

Lawrence Ryan

16th Armored Division/5th Infantry Division

World War II

What service were you in?

Mr. Ryan: Lawrence Harry Ryan, United States Army.

Where were you born sir? Where and when?

Mr. Ryan: San Francisco, California on January 29, 1925.

Do you know the primary unit you served in the Army?

Mr. Ryan: 16th Armored Division and I was with the 5th Infantry Division out here at Camp Campbell. It was Camp Campbell then.

Do you remember your parent's names and their occupations?

Mr. Ryan: Yes. My mother's name was Ivory Ryan and she was a housewife. My father was Lawrence H. Ryan, he was Harry Ryan and he was a police officer.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Mr. Ryan: No, I was an only child.

Do you have any recollection of the Great Depression as a child?

Mr. Ryan: Oh yeah.

Would you like to talk about how your family survived?

Mr. Ryan: Well I was real young growing up. My dad was with the city, which was Civil Service. He had a good income so he wasn't hurt too bad. But then again they had to watch our finances. Of course, as I said, him being in Civil Service in San Francisco we did pretty well during the Depression.

So it wasn't a total loss of land and stuff like that?

Mr. Ryan: No. In 1933 Roosevelt came in there.

Did you have a job before you went into the service?

Mr. Ryan: Yes. I was working with the Union Square Garage Incorporated. There was a parking terminal there and I was a night manager. Of course California at that time paid good money. At that time I was making \$1.41 an hour which was real good way back then.

Did you work full-time?

Mr. Ryan: I worked full-time. After school I worked at night.

Before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, how serious did you take the threat to America?

Mr. Ryan: At that time in 1941, because I was younger than when I actually went in the Army, it lightens a person from being young. You realize the seriousness of it there. It kind of adds years to your life or I think it did to mine. I realized what would have happened there. Back then patriotism was at an extreme high. Of course I was too young to go in the service at that time. The reason why I was drafted, I thought about going into the merchant marine, they were taking men younger than Army age. I signed up for a merchant ship and then I found out that I was lined up for the draft, so I just went in the Army under the draft.

What year were you drafted sir?

Mr. Ryan: I was drafted in 1944.

Do you remember how and where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Ryan: Yes, I was young and I was in the basement at home. I had had a model electric train and I can't say I was playing with it because at that time they were model trains. We were interested in model trains, the kids around the neighborhood. That is what we were doing at the time and a voice came down the street yelling, "Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Pearl Harbor bombed!" Back then the news boys would go up and down the streets. That is when we got the paper and I had seen the big headlines of Pearl Harbor bombed.

How many days did you say after it happened? Was it the next day? Do you remember when you got the newspaper?

Mr. Ryan: That was that day. Pearl Harbor was bombed on Sunday, December 7, 1941. The newspapers came out that afternoon.

Did you have a radio by any chance?

Mr. Ryan: Oh yeah.

Did you get a chance to hear F.D.R's speech?

Mr. Ryan: Yeah. My mother had a battery radio which she called ___ back then. It was a big battery about as big as an automobile battery. She had a speaker that you could carry around to different rooms. We used to listen to the radio and, of course, back in history you read about Roosevelt's fire-side chats. We used to listen to Roosevelt's fire-side chats on the radio; which seems to be a little hard to do now. We listened to the radio and you can see it on television now.

You said you did hear his speech the next day after they attacked Pearl Harbor? Did that move you? I heard a lot of people just....

Mr. Ryan: We had heard that and they showed the news reels too back then. Back then they had pretty good education with the news. They had movie theaters in San Francisco and showed the

news. That is all they showed was news. At that age I was still in high school. We used to go listen to the news in those theaters.

When did you realize that you would be drafted, sir?

Mr. Ryan: Roosevelt came out with the draft after. He said, "We are going to have to implement our Army." The Army at that time was very small. I guess the Navy was bigger because the Navy was just about wiped out down there at Pearl Harbor. All of us, at our age, they said that we could finish school and then we would be drafted.

Did you have a preference, I know you said the merchant marine, but did you have a preference of military?

Mr. Ryan: At that time then, if you went into the merchant marine you would be exempt from the draft because you would be serving your country through them. I felt that I would rather go into the Army. As I said before, I would just assume to have gotten drafted, so I just waited for my draft notice when I went into the Army.

Did you have a preference like Infantry, Artillery, or any other job?

