



Epafinio Gonzales

United States Army

Combat Engineer

European Theater

Date Interviewed: 10/24/05

Location of Interview:

Eccles Broadcast Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Interviewer:

Geoffrey Panos

THIS INTERVIEW IS NOT EDITED FOR CONTENT, LANGUAGE OR HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Geoff: Spell your name for us.

Epafinio: E-P-A-F-I-N-I-O, G-O-N-Z-A-L-E-S.

Geoff: Where were you born?

Epafinio: I was born in Colton California 1921. January the 8th 1921.

Geoff: Did you grow up there?

Epafinio: No we left California when I was about eight years old we moved to Montana.

Geoff: What did you do in Montana?

Epafinio: We worked in beat fields in Montana. That's when the depression really hit bad and so all of us had to work in order to support our family you know to make a living.

Geoff: Did you go to school there?

Epafinio: No because of our work we'd only get so many weeks of work until the harvests started and then we'd have to go out and work in the fields.

Geoff: How did you end up in the Army?

Epafinio: Well in order to help the family because of the depression, in order to alleviate some of this burden on my mother I decided to join the army so there would be less mouths to feed. So I volunteered for the Army.

Geoff: How many people in your family?

Epafinio: My mother was a single woman and she raised us all up, there was seven of us.

Geoff: Tell us how you got into the army and what year was that?

Epafinio: Oh I can't remember that. I have no idea what year it was.

Geoff: Was it before Pearl Harbor?

Epafinio: Oh yes in fact I was ready to come home on a furlough when the Japanese bombed us and everything was cancelled and we were stationed there in Fort Ord California when that happened so they froze every furlough so my furlough got cancelled.

Geoff: Do you remember how old you were when you joined the army?

Epafinio: I was 19 years old.

Geoff: And what year were you born?

Epafinio: I was born January the 8th 1921.

Geoff: So that's about 1938 or 1939.

Epafinio: Something like that yeah.

Geoff: And when you enlisted did you want to be anything particularly in the army?

Epafinio: We didn't have any choice, you know, we just went into it and I went into what was the horse-drawn artillery. Field artillery at that time was horse drawn and when it mobilized they had to reduce their forces because of the vehicles, you know, I forget how many people they'd

require to pull those gun pieces and so when they mobilized then we went into the combat engineers. I wound up in the combat engineers.

Geoff: Was this before Pearl Harbor?

Epafinio: Yes, I was already in the 19th Engineers when Pearl Harbor happened.

Geoff: Where were you when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Epafinio: We were in Fort Ord California.

Geoff: Do you remember what you were doing that morning?

Epafinio: I don't know what I was doing, I have no idea.

Geoff: What was your rank when Pearl Harbor happened?

Epafinio: Well at that time I was just I Private.

Geoff: Did they start giving you more training once you were in the combat engineers?

Epafinio: When we were in the combat engineers we went into different kinds of trainings than artillery because they gave us infantry training and then of course all the things that engineers do.

Geoff: What do combat engineers do?

Epafinio: Combat engineers are trained also to fighter infantry, their job is to erect bridges across water and to do demolition of bridges to stop the enemy impeding from progressing and their job is to lay out mine fields and eliminate booby traps.

Geoff: And do you dig up mines too?

Epafinio: Well yes, that's one of our jobs to lift up mine fields, yes.

Geoff: That's fairly dangerous isn't it?

Epafinio: Very dangerous especially if the Germans had a very complicated what they call a "Teller Mine" it was almost just as complicated as a wrist watch and I wouldn't doubt it if these mines are still active in North Africa because they built them that good.

Geoff: Is that the same as a "Bouncing Betty"?

Epafinio: No the Bouncing Betty is different, that's a little cylinder about this big and when you detonate it it goes up six feet up in the air and when it explodes there's 150 little pellets that shower you.

Geoff: So you're in the combat engineers, how do you get to North Africa? Tell us how that happened.

Epafinio: Well when we sail across the sea we landed in Scotland and then we went to Ireland and then from there we sailed to Liverpool and then we went into the invasion of North Africa which was Arsoo and that's where we landed.

Geoff: What did you think of Europe when you first saw it? What did you think of Scotland and Ireland?

Epafinio: Scotland was quite weird, it was in the fall and it was foggy and we didn't particularly care for it you know. So we didn't stay there very long before they got us aboard and we went into North Ireland and it's different, different culture, different people.

Geoff: When you were on ship did you worry about U-boats?

Epafinio: Only coming home. Only coming home that's when the U-boats were really thick, you know, we were coming home in a little Dutch ship in fact we understand that a torpedo just missed us. Somebody heard an explosion that night and we looked at the ship that was out there and it's gone, that one got hit but we were on what they called "*Kaiser Coffins*" and they lasted two winters. It took 15 minutes before they broke up when you came under torpedo fire.

Geoff: The Kaiser Coffin is a troop ship?

