

LAWTON M. CHILES CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM, FLORIDA SOUTHERN COLLEGE

Oral Interview With: Dr. Carroll Blake Gambrell, Jr.

Interviewer: James M. Denham

Place of Interview: Estates at Carpenters
Lakeland, Florida

Date of Interview: March 26, 2015

M = James M. Denham ("Mike")

C = C. B. Gambrell

M: Today is March 26, 2015, and I am resuming my conversation with Dr. C. B. Gambrell. My name is James M. Denham, and once again we are resuming our conversation today and we are about to begin discussing Dr. Gambrell's experiences in WWII. Dr. Gambrell, how are you doing today?

C: Good to be here.

M: Good. We left off last time, you were training, leading into your service in WWII. One of the things we might not have covered that thoroughly, is the type of training you did, and is there anything you would like to say about the training you received? Was it intensive? Was it physical? Was it classroom? What were some of the things that stand out about your training?

C: Well, the training that I experienced early on once I had been transported from Fort MacPherson in Atlanta to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, it was a big engineering base and I went there for specialized basic training. That went on intensively for about five weeks, and at the end of the five weeks, not that that was a particular goal to achieve, they called me out and sent me out across the base for some testing. Of course, anything to get out of basic training was welcomed. So I went over there and along with a good many other people who had been recruited from various locations, and went through a testing program. Several days later, they notified me that I was going to the University of Wyoming, it was a classification center. And it turned out that was a screening process for people to go into what was called the Army Specialized Training Program the ASTP program, where they sent various enlisted people to colleges all across the country. And the classification center at the University of Wyoming handled a great many of those assignments. I was there for several weeks, three weeks I guess, and all of the people who had gone there with me had since left and gone to their next assignment. I was pretty well left there and I wondered if they had not lost my records somewhere. The group I was with slept on cots in the gymnasium. I think I slept under the hoop and so forth. In any event, I was there for a period of three weeks, and they called me out and along with thirty-seven other people, and thirty-eight of us boarded a train and were headed for Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.

M: What was the daily activity like at Yale? Would you do classroom, would you do physical training?

C: It was one hundred percent academic experience.

M: So it was classroom.

C: Yes. We took regular classes out of the catalog and so forth. One of the features I shall always remember. We were the first contingent of Army people to arrive at Yale. They gathered us on what was called the Green, it was an open lawn type area, and Glenn Miller and his Band were there. They had recently joined the Air Corp. Glenn and his musicians welcomed us to with a concert to Yale University.

M: How many were in your group would you say?

C: There were thirty-eight of us; others came along later. I think the total contingent of Army troops there must have been something in the neighborhood of 125 to 130.

M: We've already gone through your post Yale period and you are moving forward to go over across, and of course your marriage. We covered some of that. So take us to maybe the first five or six days before you got on the ship to go across.

C: The unit that I joined, after having left Yale, was a combat engineer unit and they were on maneuvers in Tennessee sleeping in pup tents, dusty roads or else muddy roads and we gathered up all of our equipment, mostly rolling stock, loaded up and drove half way across the country to Camp Gruber, Oklahoma, where we were doing staging work for shipment overseas. I guess that's why we were there at Gruber. That was the home base of the unit prior to maneuvers, so they returned home so to speak. We did preparation work there for what was to come -- ordering equipment, lots of equipment which included big items such as prime movers, Caterpillars, and so forth. In any event, we boarded a troop train and off we went to the port of embarkation at I believe New York City, it could have been in that harbor area. I don't remember just for sure. We boarded the ship and it turned out that the ship had been a liberty vessel and had been converted for troop carrying. The bunks were tightly placed, not much room

hand and eat with the other one

M. Now were there any calisthenics or anything like that?

C. No, and come to think of it, if there had been, it would have been a welcomed activity.

M. So, when you got to England, where the houses they put you in, were there families living in the houses?

C. No, they moved them out.

M. Okay. What did you think of, this was a whole new country, what were some of the things that struck you in terms of the differences, and that sort of thing, or were you even mindful of that?

