

Lee, Thurston
January 22, 2001
WWII Interview

Interviewer: Well first of all let me ask you to introduce yourself to our viewers. I thank you so much for joining us this afternoon to share your story with us.

Lee: Ok, are you ready. My name is Thurston Lee. I live at 1665 Valley Road. My wife and I are native Mississippians, but we were stationed here in 1949. We transferred here in 1949. We have been living here more or less since then. At one stage in nineteen and fifty-three...the latter part of 53. I was in the 544th field [inaudible] battalion which was 155 [inaudible] outfit of the 11th airborne division at Fort Campbell. I had been in that outfit from 1949 until December of 53. Then I got transferred to Korea and from Korea I was transferred to...after serving my time there...Fort Brag in North Carolina. Ok now then to go back...I spent some time there and I retired from Fort Brag in the latter part of February 1959. Now, I joined the army at Fort Benning, Georgia in the latter part of February or the first of march in 1939. We [83rd]'s mission at that time...well I joined the army as a radio operator...previously qualified myself as a radio operator. We had old-fashioned radios....they worked...old field telephones. I was in the headquarters. We had 75 mil [inaudible] and this was a horse drum [inaudible] battalion. There is a difference between a horse drum and this is old timey really...in the horse [inaudible] battalion everybody did not ride horses. Some of the people rode on the wagons...the [housers?] were pulled by six horses and these ...there were two pair, then two pair, then two pair kind of like Budweiser commercials, but instead of Budweiser....we had a rider on the left side of each one of those pairs. Eventually we...our outfit wound up at Fort Sill, Oklahoma where we became school troops at Fort Sill and in June, I think it was, in 1942...prior to that time I had gone to candidate school and graduated as a second lieutenant and at that time...about the time that we graduated. The war was going on pretty rough. A bunch of us Gung-ho people decided that we would volunteer...They asked for volunteers to go overseas and a bunch of us volunteered, I know that they took four of us volunteers, and we thought we were going to North Africa, but we wound up in Panama...and a hundred and five millimeter tanks out there....part of what was known as Panama mobile fort. We would spend three months at fort Clayton, the months at [inaudible],and three months over on the other side. We prepared to fight the Japanese should they attack. The war changed...the war was located back in the Pacific in the North west Pacific...up in there. They transferred our outfit which was basically Oklahoma National Guard Battalion back to Fort Ord California, and we trained for a while to go to the [inaudible] and help fight the Japanese people---attacking the forces that were up there with the Japanese. We changed our mission—we changed from 105 Howitzers to 8 in Howitzers. Eight inch Howitzers was really—a real long range Howitzers that shot a 200lb projectile. It was the most accurate weapon that we ever had and later on I will tell you about an accuracy trail that we had to do. Anyway, we trained the sent us to Europe. We landed in Europe in D + 90—where it had been going on for some time. The ship...we were in several of these landing ship tanks each battery had one. Our headquarters and the service battery was in one and it was a brand new ship. As it pulled a shore, to go up on there—you know they all ran up there on the shore. Somebody had left an anchor out and our ship ran over that anchor and it just tore the bottom out of it.

Interviewer: Oh, no.