Epafinio: Their boats you know built by Kaiser. They built a lot of crafts but this was a particular ship that they built and we called them "*Kaiser Coffins*" you know. They were built and they didn't last very long when you got torpedoed.

Geoff: Do you remember what ship you came over on?

Epafinio: No I don't.

Geoff: We've never seen an amphibious invasion before and so many people won't understand that, tell us what it was like when you invaded North Africa. Was it night? Was it day? What was going on?

Epafinio: Well North Africa was very much because there was no resistance at all. Actually the French Foreign Legion was still fighting against it then, you know, because it was under the Vichy Government. Our things didn't exist until we invaded Sicily. Sicily was the most harrowing experience for me that I had.

Geoff: So you landed in Arzoo Algeria?

Epafinio: Right. No, no that's Oran.

Geoff: It's Algeria where you landed.

Epafinio: Well Algeria is way up there towards the other part you know because we were real close to French Morocco (Spanish Morocco) in fact I went to Spanish Morocco we had a station there.

Geoff: When you got ashore how long was it before you saw combat?

Epafinio: Not until I got to Sicily.

Geoff: So when you were in North Africa what were you doing?

Epafinio: When we got to North Africa then we got in a convoy and went through the Sahara Desert. We were under the British there, that's where they taught us how to build a bridge in all dirt and explosives. Everything that we had was obsolete about the only thing most powerful we had was dynamite so they taught us how to use their explosives and everything like that.

Geoff: Tell us what a "*Bailey Bridge*" is.

Epafinio: A Bailey Bridge is constructed of frames in which you assemble on the bank and as you assemble you push it and you counter balance it until it reaches the other shore.

Geoff: And so you were trained in all these new things in North Africa?

Epafinio: Yes.

Geoff: So there was a lot of combat going on but you weren't seeing any of that.

Epafinio: None of that, no in fact when we got to Gasbah we heard that Rommel was making a push towards us and we were supposed to hold there but I forget what kind of a caliber gun we had, it was a little artillery piece and we found out he was coming up with "*Tiger Tanks*" so we high tailed it out of there. I don't know if you're family with what a Tiger Tank is.

Geoff: Tell us what a Tiger Tank is.

Epafinio: It's one of the most awesome tanks that they had. In fact some of the tanks that we disabled got stuck in the mud and the aircraft bombed them from the top but they had holes where they were hit with our artillery but it didn't stop them, they didn't dent them and they went through our mines like firecrackers. Nothing could...you know it was just an awesome instrument of war.

Geoff: So you saw some Tiger Tanks?

Epafinio: Well we saw them all disabled after the rainy season where they got stuck because they got stuck in the mud you know and the sands where they couldn't move. They were immobilized so the air force had a hay-day with them and disabled them.

Geoff: Tell us about the invasion of Sicily then. You had been training for six months for this?

Epafinio: Yes. Sicily...we had just had a storm in Malta. We were so sick at Malta when we hit Sicily and as we hit it we didn't meet normal resistance, we were quite a ways from the shore and so a GI claims that *"the Navy is giving breakfast for GI's. If you want breakfast"* he says, *"There should be ham and eggs and all that stuff"* but everybody was so sick and he said *"does anybody want to go"*? And they said, *"no, forget it"*. So I went. I had my breakfast and as I was coming out they have these ramps, you know, these landing crafts and as I was coming out we got bombed by Stucka Bombers. I don't know if you're familiar, they're Stucka Bombers. I had a bomb hit about 15 feet in front of me and it just threw me against an artillery piece and I could hear the fragmentation hitting me on all sides. And so I ran to the shore and as I run to the shore a bomb hit about 15 feet but it was a dud and so I got up and I ran up to where they're positioned and I looked back and this German Stucka had a field day. They just set all those ships on fire within 30 minutes. I said, *"Oh my God an guardian angel is watching me"*. Three times my life was saved you know that particular moment of that invasion.

Geoff: Let's go over that a little more slowly. What time did you land?

Epafinio: We landed in the morning. It was dark.

Geoff: Was this Jayla Sicily? Do you remember the town?

Epafinio: I think that's right. I looked it up on the map but I can't make out the name but it's close to Camiso Airport.

Geoff: So tell us again about getting into the boats and this was your first time going into combat? This must have been something!

Epafinio: what particular boats are you talking about?

Geoff: Your landing craft. How you got into them and then how you got to shore.

Epafinio: Well this particular boat that we landed in in Sicily were called "*Infantry Landing Boats*" in fact when we hit that Malta storm it looked like a submarine because it was under water most of the time. We asked the sailors "*what's the structure of these*" and they said "*they're only good for three trips across the sea*". We said, "*what's this one?*" and he said "*this is about the sixth one*" and we said "*oh my Gosh!*" But anyway there wasn't a person except the sailors that weren't seasick.

Geoff: This is an open-topped...

