

BOB LANDES

Amthor: This is a portion of the *Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri in the 1940s* program. The Nodaway County Historical Society is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities Council and with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Today is February 4, 2009, and we are here today at T J's Café, in King City, Missouri, in Gentry County. Interviewer today is Joni Amthor, and assisting is Margaret Kelley, and we are here to interview Bob Landes, and he was born on July 17, 1925. He lived during the 1940s, he served in World War II, his branch of service was in the Army, and the highest rank achieved was Private First Class.

Amthor: Bob, tell us a little bit about your background, tell us about your parents, their occupation, where and when you were born and just a little bit about what life was like in 1940.

Landes: I was born on a farm; my parents were farmers. There were eight of us children: six boys and two girls. Now that was a Ridgeway address, but I went to high school in Bethany, and that was where I graduated from high school was there. No college. I went direct out of high school to the Army in 1943.

Amthor: Did any of your brothers or sisters go to the war as well?

Landes: Yes, I had two brothers that served in World War II, older than me.

Amthor: In what branches were they in?

Landes: My oldest brother was in the Army. The next brother was in the Navy.

Amthor: Can you tell us about the propaganda at that time? What the United States was saying about the war in Europe or China?

Landes: You mean like about the conditions, or something like that?

Amthor: The news accounts – what they were saying about the war; maybe you heard things on the radio, how the war was progressing.

Landes: Well, I saw some clips at the theatres – the movie theatres; they showed newsreel clips about how the war was going on. When it first started out, it didn't look very good, what we saw. Later on, it got better, naturally.

Amthor: Now where were you on the day that Pearl Harbor was attacked? What were you doing?

Landes: The first news that we got, I was at church that morning. That's where we got the first news about the attack.

Amthor: Now you said – where you enlisted or where you drafted?

Landes: I was drafted.

Amthor: Could you tell us a little bit about your basic training camp, and any memories that you have, or where you were stationed; something about your training?

Landes: The camp that I was in was called Camp Walters, it was in Texas, located approximately fifty miles west of Dallas/Fort Worth; and it was a temporary camp. It wasn't a fort by no means but it was set up for basic training, strictly. It was kind of in a sandy area, and it seemed like that the sand would blow in your face when it was raining [laughter]. Of course, being a country boy, and taking orders from the sergeants, I think I would have jumped through fire for them, because they had me buffaloed, so to speak. I really enjoyed it, I enjoyed the basic training.

Amthor: Was that the only place you were stationed for training?

Landes: No, I left there and went to Fort Benning, Georgia, and took parachute training, and I qualified as a parachutist. I made five day jumps, and one night jump to qualify.

Amthor: What kind of experience is that jumping out of planes?

Landes: I never really got adapted to that. The first time I went up the jump sergeant – they didn't have a door on the plane, because they used it strictly for jumping. The jump sergeant stuck his head out the door and we wasn't probably going 120 miles a hour, and the wind curled his face up like this, and I wonder "What am I doing up here?" But I never did get over the thrill of jumping, I'll tell you for sure. I made a – I made, in my time, 18 jumps. One combat – all the rest of them were practice jumps.

Amthor: Did you have any other type of specialized training?

Landes: Well, when I got overseas; I went over as a replacement, and I joined a division that was already there in England. We were standing in line according to our spec numbers – now I don't know if you remember the spec numbers, but this told you what you were qualified as. In my case, I was qualified as an automatic rifleman, which I wasn't too proud of, so I'm standing in line, and here's another line standing right next to me. I asked those guys what line they were in, and they said they were service people, like truck drivers and things like that. You know what I did? I just stepped over in their line, and I ended up a truck driver. I took the test, and qualified. I had driven a truck back home some, and so I kind of got away from that automatic rifle business.

Amthor: Can you tell us about other duties, maybe how the barracks were in the training facilities, or the food?

