

Veteran: HANNAN, Pat
Service Branch: ARMY
Interviewer: Robert Meschede
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Highlights of Service: **World War II; 504 Parachute Regiment; Campaigns in North Africa, Holland, Sicily, Anzio; Battle of the Bulge; Participated in liberation of Woebblin concentration camp.**

Interviewer: This is April 22, 2002. I am interviewing Pat Hannan, a World War II veteran. Mr. Hannan, are you aware that our conversation will be recorded, and that the tape and transcriptions will be placed in the Lee College Library?

Veteran: Yes, I am.

Interviewer: Basically, what we're trying to do is preserve our history. I'm going to ask you some questions. If you don't want to answer one of the questions, just go ahead and pass. What is your name? What branch of service were you in? What was your rank, and where did you serve?

Veteran: My full name is Gordon Patrick Hannan. I was in the U.S. Army during World War II. I was in the 31st National Guard Division to begin with, when we were nationalized in 1940. After that in March of 1942, I volunteered for the parachute school in Fort Benning, Georgia. I attended parachute school in the spring of '42 and I received my wings after qualifying jumps, and etc. We had to make five qualifying jumps. On July 4, 1942, I was assigned to the 504 Parachute Regiment of the 84th Airborne Division. We were stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I arrived in North Africa around the first of May of '43, and landed in Casablanca.

Interviewer: Was the war in progress during this time?

Veteran: No, the war in North Africa was over two days after we landed. At that time we went into Algeria and prepared for an invasion in Sicily. I went to Tunisia from

Algeria. The first large airborne operation of World War II was the invasion of Sicily, and the 82nd Airborne was the only airborne division involved in Sicily.

Interviewer: What made you decide to join the paratroopers versus the infantry or Navy or Marines?

Veteran: I was already in the Army since November of 1940, so all I did was stay in the Army and then volunteered for the parachute school. The principal reason was most of already had friends already there, plus they paid \$50 a month more. Before I was making about \$36 a month, so that \$50 a month more enticed a lot of us to join the paratroopers.

Interviewer: I heard that on the History Channel once, and a man mentioned the same thing. Your basic training—how was that? Was it extremely hard?

Veteran: It was extremely hard for the parachute school. It was all volunteers. No draftees were ever put in the airborne.

Interviewer: So you volunteered—weren't drafted. Tell me a little bit about your basic training—some of the hard points of your basic training.

Veteran: We did the same things that everybody else did, as far as running and jumping, walking seven miles around the airfield with full packs, and of course in the National Guard it was all just basic training. At the end, before I volunteered for the parachute school, I was sergeant in the 156th Infantry in the 31st Division, which is the Texas National Guard.

Interviewer: So, you're a native Texan?

Veteran: No, I was born and raised in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and it was in Lake Charles where I joined the National Guard. It was a Louisiana regiment that I was in. But then the training from the parachute school, we had a lot of different things from jumping off towers with just a harness on your back, sliding down a cable and tumbling exercises in order for you to learn how to land from the parachute. Then we learned how to pack our own chute. We had 250 foot towers, and they would pull us to the top with the chute already open, and then when it hit the top, it released it, and we'd fall free the 250 feet. Then to practice in the air, they

would have a harness they pulled you up on these same 250 foot towers, something like the bungee jumps of today, and after you got a certain height up the tower, it would release you and you would free fall with just your harness, and you just bounced when you got to the end of it. They made us change hands while we were falling with our ripcord with our chute, and so when you got to the bottom the first thing you checked was to see if your ripcord was in the opposite hand that you started with. It made you think and concentrate while you were falling. Then, of course, we had to jump five times in order to qualify for graduation from the parachute school and get your wings.

Interviewer: Then you're an official paratrooper.

Veteran: Right. Of course a lot of them didn't make it off the towers, because the towers were about fifty feet up in the air and you'd jump off with a static line on your back and nothing below you and nothing up there but a cable to hold you, and so you have to jump off this platform that's at an angle. After you're hooked on the cable and jump off, then you just slide down the cable from fifty feet up down to nothing. Other than that, it was pretty strenuous exercises. A lot of parachute training is different because of the tumbling and chutes and things.

Interviewer: So you didn't break your legs or anything?

Veteran: A lot of them did, but I never had a problem.

Interviewer: What weapons were you trained with. The Garand or the carbine?

Veteran: The M1 Garand. I had a carbine only for a short period of time, but principally all through the war I used the M1 Garand.

Interviewer: Is it true that a lot of paratroopers didn't even make it through basic training?

Veteran: A percentage of them dropped out.

Interviewer: So it was the tough ones that survived and made it through the basic training.

