



Ernie Mettenet

United States Army

1st Sergeant

European Theater

Dates Interviewed: 2/13/04 and 8/10/05

Location of Interview:

Eccles Broadcast Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Interviewer:

Rick Randle

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Rick: It's an honor to have with us today Mr. Ernie Mettinet. Ernie grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and attended Louisiana State University and received a degree in Chemical and Civil Engineering. He eventually started working at Hercules Corporation in 1949 and rose to become the CEO and President of Hercules Aerospace. During his management the company grew to over ¾ of a billion dollars annually and had over 8,000 employees nationwide. But the real Ernie is a very civic minded individual, he served on the Advisory Board of the Utah College of Engineering, he was awarded the Outstanding Graduate of the School of Engineering at the University of Delaware and was on the executive committee and the board of directors of the University of Utah Crimson Club. But we're not having Ernie today because of his exploits in business; we're going to talk to him about his service in WWII. Ernie received a bronze star for bravery and fought in one of the largest land battles of all times, the Battle of the Bulge. Ernie we are really proud and honored to have you with us today, I'm going to ask you just where were you in 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor? How old were you and what were you thinking?

Ernie: I can remember that day very distinctly. My dad and I went to a football game, it was a Sunday afternoon and we heard rumors that the Japanese had attacked us and certainly when we got home we really found out the catastrophe that happened.

Rick: You were in high school at the time?

Ernie: I was 17 years old at the time and it was just amazing what the reaction was, it was only a matter of weeks before almost the entire male faculty of the high school had enlisted. The fellows I were with were talking about, "*What are we going to do? We want to do something.*" The patriotic rise was just fantastic. So I was thinking about, "*What do I want to do?*" and of course the Marines crossed my mind because of the glamour that was associated with the Marines, but my father put that down in a hurry. I was fortunate enough to take a series of aptitude tests, one for the Navy their V12 program, and one for the Army their ASTP program (Army Specialized Training Program). The Navy program was the better program, at 4 years of college and the whole idea of both programs both the Navy V12 program and the Army's ASTP

program was to educate military people to serve in the Economic Theatre after the war, lawyers, engineers, professional people.

(Adjustment)

Rick: So you went on to graduate from high school and then did you sign up on the ASTP program?

Ernie: The test that you took, or actually in the spring of that year I took the Navy V12 test and the Army ASTP test and was notified that I was qualified for both programs and I preferred the Navy program. Went to Philadelphia to really sign up and low and behold I had an eye problem I wasn't aware of, fortunately the Army program the restrictions were not as tight and I was able to qualify for the Army ASTP program and enlisted at that time in the Reserve that was April before I graduated for call up in the June-July timeframe.

Rick: I might add that they just didn't take anybody in these programs you had to have very good scores, I believe Henry Kissinger was in the ASTP program as well as a few other famous people. So you entered that program right out high school then, and thinking that you were going to be, did they come out of there as Officers or enlisted men too?

Ernie: What they kind of assured you was a college degree of whatever your skill or profession was and a commission upon completion.

Rick: So I understand that you stayed there, you went to Louisiana State? (Adjustment) Alright Ernie its interesting that most of the faculty at that high school were so patriotic that they all joined up a few months after the war started and I think that was consistent with just about everyone in America.

Ernie: It was and even the student body at that time most the guys were 16, 17, no more than 18 years old just a rash of enthusiasm and sign ups and volunteering.

Rick: Right, there's a lot of guys that joined with their parents permission at the age of 17 and went in before they got out of high school.

Ernie: I had to get my parent's permission, actually I volunteered as a result of the ASTP program and if for any reason anything happened I was in the Army.

Rick: So you were headed to this ASTP program and spent 1 or 2 years in that program?

Ernie: About a year and a half.

Rick: Then tell us what happened.

Ernie: Well backing up a little bit I took 17 weeks of Infantry Basic Training (IRTC) and that kind of told us something that was later on something is going to happen. But anyway, we took 17 weeks of basic training, very arduous very well trained and after that I was assigned along with a number of other guys to the ASTP unit at Louisiana State University and it came as a surprise and Louisiana State is an excellent school. I started the cram course in Engineering and the initial assignment March-April, come November we heard from the Secretary of War that the program was over. The need was for replacements, primarily infantry for in the Pacific Theatre and European Theatre. It was very obvious if we had known this early on, never would have got into that ASTP program.