Epafinio: It's a boat that will come right up to the shore. It will go right up there, you can hit dry land where the other landing crafts like the one that I just spoke about, this was a craft that was unloading anti-aircraft. But they have those ramps that go right up to the beach.

Geoff: So coming ashore, it's morning, what do you see in the distance?

Epafinio: Well like I said, we met no resistance at all. There was nothing that we met at all and so everything was secure.

Geoff: Tell us what a Stucka is.

Epafinio: A Stucka is a German bomber that goes right straight down and you could almost put your hands around the fuselage it's about that big. It's a real slim looking job and the precision thing that goes right straight and that's how they bombed, they don't come at an angle they go right straight and that's what they call a "*Stucka Bomber*".

Geoff: Do they make noise?

Epafinio: Well to tell you the truth they're so high normally you don't know their right upon us, I didn't hear them by the time they were coming. All I heard was when the bombs explode, that's the only time I heard them.

Geoff: So tell us again about those bombs going off around you.

Epafinio: Well like I said, as I was coming off at the ramp the bomb hit and the very force threw me against this artillery piece and all the fragmentation I could hear hitting all around me like I was a silhouette and it just hit around me and that's when I ran across to the shore and that's where that dud hit over there and I found myself covered with sand and there was an officer right between my legs so we got up and ran to the shore and like I said I turned back after we got there and I saw those ships and they were just sitting ducks for those Stucka Bombers. They were on fire.

Geoff: How many were on fire?

Epafinio: I have no idea but you could see that they were all direct hits and so not all of them got wiped out but they got a lot of them. I don't even know if the one where I had breakfast got hit.

But anyway all I could say was to thank my guardian because I'm a believer. I'm a religious man. I was thinking that my guardian angel was watching over me.

Geoff: So you got ashore, you'd been bombed then what happened.

Epafinio: Well the rest was when the Navy had just bombarded the Comiso Airport and it was still dark and I got in a jeep with somebody else who was driving and we hit one of those craters that the artillery's had hit and that's where the jeep got up in the air and I fell off and I scraped my knee. I had a real bad one and medics took care of me and the medic said, "*you know you're entitled to a purple heart*" and so I felt guilty, I said "*oh no, not for this anyway*". I should have taken it because that meant more points so I could come home but I refused it anyway. So we took that airport and we maintained it until everything was secured.

Geoff: So what did you do clean it up to make it ready for aircraft?

Epafinio: Yes, our job was to fix the runways, fill up the craters and everything and make it better for our planes to come on in to land.

Geoff: Then what did you do? What happened to your unit then?

Epafinio: Well after that we...it's very foggy because I didn't right many notes on it. I know we got ready and we sailed to Messina, from Messina we went across to Italy.

Geoff: So the Army was fighting in Sicily and you were getting ready and fixing things as combat engineers, were you dealing with a lot of mine fields?

Epafinio: Oh yes, yes a lot of mine fields. We would clean a lot of mine fields at night in fact when we were in Gasbah we laid mine fields there in Gasbah but when Rommel pushed it then when Patton took over and pushed it back we went back and looked up not only our mines but the German mines that they had laid and that was our job.

Geoff: Tell us about how you dig up a mine. What are the methods?

Epafinio: The German Tower Mine is a mine about so big and it has like a clock and it has a little thing on the side, a device where you can put a trip-wire set for either release or trip and then on the bottom on the nine o'clock it has underneath (and also you have to lift up the mine and we carried a little mirror and gently we put the mirror under to see if it was not booby trapped – if it didn't have wire we would neutralize it but if it had a wire then you'd trace the wire wherever it came from because it had two type of wires – trip and release and that set them off).

Geoff: Did you lose many other fellow soldiers in your unit from mines when you were doing this?

Epafinio: No, ironically...I was sort of a father, every time these guys run into one they call on me and said "*Sarg will you come in and decipher this?*" and I guess I was fearless, I would do the job for them and I shouldn't have done but I did all the jobs. But no, we never lost any men and one instance in fact we were in Africa and we were marching along this paved road and I told the guys "*don't get off the banks, stay in form*" I had this guy that got off on the bank and he stepped on one of those Bouncing Betty's – they sound like a firecracker – he cracked on it so we hit the ground but it had rained and the water had got moisture into the part that sends it up six feet up in the air and it didn't go off but I chewed these guys out, I said "*you get up on the road and walk on the road!*" But actually that's about the only time...if that thing would have exploded it would have gotten a lot of there but it didn't explode.

Geoff: You said that you thought for some reason people thought you were fearless. Why was that? Were you really fearless?

Epafinio: I sort of took over a responsibility like a father to them taking care of them. In fact when I was coming home I remember Winoscuss he was crazy "*you're like a dad to us don't go home*", I says "*I gotta go home*". But I took that responsibility of like a father responsibility to

my men you know I was that close to them and I would not let them take the chance if I had a chance to help them and I did.

Geoff: So you were close?

Epafinio: Yes real close.