Veteran: A lot of 'em froze in the doors when it came time to jump out of the aircraft.

Interviewer: I'd be one of them, I'll tell you that much. I'm scared of heights myself. I guess you didn't participate in D-Day.

Veteran: No, and let me explain why. I made three airborne missions: Sicily, Salerno, and Holland, which the movie *A Bridge Too Far* was about that. In Sicily, I didn't jump, even though I made the mission. I jumped at Salerno and I jumped in Holland, but in Sicily we came in over the U.S. Navy, and it was all supposedly arranged that there would be no problem. There was some miscommunication involved, and the first worst case of friendly fire that ever occurred in World War II. We came in over the Navy about 500 feet.

Interviewer: Is that a low amount of feet for a jump?

Veteran: Yeah, that's low. Ordinarily in training we'd jump between 1,000 and 1,200 feet, so 500 feet is very low, because you don't have time to open your chute or your emergency chute. We came in over the Navy, and everything was supposed to be prearranged and they knew we were coming. Well, it seems that when we came in over them the Germans were also bombing them, and troops had already landed on the beach so they were attacking them. Our mission was to conquer an airfield. But anyway they opened up on us and twenty-two planes were shot down by the U.S. Navy.

Interviewer: And that was done by friendly fire?

Veteran: Right. Some of them had already unloaded, but there was about sixteen planeloads of paratroopers that were shot down. There were planes on each side of me at one time. My pilot dove for the water and we were in between all the ships, and somebody in there eventually noticed our insignia for an American plane and recognized a C47 and quit firing at us, but we already had holes in our wings from bullets, machine guns, and antiaircraft. We were all shot up. The pilot came down to about 50 feet above the water, and we thought we were going to hit the water, then he turned and we headed by to Sicily. You always have a jump master in each plane—officers or top sergeants or such as that. I had a warrant officer, and he could see the situation, and also the pilot of the plane usually gives us the green light to go, and of course he never gave us the green light. He wasn't about to jump us in the middle of the water, and I never did get

over the land from what I could observe. So, we headed back to Tunisia, and there were two or three planeloads of us that didn't jump. From Tunisia, we then rejoined our unit and went to Italy. The Texas 36th Division was the initial troops that landed with the support troops that landed in Salerno for the Italian Campaign, and the Germans were about to drive them into the sea. On the night of the 13th of September, my regiment, with some support, were jumped in about midnight. The reason I can remember it was the 13th is because I was the 13th man out of the plane. We jumped on the beaches of Salerno and went immediately to the front lines to assist in the 36th Division. From then on out I was in Italy. The 82nd Airborne did participate in D-Day, but what happened while we were in Italy I was in the 504 Parachute Regiment. The 82nd had two parachute regiments, the 504 and 505, and then they had a glider regiment, which was the 325th. After fighting the mountains above Naples, we were the first troops in Naples on October 1st.

Interviewer: I watched the HBO series *Band of Brothers*. I noticed, as you were talking about friendly fire, in the *Band of Brothers* they were getting hit by the Germans and everybody got scattered. Your first drop into a territory, were you scattered?

Veteran: Yes. More-so on the Holland jump, but it was pretty controlled, and in Salerno it was pretty controlled. It was about five days before the troops that were there hollered for help. We weren't supposed to jump, but they had flare pots for us.

Interviewer: What's a flare pot?

Veteran: A burning pot down on the beach to direct us, and then you had what they called "pathfinders" to jump ahead of you to have fires or beams or other things to spot you a landing place where they want you to jump. So we had the flare pots on the beaches at Salerno, so we were pretty much together there. Normally, though, they were scattered pretty well. So we went on through the mountains in Italy—in Naples, Pompei. We were the first to chute Pompei and Naples and they'd leapfrog units. So we stayed in Naples awhile, and another division went on ahead of us and within about three weeks we went back on the front lines up above Naples. The Army was constantly A-taching and D-taching units, so what

they did was come up with the invasion of Anzio, about 60 miles up the coast behind German lines.

Interviewer: So ya'll jumped behind the German lines?

