think we're Germans."

Interviewer: What were they really saying? That Germans were nearby?

O'Leary: Well, of course they thought we were Germans. During the Battle of the Bulge there was no well-defined line as there was where we came from, where you had a combat line, a battle-line. In the Battle of the Bulge, because of the differences in the road, they were impassable sometimes. We went into combat in the town of Marche and when they issued an issue of the "Stars and Stripes" they showed that town taken, that is it was within the Bulge. Never happened, they never got Marche. The "Stars and Stripes" said the powers-that-be had written that town off. So it's easy to understand that these people, they didn't know whether we were Germans or not. We could've been Germans or Americans. They were probably surprised when we were Americans.

Interviewer: So, what was the weather like at this time?

O'Leary: Well, you're talking December, and you're talking in the wintertime. We had snow. We had blizzards. We had cold weather. When it was clear, it was very cold, maybe ten degrees and when it wasn't clear it was snowing and a blizzard. There was no shortage of snow.

Interviewer: Did you have good cold weather gear?

O'Leary: Not really. I've already complained about the shoes. I did have my overcoat and kept my overcoat.

Interviewer: Did you get any shoepacks or anything like that?

O'Leary: No.

Interviewer: So, they take you to this place in Belgium and did they send you into combat right away?

O'Leary: We went into this town of Marche and they put us up that night in the school. The next day they marched us out. There was a road between the City of Marche and the City of Hooton. They made us dig in, dig foxholes, along this road. Normally when you dig a foxhole, you might be five yards from the guy next to you in the next foxhole. There were so few of us and the road was so long that we probably had 100 yards between foxholes.

Interviewer: That must have been lonely?

O'Leary: Yeah.

Interviewer: Was that pretty frightening being so separated?

O'Leary: Well, no. You're scared to death anyway, so if you're living and breathing and you're alive that's all right for the moment.

Interviewer: You just think about the now and the present.

O'Leary: That's it. We made foxholes along this Marche-Hooten Road and there were Germans up in the woods. We could hear them and hear their weapons, maybe 100 or 200 yards away from us. They did come down and attack. They didn't happen to attack right where we were, but they attacked a little bit further down the road from where we were to the extent that the company commander called for artillery in on our position. So we had holes, the Americans had holes, and the Germans didn't. So when the shells began falling in, the Germans were jumping in the holes with the Americans.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh. So there was some hand-to-hand struggles going on?

O'Leary: Probably. Most of the Germans were just as happy to have this thing be over at that point.

Interviewer: So you were getting a lot of prisoners?

O'Leary: Oh yeah, a fair amount.

Interviewer: Can you talk about what happened to you at the Battle of the Bulge?

O'Leary: Well, we just went where we were told to go and we tried to attack across this big field one time and we got pinned down and didn't get across. Basically, what you do is at night if you're going to change position you do it at night. Then the next day we were somewhere else. Basically what I was doing; there was a road junction and much of that area was impassable and the German tanks had to stay on the roads. So, they put all the bazookas in the battalion down on this road junction to knock out any German tanks that came along. They gave my platoon, might have been the whole company, we had to go down onto that road junction in the woods as rifle protection for the guys that had the bazookas.

Interviewer: Ah.

O'Leary: So, the next day, the next morning, they started to mortar the area and that was when I got hit.

Interviewer: That was on what day?

O'Leary: January 10th.

Interviewer: So, you went into combat in November?

O'Leary: November 18th.

Interviewer: And then you were hit on January 10th, 1945?

O'Leary: That's correct.

Interviewer: Can you describe your wounding? What happened?

O'Leary: Normally when they're mortaring an area, they "walk the mortar." That is, they fire the mortar and the mortar has a dial beside it where they would turn the dial like five degrees right or left and fire the next mortar and then turn it another five degrees and fire, basically what we call "walking the mortar." So we heard them walking this mortar toward us, where we were. Pretty soon, if you ever hear incoming fire, you hear that noise. So we knew we had one coming in close and we both made a jump for a little hole we had. My friend, the squad leader, headed first and I on top of him.

Interviewer: Lucky him?

O'Leary: The mortar shell went off. I don't know, the piece that went right through me wound up inside of him.

Interviewer: I'll be darned. And that was a piece of wood, is that right?

O'Leary: No, a piece of shrapnel. I got hit by about six or eight pieces. Some of them just left burns on my back where they just stayed there and burned, but one piece had enough force to go all the way through.

Interviewer: What did that feel like?

O'Leary: I remember standing up and saying, "I'm hit" and then I blacked out. The next thing I remember is, I'm on an operating table in a field hospital and a doctor had me on the table, had me sitting up on a table, and they were pulling the shrapnel out of my back and they were sowing up my back. They had already sowed me up on the front-side and my head was hung over. They had three big ugly stitches that they had put on the front side of my chest and I remember when I came to and I saw those stitches and I raised my head up and saying to the doctor, "My God, you mean that thing went all the way through?" They were really half-killing me and so they began shooting me up with more drugs and then I passed out. The next thing, I woke up in a cot.