Rick: So there you were expecting to become an Officer and an engineer and I guess if you stayed in that program you would've graduated in LSU and gone into the service after that and the next thing you know you're headed in the infantry, tell us about finding that out and then where did you have to go to embark to go overseas?

Ernie: It was kind of interesting, I go back and reflect we had guys from all over the Ivy League schools and I have often said those guys had never been in a street fight let alone a fire. So we took the basic training a lot of good background and I guess I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit. When we were told the ASTP program was over cause that's when the Air Force was

also affected by this cancellation and the thing that sticks in my mind, we left Baton Rouge Louisiana State in a drizzle cold rain and 10-12 hours later we pulled into the base at the Army Base at Camp Maxi, Texas. I got off the train, duffle bag wet and miserable and the voice came through loud and clear, *“You guys 6’ and over step to the end of the platform.”* I didn’t think too much about it knowing that about the army never to volunteer but at the same time it was kind of a critical command. And it turned out as a result of the 6’ and over request I ended up in the heavy weapons company, mortars 81mm mortars and 30 caliber machine guns watered cooled. And the reason they wanted the 6’ and over types the bigger guys because the breakdown of each component mortar and machine gun the weight was 40-50 pounds, and as I reflect back on where I was and what I did, the friends I had that were assigned to a rifle company it probably saved my life; not that I was any better than anyone else but you’ve got to play the hand you’re dealt.

Rick: Because you were 6’ they put you in this heavy weapons company and allowed you to stay back a little bit and probably the casualties weren’t as great and at that time it was just an insignificant choice but it meant a lot later on down the road considering the battle that you had to face.

Ernie: No question about it. The casualty rate in A-Company were a lot of my friends A-Company 394 Infantry 99th Division. The casualty rate at A-Company with friends of mine as result of the Bulge and later was over 80%, the heavy weapons company, machine gunners were a little more exposed than we were. Ordinarily the heavy weapons, the water cooled guns are on the line or right behind the line, the mortars usually sit back 300-500 yards.

Rick: Tell me about getting on the ship and going overseas, what that was like.

Ernie: Well we knew when we were assigned to the 99th Division, they were preparing they just come off Louisiana Maneuvers and they were preparing for overseas shipment; the crating and vehicles and all the logistics that go with an Army Division getting ready to ship. We kind of knew right away that we were going to the European Theatre just by the issue of clothes that they had given us and the fact that we were going to Camp Mile Spanish where the port of debarkation was of course at Boston Harbor; and now we’re September of 1944.

Rick: Then were you stacked 6 deep on that boat or what was that like?

Ernie: You know you talk about crowded conditions and you were stacked 6 high, the equipment on the floor on the deck and the room was crowded and I would have to say smelly. It was really like a zoo.

Rick: Was it an old cruise ship?

Ernie: No at that time Keiser and a lot of people were making these so-called Victory Ships, this ship probably displaced by a 7,000 tons and it was just a ship that was built in a hurry to transport soldiers and troops overseas.

Rick: I guess you didn't want to be in the bottom bunk did you?

Ernie: Really it didn't make too much difference what bunk you were in, every once in awhile as I say it was a zoo, it smelled like a zoo. Every once in awhile like 3 or 4 days you got the opportunity to take a cold shower, the shower water was cold salt water so you weren't any better off as a result of the shower.

Rick: I understand you landed at Sherberg, France and this was after the D-Day invasions in Normandy and after they had broken out and had secured the naval bases at Sherberg and that's where you landed, is that correct?

Ernie: No the troop ship landed at Liverpool and we got off the ship and they stationed us at an old British army base and we were there for maybe 2-3 weeks doing the typically army stuff, forest marches and cleaning things that didn't really need cleaning. Then we were assigned to a train and got to Liverpool, boarded a ship to cross the channel and that too was a pretty rough ride. We landed in the surf outside of Le Harve and awaited orders as to where we were going to go in Europe.