Landes: Yes, as far as the food was concerned, our mess sergeant was a regular Army guy; he'd been in there a long time. We really had pretty good food and they served it family style: you went in and sat down, and they gave the order to start eating, and everything was there in front of

you, which was a little bit different, as far as Army was concerned. I'll continue this story a little bit. When I finished my training, I still had some dental work to be done, so I was a hold over. Well, you know, dental work had about an hour every day, so I had free time, so they put me on KP. So one day the sergeant said "What did you do that you down here every day on KP?" I told him. He said, "I can take care of that." So he made me head table waiter. All I had to do was walk down through there and just point at a table, if there was an empty bowl, I'd tell the servers, "Fill the bowl." So that was a snap. Old Sergeant Barney, he took care of me.

Amthor: It's good to know those people in high places.

Landes: Absolutely. So after that I went to Fort Benning, after they got my teeth done.

Amthor: Okay, how did you adapt to those duties that you were doing.

Landes: KP wasn't too much fun, I didn't think, until I got to be head table waiter. I'll never forget the first time we carried a rifle, and did a hike. After we went – I'd say two or three months, I thought this rifle weighed a ton, but actually it only weighed 7 or 8 pounds. You weren't adapted to carrying anything any length of time. Of course, we could do anything we wanted to with it, as long as we didn't drop it. We could put it on either shoulder, and move it around, which we did. But it got pretty heavy, I thought.

Amthor: Let's talk about your war time service. So after you did your basic training, where did you go and service? Can you tell us about those places and the things you did there?

Landes: Well, first of all, after I qualified as parachutist, I went home on furlough, and then I was headed to the port of embarkation, which was New York. I went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, which was a kind of staging area. We got on the ship, and we walked out of, I guess you'd call it, a kind of like a freight house at a dock, and we just walked directly into the ship, not realizing what kind of a ship it was, because you walked up a ramp and right into it, without a vision of the ship at all. Once we got out to sea, it was the Queen Elizabeth.

Amthor: One of those luxury liners?

Landes: Of course it was British. We went across without an escort, because they were so big and fast, they went across the North Atlantic to stay away from the U boats. It was only five days going across; it was a good smooth ride. We landed in Greenwich, Scotland. I went on a narrow gauge railroad there, and went down into England on – this was in September then, and of course it was still warm, but we were in gondolas, open cars, you know. Beautiful country there, Scotland, just beautiful country. We ended up about 60 miles south of London to a camp down there.

Amthor: Was that where you were stationed most of the time during the war?

Landes: Yes, until the Bulge broke out; the Battle of the Bulge and that – we left England I think the 24th day of December, because we were headed out Christmas Day to the Bulge. I was driving a truck without a windshield. It was pretty cold! It was a truck that they just kind of

made up because they didn't have all the parts for it, and of course one of them was a windshield. So we got initiated into battle about the 26th or 27th of December. That was our first battle. Wasn't very pleasant. We ran on to the German Panzer divisions, which are tanks, and we didn't have any tank support, and really didn't have the equipment to counteract these tanks whatsoever, so we took a pretty good beating. In fact, the first 24 hours our company had 52 percent casualties. But 90 percent of those casualties returned back to the battle front eventually.

Amthor: Where did you go from there?

Landes: After we kind of countered the Germans and set them back, from their big surge that they had going on, we went back to Belgium to a rest camp and stayed there for a while, and then we started training again back in France, and we were getting ready to jump on the Rhine River in Germany, which we did later on in March of 1945.

Amthor: Was this your mission that you jumped on?

Landes: Yes.

Amthor: Can you tell us about that mission?

Landes: We went to Holland to an airfield to get on the planes, and it was the largest airborne invasion, because we were with another British division. There were two divisions jumping at the same time. We went under Montgomery's, which was a British general, we were under his command, because we jumped way up north in the – what today on the Rhine River, what they call the industrial area of Germany, where a lot of manufacturing was taking place. We got introduced to Berlin Sal, on her propaganda. She was on the radio telling us she knew we were coming. The only thing she had wrong, she had the wrong division. She told what division it was, but she had the wrong division. She said "We'll be waiting for you." She said "the flak will be so heavy you can walk down, you won't need your parachutes." And it was pretty bad, it was. But we survived.

Amthor: So what other conditions was it like there in Germany?