Interviewer: Where did you go from the field hospital?

O'Leary: We ended up in a little schoolhouse and the little town or city called Huy. I've never seen it on the map, but that was the name of the town. Normally, when you're wounded you spend a matter of hours in a field hospital or something like that. They didn't really think I was going to make it and they didn't want to waste the transportation by putting me on transportation to take me back and then have me die then. So they figured, "Why don't we just let him die on this side." And I didn't die, that's all.

Interviewer: I'm glad you didn't fulfill their expectations.

O'Leary: I was there, I must have been in that little hospital maybe ten-twelve days. When normally you only spend a matter of hours in that type of collection hospital.

Interviewer: I assume they were treating you though, during that time.

O'Leary: Not really. They had me sewed up in the front and they had me sewed up in back, but I was still bleeding internally. About every day or two my temperature would go up and I would become delirious. They had a big needle, about the size of a crochet needle, and they would put that needle through my chest wall and they would suck out the blood from my chest and when they would do that then my temperature would go down and then I would be all right for a day or two. And in a couple days, they would do their thing again. So finally, they sent me to a hospital in Paris called the 7th General, where they did an operation on me called a decortication. I don't know exactly what that means, but they did a decortication. After this operation, I developed a condition known as empyema, which basically means "pus inside the chest." Normally when

they do an operation like that, they put tubes in and normally the fluids in your chest drain out and let your chest heal but when you develop; it's a bacteria, I think bacilluspheridan they called it the green thing, and the fluid is all thick and it won't flow out of these tubes they have in. So then they go back in and rip out the stitches that they put in and put a tube directly where the pus is forming. I had to carry that tube for probably six months.

Interviewer: So it was touch and go there?

O'Leary: Well, I was alive, that was the main thing. Then I went back and I was in two hospitals in England. They thought originally when I was in Paris they were going to, what they call "ZI me," which means "zone of the interior" which meant I was coming back to the states, but instead they took me to the British Isles. So I was in two hospitals in England until May. I can't tell you how long I was in the hospital in Paris. I can't tell you how long I was in the hospital in England. In May, we went up to Edinbourough and we caught a plane out of Preswick and I landed in the states actually on VE Day, May the 7th. Landed at Mitchell Field, New York.

Interviewer: Not a bad time to come back to the states?

O'Leary: No.

Interviewer: People were happy?

O'Leary: They had cameramen watching them unload us off the plane.

Interviewer: Did it have anything to do with you being the MC for the Army Hour?

O'Leary: No, it didn't have anything to do with that.

Interviewer: Now let me make sure I've asked some of the standard questions here. Who were you closest to during the war, either at Camp Cleburne or ASTP, Europe?

O'Leary: You mean, friends by name?

Interviewer: Yes.

O'Leary: Not anybody, really. We had some good friends. There was a guy by the name of Dil Saver who got killed. He came from Mattoon, Illinois. Whenever I think about the fact that they put the guys with the highest IQ's on the front lines, I'm most angry about a guy like Dil Saver. He was a very bright young man. His father was district attorney. And he had a bright future, a man who could have been president or who knows what and wound up with a sniper bullet through his head. In a sugar beet field in Germany.

Interviewer: You mentioned snipers several times. Did ya'll ever catch any of these snipers? If so, how did you treat them?

O'Leary: Yes. We killed them. I never shot one personally, but normally we would get one….As a matter of fact, as we were withdrawing from this position, it was very windy day and this was a whole field full of sugar beets. Sugar beets grow just a little under the surface of the ground and it had been raining for three days. So running across a field full of sugar beets is like running across a field full of big ball bearings. No matter where you land on the sugar beets, your feet are going to come out (from under you). In the mean time, we've got this guy firing at us with a rifle from this building in back and the only thing was that it was so windy it was blowing a gale. I'm sure that guy, when he killed Dil Saver there was no wind blowing and he had a chance to .. Dil Saver was in one position. When we were running across that field he didn't hit any of us. It would have been impossible with the wind blowing. When you see these guys in the movies shooting people that are moving; that's the movies, believe me.

Interviewer: It was very entertaining, at least.

O'Leary: That's the movies. That ain't real life. You give a rifle and give a guy one hundred yards and tell one guy to run around a hundred yards with the other guy with the rifle, you'll never hit him, believe me. If you did it would be the miracle of the century.

Interviewer: Very interesting. Do you have any special recollections about friends or buddies?

O'Leary: Not really. Dil Saver and I were close friends. But you know, when you are in combat and you get pinned down, you don't get to dig a hole with the guy that you are friendly with. You get to dig a hole with the guy beside you. Or you could dig a hole by yourself. As a matter of fact, I didn't realize it was him. I didn't recognize his face. He still had his helmet on and they guy didn't want to tell me.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel when you think about it?