Mr. Ryan: No, they would give you test going into the Army. They would take all the draftees and inductees and they would interview you at the induction center. I guess in my interview I wound up Infantry. So I went to basic training; 17 weeks of basic training and then went to Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, and joined the 16th Armored Division and then we went overseas.

Where did you go for your induction center?

Mr. Ryan: I went to the induction center in San Francisco and from there I was at the city of Monterrey. I went into what they called the Old Army; the old city of Monterrey which was an old Army post then. From there I went to Camp Roberts, California, and had 17 weeks of basic training. I then went to Camp Shelby, Arkansas, and joined the 16th Armored Division and then we had 30 day maneuvers before we went overseas.

What was your impression of fellow recruits while you were at basic training?

Mr. Ryan: Well we all got along real well. Like I said, patriotism was at an extreme high and we just more or less formed one big family there; like the regular Army is today. The way I judge that back then, when you take men from all walks and bring them in the Army through an induction system at least I was fortunate to have good, good men to be with. We just more or less formed an Army. We stayed together all the time overseas there.

Was this the longest distance that you have been away from home at that time?

Mr. Ryan: The longest distance that I was away from home was in Chaffee, Arkansas. In fact, I never had been out of California until I went in the Army. I've been all over the world, except

the Pacific. However, I did take Pacific warfare training at Camp Roberts, California. At that time, General Patton wanted more men over in Europe. So they had taken all of us and put us into European Theater of Operations.

You said you participated in maneuvers?

Mr. Ryan: Yes, that was at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas; which is now Fort Chaffee.

How good do you think they trained you up for your task that was upcoming?

Mr. Ryan: It was extremely well. Of course out of the Armored Division we had tanks and half-tracks. I was in the half-tracks and it was pretty realistic. At that time, if there hadn't been a war, it certainly seemed like war.

So looking back do you feel you were well-prepared before you left the states?

Mr. Ryan: I think so. I really do because we had a lot of training; 17 weeks of basic which was a long time and then 30 days of extended maneuvers. As the war gradually grew to an end they were needing men bad so they cut down a lot of the advanced training. After they moved us overseas they cut down quite a bit of that long term training.

How good were the living conditions at the camps that you stayed in?

Mr. Ryan: They were good. Of course now they would probably complain about them. They are implementing all of these training centers all over the United States; we did real well. At Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, we had the barracks with the pot bellied stoves in the middle to keep them hot. We did real well. We didn't think anything different. Of course now with the modern barracks and all of its little...it's a little different. The military wouldn't want to go back to that type. Then again it was war and we didn't stay there that long at one place.

Did you go in troop ships overseas?

Mr. Ryan: We went on troop ships overseas.

What port did you depart from?

Mr. Ryan: We left New York and came into LeHavre, France. It took about 13 days; zigzagging submarine.

That is what I heard; everybody zigzagging submarines.

Mr. Ryan: In our outfit we pulled KP all the way across; the whole battalion.

How were the living conditions there? The food was it, you know?

Mr. Ryan: We were pretty well over-crowded on troop ships because most of them at that time were converted ships; some had been luxury liners. The one we went over one was a French ship but it had been converted to a troop ship so it was pretty rough. You might say it was overloaded with personnel. They really did cram military personnel on those ships. It wasn't bad. We spent most of our time coming back than going over because we pulled KP there. We didn't have to stand in line to eat because we were right there. It got pretty rough out there on the high seas. I was pretty lucky that I never did get sick. They didn't want us to go up on deck because they were afraid that somebody would throw a cigarette butt over the submarine and a German submarine would pick up the navigation of it there.

Do you know approximately how many soldiers were on the ships, roughly?

Mr. Ryan: We had just about almost a whole division on our ship. It was large enough for that because some of the smaller converted liberty ships carried smaller personnel. We had just about the whole division on there.

They had multiple decks; that is what I read about.

Mr. Ryan: Yeah and then the other ships in convoy had all of our other equipment. Being in armored infantry, I was in half-track. After we got overseas, we picked up our half-track off of the other ships. We landed at LeHavre, France, and we boarded a train in what they called back then a 40 and 8; they would hold either 40 men or 8 horses. They were pretty old cattle cars more or less. Our equipment we shipped up into France; it was a little farther up in France where we got our equipment at a later date there.

When did you arrive in France? Was it still 1944?

Mr. Ryan: Yes it was in 1944. We went through France, Belgium, Germany, Luxemburg and Nurnberg and then we went into combat in Nurnberg and were in the Liberation of Pilsen, Czechoslovakia.