Lee: Everything was ok, but it was unfit for duty. It stayed right there as an office [laughter]. Since that time, but anyhow we landed and went into the camp over there. At that time the Germans were located...our forces had run them out of most of France, and there was a hold out bunched down at [inaudible]. Well being as how we were all Gung-ho...two loads of us, young lieutenants, decided...we asked the commander to let us go [inaudible] to see what was going on down there. He said ok. So we went to [inaudible] and joined some of our outfits that were down there at the observation post. We got some good training shooting and directing gun-fire. That night we went to bed...we were in....all the civilian Germans had been out, and we went to bed in one of their houses---nice beds and so forth, we were took care of. At about one o'clock we were awakened by—we hadn't heard it before, but it was alarm clock ticking. They had left the clock going, and we figured that it was a bomb. You should have seen us looking for the sound, and it was just a regular old clock. We breathed a sigh of relief and went back to bed. We piddled around the next day a little bit, and we decided that it was time to go home. On the way home, we stopped and there was a big old place about 100 yards from the main road going back, and so I got out and went around that, walked around this place, and there was a big gate there. I walked in that gate, and facing me was a German on a 20 quad Buffer machine gun. It scared him more than it scared me. He jumped off the thing and ran [laughter] and actually I ran too and got back. That was...we got back and went on to...by the time we got back there. Our outfit was still not committed to the war, and they got a bunch of us lieutenants to ride ammunition trains. We were taking the ammunition back in there, and by that time the main forces were booked to Belgium and in that area. We road these little old bitty French planes up there, and we had to have...one of us officers on each train (there was two of us). Anyway, we had to because people were stealing dog gone ammunition off of there. I don't know what they were going to do with it. Anyway we got them up there on the way back...trucks had been going up there too, trucks and trains. I was in charge of about 50 trucks going back down to...in the vicinity where our troops were...They just gave us a kind of [inaudible] back down the road, I thought that we would...going around the road and it said 25 kilometers to Paris...going down I saw another sign that said 25 kilometers. I finally figured out that we were going around Paris not toward Paris. We finally got back into the war, and we went up and we were fighting ...we were straddling the [inaudible} line...The German Line that they had protected. Some of us were on the other side and some of us were behind it. We were strafed by one of our own airplanes. We were lucky that it didn't kill anybody. They send someone in to do the investigation, and the pilot that came in to investigate...his brother was the commander of [inaudible]. So that is just...small world. I am sure that they didn't know that when they set it up. Any how they had a meeting...the two of them—the brothers. One of the interesting facts about the war going on there...I was also...generally speaking, I was assistant communications officer in this outfit, but I was also an aerial observer. Each artillery battalion had two light airplanes that we did observing with, and we would direct fire from there. One day, we were...I was flying and our troops had made a push the night before and were pushed back down the hill. This was one of the saddest things that I have ever seen, and we hadn't had time...the people hadn't had time to pull them out. Our boys....there would be a machine gun in the nest over here and our boys...a whole squad of people would going back that a way. Their helmets would be shot through and whole squad's dead like that right there. But anyhow, the reason we know about that is that our airplane the carburetor froze and we fell, and we had to land out there amongst everything. It was....a few people had dug a few fox holes. We were at the backside of this hill, and they could not see us directly, so our airplane set there all afternoon...and they just shot mortar over at us. We were in a fox hole at that point, but neither one of us were hurt...this pilot used to be a glider pilot, but gliders went out of business, you know. He knew all about flying with dead sticks and so forth and that is how we made it in a big old cabbage field.

Interviewer: Wow.

Lee: We made it....and it come dark, our troops came over and rescued us and pulled the airplane back and put it in a road and drove it off back to the field [laughter].

Interviewer: Wow.

