Interview with Paul Blanchette

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Monday, June 23, 2008. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. It's my honor today to talk to Paul Blanchette, who normally, we would say is a Korean War veteran, but you got pretty close. You spent the Korean War era in occupation duty in Japan. That's what we wanted to talk about because that's very much part of the military experience as well. Welcome, Paul.

Blanchette: Thank you very much for having me. Appreciate it.

DePue: Okay, we always start with a couple of very basic questions: When and where were you born?

Blanchette: I was born May 20, 1934, Bradley, Illinois.

DePue: Bradley, Illinois?

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: Why am I thinking that you're a Kankakee boy, then?

Blanchette: Because Bradley and Kankakee are adjoining, and immediately after birth, we moved to Kankakee.

DePue: Okay, and what did your father do?

Blanchette: My father was in general maintenance—plumbing, heating, air conditioning, whatever. In those days he did it all.

DePue: Okay. I wasn't paying close enough attention. The year you were born again?

Blanchette: Nineteen thirty-four.

DePue: Okay, so still in the midst of the Depression, but he had pretty steady work.

Blanchette: At that time, I have no idea, because with as many kids as we had, and there were, I believe, eleven... We had a huge garden, and we lived out of that. We had chickens and we always had at least one or two pigs. Of course the farm in the family—we got milk from there, butter...

DePue: But you lived in the city?

Blanchette: We lived in the city, and at that time Bradley, Illinois was probably a wide spot in the road. Something smaller than what Alexander and New Berlin—a lot smaller than they are now. But we were on the edge and had a huge garden.

DePue: And had hogs and had chickens?

Blanchette: A couple hogs all the time. We always had at least twenty-five to one hundred chickens. I believe we had, at one time, two hundred rabbits. We would kill every Friday and deliver them to different grocery stores in and around the area for twenty-five cents apiece.

DePue: Wow, so that kept all the kids busy doing the chores, then.

Blanchette: That, and working on the farm for room and board.

DePue: Now, you've mentioned this farm a couple times. Was this a relative's farm?

Blanchette: This was a family farm. Grandpa, Grandma, uncles...

DePue: Blanchettes?

Blanchette: Blanchettes.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: East of Kankakee, right at the Kankakee River, on Route 17.

DePue: How about your mother? Was your mother a housewife? I imagine eleven kids would keep her busy enough.

Blanchette: Yeah. My mother was strictly at home. As you say, she had eleven kids, and she was always busy. But she could cook out of this world and never anybody left without being fed.

DePue: Where were you in the birth order?

Blanchette: I was third from youngest. I have two sisters younger. One now is deceased. I have four brothers older. Still have one older sister living—she's eighty-eight.

I have one younger sister living, who is seventy-two, and one older brother living, who is seventy six, I want to say.

DePue: Okay. You were still pretty young in 1941 when Pearl Harbor happened.

Blanchette: When Pearl Harbor happene I was playing kick-the-can in the middle of the street with all of the neighbor kids. I think I was seven or eight years old. I remember my mother made us all come in the house when they heard the news on the radio.

DePue: What else do you remember then?

Blanchette: I remember we had rationing. Our main meat dish, no matter what—even though we raised meat—was Polish sausage. You were not allowed to butcher for your own use. You had to get a permit for almost everything.

DePue: Even chickens?

Blanchette: That, I'm not sure. I don't remember that well. But we all hated chicken. (laughter) We all hated rabbit. But we had a lot of it.

DePue: That's why you hated it, then?

Blanchette: Yeah, yeah. We had it too much. But that's all you could get.

DePue: Was there a big market for rabbit meat at that time?

Blanchette: Oh, my, yes. And besides, to go hunting for rabbit, squirrel or go fishing. We lived right on the river. We would go fishing and clean them and cook them that day.

DePue: Tell me a little bit more about growing up. You're still pretty young during the World War II eras and rationing. What all was rationed?

Blanchette: Nearly everything that I can remember. I know for gasoline you had to have stamps. You were allowed only so many gallons a month for your car. But not too many people had cars. I rode a bicycle or walked. You got ration stamps for all your food. Sugar—forget it, you couldn't get any. Meat—like I said, the Polish sausage, you could get, I believe. I'm trying to think hard—two to three pounds a month we could have of that. They never had any other meat available. Soup bones—that you could get, but there, they took your ration stamps.

DePue: Why couldn't you butcher your own hogs?

Blanchette: Everything went for the war effort.

DePue: So did the government direct you to turn over your hogs for butchering?

Blanchette: If you butchered, the government was there to take their share.

DePue: And why was Polish sausage so available?

Blanchette: Because it was the leftovers from all of the other parts of the hog, cattle, sheep, goats, whatever. It was the leftover parts mixed with a lot of spice.

DePue: So do you like Polish sausage today?

Blanchette: Yes, I do. On the grill. I really do. That is, to me, better than hot dogs, better than Italian sausage.

DePue: But you still don't have a liking for chicken or rabbit?

Blanchette: White-meat chicken—I have to down it with at least a couple of alcoholic beverages.

DePue: (laughter) Well, that was something you probably weren't doing in the early forties then.

Blanchette: My brothers brewed our own. We didn't drink. During her entire life, my mother never had a drink or smoked a cigarette. Alcohol was not allowed in our house except on a Sunday afternoon. If Grandma came to visit, I would go down with a little brass bucket and get a bucket of beer for Grandma. My mother used to just fuss and stew and everything else. Of course, then, all the men chewed tobacco and would spit in the can by their chair at the dinner table. That would just frost her. It made me sick. But those are some of the nice things you remember. We had a huge table that would seat fifteen.

DePue: Tell me more about going to get beer. Where did they go to get the beer?

Blanchette: My uncle ran a tavern.

DePue: And which side of the family is this?

Blanchette: That would be on my mother's side of the family.

DePue: What was your mom's maiden name?

Blanchette: Anna M. Christenson.

DePue: M?

Blanchette: Anna M. Christenson.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: And my godfather and my uncle ran a tavern. I was eight or nine years old. I would take the nickel and the bucket and go down to the tavern. Usually he

would let me keep the nickel and just fill the bucket with beer to go home because he knew it was for grandma.

DePue: They were brewing their own beer, huh?

Blanchette: Oh, yeah, yeah. And made wine. They got caught, though, because we had a dirt basement. Mother used to store the salt pork that we made and her canned goods down there. My brothers brewed beer and put it into bottles and hid it in the basement. Unfortunately, it fermented too fast and it started popping. (laughter) Corks popped and they got caught. I believe it was a razor strap my dad used. We once in a while got that—never deserved it, but we got it.

DePue: Oh, you never deserved the razor strap, huh?

Blanchette: Never once. One time, my brother—my just-next older brother and I—got hold of it, cut it up in little pieces and buried it in the garden. Did not know Dad had another one. Brought it out quick. I didn't deserve that either because it wasn't my idea. But I did help cut.

DePue: (laughter) But you got it anyway.

Blanchette: Oh, yeah. Suffered all the way through life with that.

DePue: Yeah, well, it looks like it scarred you for life, so...

Blanchette: Oh, absolutely.

DePue: (laughter) You had some older brothers. Were any of those old enough to go off to World War II?

Blanchette: One older brother had extremely bad eyesight; he couldn't pass anything. The other one—I'm not sure what the reason was, but he was declined. One brother was in the Air Force and got wounded in Italy. Tore up his leg pretty badly. He was a tail gunner in a B-17 and they were on a raid. They got hit and he got flak in the right knee, I think. He was in the Veterans' Hospital at Dwight for six or seven months after he came home.

DePue: What was the mood of the family during the war, then?

Blanchette: Oh, everybody was just raring to go. No matter what, if it was for the war effort, you didn't question it. You didn't question it. If you had any extra money, you bought savings stamps or you bought bonds.

DePue: Blanchette—what's the nationality of that name?

Blanchette: We're French and Danish. My mother was Danish; my dad was French.

DePue: And Christenson is...?

Blanchette: Danish.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: Yeah. Her grandparents came from somewhere in Denmark and my dad's, of course, from France. My son David looked up the ancestry; in fact, he had the crest put on a sweatshirt for me.

DePue: When you were growing up, it sounds like there was no question that this was the right war to fight and that it needed to be won.

Blanchette: It was the only thing to do. When we went into Germany, I vaguely remember, people grumbled. But when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, there was no grumbling. They shut off streetlights every night. Blackouts. You weren't allowed to have any light showing. You had blackout curtains and you weren't allowed to have any lights at all showing. Of course, in those days, there was no air conditioning in the summer. We used to just sleep out in the yard because it was so hot. You couldn't have anything going in the house.

DePue: Did you participate in anything like scrap drives or rubber drives?

Blanchette: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we always were going to the junkyard with our wagon full of… We'd go up and down the alleys picking up tin cans and anything metal. They would buy paper at that time, like newspapers. If anybody threw anything like that away...We'd take bottles right back to the store and get a two-cent deposit. Of course, we'd run right over and buy ice cream with it.

DePue: (laughter) Was this something you guys just organized yourselves or was it part of a Boy Scout group or troop?