How soon since you landed in France did you go into combat? Was it right away?

Mr. Ryan: It was some time. As divisions moved up, we were moving up to the front line. We would always encounter snipers. It wasn't a full combat like the landing of Normandy and all. That had already been done before we had gotten there. We didn't get in the intense battle, our division, until we got into Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. It wasn't really too bad at that time then. We did have opposition and we were in the liberation in taking Pilsen from the Germans. There was an agreement made at the ___ Conference that Russia would take the capital of Czechoslovakia, which was Prague, and we would take the city of Pilsen. There is politics in war. That was at the ___ Conference between President Roosevelt and Mr. Churchill.

What was your impression of your officers and NCO's?

Mr. Ryan: We had good officers and good NCO's there. We had a lot of temporary officers. We had a lot of battlefield commissions there. We had men that had been Tech Sergeants that would get a battlefield commission to a Lieutenant there. We had all good officers and good enlisted men there. Back then and that is today, you respected your officers both non-commissioned and the officers themselves. Again that is what made a well-trained Army. Back then even though we were civilians going into the Army they made soldiers out of us.

What is the highest rank you achieved there, sir?

Mr. Ryan: I was a PFC. Rank was a little hard to get during the war. They had battlefield commissions there but that rank then was if someone else got wounded or killed-in-action then he stepped up. That was a little hard way to get promoted there.

What kind of equipment and armor did you train with and how well did it operate in the field?

Mr. Ryan: In Camp Roberts, California, we trained for straight infantry. When they assigned us to armored infantry, which was tanks, half-tracks and mortar type infantry, then we had different type of training there. We trained with the half-track and a 57 mm gun that we towed with the half-track. Of course now they just about fire one from their shoulder. It took about 8 men to fire that gun. It was like an artillery piece that ___ and we had to load it with a 57-mm shell. We found out during the war then that the time we would set the vehicle up, 8 of us would pull the piece of artillery off the half-track and get it set up, the Germans would zero in on us. We had the half-track a pretty good ways away. The 57-mm guns got kind of obsolete there back then so they don't use that type anymore. They used us more or less as infantrymen and we would clean out different towns and villages there. It made it a little hard sometimes because you had to shoot at a sniper in a church.

Did they function pretty well or did they break down mechanically?

Mr. Ryan: Most of us, after we went into the Infantry, after we got off of the half-track we carried the M-1 rifle. That was one of the soldier's best friends. It was pretty brief; about 3700 yards shooting range. It was a little heavy to carry around at times but everybody wanted a Karbine because it was a little lighter. But an M-1 would do the job.

You said your first experience in combat was in Pilsen?

Mr. Ryan: Pilsen, Czechoslovakia; we had a little before that in towns and villages.

What was your reaction to your first actual heavy engagement?

Mr. Ryan: The first time we heard the rounds going off, of course you could hear them going through basic training and you don't think too much of it because you realize they are live rounds going through an infiltration course with them shooting over your head. When you are in combat sometimes you might say to yourself, "Well if they are going to get me, I would rather it

be done with the small arms.” The Germans had those big 88 cannons. They fired those big cannons more or less and you could hear those things whizzing over your head. So you figured, “Well if I have to go I would rather it was small arms.” The Germans used those 88’s and you could really hear them whistling over your head.

Would you say there was pretty good cohesion within your unit throughout the Campaign?

Mr. Ryan: Yeah, we were attached to Patton’s 3rd Army and of course Patton was a fighting man. He liked to move those tanks to move them on up there. At the end of the war there were 60 U.S. Divisions fighting the Nazi’s back then. There were 60 U.S. Divisions on the last day of the war that he had used in winning the war.

So Patton was your Commanding General?

Mr. Ryan: No we were just attached to his Army there. We were attached to the 3rd Army which was his Army there. He commanded the divisions that were attached to his.

Do you remember who your Commanding General was?

Mr. Ryan: Gurdon; Commanding General Gurdon.

Did you have any free time; not free time but when you weren’t actually on the front lines at all?

Mr. Ryan: Like I say, our division was lucky as far as intense fighting. We didn’t really get into intense fighting. At the Liberation of Czechoslovakia the Germans were just about ready to give up when we went in there. There wasn’t really a whole lot of resistance. We did have snipers. The biggest part of the war was before our division got into Czechoslovakia but we were given credit for the Liberation of Czechoslovakia; that is the city of Pilsen and then the Russians came into Prague.