Lee: We were lucky...real lucky. That just goes to show you that back in those days the light planes had no heat on the carbonator it was just hanging out there, and it froze over. We didn't realize it at the time, but we were lucky. Now then, the...they left us when the Battle of the Bulge broke out the pulled two divisions out of this area. We were supporting the nineteenth core of the third army. We adjacent to the British second army just to our left over here...they pulled the 30th infantry division and the 29th infantry division and another infantry division out and sent them back to fight in the Bulge down there. They left an armored Cavalry regiment up there, and two or three of us artillery battalions and we the Cavalry outfit did a lot of running around up there and covered the area three divisions. Were before the Germans didn't know what was going on...had they know...of course we could have done a lot of damage with our artillery, but they didn't know that and they were sending people down there too. But after a while they whipped them and send the troops back and moved on. But anyhow, in that same area there as artilleryman we liked to get in churches...get in the steeples because it is a high place and we could look down and direct the artillery fire from there. So we knew...I have been in church steeples conducting fire too as a forward observer. We had an infantry outfit that was on ground out there and we figured out there was only one place that they were getting observed by German artillery fire and we would run a profile and figured out it was coming from this one particular church. One Sunday morning at 10, they gave me the mission of tearing up that church. We got in the airplane. We got up there and they gave me one gun an eight inch Howitzers with a two hundred pound projectile it would put a pretty big hole in the church. Of course, I am a pretty good church going religious man, but there were not church people in there...the church houses at that time. We zeroed in that thing, and I tore up the church until we didn't have any problems from then on. Anyhow, we made the war ok, and as it was over with we came back...went back to...this time we...I was assigned to Italy. We went over there and we were at a little town of Bertuzzi right over next to the Yugoslavia. We were about six or seven miles from the Yugoslavia border and they were still messing around...but not doing much. Anyhow, the wife had come over there, and we had an apartment in the Grand Hotel in Venice and one at Cortinoway up in the mountains. Our outfit was stationed in Gorizia and we...the officers on the first floor and the ground floor of this [Alberco Tra Kourna] that was the name of it three crowds. My wife and we had our son...Michael was born back in Mississippi about the time I was going across on the D + 90 deal. Anyhow, the wife...there were several wives there. We all brought our wives over there or a lot of us did. They were on the third floor, and nearly froze to death up there because the only heat that they had at that place was old brown coal. It is a little bit better than Peat, but we survived. After that was over we came back to...we were the eighty-eight division began to...they disbanded it, and we wound up...wound up down in [Laborto] I wanted to say...Leg Horn is what we know it as..and we lived in Viareggio and that winter that we were there they had 19 inches of snow. They hadn't had it...that was the biggest snow that they had had in the last 50 years.

Interviewer: Oh my goodness.

Lee: You think of a 19 inch snow in the middle of Italy they were suffering, but they made it ok... that was about the main thing that happened over there. Oh yeah, they started disbanding down there... I was transferred back to Southern...to Germany and...

Interviewer: About what year was that?

Lee: Oh it was...this was in 48...I guess...1948... 1947 or 48. I joined...being that I was a communicator I was a captain by that time. I became the signal officer for the Second Army Cavalry Regiment. You know army regiments had the job of patrolling the border between us and the Russians over there. I did that job for a long time and then they finally decided they were going to organize some field artillery battalions again...started back...and they took us people that were in other outfits like that and send us down to Houston to join the field artillery battalion. One of the...and we had uh...it was a 105 battalion, but a couple of us decided that we had some time coming in leave. So we went back and traced our steps from D-day through all the way back down there...we wound up in Paris, and we went to all the shows in Paris and so forth like that. I had an appendix attack while we were in Paris, but it was pretty rough but we made it back to my outfit and Fushion, Germany. We didn't have an American medical doctor there...we had a German doctor who was our battalion surgeon. He looked at me, and he send me to the general hospital in Munich. They operated on me up there, and it was a big mess. They dumped a couple of hands of Sulfanilamide in my belly and sewed me up. The wife and on son came home on the same boat that I did. I was in the hospital ward, and she and the son were up deck. By that time, I was feeling pretty good...I had bought a Jeep over there, and that Jeep was already in the port at New York. We came in and we checked in there...I drove that dog-gone Jeep from New York to Morton, Mississippi [laughter]. The wife and the boy...he was about four years old at that time...when I drove them down there I left the Jeep and went back and checked in the hospital, and they fixed me up. After I got out of the hospital...I was in there for about a year...they sent me to Fort Brag not Fort Brag but Fort Campbell that was here, and we came in here in 1949 and stayed here until...we lived over on Stafford Street at that time. We rented a place over there, and we bought this house in October or November in 1953. It always happens as soon as you buy a house, you get orders to move in the army....so I got orders to Korea, but my wife and kids stayed here. By that time, we had had three of them...three daughters and just one son. I wanted to come back here, but they wouldn't send me back here. By that time, I had been promoted to Major, and they said there was a field artillery battalion at Fort Brag. Field artillery battalions are authorized...seven majors in there. In an ordinary field battalion they only authorize two Majors and a lieutenant Colonel, but they said that I had to go there. Anyhow, when I checked in up there...I checked into the eighteenth...in the meantime the eleventh airborne division...the meat of our artillery battalion weren't jumpers at first. We were just attacks, but we became a part of it and all of us had become Paratroopers. When I came back to Fort Brag, I signed into the eighteenth airborne core artillery. They said you are not going there you are going to stay here. We need a communications officer, so we stayed there until I retired and then came here. That is it.