Blanchette: We did it on our own. We didn't have any money. Nobody had any money. When somebody went to work, they came home. I remember I worked in a cafeteria washing dishes when I was in eighth grade. It was Bobbitt's Cafeteria on East Court Street in Kankakee. I got paid something like seven dollars a week. Came home and put the envelope on the table. My mother used to give me fifty cents a week to spend.

DePue: That sounds like a considerable amount of money back then.

Blanchette: Oh, I was rich—filthy rich.

DePue: What all could you buy for fifty cents?

Blanchette: Oh, my God. That would keep me in bubble gum and ice cream. I had a cap pistol at that time. I never ran out of caps.

DePue: Was part of the routine going to the movies occasionally?

Blanchette: Not very often, because movies at that time were ten cents and that was quite a bit. If you wanted popcorn, that was a nickel. So you had to be pretty rich to go. We'd go on a matinee on Saturday afternoon—a cartoon or Captain Marvel or Superman or something like that. That was a nickel, and that's the one we'd try to get to.

DePue: That's about it, sounds like.

Blanchette: That was it. On Sundays, it was only church and maybe a baseball game. You didn't shop because there were no stores open. You didn't do any work whatsoever other than your chores in the morning and in the evening and stuff like that. That's all you did on Sunday.

DePue: What was the church?

Blanchette: We went to St. Rose Catholic Church.

DePue: So a Catholic family.

Blanchette: Yeah. My mother's family was all Lutheran and that caused for some weeping and gnashing of teeth.

DePue: But she attended Catholic church with the rest of the family?

Blanchette: My mother went to Catholic church more faithfully than anybody in the family.

DePue: But made sure all eleven kids got there as well?

Blanchette: Every one. We didn't sit in the back either; we sat down front. Every once in a while, you'd get a knuckle alongside the head if you weren't paying attention.

DePue: (laughter) That wasn't your mother, was it?

Blanchette: That was my mother; she was good. Mother kept a broomstick alongside the cook stove in the kitchen and my older brothers knew they'd gone too far when she reached for that broomstick. Now I never got that one. Never once got hit with. Only two of my sisters ever finished school. The other two didn't; they went to work. Bear Brand Hosiery Company in Kankakee.

DePue: Bear Brian Hosiery?

Blanchette: Bear Brand. B-e-a-r B-r-a-n-d. Bear Brand Hosiery Company on South Washington Avenue in Kankakee. It's since been torn down. But they started working there. She remarked several times about making almost ten dollars a week.

DePue: Again, at that time, that was good money.

Blanchette: That was darn good money.

DePue: I think you also knew somebody who later became pretty famous and well-known in Illinois. That was George Ryan and the Ryan family.

Blanchette: Yeah. They were pharmacists. George and I went to school together. We were very good friends.

DePue: Was he in the same class as you?

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: Yeah. Our birthdays—his is in February. Mine's in May. So I'd always call him on his birthday and say, "You're so darn much older than me, I'll have to send you a get-well card." I can't anymore. George and I are good friends. Lura Lynn, his wife… We're all good friends to this day.

DePue: You went all the way through and graduated from high school, then?

Blanchette: I didn't until I came home from Korea; then I got my diploma.

DePue: Okay. But you did attend some of high school.

Blanchette: I did attend high school. St. Patrick's one year and Kankakee High School the rest.

DePue: Was George going to St. Patrick's?

Blanchette: No, he was going to Kankakee.

DePue: Would you say that you two guys were kind of bumming around together? Were you buddies during high school?

Blanchette: Not that much because he helped in the pharmacies and I had two paper routes. In my junior year at high school, I went to work at a factory on second shift. I got out of school at three o'clock and went to work three-thirty to midnight.

DePue: Where was it? What was the factory?

Blanchette: Roper Stove Company.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: At that time, they had a government contract to manufacture tanks, and it was called the Armor Plate Division. I worked there because it paid better and I knew how to run a forklift.

DePue: That was your junior year?

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: So 1940...

Blanchette: Oh, boy. 1949, ’50.

DePue: They were still manufacturing tanks in ’49?

Blanchette: They just got started in it in late ’48.

DePue: Oh.

Blanchette: And they manufactured the floor of the tank. It weighed something like three tons. It was my job to pick up the raw steel, bring it to the line, set it on there, and turn it two or three times in the process. Then the finished product would be loaded on special trucks with cushions and everything else so it didn’t get bent, scratched or scraped. It would go somewhere else to be assembled.

DePue: Can you explain the decision or the rationale for not completing high school then?

Blanchette: I got caught working at Roper’s in a government contract underage. I lied about my age when I got the job. They asked me for birth certificate; I brought it in a sealed envelope to Personnel. They never opened it; they put it in my personnel file. Had they opened it, I wouldn’t have been able to work there. They didn’t. They got inspected one time for some reason and that was found. They immediately said, “Well, if you’d go in service, we would show on your record that you entered service and you could come back to work here when you get out.”

DePue: But you started there with the intention of not completing school?

Blanchette: Pretty close. I wanted to get done with school. The money I made there was more than I ever had in my life. At that time, I only had to give twenty dollars a week for room and board at home to help out. I got to keep the rest. I was happy with that. I bought a car and had it two days and it caught fire. (laughter) On Thanksgiving Day, on the east side of Kankakee. There was a pay phone there but I didn’t have a dime in my pocket to call. It just burned. I stood and watched it burn.

DePue: What was the model of the car?

Blanchette: Oh, boy. It was a ’46, ’47 Oldsmobile.

DePue: So it was a car that was manufactured after the war.

Blanchette: Yeah. It was a nice car. An Oldsmobile 88.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: I said, “That’s enough.”

DePue: Did you have insurance on it?

Blanchette: Oh, yeah. They made you take insurance, because, of course, I was financing. They repaired it, but you never could get that burning electric wire smell out of there. Nowadays, they can do it.

DePue: Paul, I’m still a bit confused. Maybe I’m pressing this too hard, but it sounds like you were kind of tired of school to a certain extent as well.

Blanchette: I was and I wasn’t. I’d just get off work at, like midnight, and, like a fool, instead of going home, I’d ride around looking for girls.

DePue: You were working the evening shift then, so…

Blanchette: Three-thirty to twelve o’clock.

DePue: …it didn’t conflict with going to school?

Blanchette: No.

DePue: Except you’d be dead tired when you got to school.

Blanchette: Mother made sure I got up. When I got to school in the morning, it was hard. Until about noon and then I’d wake up.

DePue: Your parents had to know that you were working there, obviously.

Blanchette: Oh, yes.

DePue: Did they also know that you weren’t supposed to be able to work there because of your age?

Blanchette: No. No, they didn’t.

DePue: Did you know that you weren’t supposed to be working there because of your age?

Blanchette: Absolutely. My buddy, who got a job right ahead of me, told me about it. He said, “But you’ll be able to work in the stove division.” And I did. I got hired there, no problem. Except when the opening came up and I knew how to drive a forklift, I applied for it, and they gave it to me.

DePue: It sounds like this job and then getting in trouble later on had a lot to do with you getting into the service. Why don't you talk about that in detail, if you could, please.

Blanchette: Okay. I made up my mind after the problem at work and after my car caught fire, that I was going to join the Marines. I had to have permission from my parents because I was underage. My oldest sister convinced my mother to go with me and she went. We went to a notary downtown and filled out all the necessary papers—the permit form and everything so that I could go. I reported to the recruiting sergeant at the post office and gave him the paperwork. The next day, I was on a train to Chicago, headed for San Diego.

DePue: When was this?

Blanchette: Nineteen fifty-one.

DePue: Okay, so the war in Korea was going on at that time.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Is that why you wanted to enlist in the Marines?

Blanchette: I think it is. At that time, I was really gung-ho. Raring to go. We went from Chicago by train. There were seven or eight of us that had enlisted. We had a sleeper car. In Santa Fe, New Mexico they hooked us onto a troop train. There were over three hundred draftees on that train. We still kept our sleeper car; they slept in the chairs. It was slow going, because we pulled onto every siding imaginable on the way to San Diego.

DePue: The war in Korea started in June of 1950. This was about a year later when you enlisted.

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: What were your thoughts when you heard about the war starting in the first place?

Blanchette: I didn't think too much about it. I was having a good time and I just didn't think that much about it. Then as things went on I began to get a little more interested.

DePue: Why?

Blanchette: Have no idea. Dumb, I guess. Just have no idea. I just felt like I wanted to go. When I got to boot camp, that opened my eyes. I wished I was back home (laughter) because it was rigorous. But I went in there skinny and underweight. They issued your uniforms. I thought, "Oh, my God, this is big." You don't complain, though—never complain. Then the drill sergeant

explained, “You fat people are going to be skinny when you leave here in twelve weeks; you skinny people are going to be filled out in muscle.” He was right. I gained almost one hundred pounds.

DePue: While in...?

Blanchette: While in boot camp. I had a friend I made on the train from Chicago who was a draftee. He couldn’t, just couldn’t, eat the food. He was a mama’s boy and everything else. You had to clean up your tray. I’d take whatever they’d give me. Then, without anybody watching, I’d take his because he couldn’t eat it. I ate double meals almost every meal.