Geoff: Okay, you're in Sicily then comes the invasion and you went through Messina but did you go to Solerno?

Epafinio: No I was not in Solerno.

Geoff: Where did you go? First off tell us what Messina is.

Epafinio: Messina is just a little town right before you...it's a little port town that goes across to Italy, there's a little span of water there. We got aboard the ship there then we sailed up to the southern part of Italy then on a convoy we went up as far as Naples.

Geoff: And you came ashore in Naples?

Epafinio: Yes we came into shore in Naples.

Geoff: What was Naples like?

Epafinio: In was in bad shape you know, the only nice place was a island of Copepe and we couldn't go over there but it was a beautiful place.

Geoff: You got to Naples then what happened?

Epafinio: Then we got right to the Monterno River there we maintained a bridge that the British had built. It's a bridge that's made out of like submarines – the boats are covered and they

submerge them in the daytime, they fill them with water like a submarine so the Germans couldn't see it but at night they would pump the water out and then have the traffic cross it. But our job was to maintain it because once in awhile the artillery would knock out some of these boats and so we would go to some of these boats and replace them.

Geoff: So were you under a lot of fire at this time?

Epafinio: Oh yes, we were under artillery fire yes.

Geoff: People have never been under an artillery barrage tell us what that's like.

Epafinio: It's a horrible thing. One of the most horrible things is mortar fire – coming under mortar fire because you feel so lonely. You're right there, you don't know whether those...those weren't '*to whom it may concern*' it's coming towards you. The only time in my life I ever called from my momma when that stuff was coming in. I felt so alone I called for my mamma. It's such a lonely feeling that you're by yourself because you know when that thing is coming right straight at you and so that's what it is to be under artillery fire and mortar fire.

Geoff: What's the noise like?

Epafinio: Well the German mortar fire they were really...they would put little plastic deals on the back of the...it's like a little rocket and it had a little plastic thing that made different sounds. It's a moral effect that's supposed to affect you and they made different sounds, they sounded like witches and benches coming over at you you know different kinds of sounds that are coming towards you. High pitched, low pitched and all that, that's when you realize your life, your moral you know. It's just a demoralizing weapon is what it is.

Geoff: So how do you operate, I mean if it was me I'd be really frightened all the time. Is that what a guy on the ground feels?

Epafinio: Oh yeah!

Geoff: Tell me more about that. What were the men feeling?

Epafinio: Well I know I had fear. I was scared. I'm a non-smoker and I started smoking to see if it would help me but it didn't help. But one of the little things that helped me – because I was a sergeant I had to give commands and when I was a young man and we worked in the beet fields my step-father said “*put two little rocks in your mouth so you don't get too thirsty*” so that helped me when I was over seas when I put two little rocks to keep my mouth moist so I could give orders to those guys. These guys say “*hey sarg how come you give the orders so...you don't stutter and all that*” and I never told them that I had little rocks in my mouth to keep my mouth...because your mouth, when you get scared you know your mouth gets real dry and a lot of people can't even speak but anyway I had my little rocks in my mouth that I could bark out commands to the post.

Geoff: At that time of year was it muddy? Was it cold? Was it rainy? What was it like that time of year?

Epafinio: When we hit Italy it rained a lot. We were living in foxholes full of water in fact a lot of us got what they called trench foot and so it was cold. But like I said it's a good thing we were young, you know we could take that kind of weather. But it was cold and wet. Miserable is what it was.

Geoff: Tell us about when you put the bridge up and you won the Silver Star.

Epafinio: I have to give credit to God the Holy Spirit because I felt such...here were men waiting for us to put a bridge across. At that time I felt so much compassion for those guys and I felt courage, I wasn't scared. So I told the *guys* “*we gotta do this job*” and they were behind me. So when we got across to that beach you know we came under heavy fire...I remember making jokes and these guys would kid them around and I reached up at one of these guys and said “*I'm not dead, leave my wristwatch alone*”. But anyway we kept up moral and like I said we put the bridge across and thank god none of us got hurt and I'm over there and I swear that I had a

machine gun nick my helmet but I felt so invincible you know again nothing could hurt me. This courage...I wasn't afraid it wasn't until after. So we did the job that we had to do.

Geoff: Tell it what it was because we weren't there. How long did it take you to put up the bridge? How complicated was it? Was it night?

Epafinio: It's night because in that book that I have we had already started the...but they left a lot of boats there and they left a lot of electrical wires and they left a lot of these duct boards – a duct board is a board that you put up where you take showers and then we started assembling them. As we assembled them we started pushing them across the river and we put another across and I was right in the front and we have these electrical wires, telephone wires that had guidelines and I'm in the front and they were guiding it until we got to the other shore. We got to the other shore there were some branches so I cleared them out, I anchored the board and by that time here comes all those infantry across, you know across the bridge.

Geoff: So you were rescuing some trapped soldiers?

Epafinio: Right, we were rescuing them. That's why I'm so proud, I was saving lives. We were saving lives.