Landes: Well, of course we went on and kept going east until the end of the war, and then we were assigned to occupation. Which was an experience in itself, the fact that we still had to round up stragglers that were hiding out wherever. But that duty wasn't too bad. I was there until they started taking the low point guys, the guys that hadn't had much service overseas, and getting ready to send them back to the states for training for the Pacific, because the war – now I'm talking about after the end of the war in Germany. I was in temporary camp in Lehar, France, waiting on a ship. The camps were called after cigarettes, and the one I was in was called Phillip Morris. Would you believe while I was sitting there the war ended in Japan? I'm destined to go home. They didn't change that. I went home. I was one of the luckiest guys that – the good Lord was just looking after me.

Amthor: It sounds like it.

Landes: I only served 27 months, and I wasn't 21 years old when I got discharged.

Amthor: Now did you leave a sweetheart at home when you left?

Landes: A high school sweetheart, yes.

Amthor: Did you marry her when you got back?

Landes: No, she married before I got back. She wanted to get married before I left, but I decided no because I think probably the main reason was that if something happened to me, my mother would get my insurance, and that's the way I wanted it.

Amthor: So did you – you just had the one mission that you were in combat?

Landes: No, I was in the Bulge, and then the invasion on the Rhine River in Germany.

Amthor: What did you witness or participate other than those? Did you participate in other missions as well?

Landes: Just the occupation was all.

Amthor: Did you witness a lot of casualties and destruction? How did you handle that emotion after seeing that?

Landes: You really didn't have much time to think about it, until things kind of died down a little bit, and then it started striking you, when you had a little lax time, and you thought back, and one of my closest buddies, I saw him get killed, and it really hurt. I just don't like to talk about it today.

Amthor: That's okay. Did you form a lot of friendships and camaraderies while you were there?

Landes: Yes, I think so.

Amthor: Do you still keep in touch?

Landes: Yes, we had division reunions, and I went to a number of those, down through the years. Of course, I was young, I was a replacement, so everybody was older than me, and a lot of them deceased, you know, and it got kind of demoralizing because you'd go and they were in wheelchairs, or crutches, on oxygen, just things like that, you know. Every year the attendance got smaller, until finally they just quit the reunions. But I enjoyed every one of them.

Amthor: How did you stay in touch with your family when you were overseas?

Landes: Strictly by mail. That was it.

Amthor: Did you use the V-mail?

Landes: Yes. Exactly. I never made a phone call. I'm not even sure we had access to making long distance phone calls.

Amthor: Did you ever have a code for telling your family where you were?

Landes: No, no. Somewhere. That was the word I used a lot. Somewhere in England. Somewhere in Germany, because they did a quite a bit of watching that because you weren't suppose to release that type of information.

Amthor: How about entertainment? Did you have very much entertainment while you were overseas?

Landes: Yes, after we came back out of the Bulge, and back into France, I went to Paris and got to see Bob Hope, Frances Langford and Jerry Colonna, all at the same time. Which was a great event for me. I got something else to tell you. When I was in Camp Kelmer, N J. waiting to go overseas, I went to an USO club and got to dance with Marlene Dietrich.

Amthor: Oh, wow!

Landes: You probably don't know who she was.

Amthor: Oh, I watch the old movies; I know who that was!

Landes: Well, she was – she was born in Germany, but she was an American citizen. Of course, I probably danced 30 seconds with her, and somebody else cut in.

Amthor: What was the dance that you danced with her?

Landes: Oh, it was a round dance, the two-step.

Amthor: Did you do the jitterbug, or the swing dance?

Landes: Not with her.

Amthor: Did people line up to get to dance with her?

Landes: Oh yes, yes

Amthor: You knew what line to get in to?

Landes: Oh, yes, they were tapping shoulders, you know, you'd just about – like I said, less than 30 seconds, somebody was tapping your shoulder.

Amthor: So what else did you do during your leisure time, when you didn't have the actual shows, did you go to movies, or play cards?

Landes: Yes. The first Christmas that I was away from home I really got homesick. I'd handled it pretty well up until then.

Amthor: What did they do for the men during Christmas?

Landes: Well, this particular time, on Christmas Day, actually the camp was pretty well evacuated. A lot of them had gone home, or was on three day passes. I was on D company, and I had a friend from my home town that was in D company, and we made a big expenditure, and went to a movie, for Christmas.