(Adjustment)

Rick: So you landed at Le Harve and then you had no idea at that time that the German's were going to put on an offensive but you were assigned to the 99th Infantry Division and I'd just like to talk about that division, I've been over to see a monument of the 99th in Belgium and I was amazed at what they accomplished. First of all, they spent 151 days in combat conditions. They had at least 12,000 casualties and an 85% turnover rate. That unit was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation as well as the Belgium Gov't gave them an award called the Belgium Forgeries. Unbeknown to you headed into the largest land battle of any war where there were 500,000 troops on the German side and 600,000 on the American side. 20,000 were killed in action in the Battle of the Bulge, 40,000 were wounded on the American side so you were about to enter one of the most crucial battles of WWII and a very historic battle so I'll let you take it from there and tell us what happened after you got off at Le Harve and entered this.

Ernie: We got off at Le Harve and the army typical transportation or the 6x6's the big trucks, we got into the trucks probably a battalion size move, the original assignment was Ubin, Belgium. We got into the Ubin and they issued us shelter, tents to stay overnight in a field getting ready to move up to the front. We could hear signs of artillery and of course on the ride up we saw evidence of what had happened, German vehicles, tanks on the side of the road, even bloated horses. Well then we got into Ubin and pitched our shelter halves, 2-man tents, and awoke to about 4-5" of snow and that was the start of being in the infantry. I always said and found out later on that infantry, frontline infantry life it yielded like a dog with all due respect the dogs, no shower, no brushing teeth, sanitary conditions were whatever you wanted to make of them, food you ate out of a cold can of hash for the most part, scrambled eggs, and there's nothing like eating an army chow out of an OD can when its freezing outside.

Rick: After the D-Day invasion and after they broke out of D-Day most of these service men thought they were going to be home by Christmas of that year 1944, and they had no idea that the German's were going to launch a massive counterattack and so it was December 16th and many of the men were not prepared with proper winter clothing and as you were mentioning, and

the German's came across in force and so take it from December 16th when you first realized that there was a big counterattack coming your way.

Ernie: I'd like to back up just a tad. Talking about living conditions, there's a lot of ingenuity in the army, barbers, butchers, candlestick makers. In foxholes with very adverse winter conditions, why not build a log cabin. The army did supply us with the necessary tools so we built 6-man cabins that were very adequate very much better than sleeping in that mud in the ground. With that came warm food and life conditions started to get a little bit better. On December 15th I hadn't had a shower now in 3 or 4 months; on December 15th I was informed that I was going to get a 3-day pass and go back to Brussels and attend a USO, hot shower, no guard duty, hot food, all the luxuries that you had grown accustomed to 12-18 months ago. Come the early morning hours of December 15th all hell broke loose, hours and hours of artillery, something we hadn't experienced before.

Rick: You could hear the German tanks crackling coming at you in the forest.

Ernie: After the artillery fire there was kind of dead silence and then the clanking and sirens of German tanks, the initial drive at the Bulge was armor and their whole idea was to move quick and get to Antwerp, Belgium the port that supplied the majority of supplies for the guys that were in the European Theatre, that was the whole idea of the German drive and I can't again begin to describe the intensity of that artillery fire and it lasted for hours. Then after that of course came the hoards of the infantry and there was a breakdown in our communications, there was just utter chaos; unit chaos on the frontlines and it was kind of every man for himself. You were hearing burp guns, machine guns, artillery, along the entire front just a massive massive attack.

Rick: Well I can't imagine what must have been going through the minds of these young men and boys as they heard this stuff coming over. The infantry was in front of you a little bit and you were in the back shooting mortars at the advancing German forces and there's an instance that made you a little bit famous there, they put you in the Stars & Stripes magazine for this and I

understand you got a bronze star for hanging in there shooting mortars when the German's were just about 25' away from you. Tell us about that.