Geoff: How did they tell you won the Silver Star?

Epafinio: Well they didn't. I didn't know. It was a surprise you know like I said I had to write a story about the experience and what recommendations I could make for a different crossing and I remember recommending that we should have had a guideline for the soldiers to get...because a lot of them fell in the water crawling across the streams and I don't know whether they drowned but there was some...cause I fell in the water too. But I suggested we should have had a guideline or rope or some type of thing that they could get a hold of and you know to cross the river. In writing the experience you know they decided to give me a Silver Star for that.

Geoff: So they surprised you?

Epafinio: Yes that was a surprise.

Geoff: We have a photo of that so tell us about when they pinned that on your chest.

Epafinio: Well it was quite an honor, you know, after I found out in fact I had practiced because I liked to click my heels when I saluted you know and I wanted to salute the captain but I got so nervous I didn't do that. But it was a nervous moment but it was an honorable...I felt good about it anyway.

Geoff: You just said you fell in the water, was that when you were erecting the bridge?

Epafinio: Yes. I was right in the front of the bridge and a Screaming Mimi hit right in the front and the bridge went under the water and I fell into the water but I was on the bridge when I went in the water.

Geoff: How did you get out?

Epafinio: Well I was holding on to the bridge, you know the boat where I went under. I didn't fall off the boat but as the Screaming Mimi hit it it hit right in front and it went up in the air then I came up and I got soaking wet.

Geoff: It must have been pretty cold.

Epafinio: It was January, it was cold in fact I think there was a little snow on the ground.

Geoff: So what happened to you after you won this Silver Star?

Epafinio: Oh I don't know, after I won the Silver Star that gave me enough points to come home and the captain of the platoon that calls for a commission officer to take charge of it so they offered me a battle commission. But I wanted to come home, I was beginning to flinch. When

you start flinching when you hear explosions that means that you're getting a little nervous, you know, a little bomb shelled they called it and so all I could think was "*home*". So I told them "*I don't want your commission sir, I want to go home*".

Geoff: What did he say?

Epafinio: Well he was very disappointed because he wanted me to take over the platoon, he said "*take the battle commission*" and I was determined to come home. He could have offered me a general and I wouldn't have accepted it, I wanted to come home.

Geoff: Tell us about going home, how did that happen?

Epafinio: Oh that's a beautiful experience! One of the most beautiful things is when you see that Statue of Liberty, I mean you're home! It's such a great feeling to finally see all that...

*** Tape Interrupt ***

Geoff: So you saw your mother?

Epafinio: Yes.

Geoff: And what did you do, kiss her?

Epafinio: Oh naturally, yes. She was very glad because all of her prayers were answered you know that I came home safe.

Geoff: Did you have any brothers in the service?

Epafinio: I have a brother that went to the Pacific.

Geoff: Did he come home?

Epafinio: Yes he came home.

Geoff: Tell us about mothers in war and why it's so sad for them.

Epafinio: Well I suppose that it's a terrible thing to send them to war you know not knowing whether their going to come back or not and mothers do a lot of praying. I know when my son got sent to Vietnam, my wife raised all kinds of hell because my son was coming here to the University of Utah and they told him if he kept an average of a "C" he would not get drafted but then he got drafted. Oh...my wife went to the draft board and raised all kinds of hell you know. Later we're sighing "*he's going, he's going*" so my wife felt real sad and angry that our son was going to Vietnam and I felt angry too because I thought we had just won World War II and that was the end of wars and Korea and then we had Vietnam and you know so I thought that it was unfair, I thought I'd done all the fighting for our family but here's my son going to Vietnam.

Geoff: Tell us about when you met General Patton.

Epafinio: Well like I said I had heard about him and all that stuff but when I met him I didn't know where I was at but...

Geoff: What had you heard about him?

Epafinio: Well like I said the most beautiful thing when I told you right after Caserine Pass (that movie Patton starts at Caserine Pass) but anyway I didn't participate but my second battalion went out there, we lost a lot of men. They were laying out a lot of mine fields to try to stop those Tiger Tanks so they got slaughtered. Anyway he wrote that beautiful letter, we were all feeling the agony of defeat and I remember the morale and the agony that you feel when you get beat up like that, so he writes a letter to us and I don't know where but he said "*born at sea, baptized in blood – you've made the best, you have nothing to be ashamed of*" he said "*feel proud that you're Americans*" and boy we felt proud that we were GI's you know. If we would have had flags we would have waved our flags. So he built our morale and the next time I don't know

where I was at but I know that I was at a prone position when General Patton walks behind me and he said “*how’re you doin son?*” I looked up there and I saw this giant of a man with his shiny boots and his pearl handle and his shiny helmet and he said “*keep up the good work son*” and that’s the end I saw of him.

Geoff: So what did you think of Patton?

Epafinio: Oh I thought he was great. He’s still my hero.