DePue: Were you one of those kids… Let me ask you this way. Before you went in the Marine Corps, how far away had you ever been from Kankakee?

Blanchette: Oh, I don’t know—Chicago? Fifty or sixty miles. That’s about it, I think.

DePue: Was that part of the rationale for joining the Marines, seeing the world and…?

Blanchette: No, no. I could care less about the rest of the world. I was having a good time and then things started to go sour. I saw this as a chance to get out, just to go.

DePue: To get out of...?

Blanchette: Of the rut, the routine…

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: …and get away.

DePue: Okay. Well, you accomplished that, didn’t you?

Blanchette: In a quick instant. That was my first Christmas away from home. On Christmas Day, we were allowed a half-hour to write a letter home. That was the only break in our training. You wrote that letter. I don’t care if you didn’t have anybody; you had better write a letter and have it ready to go.

DePue: You remember any of your drill sergeants in basic training?

Blanchette: Yes, I do. One still owes me eight dollars. That was against the rules, too. We got paid once and I saved my money. Didn’t have anything to spend it on. He approached me one day about, “Private, what are you doing with your pay?” “Sir, it’s in my locker.” “All of it?” “Well, I’ve got ten dollars.” “You wouldn’t consider letting me hold onto about eight of those, would you?” “Yessir.” Didn’t do me any good, didn’t get me any favoritism. But he never paid me back.

DePue: Do you think he was hitting up some of the other…

Blanchette: Oh, I know he was.

DePue: …recruits?

Blanchette: I know he was. He was a boozer. He'd come in in the middle of the night drunk from liberty. He would turn the lights on and blow that whistle, "Everybody out on the parade ground." Calisthenics. Ohh... They didn't give us live ammunition until we got to the rifle range. Then you're with a different group, and he wasn't around, or he'd have been dead. We would have drawn straws to see who got to shoot him.

DePue: Was he a World War II veteran?

Blanchette: No, he was a Korean War veteran. He had a Purple Heart. He had, I don't know, three or four other medals.

DePue: So he got back from Korea pretty quick.

Blanchette: Yeah, he got wounded. Then they made him drill instructor after he healed.

DePue: In other words, he was probably at the Chosin Reservoir.

Blanchette: I'm not sure. I know he was in a couple battles because he had the battle stars. But we didn't know any of this until we're ready to graduate. Then you have two or three days where it's not all pomp and circumstance and you're able to ask questions.

DePue: What month did you start basic training?

Blanchette: December sixth.

DePue: Of 1951.

Blanchette: Fifty-one.

DePue: Okay, so the war was still going on.

Blanchette: Yep.

DePue: The line had stabilized by that time.

Blanchette: We didn't know any of that. All we know is a list came out when you were ready to graduate from boot camp for those that wanted to sign up for the next Korean draft. I signed up. I signed up for four or five Korean drafts in a row and never got picked.

DePue: What do you mean by "Korean draft"?

Blanchette: They drafted so many Marines to fill a complement, to go to the cold-weather training and the advanced combat training up at Camp Pendleton. I signed up for it right away. In our platoon alone, I think we had ten or fifteen, which was a good number, out of seventy.

DePue: That signed up to go?

Blanchette: That signed up to go to Korea.

DePue: I suspect with what was going on in Korea at the time that more than 25 or 35 percent of a typical platoon would be heading over there, wouldn't they?

Blanchette: No, because they had a lot of volunteers. A lot of people that were already out in the ranks—staff personnel—that wanted to go. It was more money and there was action. We had one kid who had signs made in Korean, Chinese and English that he was taking with him if he got to go to Korea. "Marine machine-gun post this way." "You're crazy." "No, man, I want to shoot 'em." "Well, okay."

DePue: Those were different times then, weren't they?

Blanchette: Yeah, a lot different. Everybody was gung-ho. Everybody thought we were in a good war and it was justified that we should be there. Not like Vietnam, not like Iraq. I try not to form an opinion on either one of them. But to this day, I can't see why we don't go in to win. In Vietnam, we didn't go in there to win. We didn't commit the force—this is me—we didn't commit the forces to win, and we could have. And Iraq—we could have been in and out of there, but we're not.

DePue: Do you think that's a result of that experience during the World War II era, when everybody seemed convinced it was the right thing to do?

Blanchette: Everybody was convinced we were right. Now, less than half of the people are convinced we're right. But you have the bigwigs and the politicians who say we are right and we're going to stay.

DePue: So what happened to you after you got done with boot camp?

Blanchette: Instead of going to Korea, they sent me to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina to the engineer school to be a plumbing engineer.

DePue: You know what we never did mention, I don't think, where you went to basic?

Blanchette: Yes, we did. San Diego.

DePue: San Diego.

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: San Diego to the East Coast.

Blanchette: San Diego to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

DePue: Okay. Was that your decision to go there?

Blanchette: No, I didn't have anything to do with it. I made PFC out of boot camp because of my drill and manners and everything else. We only had four guys in our whole platoon made PFC. This called for a Private First Class in that field. They shipped me back across the country.

DePue: Had you shown some aptitude for that line of work?

Blanchette: No.

DePue: Had some background beforehand?

Blanchette: Yes, working with my dad. That was my mistake, to put it down on the form.

DePue: Working with your dad on the…

Blanchette: On some plumbing jobs.

DePue: Yeah, okay.

Blanchette: I was his go-fer. I was the one that crawled underneath the house in that crawl space with mice and snakes and everything else. I would drill holes in the floors and stuff like that while he was in the kitchen drinking coffee with the lady.

DePue: (laughter) That's why he had all those boys, right?

Blanchette: Yeah, but the other boys got away from home. They were smarter than me.

DePue: You eventually got away from home, too, it sounds like.

Blanchette: The hard way.

DePue: Yeah. Did you like that work at Camp Lejeune? Did you take to it?

Blanchette: Yeah, I did. For instance, I knew what tools to use for what type of thing. I could pour lead. I knew how to mix the fire pot and everything, how to use lighter knots from wood to melt the lead. I knew how to pour it and wipe the joint and pack it with oak. I knew all that. And most these other guys didn't. We had a man with us who was a draftee journeyman electrician. They were teaching him to be a plumber. (laughter) I had no mention in my interview whatsoever of plumbing. I have a card for journeyman electrician. But after we got out of that, we had portable generators—big ones. We went down to Vieges, Puerto Rico; he ran the generators and did the electrical work.

DePue: Okay. How long were you at that school, then?

Blanchette: I think we were in twelve or fourteen weeks, something like that. We built what we call a slop chute or rec hall and did all the plumbing and all the wiring. I designed all the plumbing. But then I got appendicitis and had to have surgery so I didn't get to work on much of it. But they followed my plan almost exactly.

DePue: Did the Marines take care of you pretty well in terms of your appendicitis?

Blanchette: They had a driver come and get me from sick bay that evening when they found out I was having appendicitis. They took me right to the hospital at the main camp and operated on me about nine o'clock that night. The following morning, they had me up at 6:00 a.m. pushing a mop down the hallway.

DePue: (laughter)

Blanchette: That was my therapy—to get me moving. (gasps) "I'm going to die!" But I didn't.

DePue: That's the Marine Corps' way of getting your appendix out.

Blanchette: But they got me out of the hospital—instead of the ten days, I was out in six. I was back to my unit. Thank God. I didn't want to leave that unit, because it was a bunch of nice guys. When we got selected for the Korean draft, there were three or four of those same guys who went with me. We stuck through it all the way to Japan.

DePue: I'm sure that some people are going to be listening to this and be somewhat confused by the term "draft" here. That was a Marine Corps term for...?

Blanchette: It was a draft to fill a quota of replacements going to Korea. Instead of being assigned to the First Division, which was in Korea, we were assigned to the Third Division, which was at Camp Pendleton. They were readying the entire division to go to what we thought was Korea but we ended up in Japan.

DePue: At that time, you thought you were signing up to go to Korea?

Blanchette: That's right. I thought, "Boy, the whole division's going. Boy, we're going to invade the North." We didn't do it. We invaded Iwo Jima for maneuvers.

DePue: Did you go from the United States to Iwo Jima before you…

Blanchette: United States to Yokohama.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: Then by train from Yokohama to Camp Okubo. We were there several months and got orders to pack up. "Uh-oh, we're going." Well, then, the Korean War was ending. It wasn't ended yet, but it was ending. They were in the truce talks and all this and that. "We're going to Iwo Jima." "Oh, come on." We did. Made a landing. Silliest darn thing you've ever seen in your life. But the conditions there were similar to what it would have been had we had to go and land in North Korea. So it was practice. Multi-million dollar practice.

DePue: That's what Marines do—train and get ready to go someplace.

Blanchette: All the time.

DePue: So can you describe that practice landing in Iwo Jima?

Blanchette: Go down the net, get in an M-boat, go in to shore, get wet, set up, eat four or five days of meals out of C-rations or K-rations, get back in the M-boat, climb back up the net and go back to Japan.

