

**Eugene Michael (Gene) Ambruch** interviewed September 24, 2007

1st Lieutenant, US Army, January 1952 – May 1954

Before being drafted by the Army, Gene was playing professional baseball in the Philadelphia A's organization in the coastal league for the Tarboro Athletics. In January, 1952 the army came calling. He reported to Philadelphia for a partial physical and then was shipped off to Fort Meade, MD that same night. They arrived the next morning around 6 am in the pouring rain and were greeted by the yelling and shouting of the sergeants. Gene's main thought was "What am I getting myself into?"



Fort Meade was just a preliminary stop before basic began and the first few days were spent with the issuing of uniforms and answering questionnaires. Because Gene had worked as a surveyor for the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission in the off season, he was able to go into the Corps of Engineers rather than the infantry. Gene then moved on to Fort Belvoir, VA for basic training. There, he trained for eight weeks for infantry and eight weeks for engineering. The engineering consisted of learning how to build and demolish bridges and buildings. The building was practiced in both day and night so they would be ready for any contingency. Gene's unit set a world record for building a Bailey bridge in one hour and 37 minutes. A Bailey bridge is made from pre-fabricated trusses that are put together by hand with minimal use of heavy equipment.

While in the training, he took an IQ test to get into Officers Candidate School (OCS), and scored pretty high. A few days later he was in OCS. There, they followed a class system like West Point for the 22 week course. In the "Plebe" time period of the school, there was lots of harassment and a third of the class dropped out in the first couple of weeks. Despite being the only one without a college education, he was 14<sup>th</sup> out of 27 that graduated out of the original 58. OCS training was an extension of all of the training he had previously gained. He worked hard to avoid any demerits so that he could get off the base at noon each Saturday. He had a car parked at a gas station within walking distance of the base and he would be able to get into Washington D.C. within two hours. These weekend breaks are what helped him through. The overall experience was pretty extreme, but he was motivated to become an officer to control his own destiny when he went to Korea. On November 8, 1952, he graduated from OCS and got married that night!

When you graduate, they give you three choices of what kind of unit to be assigned to. He knew, however, that this was just a joke because every person that graduated was assigned as a platoon leader of a combat engineer regiment. He was assigned to the 27<sup>th</sup> combat engineers and had to report to Fort Campbell, KY. There, he took a course in CBR (Chemical, Biological, and Radiological) weapons, learning both how to use and defend against these weapons.

A Change of Plans...

Gene was prepared to go to Korea, and had received all of his inoculations. Then, one Saturday night, when he was officer of the day (the officer in charge from 5 PM to 5 AM), he received a call telling him

he was to be transferred to the European command, not Korea! Gene didn't believe it at first and thought someone was playing a prank on him, but then he got the orders the next day and was off to Europe for the Aviation engineers. At that time, the Air Force didn't have its own engineering platoon, so Gene wore an army uniform, but was paid by the Air Force. He was stationed on a half-U.S. half-French airbase in Bordeaux, France. There, they built a warehouse for the U.S. to use.

The French in the city were not generally friendly toward Americans, but surprisingly, the people in the small villages and towns were very friendly and welcoming. He was able to visit Paris 10 or 12 times. In Paris, he was impressed by the absolute beauty of the cathedrals. He also visited Nuremburg in Germany where the war trials were held. Back at the base, he joined the base football and basketball teams. They would play teams from other bases. One time, in a football game, he lined up against Bob Tonneff who had played for the Washington Redskins! "It was a long day," Gene says of that game. He even took the time to attend the coach's clinic in Nuremberg, Germany taught by the Michigan State coaching staff. Gene's commanding officer did not like having Gene participate in the sports programs because it took time away from his duties, but the commander was not able to do anything about it.

Meanwhile, back home, Gene's wife had given birth and Gene missed home. While Gene grew up



Gene Ambruch

Catholic, he credits a Protestant chaplain with helping him deal with being in Europe while his wife and new child were back in the States. Once home, he became a Methodist.

One night, Gene was having dinner with a good friend, Lou Emory, in B Company and Lou's wife. During dinner, the wife said Lou had been scheduled to go to the Azores in the Atlantic, but she had gotten together with the Colonel's wife and arranged it so that Gene would go to the Azores in Lou's place. Gene was surprised and concluded that, apparently, women run the military!

The Azores had an airfield to give American planes a place to refuel during cross Atlantic flights and Gene spent one month there working on an airstrip. He remembers the poverty he saw on the island and the bull fight where he felt sorry for the bull. There was also a running of the bulls before the fight, just like in Spain.

Career Decision...

After he returned from the Azores, Gene thought he would be going home, but still had to spend a few more months in Bordeaux. When he finally was able to leave, he went by ship which took ten days to make the crossing to the U.S. In May of 1954, Gene was discharged at Camp Kilmer, NJ. Now, he was faced with a career choice: to play baseball again or work for the Turnpike Commission. With a wife and baby, he chose to go back to work for the Turnpike Commission and later for a bridge contractor. Gene's one regret is that he had received extensive training as a combat officer, but had never been called on to use this training. While he was disappointed that his baseball career had been ended by his time in the army, he was patriotic and knew that he had to do his duty for his country.