Geoff: Why’s that?

Epafinio: Well he’s the type of guy that...I mean they called him “*Blood and Guts*” you know and I heard him when we were training for desert up here in California and I heard that he was real stern with men in fact when we were supposed to wear our shirts tied off it was...I can’t think of the desert out there in California but anyway there was a lieutenant there that was giving orders to keep your...we had woolen shirts...they said he hit him, he said “*you practice what you preach*”. So we knew that was Patton you know but I was a very disciplinary Sergeant myself and so I kind of liked this and I admired him because of his discipline that he measured out and that’s why I admired him.

Geoff: I want to talk a little bit further about this Silver Star. Tell us again about this bridge, we don’t quite understand how you get underwater.

Epafinio: What it is, these little nomadic bridges, I forget how long they are but as I was going and we were going under a Screaming Mimi hit right in front of me and of course the water comes in and the boat went up and when it came down it went under the water and of course it was submerged and that’s where I got splattered with water. I went under the water and I was still on the boat when it came up again.

Geoff: People don't understand Italy and the don't understand what the train was like and they don't understand how frustrating it was so tell us again why you had to build a bridge. What was going on on the other side?

Epafinio: Well the 34th infantry division had got caught on the other side and they couldn't come back. In fact I don't know whether there was a rumor but we heard that there was such a slaughter that we asked for a truce from the German's in order to pick up our wounded and there was a lot of wounded. I can remember that before we went into launch the boat there was a man that they were bringing back and he was all cursing everybody and he had just lost his arm and he said "*I'll come back*". But anyway when we were going back I saw that arm that was blown up, it was a hairy arm, but he had a lot of tattoos on him. When I recognized the arm it was full of tattoos, I thought "*that's that guys arm*".

Geoff: So you hear there are men trapped on the other side and so it's a desperate time and you have to build a bridge?

Epafinio: It's a desperate time, you have to build a bridge in order to evacuate those guys that are trapped on the other side.

Geoff: Again how long did it take for you guys...you must have been working real fast.

Epafinio: Oh yes. I don't know the time, time seems to stand still, you know, because of what is going on but all we know that the mission was accomplished and we accomplished it under severe fire which was so terrible and I don't know what it is that gives our young soldiers so much courage to do these things you know. So it was done and thank god that none of my men got hurt, not a scratch. None of us got a scratch so we were all under the protection of our guardian angels.

Geoff: I notice you wear a cross.

Epafinio: Yes.

Geoff: Did you wear a cross the whole time?

Epafinio: No I got religious after.

Geoff: Have you been in contact with any of your men?

Epafinio: Yes, we used to have reunions that we made a promise that we would unite on a yearly basis. I only made a reunion once in California but I would correspond with them especially at Christmas time but most of them now have died, you know, there's very few left and we discontinued the reunions we used to have.

Geoff: If you would, tell us the name of the river that you had to cross and tell us...if you're going to draw a map for us in our minds, was it on the north side of the river that you had to go? Paint a picture for us.

Epafinio: I have no idea of what north and what south there was all I know we were on the friendly side and we were crossing the enemy side and as we're launching this bridge across, we're putting these boats together and we're splicing them together with electrical wires and we're putting the duct boards on them also splicing them with electrical wire which was plentiful. At that time we didn't have walkie talkie's, everything was commuted by telephone and there were telephone wires all over that area and that's what we were using as guidelines and as we're tying these boats together we're pushing it into the river and then we had these guidelines which go on either side and there's men holding them up so the bridge wouldn't go either way and it would just go strait. And so that's how we launched the boat across the river.

Geoff: What river was that?

Epafinio: It's Rapido River, which in English means Rapid.

Geoff: Tell me when you look back, this was obviously a very important time in your life. What do you think about it now? What do you think of World War II and what do you want to tell people about it?

Epafinio: Well, it was worth it I thought, because you know Hitler was out to dominate the world and I think we did our job and we lost a lot of men, it cost us a lot of lives but it was a war that I think was worth fighting for. To keep that maniac from ruining the world and it was part of that freedom you know that you bought for that freedom. It makes you proud to be an American that you fought that war and I'm still proud.

Geoff: What did it do for your life going away like that?

Epafinio: Well one of the most beautiful things that happened to me I think in going into the service in my life is I was an introverted person and when I went in there I became extroverted. I lived in a...most of the people I communicated with were Mexican-Americans but when I finally got in the service I started interacting with other races. It was beautiful that I could be part of that. I became family you know and that made me an extrovert in fact that's one of the reasons that I started graduating from Lieutenant or Sergeant and all that (Corporal and all that) because I found out that I was part of family – we were Americans. So it was a very beautiful experience to get from this part of my life to go into another life you know, to meet other races and other people that I could interact with.

Geoff: One more thing about Combat Engineer's, I don't think people understand – how dangerous is it to be a Combat Engineer?