O'Leary: Sad. It's sad. You didn't want to see anyone get killed. I remember my platoon sergeant. I don't know why but he took a liking to me and he was trying to take a little extra care of me. The night before we went into combat, his name was Clemente. And the next day he was dead. He and I were never close in any way except I don't know why, they had some pillboxes and the officers and the non-comms were in the pillboxes and they were having a briefing by the British tankers. We were dug in outside of this pillbox, Clemente came and got me and said, "Come in the pillbox and make yourself small." The day before I went into combat, I was in the pillbox because of Clemente. And I don't know why. We were not close; we were not friendly at any point. And the platoon sergeant

basically has 40 men in the platoon and it's not like you're platoon leader, I mean your squad leader that you deal with a lot, you just don't deal very much with your platoon sergeant. I didn't have any real or very close friends.

Interviewer: Do you feel that might have been a form of self-protection?

O'Leary: Probably. Psychologically you don't want to get too close to anybody. Yeah, that's probably part of it. No matter how many people are around you, when the shells are coming in and they are shooting at you, you are alone.

Interviewer: Do you have any interesting stories that you haven't told already? Funny or frightening or bizarre? Anything that stands out in your memory?

O'Leary: No, not really, except the one that I liked to tell about going through the infiltration course when we were singing and wouldn't stop. Dave Lapaws would give us a little bit of grief.

Interviewer: Do you remember what song you were singing?

O'Leary: No, but we had a pretty big repertoire of all the old standards. We could sing for hours. Some of us would start a song and others would join in. I don't know, but probably some of the guys got killed because after hearing me sing, they figured nothing could be worse than that.

Interviewer: Got to be prepared for combat. Did you get a chance to write after you got to Europe?

O'Leary: Very little. As a matter of fact, when I was in camp and when I was in college and when I was in the anti-aircraft, I wrote to my mother every day. Wrote a letter every day. But when you are in combat, you don't have any time to write letters and you are lucky if you receive a little mail.

Interviewer: So you did get some letters, care packages?

O'Leary: Yes, got a little mail and some packages. My mother sent me some wool socks.

Interviewer: Was that what you were most craving?

O'Leary: She had knitted these socks and I'm sure that when she found out I was in Northern Europe she figured they would be warm. And they were.

Interviewer: Did you collect any souvenirs while you were over there?

O'Leary: No, not really. When you are in the infantry, the only thing you got is what you are carrying. A guy that has a tank or a tank destroyer or a truck, he can collect stuff and he can put it there and he can carry it with him. I did pick up a German P38 revolver on the battlefield. I had that and when I was wounded, I had it on my body and they, of course, unloaded it and put it in a little muslin white unbleached bag and put it on my litter and some place during the time I was being transferred with that litter, somebody decided they wanted that pistol more than me. I just hope they have a good story for where they got it.

Interviewer: Pretty cowardly taking it from a wounded man.

O'Leary: It really wasn't all that important to me anyway. I mean was it a trophy? Yeah. Was I upset? Not really. I never really cared that much, I never have owned a handgun and have no desire to own one anyway.

Interviewer: Do you know what the concerns were of your family and friends back in the states during this time.

O'Leary: Of course, my mother had a double problem because I was on the ground in the infantry and my brother was a pilot in a B24 flying missions over Germany.

Interviewer: Both very hazardous. Would you have traded places with your brother if you could have?

O'Leary: I don't know.

Interviewer: Or someone else in the B24?

O'Leary: At least I used to tell him, after we got home together, of course he was an officer and I wasn't and after we got home we used to argue about who won the war. At least while you were living you were warm and dry.

Interviewer: Got to go home to a nice cot or something.

O'Leary: That's right, but he had a lot of people shot down too, including a guy he went to high school with, was in his squadron and the guy got shot down and they counted the parachutes when they come out and Mrs. Patcheider was not a close neighbor but lived in the same section of the city and I went to high school with him. He was in my class and my brother knew him. So my brother wrote a letter, got the letter home for my mother to talk to Mrs. Patcheider and tell her that he did get out of the plane.

Interviewer: That was nice.

O'Leary: Tell her that he did get out of the plane and he did survive.

Interviewer: Oh, wonderful. Let me change the side of the tape. How are you doing on time? Do you need to get away for anything?

O'Leary: No, I'm fine.

Interviewer: Can you tell me, what did you miss most during this time that you were in combat?

O'Leary: I don't know how to answer that.

Interviewer: Anything that you craved? Food, shower, soft bed?