C. Well, everything was new to me, and driving on the wrong side of the road was a problem for our drivers and we had any number of small accidents and so forth until they got used to it. The Captain called me in and said that we had a problem. The rail head which brings in rations is quite a ways away and I need to send someone over there to orchestrate that whole operation, and he asked me to do it. I was pleased to do so. Twice a week I would go with two trucks, sometimes three, to load up the rations to feed all of our people through the mess hall process. Going through some of those British towns was quite interesting, and I'd always had an interest in history. We went through one town and here was a big castle over on the right hand side, and a hill moved out to the left rather abruptly and half way up that hill was one of these towers, it was round, and it was built as a defense mechanism back in the crusades time. I thought, boy I'd like to go over there and look at that thing first hand. Well, I had some free time later and I walked around in the neighborhood and I thought if I could get a bicycle, I could ride out to that little town. Well, I saw a man on the street and asked him where I could rent a bicycle, and he told me I could borrow his. He took me to his home and turned his bicycle over to me and didn't take my name, a deposit or anything. I thought, boy, he sure is trusting! So I got on the bicycle and biked out to that little town and I thought maybe I'd go over to the castle first. So I went over to the castle and went up to the front door. The front door was the biggest door I'd ever seen in my life, and I banged on the door. A butler came to the door and looked down his nose at me rather dramatically, and said, "Yes?" I told him I was a GI there for the war effort, and asked if I could visit his castle and grounds. He told me I could visit the grounds, but the castle wasn't available. So I walked around the gardens and so forth associated with that castle and came back, got on the bike, and drove to go up that hillside to that round type tower that had been built several centuries earlier, and I did. I couldn't take the bike up the hill, so I got off and walked up the hill. Well, I had forgotten that inside of that circular structure there would have been at one time, a stairway. It had rotted and gone away so about all I could do was to go through the open door and look around. I admired the construction work because it had

were the working company that did the jobs. The headquarters company provided the plans and supervision and coordination and so forth. I was in the headquarters company. I was in the S4 Division that had to do with supplies, materials, and that sort.

M. Were you a lieutenant?

C. At that point in time, I was a corporal.

M. Okay. So, when you got there, I guess you had another regiment training established. Walk us through the daily activities you would have gone through every day.

C. Well, in my case, I was awfully busy keeping the unit supplied and following up on the various needs and so forth. In the meantime, others in the headquarters company were busy acquiring equipment and so forth from the various depots to supply the line company so they would have the equipment available to do their job. That went on, we were in England, well, the Battle of the Bulge started about that time, the sixteenth of December, I guess. We were alerted right away to move across the channel into France and on to the direction of the Bulge. I was selected to go on board ship with the equipment and the rest of . . . well, let's see, about four or five of us, were in that capacity, and the rest of the people were taken across in a troop ship. They moved to a staging area, a farm-type area that somebody had rented from the farmers. We were headed for the Port of Le Havre, and when we loaded up and off we went, we thought it was going to be an overnight trip, and that we would unload the next morning. Well, about two weeks later, we were still on board ship, waiting in line waiting for our opportunity to dock to unload. We had to wait our turn. In the meantime, submarines were active in the channel. I was hoping that somehow the Germans would forget we were even there. One of the activities of the submarines, they wanted to sink as many ships as they could in the mouth of the harbor to block the harbor. It just didn't come to pass. The ships they sunk, were farther out in the channel and that was really not a problem for us to get in and out of the harbor. We unloaded there at the harbor and the equipment went out to the staging area that had already been occupied by our people and we were there for a short time until we collected all of our troops and so on, and then we went off in the direction of the breakthrough of the Bulge.

M. So you were in England how long?

C. About, almost three months.

M.

M.

M. How many miles from the coast, from the port, to the staging area, or do you remember? Was it about fifty miles?

C. I guess it was about 50 to 100 miles. And the roads over there were vastly different than in this country. They were narrow and they were curvy. The bridges; you never knew if a bridge was strong enough to hold up your equipment. We had one case, right now I can't tell you just where it was, we were pulling a trailer with a Caterpillar tractor on it that had an A frame type mechanism on it and it was supposed to go under a railroad and it hit the railroad trestle member and moved it several inches and the train came along and jumped the track! We had to take care of that problem.

M. Did you, in the staging area, moving through, of course you were working hard and you don't have much time off to observe anything, did you see any evidence of damage and fighting? Were there people in distress, were there bombed out places?

C. Well, the French, in my opinion, adjusted rather rapidly to the big change and they apparently had been looking forward to it for quite a while because they just moved down and took over and were quite operational, I thought. Yes, the damage that took place was mostly from artillery shells. There was, I don't believe, any aircraft bombs and so forth at that point.