Did you capture any German P.O.W’s?

Mr. Ryan: Yes, we had quite a few prisoners-of-war. Our division had a compound there and we had several thousand compound prisoners-or-war.

Were you impressed with the quality of the enemy like their leadership, tenacity and the way they fight?

Mr. Ryan: Well at that time at the end of the war the Germans had the older men in there and young boys in the Army. They just about used up their military and lost so many of them in battle. They were pushed way back, like I say, to Czechoslovakia where they first started. They had more or less started up there, came all the way down into France and tried to take Great Britain. They were forced on back all the way back up through Europe again; up to France and their own country Germany back up to where they started from. The Germans more or less didn’t want to give up so they committed suicide.

Did you come to respect the Germans, not their cause but as soldiers fighting?

Mr. Ryan: Toward the end of the war the Germans, most of the ones we had run into, were gladly we had taken them prisoners because they had just about been starved. They had a hard time getting supplies to them where they could eat. You kind of feel sorry for people in war. War is a hard thing to understand. The leaders of these countries put their own people into these situations and you have to feel sorry for just about everyone but still knowing that that was a job and it had to be done.

Do you know how they reacted to you as an American soldier? Did they antagonize you?

Mr. Ryan: They didn't give a lot of resistance. I know out here at Fort Campbell, of course it was Camp Campbell then; there was a lot of German prisoners-of-war out here at the time that I came back here. Quite a few of them later became United States citizens; of course they went back to their country and then came back here. Now there is a different kind of respect toward the Germans as well as the Japanese and it's a little different there as far as people's attitude there now.

After you guys liberated Czechoslovakia what happened after that?

Mr. Ryan: At that time, the United States Army was setting up what they called a program of occupation there. The occupation forces were supposed to stay and help the Germans get into a form of government of their own. At that time most of us had to have some many points to get rotated back to the states. You had to have 32 points to get back to the states. Some of us were a little shy of that so we were going to be stuck with occupation and stay over there to help form a new government.

How did you get points?

Mr. Ryan: The points were accumulated through time in service, service in combat and length of service overseas. Of course all of us drew overseas pay. Most of us in our outfit didn't quite have enough points to be rotated back to the states. So at that time then they were taking volunteers to go to the Pacific. They had already planned a big invasion of Japan. Most of us in my outfit volunteered for the Pacific hoping that we would be sent back to the states, they said, for 30 day furlough, be trained for the invasion of Japan. Some were sent directly from there to training centers and others were sent back to the states. Our outfit was fortunate enough to be sent back to the states for 30 days leave. At the time we were aboard the troop ship coming back, before we got to New York, the first Atomic Bomb was dropped in Japan. When we landed at New York they had so many men in the United States when they knew that the invasion was off and that Japan had surrendered. After they dropped the third bomb we were sent home for 30 days temporary duty while the Army was trying to figure out what to do with all of us men there. We were fortunate. At that time then I was sent back along with some of the other men of the

division back here to Camp Campbell and we finished out our whatever short time I had to finish out and I finished it at Camp Campbell.

Were you just training?

Mr. Ryan: Just training at that time. Like I say, it was a camp and not a permanent fort. At that time then there were rumors that it would probably close. Of course it has become one of the biggest forts in the United States. They were proud of the 101st Airborne which was overseas at the time that we were over there. They made jumps and had the glider battalions. I give a lot of credit to the 101st. I respect all men there.

Were you ever wounded in combat?

Mr. Ryan: No. Our half-track was shot at but no one got hit in it.

Were you ever recommended for a medal?

Mr. Ryan: All of us in our outfit had the Combat Infantry Badge for going into Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, and cleaning out the snipers and things like that and that type of duty. We had the one battle star; the European Theater of Operations was one battle star.

Do you have any friends that were wounded or killed in combat, sir?

Mr. Ryan: Yes, we had a few in our outfit that were wounded.

Did you at all know the big picture of the ally's plans in Europe? Did they ever brief you guys?

Mr. Ryan: You know even up to today we learn more about World War II and its unbelievable what you learn even now. When you are in the Army you know the battle plans and you know which assignments you are going into and what area they assign you to. We learned later about, as I said before, the Russians coming into Czechoslovakia. That was the agreement made at the ___ Conference. Russia wanted some credit too. They didn't want the United States Army to get all the credit for the Liberation of Czechoslovakia. So they came in and got the capital of Prague. We were just about their anyhow but they said, "No, Pilsen was always going to get credit for it." So the Russians got credit for the Liberation of Prague and we got credit for the Liberation of Pilsen.