O'Leary: Of course, you don't get any change of clothes. Fortunately, where we were in that section of Germany and Holland was a coal-mining section and on a couple of occasions they would take us off line and they would take us to the coalmines. The coalmines had nice hot showers. We would go and they would give us clean uniforms and boy, we would get a really nice hot showers like the portable showers the army might set up for you where the water was hot and the place was warm. That was something I really enjoyed. But food wise, we ate K-rations. I could tell a couple of jokes: one thing I know for sure is the guy who put 3 pieces of toilet paper in a k-ration box never had dysentery in the middle of an artillery barrage. And they guy who said the old expression 'shit in your hat' didn't know that he really wasn't kidding.

Interviewer: Nowhere else to go? You didn't want to fill up your foxhole, I guess? You do what you have to do.

O'Leary: That's right

Interviewer: Did you have much contact with POWs?

O'Leary: No. The only contact I had with POWs was when I was coming back; they had POWs in England that would carry you around on your litter if you had to go to x-ray or something like that. I remember one guy, we had a POW, and he had a .45. He never put that .45 in the holster. If you had a couple of POWs pick up your litter they knew if they dropped you that was the last thing they were ever going to drop. They were really careful. Now and then I've heard that couldn't put these prisoners that we had in Guantanamo in tents. Do you know what kind of hospitals I was in England? In a tent.

Interviewer: You must have done something very bad. You were being punished.

O'Leary: You know, if you were really trying to punish any body, give them a couple of months in the infantry in Belgium.

Interviewer: That would be too cruel, wouldn't it? Cruel and unusual punishment. You mentioned you had contact with the British? What were your impressions of them and any other allied?

O'Leary: Well, the British were excellent soldiers. I remember listening to the briefing during that night I was in the pillbox where he was briefing our company officers and they had aerial photographs, what they call oblique photographs, not high altitude, but taken from piper cubs or something like that, of that area. I remember him and his precise language, he said (in English accent), "here you have two men in a hole here with a machine gun and we are going to go into combat at 7 o'clock and at 7:02 they will be dead. And over here we have 3 men in a hole and at 7:05 they'll be dead." They had these, what they call 14 pounders. They had American Sherman tanks but the guns they had on them was a little short barrel cannon. I remember before we went into combat, before we actually started out across the area where we're going, these tankers, and they had a big artillery barrage, they claimed, I don't know – they were trying to make us feel better I guess. That the most artillery battalions were firing on that area that had ever fired on the same similar area before. At any rate, the tankers would stand off a little ways off, maybe 100-200 yards from the pillbox and they would fire this 14 lb cannon right at the pillbox. Now the pillboxes are steel, the tops. I don't know if you've ever seen a shell or not. If you are standing directly behind an artillery shell, you can see it when it leaves the cannon. It's flight, you can see it. And these guys were firing these 14 pounders at this pillbox and they would ring it like a bell and the shell would go ricocheting and go "*ping."* I mean if anyone was inside that pillbox, would probably need a hearing aid today if they are still around. I remember that very well. But the British and the British tankers were, all our tanks were British, and I remember one time there was a tank there and the British brought up an 88 and they fired one time at this tank with the 88 and took the antenna off of the tank. And this Brit, he's got his head up in this tank and boom the next one goes right into the tank, I don't know how many escape hatches they have and how many men are in a tank, maybe five, and these guys come running out of this tank from all directions. Went running back across the battlefield.

Interviewer: They were Germans?

O'Leary: They were Americans.

Interviewer: Oh, American?

O'Leary: I mean they were British tankers.

Interviewer: Oh I see, who had gotten hit and fled the tank.

O'Leary: But the British were very good soldiers and very dependable people.

Interviewer: Do you think they had a high regard for the 84th?

O'Leary: I don't really know. There's a good reason that any good soldier looking at what we were doing would have to think we were crazy. It reminds me, I used to have a brother-in-law that used to like to play chess. Have you ever played chess?

Interviewer: Yes.

O'Leary: Okay, then you know you have all the various moves. My daughter got a chess set and she was trying to teach me to play chess. I learned enough about where the moves were. My brother-in-law used to love to play chess. So when we would be together and he would ask me to play chess with him and I would tell him, "Jack, I can't play chess." And he would say, "Come on, come on, play with me." So we'd start playing chess and pretty soon he would start scratching his head and he'd be looking at the board and he'd say, "You know, I can't figure out what the hell you're trying to do." And I said, "The reason you can't figure out what the hell I'm trying to do; I don't know have any idea in the world what I'm trying to do." And that I think was basically the way our commanders were in some instances. They didn't have any idea in the world what they were doing.

One day we walked right up on the German position. When we found out where we were, we had a major who was the battalion commander who was like, "Hey, we're attacking," (both laughing). To me it was just ridiculous. That's why we had the Germans so confused. They couldn't possibly have figured out what the hell we were trying to because we didn't have any idea what we were doing. I mean our powers-that-be didn't seem to have any idea.