Veteran: We didn't jump, because they called it off, and we went in by LCI landing craft onto the beaches of Anzio. So they A-tached my regiment, the only regiment out of the 82nd, to 3rd Division, so we went into Anzio. The rest of the division went on to England to prepare for D-Day, so we got stuck. We were in a parameter and couldn't do anything, and the Germans just had us all just pinned down there for about three months. While we were tied down in Anzio with the 3rd Division, they prepared for D-Day and replaced my regiment, the 504, with another regiment, which I think was the 508, and that's what happens with attaching and detaching. We were D-tached from the 82nd, we were A-tached to the 3rd Division. After Anzio we went up to England, but it was too late for us to get ready. We'd had about forty or fifty percent casualties, so we were, as General Ridgeway would say, we weren't ready for combat, so they replaced us. Then right after D-Day we were A-tached to the 82nd again for several jumps which were called off. Sometimes we were even in the planes over in England, and Patton would be moving too fast, and we'd had a bridge or something to capture, but he was already across it with his tanks. So we were called off. Our next jump was September 17th or 18th in Holland, and at that time at Nijmegen. The British 1st Airborne landed at Arnheim. They jumped about sixty miles behind the lines; we jumped between forty and fifty miles behind the lines. The 101st Airborne Division jumped at Einhoven(?) and they were jumped about thirty miles behind the lines. This where the title of the movie *A Bridge Too Far* came from and where the British 1st Airborne were wiped out. We at Nijmegen got the bridge, the 101st at Einhoven, so the British army in Belgium attacked the day of the jump, so they would reach us and pinpoint us in two or three days by following a corridor up to Arnheim on the Rhine. We were trying to get above the Germans and across the Rhine to come down behind them. That was on a Sunday afternoon. Jumping in Salerno was at midnight, jumping in Nijmegen was about noon on a Sunday, a clear day, so some of us were shot down. So

that's why I missed D-Day. I was A-tached to the 3rd Division and another division was A-tached to the 82nd in our place.

Interviewer: You fought the Italians and the Germans, right?

Veteran: Not really, because the Italians surrendered practically on the same day as the invasion of Italy on September 9th, so all of the American fighting through Italy was against the Germans. They had quite a few divisions in Italy.

Interviewer: That kind of answers my next question. Who did you think the most fierce fighters were—the Italians or the Germans.

Veteran: The Italians were lovers, they weren't fighters.

Interviewer: I know they occupied Greece for awhile, but they didn't do much fighting there.

Veteran: Albania and down into Greece.

Interviewer: Which specific battle did you think that the odds were totally against you? Was it when you were surrounded by the Germans?

Veteran: Anzio was bad, because we were surrounded by the Germans. The problem with Sicily was the friendly fire incident. A lot of the boys I finished parachute school with were all killed that one night. Then of course in Holland we were jumping about 50 miles behind the lines, so we were surrounded then, too. Weatherwise, it was the Battle of the Bulge.

Interviewer: Was it just one or two of your friends that you were close to that perished?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: Don't answer this question if you don't want to, but did you lose any of your real close friends?

Veteran: Yes. In fact, in Italy I lost some close friends, but most of my close friends that I went through jump school with were killed the night we went into Sicily by friendly fire. Then my best friend from my neighborhood, we went in the National Guard together and joined the parachute troops together, we graduated together from jump school, and then he was assigned to the 504. I was with him

all through Italy. When we jumped in Holland he was killed. He was my closest friend.

Interviewer: It must have been really hard for you to go on after that.

Veteran: Yes. They came and got me and said he was over there in a body bag if I wanted to see him, but his parachute didn't open, and it killed him.

Interviewer: Was it hard for you to keep on going after that?

Veteran: Well, no, because a lot of people got killed, but it was a personal loss. I was close to his mother and father and brothers, and we lived only about two blocks apart all through childhood.

Interviewer: Were you ever wounded in battle?

Veteran: No.

Interviewer: Did you ever have any close calls?

Veteran: My first experience on the front lines in Italy, the Germans were putting in barrage of mortars. We had got into some foxholes that had already been dug, probably by the 36th, and these mortars are laying around on top of my buddies in the foxholes. Then one hit about a foot or two from my foxhole, and just absolutely splintered my rifle. I laid my gun alongside me in the foxhole, so I don't know what would have happened if it had hit my gun instead of my head. So, I had a lot of close calls, from jumping, to firing the mortars for the German 88. That was their most famous.

Interviewer: Did you know about the zipper gun, what they used in their machine gun nests that shot with a continuous shot? Did you ever happen to run across any of that?

Veteran: Not really. A lot of that's the movies and aren't that accurate. Statistically, about seventy-five percent of World War II casualties weren't hand-to-hand fighting. It was artillery and mortars and such as that.

Interviewer: Did you write home a lot?

Veteran: We wrote frequently, and I got frequent letters and packages from home.

Interviewer: Was that a good source of morale for ya'll?

Veteran: Yes, very much so.

Interviewer: Was it like a piece of home for you?

Veteran: Yes, until you're actually home safe, especially when you're 18 or 19 years old. It's different from nowadays. Your childhood then with your family was much more closely knit in the thirties. I went through the Depression and all the thirties, and it was all very difficult in those days, so your family was very close knit. Like anybody else, I was homesick.

