

Interview with Leslie Bugnon

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Interviewed by David Overy

Bugnon: (Was farming about eight miles east of Cambridge when the Korean War broke out.) We were so busy on the farm that we really never gave it much thought...just another war. We didn't turn on the TV much (the first ones in the area to have one). When you day starts at 4:30 AM, and you get to bed about 11:00 PM, you don't have much time to think about anything. Then picked up the mail one day and I had my draft notice. Then we paid attention. We had just expanded our farm by 160 acres, just my dad and I running it...had built up quite a herd of cattle. My dad was bothered by arthritis. He says, "I'm sure with the condition I'm in we can get you deferred." (I agreed) because we'd really worked hard to get the farm up to where it was. After sleeping on it, the next day, I said, "No. We're going to have to make some sacrifices, because the guy down the road a little ways, his father got him off in WWII and he was labelled draft dodger." And I didn't want that. So when my time come to go, I went. He had to rent out a lot of the farm...dispose of a lot of the cattle.

Was inducted in Minneapolis, went to a processing center at Ft. Lewis, Washington. There eleven days--rained ten days and snowed one. They said if you could see Mt. Ranier, it's going to rain. If you can't see it, it's raining already. Didn't get to spend any time off the base. After there we were due to go to Ft. Jackson, South Carolina for basic training. I had never flown in my life and we were flying and I was scared to death. I think I was more scared of getting in that

airplane than I was of being in the Army. They said, "You guys are lucky. You're the last bunch going by plane. The rest are going by troop train." And I asked if I could postpone my trip to the next one. But, no we left on a United Airlines DC6. My seat was by the window. I tried to switch seats but they said, "No, we've got assigned seats and have to know where everybody is." My first airplane ride--clear across the U.S. We got to Chicago and there was an electrical storm, delayed the flight for a while. Lot of us were sitting around and saying, "If we're going to go AWOL, we're as close to home as we're going to be." There was a lot of them that was really ready to go. The wind and the rain tossed that plane like a matchstick in the wind...every which way but loose. I was so scared, I went to sleep...about the best thing that could have happened. When we got to Ft. Jackson, it was early morning hours, 2:30-3:00 AM.

Brought us to the barracks...plain wooden floors to sleep on until the rest of the camp got up. Processed us there. I got put into an ordnance company...731st Ordnance. There were only about six of us from Minnesota who wound up in this ordnance company. Went through twelve weeks of basic training. I was 43 inches around the waist--twelve weeks later I was 34'' around the waist. I came home on leave for ten days and I wanted to get out of that uniform so bad and I couldn't because none of my clothes fit me. I didn't want people to think I was flaunting my uniform. Only going to be home for ten days, so it didn't pay to buy any new clothes.

After basic training I was assigned to a specialty...small arms, PMOS 3903. Was in South Carolina ten months.

(In basic training) we got up in the morning 5:00, went across this big field. Done calisthenics for an hour, (then) double-timed around the field, then back to your tent. Took your mess kit and stood in the chow line, come back, made your bunk to be ready for inspection. Then fall out in

formation with full field gear. They said they wanted fifty pounds in the pack, but that would be later. We just made up the pack so that it looked nice and square, which usually consisted of putting an empty box in there. Had a .30 caliber M2 rifle with no ammo. Hiked for 20 miles to bivouac area. Training consisted of going through the obstacle course, where you ran up, grabbed a rope and swung across the crick, which very few made it the first time. You learned how to read a map and read a compass. Later on you went through an infiltration course (crawling on the belly under barbed wire) and they're firing live ammo over you. I don't know why nobody ever got killed on that. Down in South Carolina you never know when you're going to run into a snake... somebody jumps up. Had to close order drill and after a while they had bayonets attached to the M1 rifle. When it got close to noon, you had to hike that 20 miles back to camp to have dinner. After you had dinner, you hiked that 20 miles out there again. Eighty miles a day we were walking. Then there was a railroad track you had to double-time across. You can imagine when you have 200 guys in two columns...that's a hundred guys from the time the first man went across to the last man, you had to be double timing. So you got a little bit of workout right there. This is where I lost so much weight. When I come back at noon I was too tired to stand in that chow line. I went back and just laid in my bunk that hour. Wasn't until the last part of basic training that I started to eat again. The only time you were exempt from training was when you had to pull KP... and you welcomed KP.