Do you remember when you heard of the news of F.D.R.'s death?

Mr. Ryan: Yeah, it was pretty sad to hear that. He was our Commander-In-Chief there. I was drafted in the Army through President Roosevelt. I saw him one time as a high school student in the city of San Francisco when he drove through. President Roosevelt was on our draft notice and President Truman was on our discharge papers. Roosevelt put us in and Harry Truman put us out after the dropping of the Atomic Bomb.

With Roosevelt, were you overall supportive of his actions as the Commander-In-Chief; looking back before you entered the service and looking back when you were out of the service?

Mr. Ryan: Yes, because before going into the Army and listening to the fire-side chats and the attack on Pearl Harbor he said, "We will go into war." We had respect for him then after the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.

Is there anything else you would like to add just for future generations that may see this, to appreciate everything that happened during World War II and how it changed the world?

Mr. Ryan: Well World War II the ocean divided us there and there wasn't much fear then as there is now. There wasn't much fear of our country being attacked other than Pearl Harbor which was bad enough there. We knew that there was another ocean besides the ocean that the Japanese had traveled through the Pacific between Hawaii, and I would say, San Francisco. There was fear then that the Japanese submarines were getting into San Francisco Bay; one man subs and some of the larger subs. But now there is a little more fear in the world with terrorists. We used to worry about divisions and armies. Now we worry about maybe single people fighting these terrorist. I think everybody has a different outlook in war. However, a lot of people are not old enough to look back on World War II. World War II was different than Vietnam. Vietnam lost a lot of people and it was a hard way to fight. I feel sorry for those men and of course the Korean War before the Vietnam War. The war we have today is just something to think about as far as terrorist. We are all in great fear. You just can't travel on airlines without having some fear. History just brings a lot of things out. I have learned more here in the last few years about World War II after all those years. It's amazing what countries will go through listening to their leaders.

You had something to show me. You had pictures to show me.

Mr. Ryan: Back to wars, my uncle was in World War I; he was wounded. I was in World War II. My son was in during the Vietnam War. I told my son to go into the Navy and he would have some clean sheets every night.

That's' a pretty good lineage; World War I and World War II.

Mr. Ryan: There was three generations there.

That is something to be proud of.

Mr. Ryan: This is from Camp Campbell then. That is when I was at a division out there at Camp Campbell. One more thing I would like to say too, I had a lot of Japanese friends here at home. People would read back in history where the Japanese would turn during the war. Of course some of their families have been reimbursed. I have a division newspaper that I still get from the 16th Armored Division. This is what I cut out of the paper the other day that you might have read. Do you see my name in there?

Actually I didn't look, I will find it. Is it in alphabetical order? This is a good piece of a historical document.

Mr. Ryan: This is the same type of book in 1919 with my uncle. That was mail from the Mayor's office in San Francisco in 1919 to my mother; that was her brother, my uncle. It's not from the Mayor himself but from the Mayor's office.

Let me see if I can get that postmark. This is almost 100 years old.

Mr. Ryan: That was a; our division gets a newsletter all the time. That was back from when I made trip across. That was the ship we were on the S.S. Hermitage. That is the route we had taken.

This is from your unit's newspaper.

Mr. Ryan: I get one every year. About every three months I get a newsletter from the 16th Armored Division. We don't have very many men left. We are dying just more or less of natural causes.

Thank you for that.

Mr. Ryan: That is what the induction looks like when you get it from the President of the United States. That is a draft notice. All these expect this picture was taken up in Czechoslovakia before we left. This is the same half-track over there.

Is that the Atomic Bomb?

Mr. Ryan: No that is our platoon and all that; some of the pictures didn't come out. After we liberated the city of Pilsen, we had to take over some of the homes to live in ourselves. That was taken out at Camp Campbell then. That is at Camp Roberts. I was going through basic training at Camp Roberts. That is my mother. That was KP at Camp Roberts. There are some of my friends there. I was in high school just before I went in the Army. I used to ride all over. You have probably been in California quite a bit huh?

No, actually I've never been.

Mr. Ryan: This was my backyard. The guy I grew up with there, he just passed away in the last two years. These are all family pictures. My dad, does he look like a policeman?

(TAPE ENDS)