Interviewer: That is an incredible story. I have got some specific questions that you speared me to ask.

Lee: OK.

Interviewer: One of them is...well maybe I better go back before I ask you this particular question. It has to do with why you made a decision that you made. Let me ask you some questions like...what was...you were already in the military...you had started out in the army in 1939. What was your reaction, and some of the reactions to some of your G.I.'s when you heard about Pearl Harbor, and maybe I should ask you even before I ask you that...were ya'll aware of all the things that were going on in Europe and the things that were going on with the Japanese.

Lee: Yes, we were. That is and interesting point there. I told you that I was a radio operator, I was a kind of...I knew a little bit about radios and I worked on them and so forth like that. The day room radio was

broken, and I had a little shop upstairs in the barracks in there. I had just got that radio working that Sunday morning. They came on and declared war. That is when we knew about it. I had just got the day room radio working.

Interviewer: Well I'll be.

Lee: I was still in there listening to it at that time.

Interviewer: What was that reaction like when you all...

Lee: We had seen the handwriting on the wall. It was awe, and all like, but we were ready to go.

Interviewer: Well, what was a typical day like for you once you were in the midst of the war in Europe? What was just an average day like from morning until dusk?

Lee: Well, it would vary for a lot of reasons, but now at this...for me it would be a little bit different from...I was during...practically all of the war over there I was a first lieutenant, and later on I was promoted to captain. My time was a little bit different from [inaudible] they had it a little different. But anyhow, we all would get up in the morning, and we usually had a pretty good place to sleep. We were not on the front lines, but we were right behind it. In order to take advantage of the long range of our eight inch Howitzers we had to be up close to the front line, but not right on it so that we could shoot deep back into their territory. So we were rather close, and we were usually in German housing areas. We would be in German houses...either the houses or the barns or something another like that....were all of us slept. We had our own bed row. We would get up in the morning and shave, and go about our business. We would...my time...sometimes I would be...have to go up in airplanes and direct fire. Other times I would be up in the British Second Army Area as a leg run officer and directing fire from up there. It was deals like that. We had no time of our own. We were busy, but it wasn't frantic or anything.

Interviewer: What was it like when you...ya'll got the news come down that the Germans had surrendered and the war was coming to a close?

Lee: Well, let me tell you about that. When the...we had....well another little incident, we were naturally supporting on the line between the British Second Army and the United States. We were supporting the British arm as much as we did our core on the left. In this incident, when we started to cross...our infantry forces had gone up to the Elbe River, and I had...it was my job this particular day to go look for a place across this river to find out where we could go across. I went up to the Elbe River, and there was a road along the side of the river there and there are Germans on the other side. I left my Jeep upon a hill...jeep driver up there...this jeep driver taught me how to drive. He was a member of the Chicago Mafia that boy could drive a car...I tell you he could drive [laughter]. One thing about it...he was an Italian, and his mom kept us supplied with all of the good Italian meats and sausages and things like that all through the war. At this particular time, the jeep stayed up on the hill about a mile or half a mile away, but I went down and there was a road along here. There was a stupid British halftrack with mortar in the back of the thing. They...he was driving right along as fast as he could drop mortar in there; he was shooting them going right across the river. I was just standing, and at this time he came by there. There was...you know these red...your know the terracotta roof...they had lots of those in Germany. We don't have a lot of them in this part of the world here. But anyhow, I was standing under this terracotta roof when this British halftrack came by there. The Germans I guess just got tired of that gun, and about that time they let loose with...I don't know how many mortars, but that place really

stuck. I got a headache. The mortars hit that roof up there, and it blew...the smallest mortar that it had didn't come through that thing, but the explosive powder did that. I got a headache from smelling all of the explosive powder. But anyhow, I decided that I would let somebody else worry about that. I went back up the hill to my driver and went back to the outfit. We were still in that area, and we crossed...we eventually crossed and went up across the Elbe there. I was with the British Second Army way up on the other side of Berlin upon...next to the Baltic Sea. When the war was really...it wasn't really over at that time, but the handwriting was on the wall. The Germans had surrendered and they were coming down in droves. We were standing out at that time. We knew that it was over and ...they were....grounds soldiers and people like that they still had their arms...their weapons. We let them keep their own arms because we didn't what time they were going to turn around and start shooting back. But anyhow, we were happy...we were happy.