Interviewer: How old were you?

Veteran: I was 17. My mother had to make a mis-statement on my forms. You had to be 18 and I was only 17. {END OF SIDE 1}

{SIDE 2 BEGINS}

Interviewer: This is part two of the tape. I know a lot of Germans were POWs here in Texas. If you seen one of them on the road, would you have a hatred towards them?

Veteran: Not now. They were the enemy then. I spent two and a half years in the states, and I spent two and a half years overseas and that two and a half years was all against the Germans, so naturally they were the enemy.

Interviewer: Did you ever actually enter Berlin?

Veteran: No. I could have, because the 82nd Airborne became the occupation troops in Berlin, but they had a point system, and you were sent back home if you had a lot of points by the point system. So, right after the war, which was April and May, the 82nd Division was sent in for occupation duty. All of us were high point men, and points were awarded on length of service, battles that you've been in (like I had five battle stars), and etc.

Interviewer: Were you awarded anything?

Veteran: I have a Combat Infantryman badge, and the only way you could get it is if you were in actual combat, the Bronze Star, and then I have five battle stars, and three airborne mission stars that go on your wings. I have three stars on my wings for parachuting. I have a Belgium award and a Holland award, which wasn't given to me individually, but to my regiment for everybody in the Battle of the Bulge.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit more about the Battle of the Bulge.

Veteran: They had pulled the 82nd Airborne back from Holland, and we came back to Rhemes(?), France. I think that was December. I don't know what we were going to do after that. They jumped us across the Rhine or something. So on the night of December 21st or 22nd, we were all bedded down for the night and they come and got us out of bed, and had us on trucks within two hours headed for the front lines to try to stop this German assault for the Battle of the Bulge. So we went through Bastogne, actually, and went on the northern flank of the Germans, and the 101st behind us stopped in Bastogne, and you know their story. So we were on the northern flank with what they called the Allied Airborne, and at that time we were under Montgomery. The main thing about the Battle of the Bulge is the weather was horrible. People just froze in the snow. We had a lot of casualties in the Battle of the Bulge, but so did everybody, especially at the beginning. The weather broke a day or two after Christmas, because we could get some air support. That was the problem. When the Germans first broke through they purposely broke through in the worst weather, so the Air Force couldn't help us.

Interviewer: At that time did ya'll have air superiority?

Veteran: As soon as the weather broke, yeah, because that's when we started getting help from the air.

Interviewer: During the end of the war, I know Hitler was a madman and was sending young boys and older men, because he was desperate, crazy. Did you ever run across any of them?

Veteran: Young and old. Germany first lost some of their top soldiers in Africa during Rommel, and then throughout the war they lost the top line of their troops in training and officers and paratroopers. Plus they lost a tremendous amount in the Russian front. If it hadn't been for the Russian front, D-Day wouldn't have been successful.

Interviewer: A lot of people say that if Hitler hadn't tried to invade Russia that he possibly could have taken Europe, but trying to fight a war on two fronts...

Veteran: Yeah, that was one of his big mistakes.

Interviewer: You took a prisoner at least once. Did you ever come across someone and just surprise them and take them as a prisoner?

Veteran: We took a lot of prisoners?

Interviewer: Was a lot of them not wanting to fight?

Veteran: Yeah, they would come towards us with their hands up or a white flag. Not anything that would give me the Congressional Medal of Honor. A lot of things you see are just for the movies.

Interviewer: That's the reason we do these tapes, so we can get the facts from the people that were actually there.

Veteran: It wasn't all that heroic.

Interviewer: A lot of the Germans said they wanted to surrender to the U.S., because they knew they'd be treated a lot better than with the Russians, because they didn't send very many back. Texas, for one, got a lot of the German population. There's an old German soldier in the back of my neighborhood, and he was in the Hitler Youth, and they sent them with these things called tank busters on the Eastern front, and after the war was over they came to surrender to the U.S. rather than the Russians, because they know what would happen.

Veteran: I've got a collection of pocket watches and guns. I lost a lot of stuff I had when my house burned down in 1970—my original wings and a lot of German things that you could carry. We had big side pockets on paratrooper uniforms. I've still

got some Nazi flags with the swastika, and I still have two pistols that I got off of one German prisoner. One of them was down in his boot, and he gave me both of them. I got into trading for various things. I had more pistols than I needed and I'd trade pocket watches. A lot of trading between G.I.s. I have two Nazi flags.

Interviewer: How did you feel towards the end of the war? Did ya'll know it was coming to an end?

Veteran: Yeah.

Interviewer: I imagine you were still scared for your life.