Interviewer: And yet I've heard that the 84th was a pretty well-regarded division, at least by the Americans.

O'Leary: Well, I think what we did, we did pretty good. Notwithstanding everything I said, that the people who were living and the people that stayed with the 84th and down in the Battle of the Bulge. We did a very good job in the Battle of the Bulge. And then later on when they went back up in the run for Berlin. The 84th Division took, one day, I think 150,000 prisoners, in one day. What they had done is they had reached the, I think, Oder River and the Germans were on the other side of the Oder river and the Russians were bearing down on the Germans and the Germans didn't want to surrender to the Russians and they were swimming and boating and anyway they could do to get across that river to surrender to the 84th. So, as I say, that one-day I think the 84th took 150,000 prisoners.

Interviewer: That's amazing.

O'Leary: Just to give you another couple pieces of information about the 84th you wouldn't have known. Henry Kissinger was in the 84th Division.

Interviewer: I didn't know that. I knew that he was in World War II.

O'Leary: He was in the 84th Division.

Interviewer: Didn't he run a German town after the war or something like that?

O'Leary: I don't know. He started out as a jeep driver and when they found out he was very conversant in German, then they took him to division headquarters. Who was the guy, Malcolm Forbes, was in the 84th.

Interviewer: Really?

O'Leary: And every year now when we have a division reunion, Malcolm Forbes' son sends a check for about $10,000 to pay for some of the meals.

Interviewer: Isn't that nice? He can afford it too, but that's awfully kind of him.

How did you hear that the war over in Europe? Was it as you got off the plane?

O'Leary: As I got off the plane, that's what they were celebrating. I was ambulatory at the time with this tube in my back. For transportation, they made me get on a litter, which meant that when we got on the plane and off the plane they had to carry me on and off on the litter. Once they got the litter on the ground then I could get off and walk around, but they still wouldn't – I had some dental work that needed to be done. I had lost a tooth and so a dentist said he would fix it. So they didn't let me go into New York on VE-Day, but some of the people that got off the plane and were at Mitchell Field got to go into New York, but I didn't get to go.

Interviewer: That must have been a lot of fun.

O'Leary: Yeah.

Interviewer: When did you go on the Army Hour? How did that happen?

O'Leary: Well, they had, in the hospital, a program called the reconditioning program. I was at Walter Reed at the time. They kept your clothes in a separate building and you wore like a hospital jumpsuit or a leisure suit, you might call it or sweat suit, was what you wore. When you went on pass, you'd have to go down and show the pass and then they'd give you your uniform. You had a locker and once you come back you'd have to take off your uniform down there and go in. At any rate, they had, for patients that were ambulatory, they had a thing called a reconditioning program where you were supposed to go to four hours of class each day.

And you could choose from whatever classes they had. Well, three of the classes you chose and one was mandatory in the big auditorium, everybody had to go to that one place. In earlier broadcasts of the Army Hour, they were doing a spot on the reconditioning program. One of the classes on the reconditioning program supposedly was a discussion group. In the meantime, I was involved as a patient, in the broadcasting system at Walter Reed, where I would do a broadcast every morning over the hospital network at Walter Reed. So, I guess because of that, they said, "We're gonna put this section together. We're gonna put you and about three or four guys in a room and we're gonna ask you some questions. Just let you discuss this stuff as much as you want. Then they'll take maybe, you know, twenty minutes of discussion and make like thirty seconds or a minute, a minute and a half, to put on this tape." So I did that section for them and taped it. Then maybe three or four weeks later, I got a call from the public relations officer at Walter Reed. His name was Dwyer. He said, "Sergeant O'Leary, do I know you?" I said, "I don't think so and do I know you?" He said, "I don't think so. Well, I'd like for you to come down to my office today and I'd like to meet you." So I said, "Okay."

So at the time, I was at an extension of Walter Reed in Forest Glen, Maryland. They had a convalescent center separate from the main hospital and they had buses running back and forth. So I went to see the PR officer. He said, "I don't know what this is all about, but we have a request from NBC and they want you to go to New York and MC the last broadcast of the Army Hour." Apparently what they had done is they basically took my voice off of this tape and decided that I had a voice of broadcast quality and that's why they put me up there.

Then after he found out what I was doing, then I did a Martin Rally and a theater up in Baltimore selling bonds from the stage of a theater. I also did several talks to some civic and religious – I think I did a talk to a Holy Name Society in a church in Washington and stuff like that. I was doing some work out of the public relations office then, but I was just a patient. He said maybe I could stay in and work with him. I said no way, when it's ready for me to go home, I'm gone.

Interviewer: You weren't interested in a public relations career with the Army?

O'Leary: Well, as a matter of fact, I had thought about that because basically I was working at the hospital with a lady who had been in radio broadcasting and she was trying to encourage me except that at the time I had a really heavy Boston accent. I still have some of it.

