

The National Museum of the Pacific War
Nimitz Education and Research Center
Fredericksburg Texas

Interview with:
Gilbert Esensee
29th Infantry Division-175 Regiment
March 25, 2014

This is Ed Metzler. Today is March 25, 2014. I am in Fredericksburg, Texas and I am interviewing Mr. Gilbert Esensee, at his home. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of information related to World War II.

Ed Metzler: Gil, let me start by thanking you for spending your time this morning, to share your World War II experiences with us. I would like to get started by having you introduce yourself by giving us your full name, where you were born and when, and we will take it from there.

Gilbert Esensee: My name is Gilbert Esensee. I was born right here on this property August 6, 1925.

Ed: Was it this house?

Gil: No, it was down by the road. My dad had a service station.

Ed: What did your dad do for a living?

Gil: He ran a service station.

Ed: Do you remember what year he opened that service station?

Gil: I believe it was 1923.

Ed: That was the day when people were still driving Model Ts.

Gil: That is right.

Ed: What about your mother? Was she a homemaker?

Gil: Yes.

Ed: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Gil: I had four brothers and three sisters.

Ed: That was eight children.

Gil: Yes, but there are only three of us still alive.

Ed: Were you the youngest?

Gil: I was the second youngest. My brother is 84. He is four years younger.

Ed: Did you grow up here in Fredericksburg?

Gil: Yes, sir.

Ed: Did you go to school here?

Gil: Yes. I graduated when I was six-teen year old. I had started right after I turned six and it so happened that they put a grade in, there were only eleven grades to start with and they put another grade in that was behind me, so I moved up a grade.

Ed: So, did you graduate in 1941 or 1942?

Gil: 1942.

Ed: So, the war had started. Do you remember, when the war started? Do you remember December 7th? If so, tell me what happened.

Gil: Back then, there wasn't really that much information to get. We just heard that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. I went ahead and went to work in San Antonio at Fair Maid Baking Company. I was upset about what was going on over there with Germany, I'm German myself, and with what Hitler was doing which was not right. I decided to enlist. I had been drafted but for some reason my blood pressure was high, so I didn't pass my physical.

Ed: Tell me about it.

Gil: They gave me a physical in San Antonio and I didn't pass because of my blood pressure, so I worked on that, because I wanted to go help fight. When I was nine-teen, I decided to join the service.

Ed: How did you get your blood pressure down?

Gil: I don't know, really? Well I joined and they sent me to Camp Roberts, California for my Basic training.

Ed: Where is that?

Gil: Well, it's kind of out on the desert. It was hot. It was out in the country and there was no place to go that was close by. We were just stuck there. We were supposed to get seventeen weeks of Basic and we were out on bivouac during our fourteenth week, when they called us all together for a meeting. This was in 1944. They told us to pack up our gear and we headed back to camp. Come to find that the German Borsch happened and they needed more soldiers over there, so we only had fourteen weeks of basic instead of the seventeen.

Ed: So, you are talking about the Battle of the Bulge, correct?

Gil: Right. As soon as we got back into camp, they gave me a three-day pass to go home and then straight up to Fort Mead, Maryland.

Ed: How did you get out to California for Basic training, on the train?

Gil: Yes,

Ed: How about when you went to Fort Meade?

Gil: We went by train.

Ed: Do they feed you, when you are on those trains?

Gil: No. I got that wrong. It was a plane ride out of San Antonio.

Ed: Really?

Gil: When I came back, it was a train ride.

Ed: What kind of things did they train you on, when you were in Basic training?

Gil: They taught us how to use the rifle and bayonet and they sent us through the infiltration course, where real bullets were flying right over your head and you crawl through. At night they used tracers and you could see them.

Ed: How are you feeling about this during this training? Here you are a young kid that had never been shot at before?

Gil: It was somewhat scary.

Ed: So, you flew up to Fort Meade and what did they do with you then?

Gil: They put me on a boat to go to England and that was about a twelve- day trip.

Ed: Was this a Troop Ship?

Gil: Yes.

Ed: Did you get sea-sick?

Gil: No not then, but going from England over to France, that is some rough water. I didn't really get that sick, but man, some of them got really sick. You could be standing in the chow-line all of sudden the guy in front of you would vomit. Sometimes, I would just turn around and leave.

Ed: Did they feed you ok on that boat?

Gil: Yes.

Ed: Where did you sleep?

Gil: We had bunks.

Ed: What time of year was this, when you are going over?

Gil: It was sometime in the early part of 1945.

Ed: Where did you land in England, when you arrived?

Gil: I can't recall the exact place. Then we had to go through the English Channel.

Ed: You went to England first, so what did they do, put you in a camp for a while?

Gil: No. It was straight over there.

Ed: What did England look like to you?

Gil: Well, we didn't get to see much of it.

Ed: At that point, were you assigned to the 29th Infantry Division?

Gil: Yes.

Ed: You went from England and you landed in France.

Gil: We landed at La Have.

Ed: What was France like?

Gil: We didn't get to see much of that either. We went straight, in box cars that were so crowded that you couldn't even lay down to sleep. You had to sit back to back. We were stacked in there like sardines, in those boxcars. It was about a three-day ride to get up to the front-lines.