DePue: Now, you were still performing your duties as an engineer at that time.

Blanchette: No.

DePue: What were you then?

Blanchette: Just an infantryman.

DePue: (laughter) So all that wonderful training you got, and all that experience you had beforehand...

Blanchette: At that time, I was machine gun anti-tank assault repair sergeant, in charge of the armory. Because I'd made sergeant.

DePue: You're a unit armorer or an assistant armorer?

Blanchette: I was the armorer.

DePue: Okay. For a company?

Blanchette: For our engineer company.

DePue: Okay. So you were still in an engineer company.

Blanchette: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I never left the engineer company.

DePue: What was the engineer company?

Blanchette: Third Engineers.

DePue: That would suggest that there was just one engineer company per division?

Blanchette: I think so. I'm almost sure it is. When we were at Camp Lejeune, we were the Eighth Engineers attached to the Second Division. So I never heard of Second Engineers. But we were the Eighth Engineers and it was a training battalion. So.

DePue: I would speculate because there were more jobs and duties for engineers at a base camp like that…

Blanchette: Yes. Yeah, you did…

DePue: …than there would be on the usual.

Blanchette: Yes, you did the latrines and the mess halls and the rec halls and the PX. You took care of all the maintenance—the plumbing, and electrical, and things like that.

DePue: Anything stick in your mind about the place of Iwo Jima? I mean, it's such a storied location in Marine Corps lore.

Blanchette: Nothing but a barren island as far as I'm concerned. The stories are all glorified. It's a bunch of coral. It's a crappy place to be. That's the way I'd describe it.

DePue: Black sand?

Blanchette: Dark.

DePue: I read stories that it stunk of sulfur a lot.

Blanchette: I don't remember that.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: I do know that in our division that you were warned, "Do not go souvenir hunting. Do not pick up anything you see." A couple guys got killed because there was still live ammunition and booby-trapped stuff. We didn't go in any of the caves—I didn't, but a lot of the guys did. They were looking for samurai swords—Japanese anything. I didn't want it.

DePue: How long were you there?

Blanchette: Five or six days. It wasn't long.

DePue: But that was in the midst of basically what was garrison duty back in Japan?

Blanchette: Yep, right.

DePue: Okay. Talk to me about first arriving in Japan, then. Did you go by ship?

Blanchette: We went by ship. Fourteen days on a troop ship with thirty eight hundred other Marines.

DePue: Do you remember the name of the troop ship?

Blanchette: No, but I might have—if I can find the pictures—an APA and the number. Took a picture of it, and we could look it up in the archives and find out the name. But it was crowded, and we hit a storm. Thank God I got to be sergeant of the guard because I was on deck in a little office. Down in those holds, where they were seven and eight high, guys were puking all over each other. Oh, what a mess. I stayed up in that cabin on deck in the office. Why you need a guard on a ship filled with Marines, I will never know. But you didn't leave. Oh, those waves were as high as the ship. It was a typhoon.

DePue: Where did you make port, then?

Blanchette: When we came back?

DePue: No, in Japan.

Blanchette: In Japan, yeah. In Yokohama—same place. Left and came back.

DePue: And how far is Camp Okubo from Yokohama, then?

Blanchette: Oh, golly, I'd have to say 100 or 150 miles.

DePue: Okubo—I don't recognize the name. Is it close to a town that we might know?

Blanchette: It's in between Nara and Kyoto, midway between them. It's just a little hamlet. People are just—oh, they were wonderful.

DePue: What was your first impression of Japan after getting out of Yokohama and start driving through the countryside?

Blanchette: It stunk. For one thing, they gathered up the human waste in what they call "honey buckets." These carts would go and dip it out and put it in there. Then they'd spread it on the rice fields. Never thought I'd ever eat rice again in my life, but I do. But it stunk, and there was no way around it. That's from the fertilizer. Here are these people out there in wide hats and shorts and no shoes working in the rice fields. They were spreading this honey bucket crap all over the place. One time, one of our jeeps hit one of them in traffic. They wouldn't let the driver back in. They took a hose to him and washed him off. (laughter) That was a mess.

DePue: This was maybe close to seven years now, after the end of the war. Did it still appear to you that they hadn't quite recovered from the war yet?

Blanchette: Other than May Day, they were probably the nicest people I'd ever met in my life. Couldn't be more courteous, couldn't be more helpful. Our civilian guards were Japanese ex-soldiers and most of them spoke perfect English. One, Murray, got me enrolled in a judo school. I had to have a Japanese sponsor and he sponsored me. Went with me to the first five or six classes. He introduced me to some lovely young ladies, because he was young and good-looking and liked to say he had his own harem. But I got along good with them. On May Day, everything was locked down, because the Communists paraded at that time and were really strong. That was what you'd want to call the regular workers, like the union—was the Communists. We were locked down for one day and that was it.

DePue: But they didn't dominate the rest of society?

Blanchette: No, no. The Japanese police, unlike our police, didn't put up with anything. You followed the rules or they had these clubs about that long and they used them.

DePue: Would you say about a couple feet long?

Blanchette: At least.

DePue: Two or three foot long.

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: Billy club.

Blanchette: Billy clubs. Yeah.

DePue: When you say they used them...

Blanchette: They would beat the devil out of you if you got in the way. Of course, as any other service, you'd have Marines getting drunk and disorderly. They would bring them back to the gate, un-handcuff them and hand them over the Marine guards. Not to the civilians—to the Marine guards. They would explain what they were doing and why they were being brought back like that. They wouldn't charge them unless they had damaged something. Then, "This is what is owed," Boom, boom, boom. So the lieutenant or whoever was in charge of the guard at that time would take the list and "It will be taken care of." And it was.

DePue: I would guess that at that time, there was a Status of Forces Agreement that…

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: …American GIs could not be tried in Japanese court system.

Blanchette: Right, right.

DePue: But what was the reaction of the Marine MP's when somebody was hauled in like that? It wasn't going to be good for the soldier?

Blanchette: It was pretty tough because they made us look bad. If it got too rough and we were restricted and couldn't go on liberty, that would be tough. As a sergeant, I carried my card.

DePue: Your card?

Blanchette: Liberty card. You had to have an ID card to go out that gate and to get back in. When the ships were in (like the Navy was docked and the sailors were in) you'd have a Marine and a sailor MP. You'd have shore patrol and an MP patrolling together. You took care of your own. If they got too out of line, you called the Japanese. They could handle it.

DePue: So they would use the clubs occasionally, to…

Blanchette: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Even on the Marines?

Blanchette: Oh, yeah. You behaved. But most of them were trained as far as self-defense (judo) so very seldom, anybody got badly hurt. Wake up in the morning, and have a knot on your head, and say, "Boy." To have to go in for office hours was even worse. We had a darn good captain—darn good. He came up through the ranks.

DePue: Remember his name?

Blanchette: No, I don't. I tried not to remember those guys too much. He had office hours one time and I was sergeant of the guard. Of course I had to be there. "Sarge, this man did exactly what I did. What do you think? Two weeks confinement? Confined to post?" "Well, sir, that sounds fair to me." Boom, that's what he got. I liked it. In Japan they had shortages. A can of coffee…

DePue: What, about a…

Blanchette: Two pound.

DePue: Two-pound can.

Blanchette: Get that from the mess hall—the olive drab cans. Carry that out in a paper bag. They never checked me. Never checked hardly anybody with that stuff. That would get me a weekend.

DePue: Was that supposed to be rationed?

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: I would imagine quite a few things that you could get in the PX or the Commissary were.

Blanchette: Nylons. Nylons. If you had a couple pairs of those, you had a friend for life. Coffee. Now, they did have meat. I'm not sure what it was.

DePue: "They" being the Japanese?

Blanchette: Yeah. But I would have a nice steak cooked on a hibachi, French fries, and all the Asahi beer I could handle if I brought a couple pounds of coffee and a pair of nylons.

DePue: Where were you going for this? Because there's…

Blanchette: Usually, you'd go into Okubo, because there was a little—what I call a tavern there. They called it a cantina or something like that in Japanese. It had four or five tables, a mama-san who had to be two hundred years old and a couple nice waitresses. But you behaved yourself. They always had the coldest beer anyway. Now, for a real fling… Oh, and they would let you come in in civilian clothes, too.

DePue: Oh, they would? You could walk through that gate in civilian attire?

Blanchette: Yeah. After we'd been there a while. I had my mother send me some because you couldn't get them. But if you went into Kyoto, you had to wear your uniform. In wintertime, you had to wear your class A necktie and everything else. In the summer, you could go in the khaki shirt and no tie, and that worked pretty well. But you get on that train, and—I've never seen it except in the movies—they had the packers. They didn't close the door until everybody is in.

DePue: You need to explain what packers are, for those of us who haven't seen that.

Blanchette: They pushed people into the train where you're so crushed together and they can just barely get the doors closed. That train, then, goes from zero to about ninety-five in about two blocks. You get to the next stop. A lot of people get out; a lot of people get in. Get into Kyoto, everybody got off, like ants. In Kyoto, they had International Hotel, which I think was owned by Canadians, but all staffed by Japanese. So servicemen were welcome. There was a USO counter and everything else.