Discipline was prejudiced. When we wound up in that company, we got put in with the Alabama National Guard. We were Yankees. After basic training, when you could get a pass to go into town, you'd always have inspection on Saturday morning. This sergeant we had--never forget him, Sgt. McDonald- he would always make sure that us guys from Minnesota got gigged. For example, one morning, I'm standing there all ready for inspection—you could drop a coin on my

bunk and she'd pop--really got everything down pat, everything up to snuff in my locker, everything was perfect. At the last minute he tells me to go to the latrine and see if everything's clean down there. Now, these streets we had were all dirt and I came back and said everything's clean down there. Just as I got back and stood by my bunk, the officers were coming in the other door. And there I was standing with my boots all dusty...gigged and stayed in for the weekend. He manage to find something wrong every week. You just didn't lose your pass. You were on company punishment for two days. Clean the latrines, take the ashes out of the boiler, scrub the shower floor. (McDonald) was a southerner--all of them were from around Montgomery. (But did make some good friends among them.)

I had to volunteer for overseas duty to get out of South Carolina. They wanted to keep me there. I was in small arms and must have made the most of it too much because... I could take a .30 cal. M2 carbine apart and put it back together blind-folded in less than 30 seconds. They wanted to make an instructor out of me. I didn't like small arms in the first place...didn't like guns in the first place. The only gun we had at home was a 22--used that to kill pigs when we're ready to butcher. I'd never been a hunter. I wanted to get into heavy artillery down there, and everything was filled up. (With those bigger pieces there isn't as much to keep track of.. or so he thought at the time.) (On the farm) we used to tear down the tractors and overhaul 'em, done all our own repairs on the machinery. Also I told 'em I didn't know if I had the patience to teach somebody... if somebody can't get something in their head.

(Went to the CO and volunteered for overseas duty. The CO wanted to keep him in South Carolina as an instructor in small arms, but) I don't want to spend my whole two years in South Carolina. I got a delay enroute, got home just before Thanksgiving, and had to be in Seattle on the 10th of December, 1951. (Actually had ten days grace) So, I spent ten days in Seattle when I

didn't have to be there until the 20th. Got to camp and there was nobody there. I learned how to give people shots. Before that we had our own medicine on the farm. I gave the cows (shots). Dad couldn't even stand to look at that when I give cows shots. Learned how to do that to save money..veterinarian bills. Formed two columns...see I don't know how many shots you had to get to go overseas...two medics standing there, give the first two guys shots, then handed you the needle. 'We got other things to do.' That kind of helped me, because I'd given cows shots. Course the cows don't complain if it hurts. But, made it through; nobody really complained. We left the States at 9:00 P.M. Christmas Eve. Stood aboard that ship on top deck as long as we could see lights. (Left the States) with sort of mixed emotions. Had a girlfriend...we were engaged. Guess I was a little scared knowing there was no turning back now. (One 19 year old medic was so scared, he had a heart attack—took him off at Pearl Harbor) We were on a luxury liner converted. There were 1500 of us on. All the officer, their wives and families were on it too. Down below in the hold were all those brand new cars, brand new '51s. That's where we used to goof off, when they'd call us for a detail. We made sure we'd disappear...go down in the hold, climb in those cars and sleep. (Officers' cars) We did manage to get caught in some details like the kitchen. Did manage to get inside the ship...gee, looked just like a big luxury hotel where the officers, wives and kids (were). (Our quarters were like) a dungeon. We were down below, slept in hammocks five high. Lights out at 10:00. Guys would sit there and tell stories. From the time we left Seattle, even stopping at Hawaii, then to Yokohama, Japan, only took eleven days.