Ed: So, you went right into action. At that point, did you have any buddies that you knew pretty well?

Gil: No, not really.

Ed: That was kind of scary, wasn't it?

Gil: Yes. But you just have to do it. That's the way war is.

Ed: They say that war is Hell. What did you have to eat during the trip, K-rations?

Gil: Yes. That is what we had for a long time. In the front-lines, that was all that you had.

Ed: Where did the train stop and let you off?

Gil: I can't remember that, but I did end up on the front-lines.

Ed: Did they take you all the way to Germany?

Gil: Yes. We had orders to start pushing back. We were bushing them back, pushing them back. It was on the Roer River, when I got up on the front-lines. We were holding for about a week before it was decided that we attack and go across.

Ed: So, this is the Roer River, not the Ruhr?

Gil: Yes.

Ed: So, they said, get ready we are going to attack.

Gil: Yes. We were holding for about a week and sitting a fox-hole and you could hear the machine guns, about five o'clock in the morning. The Germans had this fast machine gun. We didn't have anything that fast. (gives verbal rendition of German machine gun and American machine gun.). You would hear that and man, you would stick your head down in that fox-hole. We set up about fifty yards from the river and about five in the morning, they would let us know they were still over there. The machine guns would open up. They didn't know what they were shooting at but they were firing anyway.

Ed: How did you get across the river?

Gil: We crossed on a swing bridge and that is where it all started.

Ed: Tell me what happened.

Gil: Well, it was early in the morning and as I crossed the river, just about 100 feet from the river there lay one of our soldiers face up. I can still see his face. Just lying there. It was about 100 yards from there when all of a sudden: you have heard about the 88, the "Screaming meanies".

Ed: I have heard about the 88.

Gil: You could hear them and when the sound slowed down, you knew the shell was about to land. This one went whoooooo and we all hit the ground. Then all of a sudden BANG!, a piece of shrapnel from one of the shells that hit about 25 feet from me, hit me in the forehead. I had a hole about the size of a silver dollar, in my helmet and blood was running down my face. I was wondering what had happened. The Medic sent me back across the swinging bridge to get sewed up. After I got sewed up, they told me that I wasn't hurt that bad but they could send me back to a rest area for two weeks. I told them no. I was gone only a couple of hours, but during that time, an open field that my platoon had to cross, which was kind of like a rail road station, and the Germans had set up a machine gun and a lot of my friends got half-way across and were killed trying to cross that field. So, it was my luck that I did get hit when I did and I spent those two hours back, getting fixed up.

Ed: That was an important two hours for you.

Gil: Yes, it was.

Ed: So, a lot of the fellows in your outfit were killed or wounded, crossing that field.

Gil: Right. After that, we marched and marched. The Germans just kept falling back. They didn't give much opposition, except one town. We had a real problem and my Sergeant got wounded in that battle.

Ed: Tell me about it.

Gil: In the small village, there was a sniper in one of the taller buildings. He must have got away some way, I don't think we ever got him. We finally got into the building and we didn't find anybody, except some people who lived there.

Ed: Where was your sergeant wounded?

Gil: In the leg. We had to get a new sergeant. From there on we just kept marching and marching, from town to town. We didn't encounter any problems.

Ed: What did these towns look like?

Gil: They were demolished. Oh, man! A lot of them were just flattened.

Ed: I guess they rebuilt all that after the war. Did you see any dead livestock and stuff like that?

Gil: Not that I recall.

Ed: What kind of casualties were you seeing with the other guys in your outfit? Were a lot of the guys wounded or was it pretty easy at that point, or what?

Gil: No, we didn't have any other than those I have told you about. All the way to the What River; and that's where we held to wait for the Russians on the other side.

I'll tell you what. The Germans were so scared of the Russians that some of them tried to swim that river to get to us, so they could surrender.

Ed: I can see why, because the Russians were going to get revenge.

Gil: I remember, after the war, they sent a whole bunch of us to Julich, Germany just to stand guard.

Ed: Is that near the Elbe river.

Gil: It is back some.

Ed: Let's go back to when you were wounded. You said that there was a big hole in your helmet. Did you keep that helmet?

Gil: Yes. I carried it around. I met my wife in Tennessee and I had a job in Arizona. And after moving around some, I was offered a job in Chicago. So, we packed up our stuff on a trailer and I had my steel helmet right on top. It was stolen, after we got to Chicago. I found us a place to stay and the next morning my helmet was gone.

Ed: That's a shame. Now when you were first hit with the shrapnel, did you know what happened to you?

Gil: Yes, I did.

Ed: Did you think you were hurt bad?

Gil: Yes. Blood was running down my face.

Ed: That means you were wounded in action and that means you were awarded a Purple Heart. Tell me when you got it and the circumstances were around that.

Gil: They called a meeting and had us standing in formation, in front of a bunch of Officers, and they called my name. I was nervous as I walked up there. I didn't know that I was going to get a Purple Heart at that time. They pinned that Purple Heart on my chest and we saluted.