DePue: They were catering to servicemen?

Blanchette: Yeah. And a weekend would cost you about ten dollars. That's Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Cost you about ten bucks for the room. If you wanted

food or anything else, you went downstairs. It was real reasonable. I think I made, tops, around eighty-seven dollars a month.

DePue: Wasn't this during a time, though, that there was still rationing in Japan? Rice—and I would certainly think meat and some of the other luxuries.

Blanchette: Yeah. But if you had the money, you could get it, like anything else. They couldn't get coffee and they were addicted to it. That's why I go to the desk sergeant. Oh, and that was another thing. I had the only ice cream making machine in the Far East. It came over by mistake! It was in a crate, and we opened that, and, "Ooh." We would make brandy ice cream, whisky ice cream and gin ice cream. We would make all the goodies. I got it running, and we'd trade for different things.

DePue: Where were you getting the cream and the dairy products to keep that…?

Blanchette: Dried.

DePue: Oh.

Blanchette: Powdered.

DePue: So that was being shipped over from the States.

Blanchette: Oh, we could get all that we wanted. Yeah. Took a while experimenting to where it was palatable. But they never had that.

DePue: So that was a big hit, both on base and in the economy then, too?

Blanchette: Yeah, and it was tough. Dry ice was hard to get. It was tough to get it from here to there without it being all melted.

DePue: What other things were rationed?

Blanchette: Well, let's see.

DePue: As far as you guys were concerned. What were things that you knew you weren't supposed to be taking off post?

Blanchette: Oh, that was darn near everything. Lunchmeat, which we had plenty of. Good American whiskey. They had sake that would curl your eyebrows. Asahi beer—which was excellent beer.

DePue: Asign beer?

Blanchette: Asahi. A-s-a-h-i, I think it is. A-sah-i. Anyway, you can buy that out at Friar Tuck's out here—Asahi beer. I went in there one day, and, "My God, you've got Asahi beer!" "Oh, yes. A good seller." "Oh." Akadama wine—that gave you usually a four-day headache.

DePue: Was that a grape wine?

Blanchette: Yeah, dark grape. Akadama. But that was about a four-day headache. We drank and made merry as often as we could. It was dull in Japan. Very dull. Inside that base, it was spotless. We lived in old Japanese army barracks with two stories. No central heat. It got kind of chilly there at wintertime. We had space heaters—one for each room. All that did would be to just keep the frost off your blankets.

DePue: Space heaters running off of kerosene, or...?

Blanchette: Kerosene.

DePue: So you had…

Blanchette: Fuel oil.

DePue: …to make sure they were ventilated right.

Blanchette: Fuel oil. Yeah, yeah, and still it stunk of kerosene, fuel oil and everything else.

DePue: Did you have a lot of Japanese working on the base?

Blanchette: Mainly in the security area. Mainly they were at the gates. They would come in and get like the garbage, trash and stuff like that. But other than that, we didn't have too many working there.

DePue: Were there many dependents on the base?

Blanchette: Oh, we had no dependents.

DePue: At your location, there were none?

Blanchette: None. They weren't allowed. Excuse me. Marine Corps at that time didn't allow you to have a wife, kids or anything else.

DePue: You mean, you weren't supposed to be married, period?

Blanchette: You could be married but they couldn't live with you.

DePue: Okay. I knew that there were plenty of dependents in the Army and Air Force, though.

Blanchette: Oh, yes. But we were on an Army base—actually an Army base. They were a maintenance company and we hardly ever saw them because they were here, there and everywhere else.

DePue: Did you all follow the war pretty closely while you were stuck in Japan?

Blanchette: No, no. The big deal for us was being able to get, like the one kid said, WCKY Cincinnati one Ohio to listen to the hillbilly music. If the newscast came on, nobody paid any attention to it. I didn't. The draftees couldn't wait. Everybody had a calendar—everybody. For the last seven months, I had one. Up 'til then, I never worried about it. When they told me I could not stay in Japan if I reenlisted, that's when I started keeping track. They kept trying to talk to me and I said, "I will re-enlist, but I want to stay here." "You've been out of the States too long; you have to go back. That's the rules." "Well, let me out."

DePue: Why did you want to stay in Japan?

Blanchette: I loved it. Just loved it. Where else can a nineteen– or twenty-year-old young, active man have all the alcohol he can drink, a lovely partner to spend all his spare time with, bathhouses where the woman next to you is washing your back and you wash hers? You never met her before in your life, but... Then get in the hot tub. There might be twenty people around in a big hot tub and you're enjoying each other. This was a whole new way of life. Nudity was not frowned down. You'd go to the beach and disrobe and nobody paid any attention. We were told not to swim in the ocean, which we didn't. We would fish. There were always little kids. We'd give the fish to the little kids and they were tickled to death with them.

DePue: Did you guys get in the role of handing out candy and other stuff to the kids as well?

Blanchette: We didn't have much candy. Yeah, I did, because I had these lemon drops. I forget how I got hold of those. I think one of my sisters sent me a box and had them in and I didn't care for them, so I passed those out. And I had eight or ten packages. Oh, they loved them. My shoes would be shined and different things like that. Right outside the gate, here you go. Get your shoes shined, clothes pressed and washed. Didn't have to send them to the Marine laundry where they starched even your underwear. Oh...

DePue: Were the Japanese kids fascinated with the Americans or were they just kind of hanging around, hoping to get handouts?

Blanchette: Murray the guard told me that the Japanese were convinced that the Marines—not any Army or the Air Force—would cook them and eat them. Said that's what he was taught. Oh, boy.

DePue: Who was this that told you that?

Blanchette: This Japanese security guard, Murray.

DePue: Murray?

Blanchette: Murray. I don't know what his Japanese name was.

DePue: (laughter) Yeah.

Blanchette: We called him Murray.

DePue: Murray.

Blanchette: Yeah. But he said, "Oh, no. The Japanese soldiers were convinced when they were going to fight on different islands like the Philippines to never surrender because the Marines would butcher you and cook you and eat you." I said, "Well, that's not really true." "I know now," but he said, "That's why a lot..." Of course, they have hari-kari. They were not going to surrender. That was bred into them to never surrender. So many of them committed suicide jumping off cliffs and…

DePue: I would think that that whole experience, realizing that all that propaganda that you've been taught for your entire life was absolutely, 100 percent wrong. That had to be quite a jarring experience for them to reach that realization, if you will. I mean, all of that happened long before you got there, though.

Blanchette: Long before we got there, yeah. The Japanese warlords were training for this for years and indoctrinating the troops. That's what would happen if you didn't fight.

DePue: You never had any fear of the Japanese—walking around in the local economy?

Blanchette: No, no.

DePue: Do you think they respected you, or they feared you, or they liked Americans?

Blanchette: I think they liked us once they got over the idea that we were not there to do them any harm. I think they liked them. I know they were honest to a fault, because I left my billfold one morning. It almost beat me back to my base. They put it in a taxi because they knew where I was going. I had to take the train. The taxi at that time was something like eighty cents and that was quite a bit of money. But I get back there, and I'm already in the gate. I had to fill out a form, you know, "I lost my ID," this and this and this. This sentry said, "Sarge, get back here. Here's your billfold." Wow. "How'd that get here?" "Taxi dropped it off." Oh, boy. Didn't have much money; I think four or five dollars in it.

DePue: From what you observed, do you think the Americans behaved themselves? Treated the…

Blanchette: No.

DePue: …Japanese well?

Blanchette: No. There were a big percentage of the Americans who treated the Japanese badly. Got drunk, cussed at them, started fights and things like that. What they call "the ugly American." Now, the group that I ran with—there were four or five guys—we didn't do that. We always had a good time. A lot of beer drinking, a lot of laughing and a lot of fooling around with the girls, but we did not cause a problem. To this day, I don't regret that.

DePue: But you felt bad about seeing other Americans treating them badly?

Blanchette: I was embarrassed. I did not interfere, mainly because I didn't want to get in a fight with them. When someone's drunk like that, you just let them be and get away from them.

DePue: Are there any incidents in particular that stick with you?

Blanchette: One time on a one lane bridge in Kyoto, these two—one was an Army guy and the other was a sailor—were trying to throw a Japanese cab driver off the bridge. Luckily, the Japanese police got there. They said he cheated them. They said that he had told them he would take them somewhere and only charge them so much. He wanted more and so they were going to teach him a lesson. That didn't make for good relations.

DePue: What did the Japanese police do to these two GIs?

Blanchette: I have no idea. I do know they left peaceably. That much I know. But at each end of the bridge was a police check post. They might you stop you and ask for your ID to make sure you're not AWOL or something like that. Usually, there'd be an MP with them. But at each end of the bridge. It's only one lane and mainly they were there for traffic control. If a lot of taxis were coming one way, they would block it at the other end, and let 'em through and then let everybody go.

DePue: You talked earlier about going to a traditional Japanese bathhouse.

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: And I think that deserves a little bit more explanation about what that experience is.