Interviewer: Well, the question that I...that you really got me wondering about because you went into the army before the drafts began and everything...

Lee: Well, there is a reason for that I was poor country farm boy and didn't have much to look forward too. That is why I joined the army.

Interviewer: Did you come from a big family?

Lee: No, there were only two of us. I had one brother. We were poor Mississippi farmers.

Interviewer: Yes, sir. So that was the reason why you enlisted. What made you decide to make a career out of it?

Lee: Well after the war was over, I had made arrangements with...let me tell you...while all of this was going on...I only had a 10th grade education all through the army, and I got promoted to a major with a 10th grade education. Some place along the line, they had test that you could take and I got credit for at least two years of college. I used to be an avid reader, and that is why I knew all of this. But anyhow, I had made arrangements to...with the University of Mississippi...Mississippi State University to go down there and go to school. Just before I decided not to, and I stayed in the army.

Interviewer: So, what was it like your experience of getting the opportunity to do all that travelling? Was that certainly...

Lee: Yeah, that was nice. My wife joined us on one those trips over there, and we were lucky. We were stationed at Italy and lived in...the Gritz area. Now let me tell you about...well I made a reference that we were right beside Yugoslavia border a while ago. Now we had several of the wives out there and my little son that was about four years old, they were shopping one day about a quarter of a mile where everything was peaceful, and I don't know where I was...we were on a training mission or something. But there were still some of our people in the officers' quarters in town that knew what was going on, and a bunch of shooting was going on. What had happened is a bunch of silly Yugoslavians had come into town and was shooting up the town. My wife and this boy...little boy was down there in the area where they were shooting. One of the officers got a jeep and ran down there and rescued them out of this area and nobody got hurt. Very seldom...I don't think that they could shoot straight. But anyhow, they were just making a lot of noise, and it scared the dickens out of them. They grabbed the jeep and came back in there. Yeah, it was an enjoyable trip.

Interviewer: Wow, I tell you what...we have covered so much ground. Is there anything that you can think of that you would like to share that we haven't talked about especially about your WWII experiences?

Lee: No, now we had...during all this time...we had only one casualty in our battalion during the whole period of war. It had no...this man had no business in doing what he did...he was just brave, and it was unfortunate that he got killed. We were on...we had some observers on the other side of a river...I forget the name of...it wasn't a very major river, but it was a boundary line. We had a few forces over there, and we had a forward observer over there. He was about to run out of batteries for his radio, so he couldn't talk back. This major, which all of us liked, decided upon himself to take him the batteries. He could have sent anybody else over there, but he decided to take them himself. About the time he got there...in fact, he had delivered the batteries and was on his way back, and a stray artillery shell landed in there and killed him. Just hazard, that is the way it was.

Interviewer: Well goodness, that is an interesting record though of such a...

Lee: Well it was about 4 or 500 men in this battalion.

Interviewer: Yes, sir. Wow. I am sure that the infantry were always glad to hear ya'll behind them.

Lee: Yes, that is right. They protected us. They do what they did for them.

Interviewer: Yes, sir. You made support for them and helped them to really push...let's see there was something that you mentioned that made me think of something that I wanted to ask. You mentioned about the only one casualty in your outfit. What...let's see...were there. I know what the question was...were there any types of new weapons that were coming along that hadn't really been able to be tested fully before the war that ya'll had the opportunity to really to put in.