Epafinio: Very dangerous! It's very dangerous. I think it's quite different when you're fighting the enemy you can defend yourself especially when you go into hand-to-hand combat but when you're out there dealing with object that you don't know when they're going to explode and you're neutralizing a mine and you don't know if there's a booby trap on the side of you, that's what's so scary that you might back up a little and there's a booby trap that might go off because that's what the German's would do. They would put them there and then they would put booby

traps, those Bouncing ??? that we spoke about and it's something that you can't help yourself, you're just doing it and if you could fight back it would be different but you can't fight, you're just neutralizing something that might go off in your face.

Geoff: Did you have people, you know, infantry covering you?

Epafinio: No, you're on your own.

Geoff: So you were exposed?

Epafinio: You're exposed, sure. I can remember one time when we were under the bridge and we went to neutralize a minefield and the Germans would have barbed wire and they would put cans in order to...in fact we hit the cans and they discovered us and we came under fire. We had this British Officer and he was so cold, he would just puff on a dry pipe and stay cool, he was quite a character. In fact I have to tell you a little story when we were in Gaspa. When we got to Gaspa we went into this enclosure that was made out of adobe, I don't think it was a house but anyway the first thing I did was I saw a big culvert made out of galvanized metal and so I put it right by this wall and I covered with but the officer came that day and he started looking at the foxholes and he didn't say nothing he just puffed on that old dry pipe and that night we got bombed with butterfly bombs and little darts – I don't know if you know what a butterfly bomb is.

Geoff: No, tell us.

Epafinio: A butterfly bomb is a firebomb that the German's drop in canisters and as they're coming down they open up and they wind up like a little clock and when they hit the ground the little clock is like a little timer, it doesn't go off for maybe two or three hours later and that's when they explode. Anyway after this happened here comes the officer and that night we were like foxes under there, we dug holes and we covered them up and he said *"oh that's more like GI's, that's a better foxhole"*. We said *"why didn't you tell us"* he said *"you never would have listened"* he said *"you have to experience these things"*. *"But we could've got killed!"* *"Well*

you didn't get killed, now you know better!". But that was kind of our training that we got from those British Officers.

Geoff: What did you think of the Germans as an enemy?

Epafinio: Well you know one of the most saddest things that I had, it was around Christmas time and we had just bombed or sent our artillery (I don't know how big of a projector, I don't know if it was a 155 gun, but this was huge) and we had sent some artillery to some bunkers and when I went to these bunkers after the artillery lit off I went into one of these dugouts where it was Christmas time and then I saw a picture of his wife and his children. He was dead he got killed by concussion, they got killed by concussions and they're Christians. I said "*what the hell are we doing killing each other?*" I felt sad, I can still cry because of what happened and to see these guys killed you know and it touched my heart.

Geoff: Were you angry at the Germans?

Epafinio: Not me. Not then. At one time I might have been but not then. Something was happening in our lives you know, it was changing our lives. It was time to cease all these hostilities. In fact when I met the Germans we met them in some little town where they got the mind fields and I met them out there and we were having fun with each other and somebody was taking pictures and I said "*you guys are going to come out in Hollywood, you're going to be movie stars*", we were laughing and all. And so I have no animosity I guess, no, not at all.

Geoff: We have another photo of you that a very famous photographer took of you. Tell us about Bob Capland.

Epafinio: Well I didn't know who he was at that time, you know, it was after I found out that I read how famous he was but at that time when I met him I had no idea who he was. In fact I was trying to discourage him from going up with me to this little town because the only way you could get up to that little town was by either donkey or cart. It was unavailable for vehicles so I asked him if he was willing to go do that dangerous thing and he said "*son, I've been through it.*"

Don't worry about it". But I didn't know at that time who he was and it was so sad when I found out that thing he got killed in Korea.

Geoff: So what were you doing when he took that photo?

Epafinio: Well we had found out...we had taken this little town but we went a different route and we wanted to use that route but it was booby trapped and then we found out that this little old lady knew where the German's had put all these booby traps and so they assigned me to do this job like I said "*good old Sergeant Gonzales will come to the rescue*" you know so that was my job to go and neutralize all these booby traps that were going up to this little town.

Geoff: And so he came along?

Epafinio: He came all the way up there and we went all around to neutralize all those booby traps, those mines and everything. He was with me all the way.

Geoff: Did you get a lot of letters from home? Did your mother write a lot?

Epafinio: My mother was illiterate, she could not write but I would get letters from my sisters. In fact my mother sent me a cake that got lost and when I got it was just as hard as a rock, you couldn't even eat it. She didn't know, she didn't know better – it was just a terrible thing to send a cake but I remember she sent me a cake that got so hard and it must have taken about a year to get to me.

Geoff: When the war first started was there any doubt in your mind that America would win?