Interviewer: It's not that noticeable to me.

O'Leary: Not so much now, but at that time if you hear that Army Hour tape, you hear that Boston accent. At any rate, when I was getting ready to

come out, I was dating a girl in Washington whom I later married, so I wasn't all that anxious to come home because this convalescence center was a nice living. They had good food there and I had a pass every day and could come and go. Wasn't a bad life at all and I was going with this lady and I could see a lot of her.

Interviewer: When was this?

O'Leary: This was in November of '45. At any rate, when it was time for me to get discharged, then I had to go home. Then we got back together later on. I knew my way around Washington pretty well. It was an ideal place because we had all kinds of celebrities coming through there.

Interviewer: Do you remember some of them?

O'Leary: Bing Crosby, Katherine Hepburn. I had seen all of these people because part of my job every day when I went on the air was to tout whatever program was on the main building that day and to tout what was going to be coming up in the next two or three days, a week. We had Eleanor Roosevelt. We had General Bradley. All kinds of people would come through there. If they were in Washington, they would make it a point to get to Walter Reed.

One of the interesting things that happened – the lady who owned the Hope Diamond was a woman by the name of Evelyn Walsh McClain. She owned the Washington Post. At that time, she supposedly was the richest woman in the world and she had a thing for the patients at Walter Reed and she had a big, beautiful home. Every Saturday night she had a party at her home for the patients at Walter Reed. The Red Cross, I befriended the Red Cross girls, they were the ones that had these invitations. I went once and took my girlfriend – once for dinner. But then they had after dinner invitations. Every Saturday afternoon about four o'clock I'd go by the Red Cross and I'd say, "Do you still have any after dinner invitations?" And if they did, I'd grab the after dinner invitation because you go out there – I didn't drink very much then - they had free booze and a band. You're rubbing shoulders with Bradley and Congressmen. They all would show up at Evelyn Walsh McClain's with the Hope Diamond.

Interviewer: How exciting.

O'Leary: I got three photographs of me. They would take a photograph in the ballroom every time we were there. I have three photographs showing me and my girlfriend and – she would have the girls wearing the Hope Diamond. She was a very profane woman. She really was. I mean, she was the first woman that I heard use the F-word.

Interviewer: Was that shocking to you at the time?

O'Leary: At the time, yeah. We're talking 1945. For a woman to use that word and at a dinner table. She used to say about the Hope Diamond – she swore that the stones that she had when she had these parties. She had one guy who was like the security guy who kept track of these stones because the girls all wanted to try on this ring and that ring and she'd hand the Hope Diamond to a girl and say, "You know, they say the damn thing is cursed but I had the Pope bless it so I must be all right now if you want to put it on but if not, okay," (both laughing).

So that was an interesting experience. It was a very interesting time to be in Washington where I was and to be at that time healthy enough to be able to enjoy what was going on.

Interviewer: Did you ever have any fears at all that you might have to go fight in the Pacific?

O'Leary: Not really. Not really. I knew by the time they got this tube out, which was in probably October of that year and then it took awhile for the – they thought maybe they would have to do plastic surgery to heal my back because when you put a tube like that and you have fluid running down. It's a horrible looking thing, the hole there. They didn't know whether I'd be able to close it up or not, but I got it closed without any plastic surgery. I was missing some ribs and so forth. I knew that I was all through.

Interviewer: Oh boy. How did you feel when you heard about the atomic bombs being dropped on Japan?

O'Leary: Well, I don't really remember very much about that to be perfectly honest with you. I remember VJ-Day very well, but in relationship to the atomic bomb, I don't really have any big memory of it really. But I mean we knew that the war was gonna soon be over. I don't recall that I had any tremendous feelings about it one-way or the other.

Interviewer: What about when you saw your first family member after getting back, do you remember anything about that?

O'Leary: Well, yeah. My parents. When I got into New York I called my parents and told them not to come to New York. That I didn't know where I was gonna be, but I thought I was gonna be in Washington. As soon as I got to Washington, I called them and they came down to Washington to see me. I remember my father, he was actually old enough to be my grandfather, but one of the first things he did when we were at Walter Reed was he took me aside and said, "Jack, if I were you, I just wouldn't mention that you got hit in the back" (both laughing). The only people that get hit in the back are the people who are running away.

Interviewer: Or the cowards who are running away.

O'Leary: Of course he didn't know anything about it.

Interviewer: This would have gone through your front right and then through your back. Not that it mattered when you're hunkered down in a foxhole.

O'Leary: (Both laughing) "I wouldn't mention getting hit in the back." (More laughing)

Interviewer: That's funny.