Blanchette: It was my first wonderful experience. I think I was eighteen years old. Bathhouse in Japan. They're public. You go in and disrobe. Everything comes off. Then you go in and sit on something like a milking stool. Whoever's behind you or next to you washes your back and you turn around and do theirs or you do the one in front of you. The first time that happened, the young lady I was with said, "Oh, no, no, no. That's fine, that's fine. But you must do her." "Ooh, okay."

DePue: (laughter)

Blanchette: Then they take these buckets of scalding water and pour over the top of you to rinse all the soap off. Then you get into the hot tub together. You sit in the hot tub and relax. Usually, my friend handed the American GI's a cold glass of Asahi beer to sip on every once in a while. She was sitting alongside the tub. You sit there fifteen or twenty minutes drinking ice cold beer. Every muscle in your body relaxes. You get out and she dries you off. You dry her off. Then you go get dressed. In the meantime, your shoes have been shined and your pants and shirt are both pressed. You put everything on; you're like brand new. Then you might go out and sit in the main area, which I would have called a restaurant. It wasn't; it was what you would call a recovery area. You could drink beer or wine or maybe have a rice cake. I never cared for them after I saw the rice paddies. (laughter) But it was really nice.

Then you go wind down an alley or street or whatever (we'd call it an alley; it was actually a street) to a little mama-san and her papa-san hotel. Might have three or four rooms. Spotless. In wintertime, they would put hot bricks wrapped in towels at the foot of your bed under the covers to warm your feet. The rest of your body was warmed by your companion. These are usually lovely young Japanese women. Just beautiful. Well-groomed, clean as a whistle and good companions. You pick and choose. Problem is, if you went to the same one three or four times, "You take me home with you." "Can I go to the States with you?" "Uh, no, I'd have to marry you." "Well, we can do." "No, no, no, no. I'm allergic to marriage; I might get sick."

DePue: Didn't the Marine Corps have a policy on marriage?

Blanchette: Yeah. It was almost impossible. Just about impossible. The paperwork alone would take you two years, and you're not there that long. We had a sergeant who had a little baby with a Japanese girl. He had to leave her. He was going to desert. But they'll hunt you down. American living in Japan? Uh-uh, you don't have a chance. He got loaded on a ship. Once they were offshore, it was fine.

DePue: I also know that the Japanese as a people pride themselves on being a pure race. This is a generalization.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: And I would think the Japanese society would really look down on these women who were trying to do that.

Blanchette: An American-Japanese child didn't have a chance. It's like Korea. The guys that had been to Korea would tell you uh-uh. You watch MASH. [a popular TV program about Americans acting goofy in a Mobile Advance Surgical Hospital] That part was true about American babies in Korea. They're shunned. They can't get a good education and they don't have heath care. Unless the woman's family takes it in, they're going to be on the street.

DePue: That speaks quite a bit that there was not a shortage of these attractive young ladies who are willing to do this even though the rest of their society would really shun them.

Blanchette: No, they're called working girls.

DePue: Yeah. Were they regulated?

Blanchette: Oh, yes. Health checked every week.

DePue: For VD and…

Blanchette: For VD and any kind of disease. If one would happen to get pregnant, she could go get a shot for three dollars and abort the baby. There was a lot of that went on. There was also VD. One of our guys, who was a married man, turned up with gonorrhea two weeks before he was to ship out. He couldn't go home. He wouldn't dare go home. They extended him, I think it was eight weeks, to be treated. on post.

DePue: And I would guess, kept him

Blanchette: Oh, he was restricted. They didn't just take his liberty card; they tore it up. Oh, he was totally restricted.

DePue: You talked about these bathhouses, but I recall talking to you earlier that some of these activities absolutely did not happen at the bath house.

Blanchette: Oh, nothing. Nothing illegal, immoral or fattening happened at the bathhouse. That was strictly a business for you to go to to relax, to behave yourself or you were put out in the street. You may be put out in the street in the nude and your clothes thrown out after you.

DePue: Would entire Japanese families go there together as well?

Blanchette: Oh, yes. Women, children, fathers, mothers and grandmothers.

DePue: I mean, that's where you had to go if you wanted to...

Blanchette: We had showers, of course, in our barracks.

DePue: Sure.

Blanchette: But after my first experience there, the shower was no good.

DePue: (laughter)

Blanchette: Oh, it was wonderful. Then they talk about walking on your back—massage. I had that happen. Of course, she couldn't have weighed eighty pounds. But oh, God, that was wonderful.

DePue: But I would guess the average Japanese citizen didn't have a shower at their house.

Blanchette: No, no. It was bathhouse or out of the bucket.

DePue: What were your military duties like while you were working?

Blanchette: Of course, being the armorer, I had to keep everything in the armory. We had these heavy 50 caliber machine guns. We had ten of those. We had 30's—I forget how many of those. We had M1's and 45's [rifles]. I had to inspect that every day. I had to count it every day to be sure nothing was missing. We had new cases and new shipping boxes made for our machine guns. The carpenters put them together for us. Turns out it was green wood and everything we owned turned to rust. We worked night and day to get that steel wooled down, cleaned up, inside and out. When the captain came by and I showed him what it was, he said, "Get it fixed now." And we did. But you couldn't use the boxes.

DePue: In that kind of a position, as the armorer for a company with a lot of weapons, and heavy weapons as well, I suspect you didn't have a lot of spare time when you were working.

Blanchette: I had all kinds of spare time because I set up a method. I had assistants. The three of us would only be together a day or two before an inspection. We were always notified about an inspection. Then we'd spit-shine everything. We had inspection every day. They would go through the barracks and check the bed's made and this and that. One of us would stay at the armory; the other two could go goof off.

DePue: You mentioned earlier—calendars. In the Army vernacular, it's counting days.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: And that's how you referred to it as well?

Blanchette: That's it.

DePue: Talk about the rotation policy and about what the average Marine's attitude towards it would be.

Blanchette: The draftees wanted to go home almost to a man. People like me, who enlisted, yeah, once in a while, it'd be fine. Get a Dear John letter, then, "Boy, can't wait to get home and straighten things out." But other than that, I didn't care to go back home. I had it made. Several of the guys—I know Rich, he'd cry at night. Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays—grown men were just crying and wanting to go home. Can't do it. When you're in the States, you can go AWOL and hitchhike and get home. When you're seven thousand miles away, you're not going anywhere. (laughter)

DePue: Yeah.

Blanchette: Then to go home they put you back on a troop ship for fourteen or fifteen days. When I went home, it was on a dependent ship. There were only four hundred of us going home; the rest were all civilian. Army wives, Red Cross workers and USO workers. They'd be out on deck sunbathing in bathing suits and things. Here we are, drooling, assigned to fan tail in shifts because there was not enough room. But nothing you could do about it.

DePue: Not quite as gruesome of an experience heading back to the States on the ship?

Blanchette: Not really; it was just long. We played pinochle every day. It'd run twenty-four hours a day. There was always somebody wanting to sit in. Not for money. Nobody had any money, hardly. I didn't get all my overseas pay until I got back to San Francisco. Then I was rich. Oh! Bought my plane ticket, ready to go. We got so much a month for being out of the States.

DePue: You got it all in a one lump sum?

Blanchette: I elected not to take it as regular pay. I elected not to take my whole pay every month for the whole three years I was in.

DePue: A built-in savings plan?

Blanchette: Yeah. Had it go in direct bank deposit in Kankakee in mine and my mother's name. So I had a little bit of money when I got back.

DePue: Did you get assigned anywhere else when you returned to the States?

Blanchette: I got assigned to Quantico, Virginia.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: Machine gun anti-tank assault training. We were training the officers-to-be. They were in officers' training and this was part of their training. They would come to us to learn how to assemble, fire, clean and maintain weapons.

DePue: Anything you remember about that experience?

Blanchette: Yeah. You had to be dressed up all the time. You had to wear a tie, you had to have dress blues and you stood inspection every week.

DePue: You really liked that, huh?

Blanchette: I hated it.

DePue: (laughter)

Blanchette: But I knew I was getting out shortly. Every day, I had a talking-to by some officer wanting me to change my mind. All I said was "Send me back to Japan."

DePue: When was this?

Blanchette: Just before I got out.

DePue: When did you return to the States?

Blanchette: I got back the end of October.

DePue: Of '53?

Blanchette: Four.

DePue: Fifty-four.

Blanchette: Yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: And I was due to be out December 6 of '54.

DePue: So it sounds like you were in Japan for about two years?

Blanchette: Yeah, just about.

DePue: Okay. And so you weren't at Quantico all that long before you were discharged.

Blanchette: Oh, no. No, I couldn't have stood it there. I would have shot myself. That was all spit and polish. You ever visit the Arlington Cemetery, those guards?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Blanchette: I stood two different burial details for Marines when I was at Quantico. They come and get you on a special bus. Your creases on your trousers are just so. You grab the bars and you pull yourself up into the bus. You walk stiff-legged so you don't bend the creases. You can see your face in every bit of your shoes. Your fingernails are perfectly cleaned and trimmed; your hair, of course, is buzz cut; you have no whiskers whatsoever. You're there for an hour. They don't even want you to blink. Fire the salute and you're done. March back to the bus and get on any way you feel like if you're done. Go back, clean your weapon and you're off for the day. But if you get on that regular, that is a pain. Every single day, there are always burials going on. I didn't like that. I didn't want to be involved in that spit and polish. If I would re-enlist, they were going to assign me to embassy duty. But they couldn't tell

me what embassy. I was worried I might get one in D.C. I didn't want that. I wanted to go to Arabia, Turkey, Greece or…

DePue: See another part of the world.