Amthor: So did – was that the only Christmas that you –

Landes: The next Christmas, we were in convoy going to the Bulge, so I guess that was it. The third Christmas, yes, there would have been a third Christmas. Where was I? Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Amthor: Did you get a lot of care packages from your family?

Landes: Yes, sure did.

Amthor: What kind of things did you get in those packages?

Landes: Well, it seemed like every package I got from them had salami in it. And I wasn't too fond of salami, but [laughter] but I ate it because it was different than GI food.

Amthor: How did they keep that food fresh? I hear some people sent candy or cookies and how did they get that overseas?

Landes: You know, I don't ever remember contacting anything that was bad; that had turned bad. Even the salami. Of course it was – I don't think you call it cured, but it is solified, you know. I ate it like it was good.

Amthor: Did you get a lot – during Christmas did you get Christmas card?

Landes: Yes, I had pen pal, people that I didn't even know that wrote me. Especially girls.

Amthor: That was probably pretty good.

Landes: I remember one of them; she was from South Carolina. In the course of our correspondence, she found out I was a farmer, or born on a farm. She sent me a picture of her sitting on a tractor. She said "I think you'll relate to this."

Amthor: How about – you said you listened to Axis Sally

Landes: Berlin Sally

Amthor: So what other kind of things did she say on the radio.

Landes: You know, as far as I can remember, that was the only time I ever – and this was when I was in the northland, waiting to get on the planes, and she was yakking at the top of her voice. A great morale builder, you know.

Amthor: What was the experience like when you jumped that one mission? What was going through your mind as you were flying through the air?

Landes: Get out of the plane. I just wanted to get out of that plane so bad so quick. We had so much equipment on, we were very uncomfortable. I didn't get airsick, and we went quite a ways, because it was a large armada; so many planes, like I said, there were two divisions of us, one British, and one American. Some of them caught flak, and you could see that some of them had caught fire, and you just wanted to get out and get on the ground, and take your chances from there. There was nothing you could do up there. You were just like a clay pigeon.

Amthor: Did you land flat on the ground? You didn't land in a tree did you?

Landes: No, in my training I made some bad landings, but that jump was pretty good. The ground, there, was on the Rhine River, and it was flat territory, and there was quite a few trees around, but I didn't make a tree fall. I'll have to tell you about one of my practice jumps, though. I had never even been up in an airplane, you know, and everything was new to me, being a farm boy. I looked down, and we were trained about tree falls, and I looked down and all I could see was trees, and I knew I was going to have to make a tree fall when I got out. But when I got down there, guess what it was? A peanut patch.

Amthor: A peanut patch?

Landes: That's how you could observe you weren't familiar about observing from the air, about what it was like. I didn't make a very good landing that time. A matter of fact, I got to oscillating so bad, I got to swinging like this, and if you had time, you could check a lot of that up, but seemed like I never had enough time. Matter of fact, the chute and I hit the ground about the same time. Of course I hit flat on my back, and I laid there hoping I would get my breath.

Amthor: Were you ever injured?

Landes: No, never was. Laid there trying to get my breath in the peanut patch. I got a little story to tell. We were trained to – when we got out, they had reserve chutes. We were supposed to count, one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, and if our main chute didn't open, then we were supposed to use our reserves. Well, our fifth jump was what they call a tactical jump. You didn't say or do anything. This was the only time I said one thousand, two thousand, three thousand. One of the NCO's was on the ground with a megaphone; shut up up there!

Amthor: He didn't want you to say anything in case the enemy was around?

Landes: There you go! That's the whole idea, yes. But you now, I was out of time.

Amthor: So did any of your fellow men, did they ever have a bad landing?

Landes: No, as far as it being somebody personal, no, but I did see some casualties, yes. It wasn't pleasant. It was very uncommon; the casualty rate was very low.

Amthor: At the end of the war, how did you feel about the dropping of the atomic bomb, and did you agree with President Truman?

Landes: I most certainly did. Especially when I thought I was headed over.

Amthor: Quick end. What were you actually doing when you got the news that the war was over?