O'Leary: But it was kind of sad at Walter Reed because they would gather like-patients in one hospital. Walter Reed was an orthopedic center as well as a thoracic center for chest patients, which meant that when I would go over like to the Red Cross, even when my parents were there. They had a big solarium where parents could come and visit their boys and so forth and so on. Everybody there either obviously was missing one limb or two, in wheelchairs. The other half of the group, like us, were walking around like we didn't have anything the matter with us. I remember the way that when some of these parents would be seeing their son for the first time in a wheelchair with a leg missing or what have you and then I would be there in the solarium and I remember they'd look at me with a kind of funny expression on their face, much as to say, "Why is my son in this chair instead of you and what the hell are doing here." You know, that type of thing. It was just one of those things.

I did become quite friendly with a double amputee who was there at the time. He ultimately had two legs gone above the knee. That's tough. That's tough. A lot of these guys were the tankers. They were the guys in the turret of the tank. When a German shell would come in and hit the seam where the turret connected to the rest of the tank, and when that shell would come in and blow a hole, that thing would take off their legs. So most of the guys that were double amputees, a lot of them that were double amputees, were guys who were in the tank turrets at the time and lost both of their legs.

Interviewer: I never did ask you, were you ever in any river crossings in Europe?

O'Leary: No, they crossed the Roer after I was already wounded and out of there. But yeah, the 84th did have a river crossing at the Roer River, but I wasn't there then.

Interviewer: Where were you wounded again?

O'Leary: I was wounded in Belgium. The closest town was Laroche, Belgium. The day that I was wounded, we were biting the tip off of the Bulge. Patton was coming up from the south and we were going down from the north and the day that I got wounded, we had a patrol from the

84th and a patrol from Patton met in the town of Laroche, which meant that we had bitten off the end of the Bulge.

Interviewer: That must have been a nice moment?

O'Leary: Yes, but as I say, that happened that day that I was hit. So I wasn't around to enjoy it, but I knew it was going to happen that day.

Interviewer: So the 84th was part of the Ninth Army?

O'Leary: Yes, in the north.

Interviewer: Was the Ninth Army, was that under Montgomery's command?

O'Leary: No, General Simpson was the American general who was in charge of the Ninth Army. They were on the very left flank of the American forces and the British were north of us.

Interviewer: Gosh, I can't think of much else to ask you Mr. O'Leary.

O'Leary: When and if you get this – by the way, did you email my friend with the 84th?

Interviewer: Oh no, about my dad and all that?

O'Leary: Lila.

Interviewer: No, no.

O'Leary: Well, if you email Lila and ask her for some information and prices. She'll sell you a …

Interviewer: Oh, the Unit history.

O'Leary: A Division history.

Interviewer: Oh, I'd like that.

O'Leary: And the division history has maps in it basically and has a complete history of the division and maps showing where they were.

Interviewer: This is the official unit history? I remember my dad had a tattered old copy of that if that's the one I'm thinking about.

O'Leary: Well, the one he might have had might have been one just for his unit because I have two books. One is for the 334th Infantry Regiment which is a group of anecdotes where each company in the regiment wrote an anecdote about each battle and a few photographs of men that were taken after the combat and some combat pictures are in there too. But the division history is a lot broader history and has pictures and maps in it.

There is also a tape recording, which you can buy, I think the name of it is "Tried by Fire" and basically it's a tape I think of mainly the Ninth Army, but a lot of it is of the 84th Division and these were made by official cameramen.

Interviewer: Oh.

O'Leary: By the War Department I guess. I'm sure I have one of those tapes here, but I'm sure you would find both the history and the tape very interesting.

Interviewer: Has the 84th already had it's 60th?

O'Leary: No, that reunion is going to be in, as I told you, in Springfield, Illinois in August. Let's see if I can remember the exact dates. Late in August, probably the 25th, 26th, 27th, 28th; somewhere in that range there. I may go to that, I haven't decided yet. The reason why I haven't decided is because we are going to be going to Europe, July the 27th, and we're going to be gone for about twenty days. So, we'll be back maybe around the 17th or 18th of August and I'm not sure that I wanna make another trip but I probably will and I probably will fly. You can get basically a pretty straight flight. Well, from here, normally you go to St. Louis and then get a flight into Springfield, Illinois. And I may go on that and if I do and you would be interested, we could go together and share a room.

Interviewer: Oh, my. Well that would be incredible.

O'Leary: Well, you can think about it.

Interviewer: I will, I will. August. Wow, that would be something else. Maybe someone might know my Dad, huh?

O'Leary: You never can tell. Although, now the ranks are getting very thin and plus the fact that probably only maybe originally maybe only twenty percent of the men who were eligible to belong to the association ever joined. Quite possibly, your father never joined the association.

Interviewer: I got a feeling he didn't really reminisce much.

O'Leary: It was not unusual for men to come home and want to completely forget the whole damn mess and not have anything to do with anything that concerned (the war). That was not an unusual reaction. I didn't even know the organization existed until maybe ten years ago or twelve years ago, something like that. When I happened to see an item in the – I belonged to the DAV and in the DAV Magazine I saw an item about the 84th having a division reunion and it had a phone number in there and I called the guy and he asked, "Don't you belong?" And I said no.