Blanchette: Yeah. But they couldn't tell you which one; they wouldn't guarantee it.

DePue: I suspect there were some Marines who really liked that spit and polish stuff, though.

Blanchette: Oh, yes, absolutely. They were the ones I tried to ignore and stay away from.

DePue: (laughter) You were on a different wavelength from those folks.

Blanchette: I was not that spit and polish. I got spoiled by Japan living. To this day, I still would like to go back there, but you can't afford it.

DePue: You've never been back, then?

Blanchette: No. At our home in Mexico, I talk with Japanese tourists. They come there to play golf. They play seven days a week—thirty-six holes a day. In Japan, it costs them $1,500 for nine holes.

DePue: I know trying to get scheduled on the course in the first place is a nightmare.

Blanchette: Three or four months minimum to get scheduled. They're fanatics.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about what happened to Paul Blanchette when he got back home.

Blanchette: Got out and thought, at that time, I could draw unemployment for twenty-six weeks, I believe it was. Mother welcomed me with open arms and my old bed was still there and everything else. Of course, most everybody else had moved out. I thought, "I'm going to draw unemployment." Well, my older brother was personnel manager for Armor Laboratories. That dirty bird got me a job every day.

DePue: At where?

Blanchette: Armor Laboratories in Bradley, Illinois.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: They did research on blood and stuff like that. But he got me a job the first day unloading the boxcars of outdated plasma. That was work. It's tough to get fired from a job six or seven times when your brother's the personnel manager. He'd call the house 7:15 or 7:30 in the morning, and my mother would come and wake me. "Your brother's got a job for you today. Get out there." "Oh, Mom." "Come on." Of course I would do it. Finally, I made up

my mind and thought, “I’m going to work. I’ve had enough of this.” So then I went to work for a local politician who owned a Cadillac agency.

DePue: Who was that?

Blanchette: Senator Victor McBroom. Went to work detailing cars. Picking up brand new cars in Chicago at the lot and bringing them back, getting them ready for people that bought them.

DePue: He was an Illinois state senator?

Blanchette: He was state senator. He ruled the roost in Kankakee County. If you wanted a job at the state hospital, you wanted a job at Stateville Prison, you wanted any kind of a state job, if you got the blessing from the state senator, it was yours.

DePue: He was a Republican or Democrat?

Blanchette: Republican. Good guy. Real good family. I wanted to go in the police department. It wasn’t long. Took the test, and they told me—he already told me what day I’d be starting. I said, “But I haven’t taken the test yet.” “Go take it and pass it.” Passed it and got called first. They hired three of us the same day. They hired me first so I had seniority.

DePue: Did you ever consider going to school? Because you certainly would have had the GI Bill benefits.

Blanchette: I went back to Mary Crest Business College and got my degree in computer programming. But I did that evenings.

DePue: While you were still working? While you were working?

Blanchette: While I was working as a policeman.

DePue: Okay, so this would have been after working for Senator McBroom.

Blanchette: Yeah, right. I got to be a policeman, and then another policeman said, “Mary Crest has got a GI Bill and we can get in there.” I said, “But I don’t know what I want to take.” He said, “I’m going to take computer programming.” So I said, “Oh, okay.” So we went and filled out the papers and got right in. It was an evening class. We had a heck of a nice teacher. I went through the sixteen weeks and got my degree. “That’s it? I don’t have to come back?” “Nope.” I got a full degree in computer programming. So when George got me my job at the state, that was my downfall, because they put me in the computer center, and I didn’t (laughter) know scratch about it.

DePue: You mentioned police work. Was that what you would consider now, looking back, your main profession for a few years?

Blanchette: Yeah, for ten years.

DePue: What police force?

Blanchette: Kankakee. Tom Ryan—George's older brother—was mayor during part of that time. Had a couple others. They're nice people. I stayed on the midnight shift the whole time. That's where I wanted to be. Ten o'clock at night 'til six o'clock in the morning. Nobody bothered you. My lieutenant got caught drunk and naked in a squad car one night by the state police. So as sergeant, I was in charge. They never bothered to hire anybody to take his place. I enjoyed it. Then the politics got too involved, and I thought, "Uh-uh."

I was up for lieutenant, and some guy who was not one of my favorite people got it. And I thought, "Ooh." I looked at the eligibility list. I'm number one. They pick from the top three. He was fourth. They took him. I thought, "That's enough; let me out." So that's when I decided to go out in the regular world.

I went to work for Penn Central Railroad for a while. First day there, I showed up and they put me in training. You have to have eight hours. The crew called me that night because the conductor called in sick. I'd never been on a freight train in my life and here I am a conductor. So that set me up as a qualified conductor. Great. Eight dollars more on a trip. I worked there until they had that blizzard and shut everything down.

A friend of mine worked for General Mills Chemical and he called me. He said, "We're going to put on three men in the lab as lab technicians. Why don't you come out and apply for it?" I went out there. The supervisor of the line was one of my brother's best friends who managed the bowling alley. He said, "You want a job?" "Yeah." "You got it." I had to fill out the paperwork, go get a physical with a drug test and everything. Went to work as a lab technician until Baker & Taylor Company advertised for an assistant sales manager. I'd like to get into that, because that's commission. Override and things like that. So I took the exam and they hired me.

DePue: What were you selling, then?

Blanchette: Books. Library, school… In fact, the lady that was here?

DePue: Yeah, Kathryn Harris.

Blanchette: Harris. I said, "Yeah, I was with Baker & Taylor; we set up your automated buying system." "You did?" "Yep. When we put it in, I came down with the crew that was installing it and went over the profile, helped them fill it out and get everything ready." She said, "Well, what are you doing here?" I said, "I got offered the position of national sales manager for Hertzberg Bindery." "Well, they bind our books." "Yeah, they did, for years." I said, "You were

one of the best accounts." So we moved to Jacksonville thirty-seven years ago.

We moved to Jacksonville and I took over. I hired all the salesmen and trained them. Was on the road… Oh, had a million miles on three different airlines. Enjoyed it; loved it. Except it was a family-owned business and the family got into a huge fight. The side that hired me didn't have enough money to buy all the stock they wanted.

I was in Denver when my boss called me. He said, "Have you got a return ticket?" "Yeah." "Where's your car?" I said, "At valet parking in St. Louis." "Oh, good," he said, "because we're out." I said, "What?" He said, "Your office door is locked with a new lock on it." "Well, that won't bother me; I still have my lock gun from the police department." (laughter)

He said, "Your car—he won't let them have it." He didn't. The black guy that ran the park—because any time I'd go to Vegas, I'd stop. "What do you want to play in Las Vegas this time?" "Hey, man." One time he gave me a ten-dollar bill and I brought him back one thousand dollars. We just happened to hit it playing at the crap table. He said, "They were after your car. I wasn't about to give it to them." I said, "Good for you."

So I had return tickets to get home from Denver because they cancelled all my credit cards. I had a car to get back from the airport and I got in late at night and went right to the office. I got in, took out all my personal files and shredded them.

DePue: When would this be?

Blanchette: That would have to be in 1984 or '85. Somewhere in there.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: Right before I went to work for the state.

DePue: Okay. I wanted to talk about that. But first, let's talk about—you got married somewhere in here, back in 1958?

Blanchette: Fifty-one years ago! Well, fifty years ago, actually. Yeah, 1958. February sixteenth. I always said it'd be a cold day when I got married and it was sixteen below zero. (laughter) The photographer couldn't even take pictures. His camera kept flashing and flashing. He said, "It's too cold."

DePue: But she was willing.

Blanchette: Oh, yeah. She set the date.

DePue: And your wife's name?

Blanchette: Marilyn.

DePue: Marilyn...?

Blanchette: Potts. P-o-t-t-s. Yeah, her dad owned Rexall drugstores.

DePue: Okay. How did the two of you meet?

Blanchette: I was a rookie policeman walking skid row in Kankakee, which was the street right along the railroad where all the dime hotels and stuff like that are and eight bars. A friend of mine ran the Log Cabin, which was one of the bars. All my buddies hung out there. I had my night off. I was going to go down and see if Jim wanted to go up to Chicago Heights and fool around. He had to work that night because his bartender called in. So I'm sitting there having a beer with him. In walk these two women. Never saw them before in my life. I said, "Wow, suppose I could by them a drink?" Well, they ordered a little seven-ounce bottle of beer and split it. "Yeah, I'm sure they'd let you buy them one." He came back. "You sure?" I said, "Give them whatever they want." They went to bourbon on the rocks. I said, "What?" He said, "I should have warned you." He said, "They do this all the time." Both good-looking young blondes.