This guy he told stories every night and I don't think he told the same one twice. All night long. The officer would come down: "Shut up, you guys." (Guy would say:) "What are you gonna do, send me overseas?"

The first day out, I don't think there was a man who wasn't seasick. I had my share of it. There was so much vomit that you were slippin' and slidin'. Couldn't hold on to a wall because it was full of it. (But) you were so sick it couldn't make you any sicker. You had to get better. I don't know who ever cleaned up that mess. Any of us guys would have done it, we'd just have got sick again. I could have never imagined when people say seasick. I like to go fishing. I've been on rough water, never got sick from that.

We ate good, we ate the Navy food, and they eat good. I think the Air Force eats the best. I was sick two days, then I was fine after that. We would wash our clothes. Tie them all together, tie a rope around them, throw them over into the ocean. Course you want to do that at the front of the boat. Let it hang out for about half an hour in the ocean water. You bring 'em up and rinse 'em out and they're just as clean. Some of the guys goofed up and hung off the back...that's where all the garbage (is thrown). And these seagulls...from the time we left Seattle, almost looked like the same birds. They followed that ship clear across the ocean. They'd come up and scoop the garbage out of the water...fly around. I never did see any of 'em land on the water. Thought, see don't they ever take a rest, where do they go?

Got to this (Japanese town...wasn't Yokohama)...there was a processing center. That's where any money we had (had to be exchanged for) military script. You got more of our clothes that you're going to need...overcoats, field jackets, another pair of boots, extra coats, a lot. We were there about a week. A lot of the guys would go AWOL, go into town, a few visits with some of the girls. One guy come running back one morning, all he had on was his boots and his necktie. Buddy of his in the States, he says, in WWII was in that camp, (was Camp Drake). And in one particular area, he says, there's a whole in the fence. That was in WWII, you'd think they'd have

it fixed by now. That hole was still there. He snuck out of the camp. I didn't need those kind of problems so I just stayed put.

Got on board ship again and went across the Sea of Japan to INCHON. You talk about a rough ride. That water was so rough, the front of the boat came down you could even see it (hit?) the water, then up like you were on an elevator, then down. They said that as long as you guys 've been so sick already, you won't get sick again. And we didn't. Made it OZ, then climbed over the side on the rope, climbed into these LST's. Riding in that going up the shore, I just sat back and envisioned all the troops on the Normandy Landing, etc. in WWII. Here, we're unloading on peaceful shores and when you hit there, they just go in so far. When that door dropped down and we had to run through water about waist deep. I got to thinking how lucky we are that we can run to shore without having someone shooting at us. We got up there and called out our names (and we got on different trucks). They were dividing everybody up to where they were going. I got on this truck without the slightest idea where I was going.

Got up to this place and I seen guns out there and a tank, and a good big motor pool, trucks, jeep, ¾ tons. Thought must be an ordnance outfit. Brought us into the commander's tent. "Welcome gentlemen.' He says, "You're now in the 2nd Ordnance. According to this your MOS is 3903. We don't have no need for anybody in small arms." Looked at my records and said "Your records are excellent, but we can't use anybody. So we're going to have to change your MOS to 3913." My heart just jumped. It's what I wanted all this while...heavy artillery. Three sergeants there--all from Big Springs, Texas--all knew each other back home. Only one out of three was a good guy. The other two had ego trips. Very next day they said they were going to go out and contract artillery batteries. I told them I'd like permission to go with. The company at the time was two miles behind the front lines. (I went out to the front lines every day and) I learned those guns.