Veteran: It gave you more hope that it was about over. The problem was down in Sicily and Africa, it was a hell of a feeling how long unofficially you might be tied up from the European war. You had no hope of getting home soon, and that made your homesickness worse. It was a very bleak outlook. In 1943 you couldn't see far enough to know when you'd be home again. After the Bulge and we were going through Germany, we met the Russians at a little town about a hundred miles north of Berlin.

Interviewer: So that gave you a good feeling then?

Veteran: A very good feeling, because you could see the thing was about to wind up.

Interviewer: Did ya'll have a problem with snipers in Germany?

Veteran: You always had problems with snipers.

Interviewer: Was that a major fear for ya'll once you got near the major cities?

Veteran: Not really. They were few and far between.

Interviewer: They used the K-98 bolt action rifle for their infantry gun for the most part. Did it give you a better feeling, infantry for infantry, to know that you had the Garand?

Veteran: Yeah, but overall the Germans had better hardware and clothes than we did for awhile, like the snowsuits. But German pistols, from the Lugers to the big 38s and their rifles and tanks, the Germans had quality equipment and they were

quality soldiers. That's why they could walk through France, and Poland, and Czechoslovakia. There's no comparison with the German soldiers. The English were good soldiers. You hear a lot of jokes, but they were good soldiers.

Interviewer: What about the French? Did you think they were overwhelmed?

Veteran: Yes. There was no comparison between the French soldiers and the German soldiers.

Interviewer: Didn't the Germans have a lot more training?

Veteran: Oh, yeah, and more of a nationalist spirit, and just made for a lot better soldier, because of training and their thinking. They had good hardware. Ours' came in a little late. Our tanks were made towards the end of the war, so we got with it as the war progressed.

Interviewer: Let me ask you one final question. Did you ever run across any of the concentration camps?

Veteran: Yes. I wasn't with the first ones through the gate. I didn't go in until the next morning. I think it was Woebblin {spelled by veteran}. I've seen pictures of it at that the Jewish Holocaust Museum in Houston, but it was everything you see on television.

Interviewer: It was horrible?

Veteran: Yeah. We found a lot of 'em dead where they came out of the gate towards the railroad tracks thinking they were going to escape. Then all across the yard was the dead and the dying. Then when we went inside, you've seen pictures of them in their bunks, and a lot of 'em were alive; a lot of them were dead. Most of those that were alive were so weak and skinny and couldn't move or walk. Actually we couldn't do anything for them. It wasn't a large camp, but there were hundreds of them and we had to wait for medics to come in. It took several days for them to get any assistance. It was just like you saw.

Interviewer: Was it a surprise when you saw it?

Veteran: I didn't know about it until I got there. I think through intelligence the Americans knew about the larger ones, like Auschwitz, Buchenwald, or Bergen-Belsen, but they had so many of them. The one we went in wasn't one of the big ones, so it wasn't as widely known. To my knowledge, they didn't have any advance warning that we were going to find it there, but you've got to remember when you're down in the lower ranks, there's a lot going on at headquarters that you don't know about. When you're down there as a private first class, you don't know what's going on with Patton or Ridgeway. Ridgeway was my division commander. He's the general that replaced MacArthur in Korea.

Interviewer: Who was your general?

Veteran: Matt Ridgeway. He came on right after the war as chief of staff and made four-star general. He was my general when we went over, and until they formed the Allied Airborne army about the time of D-Day, then Gabbon became my general of the 82nd. Ridgeway was like a full commander of several airborne divisions: the 101st, the 17th, the 82nd, were all under Ridgeway. You never knew.

Interviewer: It must have been mind-boggling when you came up on Woebblin.

Veteran: Oh yeah, it was totally unexpected by us. The larger ones were known from intelligence from the underground, the French, and they always had partisans, and they'd get that information back from Air Force photos and such. We weren't privileged at our level to see all that stuff. We really didn't know anything about it until we actually saw it.

Interviewer: I appreciate it, Mr. Hannan. I appreciate the interview. If there's anything else you'd like to add, please go ahead.

Veteran: No, I think that covered it in general as far as where I went and what I did, my unit, and who I was with.

Interviewer: One more question. What was the percentage of a paratrooper making it home alive? Do you know?

Veteran: No, that would be difficult to say. I have my regimental book that shows all the KIA, MIA, WIA, and all of that. I've got a long list of killed in action in my regiment. I'm sure it would be at least twenty-five percent.

Interviewer: So you definitely feel like a lucky man to be able to breathe air and living now. I'm definitely glad you're here. I appreciate you doing the interview.

Veteran: Thank you very much.

{END OF INTERVIEW}