Lee: The eight inch Howitzers was a relatively new weapon, but the system was not new. Everybody knew about the system. As far as we are concerned, the new thing was a rocket launcher that we had on there. We had...we didn't get to shoot those because we didn't get close to tanks...talking about tanks. One of our missions, I told you that I was there observer. I was observing one day and I had been told to go down and support the division to the right of us. Our battalion was still coordinating fire, and this was...we hadn't gotten to the Rhine River yet, at this particular case...and I looked out and I saw nine tanks coming...about the time that I saw the nine tanks a coming....my antenna fell. It was a little old telescope antenna that went out lodger of the airplane, and I finally got the antenna stuck back up. The reason it fell was it was cold up there and the rain. You know when the metal contracts when it gets cold, so it collapsed. I finally got it back up there and talked them in time to start shooting at them. Well, it took them a long time to decide that I really knew what I was looking at and by that time they were getting pretty close to the front lines. People with tank destroyers and other people at like were shooting at them too, but anyhow, one of them got all of the way through. I don't know whether I got him or somebody else got him. His tracks were there; he was just running around in circles. Somebody eventually killed him, but that was about the tank.

Interviewer: Yes, sir. Being up in the plane, you were able to see so many things that were going on. I was going to ask you to share with us a couple of examples of some of the..maybe one of the most enjoyable moments that you had if you could think of one that you experienced during the war.

Lee: The best thing is when it was all over with, I guess [laughter]. That was it because you never knew what a stray round was going to do...like the major that got killed. That was just a haphazard. You think you are safe, and then a stray round comes in and you don't know. When the shooting ends then you are alright then you don't have to worry. We didn't have to worry about the mines then that we had been having in the last two or three wars. We had mines, but they weren't as extensive. Now, after the war was over we came back and occupied little towns, you know, until we finally came home.

Interviewer: So ya'll were part of the occupied force?

Lee: Yeah, we...our outfit stayed over there. See we came in on D + 90, so we didn't have as much time as some of the other outfits so we stayed over there.

Interviewer: So ya'll had to make your points up by staying?

Lee: Yeah, by that time I was a captain and was commanding the headquarters. I was always the mayor of the little towns that we come in. We didn't have organized what we have now...we had military people just going in there and we had to do it as we were going. It was my job to be...I was appointed the mayor in each town that we went into...

Interviewer: Well goodness, I tell you what your experiences are just incredibly rich, and you are the first person that I have had the pleasure of visiting with that went in and joined the United States Army on their own and long before the war and made a career out of it.

Lee: Yeah, when that was all over with I retired and came back here and went to Austin Peay and graduated from Austin Peay in 1961.

Interviewer: What was your major area of study? I am just curious.

Lee: industrial arts...I had a history....my major was History and Industrial Arts, and but that is it. I minored in Biology.

Interviewer: That is a wonderful background. It sure is.

Lee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Well I just want to thank you so very much for talking with us this afternoon, and I know that we need to cut the interview a little short because of some time scheduling and all. I just thank you so much Mr. Lee for joining us, and I know it will mean an awful lot to our viewers in the future to hear your story.

Lee: Well...after I graduated from Austin Peay and taught at Clarksville High School for a long time until we started getting all of this fancy equipment in and building around houses and so forth. Then I stopped teaching and started taking care of that. I retired from the school system in 1979.

Interviewer: Well good gracious, you have had at least two careers now.

Lee: There was another one. While I was teaching, I was moonlighting on the two-way radio business on the side. I had a little small two-way radio business, and I retired from that in 1995.

Interviewer: Well, do you still tinker with radios?

Lee: Very seldom, I was also an amateur radio operator.

Interviewer: I was wondering if you had a hound set.

Lee: I am W4NGK, and I am also on the internet now...AOL.

Interviewer: So, you are still right in the middle of all the communications?

Lee: Communications is...it has expanded. We didn't know anything about satellites back then, and satellites...I don't know what would happen if someone learned to shot them down, but we are going to be in big trouble if they ever learn that.

Interviewer: Yes, sir. Wow, I am so delighted. Thank you so much for sharing your story with us, and that will conclude our interview. I want to thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Lee: Thank you.

[End of interview]