Ed: How did you feel, when they pinned that on you?

Gil: I was proud.

Ed: It good they recognize that kind of thing. Do you still have your Purple Heart?

Gil: Yes. There it is, hanging on the wall.

Ed: Let us go back to when you were at the Elbe River. You said that some of the Germans were swimming the river toward the Americans, to surrender to the Americans, rather than the Russians. Tell me what you saw.

Gil: I didn't see that much. That is what I was told.

Ed: Did you see any of the Germans that had surrendered, up close?

Gil: No.

Ed: What did the German public look like, around these places where you had guard duty, such as at Julich.

Gil: They were friendly. Our sergeant and I would ride out into the country to get potatoes and stuff and we would swap cigarettes. They were hurting for cigarettes, so we would swap for potatoes and we would come back and have French fries.

They were just brain washed.

Ed: Did you smoke, when you were in the service?

Gil: That is when I started smoking.

Ed: How long did you smoke.

Gil: I quit about twenty years ago.

Ed: Lets go back to Germany. What were your Officers like?

Gil: They were really good.

Ed: Did you ever see any High Brass come through?

Gil: No.

Ed: You never saw Patton?

Gil: No.

Ed: Did you write letters home, while you were over there?

Gil: Yes.

Ed: Did they sensor your letters?

Gil: Yes. You couldn't really put anything in your letter.

Ed: You were basically doing guard duty in the village of Julich. How long were you doing that?

Gil: That is where we ended up.

Ed: Which Company were you in?

Gil: I don't recall.

Ed: You were in the 175th Regiment.

Gil: Yes.

Ed: Do you remember when V-E Day happened?

Gil: I remember that it was a happy occasion.

Ed: Did you have access to alcoholic beverages, while you were over there?

Gil: I didn't drink and I still don't drink.

Ed: You had not been over there long enough to come home, so what did you do?

Gil: I got shipped to Berlin and I guess it was about two months and they came up with this deal; If you re-enlisted, you would get to go home for three months and then you would get stationed where you chose. I got stationed at Fort Hood, Texas.

Ed: So, they gave you this deal. You could either stay there or can re-enlist and they would bring you home immediately, but you have to stay in an additional 18 months. So, you chose to resign and re-enlist, so you could get out of there.

Gil: I got discharged and re-enlisted the same day.

Ed: Why were you so anxious to leave?

Gil: I was home-sick for my family.

Ed: You had rather be home with family than in Germany.

Gil: Yes.

Ed: You made the big decision, so, they brought you home. Did you come back on another troop ship, or what?

Gil: Yes. It took ten or eleven days to get to the US.

Ed: How long after the war was over, before you came home?

Gil: It was about 5 or 6 months.

Ed: You spent some of the time in Berlin. Tell me what it looked like.

Gil: I stayed there about 2 months.

Ed: Tell me what Berlin looked like.

Gil: The part we were in was pretty much intact. We had some good houses to live in. We took over the houses.

Ed: Did the people who lived in the houses stay there too?

Gil: No.

Ed: That beats living in a fox-hole, doesn't it?

Gil: Yes.

Ed: Were you getting some real food, at that point?

Gil: Yes.

Ed: Did they have a Mess Tent, or what?

Gil: I don't recall, but I did eat well.

Ed: Did you swap cigarettes, candy and gum?

Gil: Yes. The kids would follow you around to pick up the cigarette butts.

Ed: How old were these kids.

Gil: They were of different ages.

Ed: The Germans had it pretty tough after the war.

Gil: Yes, they did.

Ed: How did it feel to get back to the United States?

Gil: It felt great.

Ed: Where did you land?

Gil: At Fort Meade. Then I took a train ride, all the way to San Antonio

Ed: How did you feel, when you can see Texas.

Gil: Just great.

Ed: So, the train came into San Antonio?

Gil: Yes. I worked in San Antonio, before.

Ed: Were you still living in Fredericksburg, when you were working in San Antonio?

Gil: I lived in San Antonio.

Ed: When you got back into San Antonio, what did you do? You are still in the Army, so what did they do with you?

Gil: I got three months at home.

Ed: So that's when you got the long liberty at home.

Gil: Right.

Ed: Did your dad put you to work in his service station?

Gil: No. I just loafed.

Ed: You still had 18 months to service, so what did they do with you?

Gil: We didn't do much. Our Platoon did march in the Madi Grau parade. We rode in trucks from Fort Hood, to New Orleans. It was a long drive. We also marched in Battle of Flowers parade in San Antonio.

Ed: After the eight-teen months, you went back to Civilian life.

Gil: Yes.

Ed: What do you think of the German people, after being shot at and wounded and things you saw?

Gil: I think they are just about like us.

Ed: Do you feel like that, when you went, as a young man, to Europe to fight, that it changed you as a person?

Gil: It probably did.

Ed: Did you ever get crossways with your Officers?

Gil: No.

Ed: Is there anything else we can talk about concerning your war experiences?

Gil: There is not much more to tell.

Ed: Thank you Gil, for taking the time for talking about your war experiences. I wish you still had your helmet.

Transcribed by:
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