M. Now, at this time, d

M. Where were you?

C. I was on my way there with a load of equipment.

M. So, what happened then?

C. Well, the bridge was gone and we pulled back and lost a lot of equipment when it went down with the bridge. We pulled back and had to reorganize because we had lost quite a number of personnel and a lot of equipment. We backed off and did what was necessary to become operational again. Then we, well, if I don't tell you this item, I'll forget it. At that point in time, I was sleeping in a cloak room of a schoolhouse down river a little distance. There was a sort of mansion on the western side of the river, I guess a wealthy person must have lived there, the Colonel took over that residence and the German lady, who I guess owned the house, she was forever giving him a bad time about his personnel not operating correctly and so forth. About that time, while we were still there reorganizing, a USO troop showed up. Some of those girls had short skirts and all that and would bounce around on stage – we used the stage in the schoolhouse. They sang and danced for us, and we just thought that was too much to pass up.

M. While we are talking about that, and one of the things that we haven't mentioned at all is, you did mention the incident with the bike, and the kind gentleman that loaned you the bike in Britain, and then you were obviously in France for quite some time and then you moved into Germany later on, can you reflect a little bit on some of the interactions you had with the people in England and then France and then when you crossed into Germany?

C. They were all, no matter what nationality they were all very understanding and very helpful. I still remember we moved into one German town and the part of the residence that they assigned us, there were about three of us that were to stay in that, the German family moved out into the back yard, sort of like a garage or something back there, and they moved into that garage while we were there, and we had their whole house. They didn't complain at all. There was a latrine back there, and several of our people were using the latrine and they carried toilet paper roll with them. The German man saw that, and he came over and asked me if I would give him some toilet paper. I gave him a whole roll and you would have thought I had given him quite a treasure.

M. So, did you anticipate when you knew you were in Germany, obviously you were in France, but when you crossed into Germany, did you anticipate . . . what was going through your mind?

C. I personally, was very curious

C. Yep.

M. So, walk us through the concluding months of the war.

C. Well, as things began to speed up in terms of movement of troops and did our best to keep up with the infantry, behind, and take care of things. We had to do something with respect to the flow of traffic – the civilian type flow of traffic. They had things and necessities that needed to be taken care of and so forth.

M. Refugees I guess?

C. Have you ever heard of a Bailey bridge? That was invented in England and you could span across a crevasse with a Bailey bridge. It was put together like an Erector set; a gigantic Erector set. We used that in several places. Our line companies knew how to construct those bridges and the components of the bridge would be brought up by big trucks. Several trucks, maybe eight or ten trucks; it took that many to carry the bridge and its components. Well then, if you put a bridge up, then you have to build access roads and exit roads and so forth. We were awfully busy keeping things moving and when the enemy moved ahead rapidly, they bypassed some towns. Well, it fell on part of our assignment to clear out some of those towns if at all possible. There was one town there that I was given the responsibility of clearing it up this particularly area over here, borderline business area, I went in this one building, and it was a motorcycle shop. Did I tell you this earlier? There was a brand new Bosch motorcycle. I had a conference with myself. I knew if I passed it by, the next fellow that came along would take it. So I took it. I had a personal motorcycle for a while. Whenever we would move from one town to another town, I had a couple of friends in the motor pool, they would load my motorcycle up and tie it to the side of a Caterpillar tractor and off they went. When we settled in Wildberg, the Mayor moved out and we had his complex, and it was on the side of a hill and a very prominent facility. I woke up, I believe it was a Sunday morning, and it was early and the cook had not gotten to his job at least, I had some time on my hands and I thought, "Boy or boy, why don't I just get on this motorcycle and ride around!"

C. Yes.

M. Are there still incidents where you are still taking fire from people, are people firing?

C. No. We were seven kilometers down the road from Wetzlar, Germany, where the famous Leica cameras were made. We were in Asslar I guess it was. We were in Wilberg when we were given orders to prepare to ship – when the war was over we thought they were going to send us to the Far East. Things there moved along rapidly and the unit – I was designated to stay behind, there were about ten of us that were selected to stay behind and turn in all of our equipment – the rest of them loaded up and got on board a ship and off they went. They were going to go through the United States on their way to the Far East and they got to the United States and the war was over, over there too. They got home early.

M. Were there any incidents between the motorcycle incident and the surrender that you can remember vividly? May 8th I think is when the surrender occurred. Are there any incidents that you recall that between that time and the surrender that were memorable that you would like to talk about?

C. Yes, where we were quartered, there was a canal for shipping purposes. Along the canal were locks. Station houses for the person who monitored the locks lived with his family. Several of us, three or four of us, went down and watched the locks operate, and we got to know the family. They were very gracious and understanding. Maybe they did that because they knew it was good to do rather than a heartfelt feature. The canal itself was probably fifteen feet wide, and I don't know how deep it was, but it flowed full of water the whole time we were there. The locks worked beautifully, and there was a small amount of canal traffic.