Epafinio: I don't know. I don't know at that time what it was, we didn't know much about the current events. We hadn't heard that the German's had gone through Europe with all their Blitzkriegs and all that stuff and taking over all these towns and when we met the Desert Fox in Africa it was a harrowing experience that he made us run, you know. I remember he pushed us for 60 miles until we got to the foot of the Atlas Mountains there and we still came under the 88

fire...but no, I had no idea. I only know we were fighting to survive. We were fighting for a cause and we gave it our best shot and thank God mission accomplished.

Geoff: Were you in the states when VE-Day happened?

Epafinio: I was coming home. I was aboard ship when Normandy happened.

Geoff: When the war ended – VE-Day.

Epafinio: Oh VE-Day, no I was already a civilian. Victory as in Victory, no I was a civilian already.

Geoff: Where were you? How did you celebrate the end of the war?

Epafinio: Well, I don't know, I just said "woo" because most of the people had quite a celebration when it happened but I didn't think much of it. I was just glad it was over with, especially when you've been through all that, you're glad it's over with!

Geoff: So you settled here in Salt Lake City?

Epafinio: Yes I settled here in Salt Lake City?

Geoff: And you're a good Catholic I can see.

Epafinio: Yes I am.

Geoff: Do you look back...you touched a little bit on your religious beliefs, you weren't religious then but you talked about a guardian angel.

Epafinio: Well I believe in guardian angels. I didn't know at your birth you had a guardian angel assigned to you, in fact I named him "Rufna". I didn't know what it was but I found out

that Ruf in Jewish means “*Spirit*”, not “*I don’t know*” but I made friends with it, I talked to him every day. I thanked him for all of the things he had done for me and of course I believe that we have gifts of the holy spirit that gives us courage, love and all these things and I think if I want to give any credit it’s to God the holy spirit that gave me the courage and the love for my men for the things that I’ve done. I’m only an instrument, I was only an instrument for God the Holy Spirit for the things that I accomplished. If any credit has to be given, it’s to God the Holy Spirit because he has a plan for you and that plan – nothing is to deter it, that plan is going to be accomplished. He’s sending me all this time to accomplish which I did, my crowning point was to save lives and I’ve got the holy spirit to thank and my guardian angel to thank. Like I said, I became very religious in fact I taught Catechism for 50 years after that.

Geoff: Who inspired you during the war?

Epafinio: God the Holy Spirit.

Geoff: But as far as the other military people that maybe you met or didn’t meet? Who was inspirational?

Epafinio: I don’t know any officers that inspired me other than Patton, you know.

Geoff: How were the commanding officers in your battalion? What were they like?

Epafinio: They were really good officers, in fact when we got to Enscal in Ireland they tried to separate because we ate together and they tried to separate the officers to eat separate and we were non-commission officers to be separate also and that’s the British way but we said “*no we want to chow together*”. So the officers, we all ate together and it was a camaraderie that we kept together and so we got to know each other real good, real good friends which they said not to do but I got to be real good friends with them. In fact I cried like a baby when I lost some of my buddies you know I really missed them and I felt so...because I became so close to them just like my bothers. So we formed camaraderie, we were close together and we were close together with our officers, real friendly.

Geoff: How did your war experience in Europe compare with your brother's in the Pacific?

Epafinio: Oh I'm so glad it was different because my brother would tell me the experiences in the Pacific it was so different fighting a different kind of an enemy which is a fanatic enemy. When the Germans felt themselves defeated they would give up, not the Japanese. The Japanese would fight to the finish and so my brother got injuries, it didn't help because the medical personnel at war were handled with a bulls eye and that was supposed to be under the Geneva rule...but that was a bulls eye that's where they got hit right in that cross you know so my brother explained some of those bayonet attacks that they had. I was so glad I wasn't fighting in the Pacific because I don't think...you know it was not only that you had the jungle getting fevers, malaria and all that stuff and it was a different type of war.

Geoff: What do you think of your country?

Epafinio: It's great! It's the greatest country in the world and after seeing what things were like in Europe but it's great to be an American. This is one of the greatest countries in the world. Anybody that knows this country would be better to fight for it, it's just that great.

Geoff: Is there anything you want to tell us that we've not mentioned or something that you think is important for us to hear?

Epafinio: Well I don't know. Like I said I didn't think about it, there's a lot of things that you know you just can't remember.

Geoff: Is there something about World War II? Something that you want to leave as a legacy to somebody who wasn't there?

Epafinio: Some of my kids want me to sit down and write down and tell them all about it because they don't know much about it you know and I'm not that type of a person. I never felt any depression or anything. I didn't go through any setbacks or anything, I mean I just got it all

in my mind and a lot of GI's had a hard time adjusting to the experiences that they had but I never had those experiences bother me at all. It's a nightmare that I want to forget and it happened but thank God it's over with. It's like coming out of a nightmare and you wake up and say "*it was a nightmare*" but it was real but it was a nightmare but my kids want to find out what I went through but it's pretty hard to tell and all these things.

Geoff: Well this has been wonderful. We so deeply appreciate it, you've been fabulous.