Landes: In Europe. Like I told you, I drove a truck. We were unloading ammunition, me and some other GIs, and these planes started flying over. We didn't know it was over, but the planes did. They started flying over us, and buzzing us; I mean they were just a few feet above us. We thought "What's the matter with these guys?" We thought they were drinking or something. Come to find out, the war was over. That's why they were buzzing us.

Amthor: So what were the celebrations like when you found out the war was over?

Landes: Well, we took – one thing, we started bonfires. We took ammunition crates, and busted them up, and started fires, and danced around them like a bunch of idiots [laughter] very happy; very happy! We were ready.

Amthor: How were the Europeans that you came across – did they treat you fair?

Landes: To be truthful, I just didn't like the French too well. The English was fine. The German people, when we were in occupation, I really liked the German people. I really did. Because after the war was over, I think they were just as relieved as we were, you know, and was glad; They welcomed us.

Amthor: I've heard others say that the German people were very nice.

Landes: They were, they were. Because they had been under bad thumbs, so to speak; bad ruling. Of course, you know what Hitler was like.

Amthor: Now, did you ever see any of the major generals or Hitler's generals?

Landes: Yes, I've had the pleasure of seeing Patton in the Bulge. We were under his command at that time, and as a matter of fact helped push his jeep out of the ditch one time. He got right out with us and helped push it out.

Amthor: So you got to meet him?

Landes: Well, if you call that meeting. And then I got to see Churchill and Eisenhower at the same time. This was after the Rhine campaign, and they were over there.

Amthor: What about Hitler?

Landes: Never got to Berlin.

Amthor: So how did you get home after the war was over? Take another boat home?

Landes: Yes.

Amthor: How was that boat ride compared to the first one?

Landes: It was a good ride. It was what they call a Victory Ship. It was a ship of course that was made during the war, and it was made especially for this type of use, and it was a good ride. I never did get seasick, and I was happy about that, because some of the guys did, and it wasn't – when they were sick, they were sick. I got a little story to tell about the chaplain.

Amthor: Okay.

Landes: When we were coming back, the chaplain – this one guy had a tough time. He'd get to feeling good, and he get out of his bunk, and as soon as his foot hit the floor why he'd start urping, or whatever you want to call it; gagging. He was – he just spent most of his time at the rail of the ship, sick. This chaplain walked up to him, and he knew he was having a tough time, kind of walked up to him, put his arm around him, and he said, "Soldier, are you really sick?" "Well, what the hell do you think I'm a puking for?"

Amthor: I bet there were quite a few people that got sick on that ship.

Landes: I hope you can accept that language, but that is exactly what was said.

Amthor: Did you get a big reception from your family and friends when you got home?

Landes: Yes, I did. I sure did. I had an older brother who got home before I did, so he was there. He was in the South Pacific, and I sure was glad to see him. My other brother had signed up for six years, so he was still in. He got out later, but he had signed up before Pearl Harbor.

Amthor: How did the people treat you when you go back? The community -- as a vet?

Landes: Like you'd never left, in a sense. I mean, you just filled it right in wherever you were at.

Amthor: So you jut headed back to civilian life?

Landes: I think it took me less than 24 hours.

Amthor: Did you go back to farming when you got back?

Landes: Yes.

Amthor: Did you join the American Legion or the VFW?

Landes: I joined the VFW.

Amthor: Are you proud to be a veteran of World War II?

Landes: I sure am.

Amthor: Were you concerned at the Soviet Union's spread of Communism?

Landes: Yes, I was. General Patton had the right idea. He knew what he was wanting to do. When the war was over, he was wanting to keep going. He wanted to fight them. Of course, he was gung-ho. But, he was right. He was right.

Amthor: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill?

Landes: No, I never did. They had what they called the 52-20 Club. Are you familiar with that?

Amthor: No.

Landes: You could draw \$20 a week for 52 weeks. I never even – I don't know if I was too ignorant, or too proud, but I never took it. I went to work.

Amthor: What do you think are the differences between the war today and the war you fought?