M. What went through your mind the day you learned the Germans had surrendered? What was that day like?

C. Well, first of all the cooks gave us a good meal. We celebrated with a pretty good meal that day, but it was difficult for most of us to understand and appreciate what all took place. We just didn't know what the next move – if that hadn't of happened, we knew we were pushing ahead and taking over territory and so forth. When you stop, what do you do? We didn't understand and it was a while, maybe a couple of days before we really understood what had taken place and our part in it.

M. Did you immediately start thinking, "I can't wait to get home!"

C. Oh, yes, we were always . . .

M. You were just thinking how you could get out of there and get on a ship.

C. Somebody in the high command developed what was called a point system. Every soldier, every person, officers included, participated in the point system, and you went home by

C.

C. I was discharged in February, and I worked for the Crow Construction Company for several months following that while things settled down. I did get a temporary job with Mr. Shepherd who was part of the management of that company. I had to get ready to go to school in September so I was there at Howard for an academic year. By that time the GI's were inundated colleges everywhere.

M. Talk about that a little bit. Talk about how that transformed.

C. The colleges that I dealt with were mainly three I guess, University of Alabama Residence Center at Birmingham, Howard College and later on Clemson University. They adjusted to the influx of GI student and processed all of the paperwork to not only admit you to the college, but they had books you bought from their bookstore, you had in some cases to live in their dormitory and eat in the dining room and so on. I lived at home in Olive's house while I was at Howard College, and my Dad had been a student at Clemson for a short time in WWI. He had kept up with some of the activities there and when I applied to go to Clemson, I was turned down because I was not a South Carolina resident. They were giving preference to those people. My Dad said, "I know the alumni director, I'll see if he can help us." He wrote a letter to him and the next thing I knew, I had an admission slip to go to Clemson. I went there and I was a student there for two, two-and-a-half years I guess. I guess ninety percent of the enrollment was returning GIs. When I was graduated, in 1949, the commencement speaker was J. Strom Thurmond. I don't know if he was a graduate or not, but he was the governor.

M. Yes, Governor. Okay.

C. He was the commencement speaker. Then I was invited to stay on the Junior Faculty in the Textile School and I took that job and by that time Olive had a job in the Treasurer's Office.

Battalion. They were alerted for shipment for San Francisco to the Far East. Well, they never told me one thing or another. They just assumed I was going with them. They shipped me a foot locker and I don't know what all. I didn't feel too good about that, so I called up some headquarters somewhere to find out what the story was with me. Well, they had never heard of me and I didn't get an answer there. They sent a troop train in to load up all those people, and by the way they were getting their equipment – we had done this before – they were getting their equipment and everything ready for shipment. Well, the day before the troops were to load on the train, the IG came over from Atlanta from Fort McPherson. I understand he went down every personnel. He said, "What's this man doing here?" That was me! They said, "Well, he's here on active duty." He said, "Well, have you made preparations to separate him?" "No, we are taking him with us!" He told them, "No you are not. He's here until the first of September and then he goes back to civilian status." "Oh, no! We need him!" He wouldn't approve it. The day before the shipment took place, I got pulled off the shipping list. I served out my remaining three month time in the post engineers.

M. So, how do you account for that? Just luck?

C. Well, somebody followed the rules is really what took place. Now if the IG hadn't come over there, I'd have been in Korea. I don't know whether that was a fluke or what. I'd never experienced anything like that.

M. Did you do another year at Clemson?

C. Oh, yeah. I was two years on the faculty there. Then I told Olive I liked teaching, it is interesting and rewarding, but if I'm going to be in teaching, I need some advanced degrees. We decided that I ought to go on for a Masters degree. I went to the University of Florida.

M. Now did you consider, you have an Engineering degree, but that seems to me that would have been in high demand? Did you ever consider going into private industry working for a construction company?

C. I worked for the Boeing Company.

M. The Boeing Company, that kind of thing. You didn't like that as much as teaching even though it was probably more money?

C. Yes, you know what my salary was as a teacher? Twenty-six hundred dollars a year!

M. Yes.

C. And we weren't hurting.

M. What was the salary at Boeing?

C. Twice that.

M. That is probably a pretty good place to wrap up for today. What we will do next time is pick up with your career.

C. There may be some gaps in there too, and you might like me to go back and fill in. I'll be glad to do tt2 (T0 Tm /TT50 0 0 50ET Q 0.lh(08cm BT 50 0 0 50 0 0 Tm /TT1 1 Tf () Tj ET Q 0.24 0 0 0.24