Ernie: After the initial barrage we heard small arms fire all around us and we were firing the mortar in support of the rifle companies that were in front of us. Suddenly we heard small arms fire up behind us and if you've ever heard the rattle of a German burp gun you never forget it and we heard burp gunfire to our rear. We did have some fire communications with Sgt. Wagner who at that time was the section leader and somehow he got in position to our rear. A heavy weapons company, especially a mortar platoon really doesn't have the firefight capability to defend itself. Well these German's to the rear, we only had one tool that we could use and that was the 81mm mortar. Wagner was the forward observer and he said, "*Let's bring down fire.*" So we turned the mortar around in the foxhole, actually picked up the bipods the bipod of the mortar and planted it into the sidewalls of the gun emplacement because the azimuth had changed, they were now to our rear poor formally we were firing forward to the German line. We dropped a few shells in the tube and they were long, Wagner was doing the forward observing and he kept saying, "*More elevation, we're short, we're short, we need to be shorter.*" Well we ended up, I ended up in order to reach the range that he was asking, planting the bipod of the mortar into the side of the foxhole in order for the tube to gain the necessary elevation to bring the platoon in range. We fired a couple more and he said, "*We're on target.*" The command then was fired for effect and that means you just drop, you drop shells into the tube and the burp gunfire stopped and Wagner said, "*I think we better get the hell out of here!*" On the way out we got into a jeep and on the way out we could see what was left, what had to be a sizeable German patrol maybe platoon size and it wasn't a very pretty site.

Rick: At that time were you conscious of your safety at all or being in harms way or just conscious about doing your job?

Ernie: Somehow it doesn't cross your mind. You might have a post event effect but at that time you had to do what you had to do, and it was survive and it never crosses your mind.

Rick: I've seen this picture that was put in the Stars and Stripes magazine of you pointing this mortar almost vertically in the air with an 89 degree shot in order to get the advancing enemy that close, quite an interesting article that came out about you and then you did receive a bronze star for that effort.

Ernie: The training manual says, "*Never fire a mortar at an angle greater than 80 degrees.*" In order to reach the target, the gun sight on the mortar I can remember very vividly was at 89 degrees, which is just about straight up. We could actually see, I could actually see observe the flight of the round in the air and ordinarily on a mortar round it goes, "*poof!*" and its gone but I was actually seeing the flight and of course screams of the guys that were out there, the German platoon.

(New tape)

So I told the squad, "*Get into the Jeep.*" And we could only move in one direction and that was to the rear and there really wasn't a rear, the whole front was fluid. So we got tied into another 2 or 3 vehicles that were again going west instead of east and got along this road, darkness was starting to set in it was cold as hell starting to snow and we came into some German artillery fire, it was very obvious they had the road zeroed in. The reaction is to get away from the vehicles, so I took off and the fire continued and we were getting a lot of tree bursts artillery shells that were raining shrapnel down on troops. So I kept walking, suddenly I realized I was lost I couldn't find my way back, it was dark cold I hadn't eaten and kind of weary and concerned. The driver was avoid getting captured because what had happened at Malmady, by myself fortunately saw a farmhouse the silhouette of a farmhouse on the horizon and decided to try to take that in to get some shelter and possible some sleep. I kind of surveyed the farmhouse very cautiously and it had been damaged and it was vacant, so to get in to at least get some protection went in the farmhouse and had a very restless 8,10,12 hours of sleep. Suddenly daylight heard German voices outside the farmhouse and peered out the window and here was a group of German's herding 2 or 3 GI's toward a railcar that was at a nearby sighting. Well it was very obvious what was going to happen to Ernie, they were going to search that farmhouse and I was going to end up probably on my way back to some German POW camp. There were a

handful of GI's there, all of a sudden a firefight ensued a patrol from the 9th Division had broken through and of course without the German's moved out and they kind of saved my tail.

Rick: You mentioned Malmandy there, many of the listeners may not know what happened there but that's when the German's pulled up some trucks in front of a group of medical detachment people and mowed them all down and massacred them all with machine guns so they weren't very interested in taking prisoners at that time.

Ernie: The word was out on both sides, we don't need any prisoners. Ordinarily prisoners are taken to gain a little bit of intelligence, to gain some insight on who's over there and why. But we weren't taking any prisoners.