Landes: Almost as different as day and night. There are different types of war entirely. You don't see much hand to hand combat like you did in WWII, or WWI, especially, today, it just don't happen that much, on account of the equipment that they have. They don't get that close to each other. It's either do or die before, so ... it's just a different type of war.

Amthor: Is there any other stories that we didn't cover that you'd like to share with us today? Maybe something that stands out in your mind that made a difference?

Landes: Well, I had these two buddies that I really stayed in close contact with after we got home, and went to reunions. One was from Oklahoma and one was from Massachusetts, and we always got together at the reunions, and had our wives, you know, and did some partying together – can you believe that? They both passed away before I did; again they were both older than me. But we had a lot of fun, just you know, from year to year. The one in Massachusetts, he knew I played golf balls, and he always brought me a dozen golf balls every time. I think

Brockton is the name of the town he was from, which is a suburb of Boston, and they had a place there that they made golf balls there. One of the reasons why he brought them, you know, for a gift.

Amthor: It's nice to have people that you meet like that, from your experience.

Landes: Absolutely. You bet.

Amthor: Do you think the war left any type of imprints on you – the type of person you became after the war?

Landes: You know, after I'd been home for a while, I got kind of homesick for the Army. I couldn't wait to get home, and get out of the Army, and after I got home a while, it didn't last long; I got occupied otherwise.

Amthor: What was life at home like? Did they ever mention what your family went through with the scrap metal drives, or the coupon books, the shortages?

Landes: Well, a lot of this was going on before I ever enlisted. I mean, the rationing? Tires were almost impossible to buy. Of course sugar was rationed, and gasoline was rationed, and of course it went on and on after I went to the Army. So I got a little touch of that before I went in, to know what that was like. I had a car then, and it was running on rags and I couldn't get tires.

Amthor: So was it still there when you got home? Your car?

Landes: Yes, it was. It still had the rags on it too!

Amthor: So was there any major hardships that your family had to deal with during that time?

Landes: My mother was one of these people who didn't show her emotions too much; she was a stout woman, both physically and mentally. I'm sure anything that happened, we didn't know about. She kept it pretty well to herself, and to Dad. Of course we were gone, and didn't know for sure what went on. The letters always sounded good, but she didn't express any hard feelings that way. She tried to cheer us up and keep us going, you know.

Amthor: You said you came back and went into farming. What was life like after the war, up to 1950?

Landes: I went to farming with my older brother, that didn't go to service; he had a family and was exempt, and he and I went in as partners for a while. I think it was a case of maybe him wanting to help; thinking that this was just my silent idea. He just wanted to do something, since he wasn't in the military, you know. So there was quite a difference in our age, but he kind of took me under his wing, and we were partners for a while. We had a good relationship.

Amthor: Is there anything else that you'd like to comment, or leave us about those particular years?

Landes: Probably when I get home I'll think of half a dozen things. At this time, I can't think of anything though. I know this makes it a hard interview for you.

Amthor: No, it's been wonderful

Landes: Oh, really?

Amthor: We've learned a lot. Every interview is different. There are a few things that are similar, we see a lot of similarities, but everyone is different and it's always interesting.

Landes: I had one thing that has really stuck in my mind, that I shouldn't have done. One of my closest buddies got killed and when we made the jump. I saw him light on this house, and it was a tile roof. And the peaks were pretty steep, and his chute was on one side of the house, and he was on the other, and he was having a tough time getting out of it, and that was where he got shot, right there, trying to get out of his chute. So, later on, after I came home; I knew his address, he was from Indiana, I stopped and called his folks, when I was in this town, and I found out then, I didn't know at the time, that they ran the funeral home. They begged me to come down and see them, because I had called them from a pay phone, and I refused, because I wasn't sure I couldn't handle it. I knew it was going to stir up some bad emotions, for them and me both. I wish now I would have done it, for their sake. I mean, that's one of the sorry things that I can really look back and say, I wish I had done it.

Amthor: I think it is hard to know what a person would do at that time, what's best

Landes: Especially on the telephone.

Amthor: It's hard.

Landes: Yes.

Amthor: Well, we really appreciate your coming in, and I really think that this was a really good interview, and it's been really nice listening to your stories.

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