As a matter of fact, I live in the same condominium with a guy who was in A Company of the 334th – a neighbor of mine – and one morning I was walking. Florida doesn't have a front license plate and so I had an 84th license plate on the front of the car. This guy, I'd seen him walking almost every morning because I walk every morning and this man stopped me and said, "Are you the guy with the 84th plate?" And I said "Yeah". He said, "I was in the 84th." I said, "You were?" "Yeah, what regiment?" The 334th.

I said, "Well, I was in the 334th too. What company?" "Company A." I said, "Well I was in Company E." This guy had never joined the association and I got him to join the association and he's been to two or three reunions and rekindled some of his relationships with some people because he was a guy that came through the war and hadn't got hit. And rekindled some of his relationships. The guys who were still with their divisions at the end had a chance to form more friendships with the guys than guys like me. See, once I left, they didn't know where I lived or whatever and I didn't even know the association existed, but those guys that were still with their division at the end were given a chance to join the association. I was at a reunion some years ago where one man had been to every reunion.

Interviewer: Wow.

O'Leary: But I may go up there to the 60th and my companion, the lady I live with has shown not much interest in going and I think she might be bored to death if she did go to be perfectly honest with you.

Interviewer: Well, I'm interested in that. I'll have to see what's going on at that time, as we get closer to that time. I'll keep your number and everything. I think that would be very interesting.

O'Leary: Well, I think you would find it interesting, although I think they have; every year they used to set up, they had one a big room for all the archives, pictures and newspaper articles and everything about the 84th. I think they have since given all that material to some other museum someplace, so they wouldn't have that. But if they still had some of that, you would find it very interesting. You could spend three days doing nothing but just going through this information, but they would be more than happy to welcome you if you would like to go.

Interviewer: Well, that sounds very, very nice. Well, Mr. O'Leary, is there anything else that you would like to add or that I should have asked you?

O'Leary: I don't think so. I've probably talked too much already (laughing).

Interviewer: Well, it's just been fascinating.

O'Leary: Well, it's not a story of a big hero or anything like that, but I was there.

Interviewer: Oh, I don't think I ever asked you, what kind of medals did you get? You must have gotten a Purple Heart obviously.

O'Leary: Well, I have a Purple Heart and then after I was discharged…I think for every combat infantrymen they gave a Bronze Star, so I have a Bronze Star too. I'm sure your father, I don't know if your father had a Combat Infantry Badge or not.

Interviewer: I don't know.

O'Leary: If he had a Combat Infantry Badge, if you get a copy of his discharge, it would tell you. If he had a Combat Infantry Badge, the chances are he would have been awarded a Bronze Star. If he didn't, I don't think he would have been awarded a Bronze Star.

The Bronze Star was a medal of rank. I don't know if you know this but medals have a ranking. The ranking of the Bronze Star was the same ranking as the Air Medal and any man who flew a combat mission over enemy territory was awarded an Air Medal. And then every five missions thereafter he was awarded an Oak Leaf Cluster to his Air Medal. Some guys like my brother had an Air Medal with like three Oak Leaf Clusters on it.

At any rate, after the war, apparently somebody said, "Look, any airman who flew a combat mission over there was given the Air Medal. I think we should give every combat infantryman the Bronze Star." So they did. So there's nothing really different, I mean I didn't do any specific act to get the Bronze Star.

Interviewer: Well, I'm sure you richly deserved it.

O'Leary: Well, if you were there you did.

Interviewer: Well, that's good enough in my book. Is there anything else Mr. O'Leary?

O'Leary: I don't think so. You keep my number and if there's something needed, you can get back to me. If you are interested in this reunion after you think about it, get back to me because we have to make the reservations. I mean we have plenty of time between now and August, but there are a couple hotels I think that are running I think a hundred dollars a night whether a single or double. The airfield, I think, is about two hundred and fifty bucks.

Interviewer: That's not too bad. It was very enjoyable talking to you.

O'Leary: Well, I talked too much I'm sure. You probably know more than you need to know.

Interviewer: No, never.

O'Leary: Well, I always had a reputation. Years ago, I was basically the brains of a fairly large life insurance office and there used to be a saying, "Don't ask Jack O'Leary what time it is, cause if you ask what time it is he'll tell you how to make a watch."

Interviewer: I'm sure it's an exaggeration.

O'Leary: At any rate Paul, I'm glad you called and I hope that whatever you do with this material that you found it useful and interesting.

Interviewer: I certainly do.

O'Leary: Ok.

Interviewer: You take care sir.

O'Leary: Good luck to you.

Interviewer: Talk to you later.

O'Leary: Bye-bye.

Interviewer: Bye-bye.