Rick: With a lot of tenacity and courage while the American forces prevailed and the German's then began to retreat and as they retreated back into Germany they tried to blow every bridge that was across that Rhine river but one was not blown, the bridge at Remagan so tell us your experiences with that.

Ernie: We did break through, after the Bulge it was within weeks mid-January all the real estate that the German's had taken during the Bulge had been retaken. We went into a rest area, a rest area of cutting trees corduroy roads lots of good rest, the food was warm and you didn't pull guard duty. Suddenly they said we're going to the 3rd army, at that time George Patton or General Patton was the commanding General of the 3rd army and of course he has a lot of interesting background; so we got into going south got orders to head for Remagan, Germany. The 9th Armor Division had crossed at that point a bridge that the German's had attempted to destroy and weren't successful. As you mentioned, most of the bridges upriver Cologne, Bond had been attempted to the German's attempted to blow them they had armed them with explosives and were about doing this. The Ludendorf Bridge at Remagan they attempted to destroy and were unsuccessful in that attempt primarily because the 9th Armored had gotten there a little early and had surprised them so the bridge was intact, it was a real bridge and about 50' above the river and we were told to cross and be the 1st infantry group to make the crossing. You cross the bridge going through what they call dead man's corner, the German's had 88 guns

mounted high on a bluff, they had a real tunnel firing point blank on the bridge it was quite an interesting setup. As they say it was rain, cold, dead man's corner across the bridge.

Rick: And basically you were the 1st infantry unit to cross over into Germany is that correct?

Ernie: The first foot infantry unit, yes.

Rick: Across the Bridge at Remagan.

Ernie: I thought, during that evening I was going to meet my maker no question about it, it was probably the most concerning point personally in my career – it was all over, walking in the dark tie by tie, railroad ties, with the German's firing at you point blank from above and from the tunnel straight out; a very interesting experience.

Rick: Did anybody in your unit get shot going across that bridge?

Ernie: Yes. We lost a handful of guys at the bridge and of course my 1st thought after we did cross was, *"It's a trap, they're going to allow us to cross and then push us back into the river."* So there was a series of very good firefights on the whole bridgehead. And interesting at that time, I saw my first jet a German jet and we were defending the bridge with B38's twin tailed very very capable airplanes. The German's made mince meat out of the jets a lot of firefights, it was quite a show really better than a movie. The bridge had to be defended so the core of engineers placed spotlights on the water, the German's were sending frogmen with explosives in attempt to further destroy it we had moved in massive antiaircraft 90 and 20mm to attempt to protect the bridge. At times it was actually raining shrapnel from the exploding of antiaircraft fire.

Rick: After you left the bridge and got over into Germany did you meet much resistance after that?

Ernie: No. The only resistance we would meet would be maybe at a small town or a crossroad and what the German's would do would be send some armor in to defend it and it slowed down the advance. I really give a lot of credit to the tactical air corps the 9th especially, those guys would come in and really make short work of any tank that might be firing 88 or really supporting the infantry. Kind of a humorous thing, we got to know these guys pretty well just sound wise, vocally, and they'd always sound off with, "*Well we're going back to Piccadilly, England to catch a shower and a hot meal. See you guys tomorrow morning.*"

Rick: You mean they would yell at you from their aircraft?

Ernie: Yes. But we had radio communication.

Rick: Where were you at VE-Day when the German's surrendered, tell us about that for just a minute.

Ernie: Well we had been, we had moved into Bavaria and suddenly living conditions really improved, this was right after the break of the bridge. We started approaching on German housing, German bathtubs, German chickens, German wine, we started to live a little better and I have often said to myself, "*I didn't think there would be a chicken left in Germany after the breakthrough.*" So it was, the resistance was moderate, the tactical air corps cleaned up whatever resistance was there. We started to see white flags coming from the dormer windows as we moved through towns, and as I said before we'd get a daily objective from battalion or regiment and for whatever reason we could never totally accomplish the daily objective if it ended up in the boondocks it had to end up on the other side of town again.

Rick: Thank you for being here and sharing experiences, on behalf of myself and all of the citizen's of America who have been living in prosperity and peace the last 60 years why we thank you and all of those people in your unit that were left over there and didn't return.