Didn't learn anything from books. Learned by doing. The first job, which I really didn't care for, (involved) a gun which had misfired and the breech ring blew. When a gun blows, it goes straight back. And there was some tents behind the gun-maybe 50--60 feet away. And this big breech ring went straight back and through that tent and out the other side and so close to the bunk that it ruffled the covers. It went through that canvas tent with such tremendous power that you could see every outline of every screw--exact what that piece looked like. And every piece of that gun had to be put in a separate box. No matter how small the piece you had to make a box for it. It all got sent back to Aberdeen Proving Ground to try to figure out what went wrong. That took a long time to make boxes for all that stuff.

We were about 35 miles south of Seoul...about three miles from where they were holding the peace talks at Panmunjom. They were going on the point system for rotation; we were getting twelve points a month. Our company didn't move, and we were pushing the enemy back. Then they started dropping our points, because we weren't as close to the front lines. Pretty soon we dropped down to three points, and then two points a month. I says, I'll never make R&R-- because you had to have so many points. Consequently, I wound up coming home on, because my time was up rather than come home on points. They offered me 360 dollars, if I would re-up, rather than coming home. Would give me rank of Sergeant First Class.

Overy: What were your day-to-day duties?

Bugnon: I'd go out in a jeep, usually took somebody with me, and we'd contact these artillery batteries. We didn't wait for them to call us that they had a gun down. Those guys depended on those guns keeping them alive. We had four artillery batteries we took care of, three of them had four guns and one had five. Then we had one with a roving gun. The guys taking care of the

guns, every time they have a fire mission, they'd keep track of how many rounds they'd fire. Like a 155 howitzer, 500 (rounds). When they think they're getting close, they'll add up in the gun book. If they're getting close, they'll call us. Then, rather than check only one when we get out there, we'll check them all. Then we'd use a pull-over gauge (like a micrometer, which measures the wear on the artillery tube). I don't recall anymore how low these lands and grooves have got to be wore down before you take the gun out of action. But if we get in there and see that a gun has got say 450 rounds on it, we'll make a note of it--won't pull the gun out, but when we get back to camp we'll order a new tube. Usually it wouldn't take long for a new tube to get up here. Then we go right out to the artillery battery and change it. Use two ten ton wreckers. We'd ask them how the gun was recoiling. (Sometimes when a gun wasn't recoiling to well), you never fire a gun; just to see how it's working. You have to request a firing mission. The guy on the radio will contact the forward observer... request three rounds. I'd fire the gun. You never fire the gun with your good arm, cause if something would malfunction, that gun could come back and take your arm off--no way anybody's got reflexes to get your arm out. If your right handed to pull that lanyard with your left hand. Safest place to stand by a gun is right alongside of it. I'd fire it and watch it. (After getting it fixed/adjusted, he would test-fire it) it'd just seem so awesome that one person can be in charge of so much power. Here you've got that big 8 inch howitzer, all this power that can destroy--and here you are with a little piece of rope, like starting a lawnmower. Pull that rope and watch the gun recoil. This is what we'd do every day.

Towards the last when I was over there, we finally got a big blackout tent and we got a movie in. Everybody sitting in there watching a movie you'd probably seen fourteen times when you was at home. But it looked good over there. Was sitting there and it was just getting past the credits, Lt. Hall comes in, says "We need you tonight." That meant---you see we didn't fire until we

were fired upon, and they were being fired on and were out of action. We didn't know what it was, what they needed. We had 2 ½ ton 6X6 loaded all the time with everything we need, might possibly need, on it--sitting there all the time. It was twenty miles up there total blackout. You had to know the roads, because if you're off the road, you're dead...ditches filled with mines. I handpicked three guys that I felt were just as eager to learn as I was. (The one I took I wanted to learn the roads in case something happened to me.) He drove the 6X and I drove a jeep with a trailer behind. Drove with blackout lights on. Got up there and everybody knew, any matches or cigarette lighters they stay in the jeep. No smoking around those artillery pieces. This was a 155 gun, self-propelled on a tank. All we had to work with was luminous gauges, couldn't work with a flashlight. Got out there about midnight and it was just breaking daylight when we finished.