We sat there and drank and drank and it wasn't a busy night. Jim said, "You girls better take him for coffee; I don't want him to drive." Jim ended up our best man. So they did. Virginia had her car and Marilyn didn't. I sat in the back seat and Marilyn and Virginia sat in the front seat. We had coffee and shot the breeze 'til 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning. Then they brought me back to my car. I said to Marilyn, "I'll call you." She said, "Yeah, I know." So my next day off, I called her two days before and asked if she wanted to go out and have a nice dinner or something. "Well, yeah, I'd love to." That started it. My downfall.

DePue: (laughter)

Blanchette: We went to a place was a friend of my brother's—Cliff House in Bradley. It was a nice place—a supper club. Walked in, and Basil said, "Paul, you're dating Marilyn?" "Oh, you know her?" "Oh, yeah. She's in here quite often on dates." "Yeah, I figured that." Lobster.

DePue: Oh.

Blanchette: I said, "My God." He said, "Yeah, it's going to cost you." "Dang." For our fiftieth, the kids gave us a Chesapeake Seafood gift certificate. That's the first time in ages that she had lobster. She had two eight-ounce tails. I can't eat all that. You'll do it.

We had a real good dating time, because I only had one night a week off. On Friday or Saturday night, she and Virginia would usually go to an

after-hours club in Watseka, which is thirty-five miles away. They were open all night. One night, I'm running radar on old [Route] 54 and here comes this car whizzing in. Fifty-two miles an hour in a thirty zone. Whoopee. Took out after them. Oh, no. Virginia. She pulled over right away. I shut the red lights off, walked up. She said, "Oh, God. We were hoping it was you." I said, "License, please." Marilyn said, "You give her a ticket, and our date's off for tomorrow night." I said, "See you later. Go home."

But now Virginia's in Houston, in an assisted living place with Alzheimer's. She never did get married. I told her several times at class reunions and stuff, "If Marilyn had had her car that night, you and I would probably be married." She said, "That's why I never married; you broke my heart." Yeah, right. But she was executive secretary to the president of General Mills for thirty years. She retired up there and then had a stroke and everything. At the last class luncheon we had, her sister said, "We moved her to Houston to be with us. She's in an assisted living place." I said, "Well, be sure and let us have the address." She said, "I'll send it to you," and she did.

DePue: Let's go back to getting locked out of your office because the company changed hands. What happened after that?

Blanchette: That day, when the president and his so-called assistant showed up, the two of them had me in. I said, "Jim, Irma, I've got two conventions on the East Coast. They're set up; they're paid for. You want me to cover them or not?" "Will somebody else be there?" I said, "Wes will be there from North Carolina. I can call O'Brien's from Virginia and they will cover. But I should be there because I'm the one who issued the invitation for the cocktail party and the dinner that the company's putting on." "We'll see. Go back to your office." So I did. Went back there and sat.

Pretty soon, the plant manager came in. He said, "Get your stuff out of here; we'll have somebody take you home." Wow. I said, "Paycheck?" "Oh." I said, "If I'm fired, they've got to give me my paycheck today." "Wait a minute." Came back, and he had my paycheck. Okie-dokie. Nothing much I can do about it. The assistant manager came and said, "Come on. What all you going to take?" "Nothing." "Nothing at all?" "Nope. I cleaned it out during the night." He said, "You're smart."

Took me on home, and, shoot, I wasn't home two or three hours before my salesman from Boston called. He said, "Going to be a lady from Long Island contact you. Educational Activities wants to you take over Illinois for them. Commission sales. It's a good company; I have them out here." I said, "Okay." So I went selling commission sales for a while. I wasn't that thrilled with it.

Then I went with the gas company for a while as a regional manager. I had plants in Quincy, Louisiana and Bowling Green—all over the two states.

When they were sold, that was a real bummer. On Christmas Eve, my boss brought all the bonus checks for my managers. I always took them around. He said, “Oh, and by the way, on December 31st, you and I are out of a job, too.” I said, “What?” He said, “We make too much money.” I said, “Gee, you’re kidding me.” “No.” He said, “We’re severed as of December 31st.” I said, “What about the plant?” He said, “They’re bringing a man up from southern Illinois that makes about half what you do.” Well, you had no problem, and it’s propane. He knows what he was doing; just followed directions. So I got hold of George…

DePue: George...?

Blanchette: Ryan. He said, “Come on over. We’ll have a coffee.”

DePue: What was George doing at this time?

Blanchette: He at that time was Lieutenant Governor.

DePue: This would have been what year?

Blanchette: Oh, boy. 1985.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: So I came over here and went up to his office. We had coffee. He got on the phone and called Bill Fleishli, who at that time was with CMS. He told him what he needed. He said, “I don’t want a job; I want a position. This is a very good friend.” Hung up and he said, “They’ll call you.” I said, “Well...” He said, “Oh, we’ll give them all the information. They’ll call you.” Couple weeks went by; they hadn’t. I called and he said, “Come on back over.” He got on the phone that day and he cussed them out. “You want to be working here tomorrow, this man better be working too.” I went to work the next morning. Had a parking place which you don’t get. You just don’t.

DePue: At CMS?

Blanchette: At CMS. Right behind the building in the main lot. The guys working with me said, “Oh, man, who are you sucking up to?” I told them. I said, “Geez, I don’t know. I went to school with George Ryan.” My boss never bothered me.

DePue: What was your assignment?

Blanchette: I collected overdue and uncollectible bills from different agencies. See, the telephone service and computer service is billed to the different agencies. They’re supposed to pay CMS out of their budgets. The University of Illinois (sighs) was horrible. I don’t know how many times I had to go over there and take copies of the bills that had been sent to them and go over it with their people.

Reorganization of some kind. Anyway, they moved me to the computer center. I was paying bills, doing the security work and running phone lines. They gave me a blueprint of the whole building. Like this building, it has subterranean passages for all the computer cables and everything. Phone lines and everything is underneath the floors. I traced down fifty-nine phone lines that had been disconnected. The lines had never been deadened and they hadn't been taken off the billing from General Tel or whatever it is that has it. I tracked that down. Then I tracked down something like eight miles of dead computer cables that were under the floors that could have been recycled and could have been salvaged.

Then IBM and STK and Hitachi and the others had to come in and pull those cables out. That's a job. We have, I think, two or three semi loads taken out of that building. They just give me this to keep me out of their hair. Nobody ever bothered me. Security—you'd come in (new man) I'd have to take your picture and assign you a security badge that worked. If you break or wear out yours, I'd make a new one. Keys—your desk key—I'd assign that to you by number, and I could tell you every key and every lock in the place. It was just part of my duties.

DePue: Going back to George, had you kept in touch with George…

Blanchette: Oh, yeah.

DePue: …all the way through these years?

Blanchette: Yep, sure had.

DePue: What was the nature of relationship that the two of you had?

Blanchette: It was fine. When he got to be Secretary of State, I was that close to going to work over there. Nah, because they wanted me to travel to Chicago. Dean Bower, who is one of my old police friends, who spent time in prison for George, he was Inspector General—that's who I would be working with. I'm so glad now I didn't, because I'd be right in with him.

DePue: Did you guys go out as couples together, or…?

Blanchette: No.

DePue: Casual acquaintances, what?

Blanchette: Casual acquaintances, because his scheduling and position was so much different than mine. I would go over to his office and have coffee with him. Of course, "Bring rolls."

DePue: But when you first went to him to see if he could help you get a job, between the times you guys knew each other in high school and then, had you known each other that closely?

Blanchette: No, because we'd been separated. See, when I moved out of Kankakee, he was in the House or Senate, I don't know. We'd go back for class stuff and run into each other, stuff like that.

DePue: That's about it?

Blanchette: Yeah, that was about it.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: Really, there was nothing. I didn't want to work for the state. I wasn't that silly.

DePue: (laughter)

Blanchette: When you got to be my age, jobs are kind of hard to come by. We didn't want to move. We had made the move down here and we were pretty happy. My wife had a good job. She'd still be working if she hadn't had that stroke.

DePue: Well, let's kind of close things up. I've got some more general questions for you. There was one thing I wanted to ask you about in your experience in Japan that I failed to ask you about. This was a time when integration of the military was still pretty new. What was your impression of how well or how poorly that was going?

Blanchette: We didn't have that problem. In boot camp, we had two black men, period, out of seventy-one or seventy-two. George McCoy, who was our right guide, led the platoon. Tall, good-looking black guy. He was in chains coming back from Japan because he'd stolen an officer's uniform and was wearing it when he got caught. The other man—I have no idea whatever happened to him.

DePue: Do you know why he did that?

Blanchette: Yeah, because he was chasing after some young white girl and thought she'd be impressed. He told me. I ran into him. "George!" He had a guard with him. He said, "Yeah, it's me. I'm in the brig down below. I'm up for my air." Oh, boy. But no, we didn't have a problem that I know of. No, we didn't have a black man in our service company. We didn't have one.

DePue: Did you see or did you experience any times when the Japanese treated the blacks any different than whites?

Blanchette: Japanese treated them very much different. Japanese girls did not want to date the black men. We saw the black Army guys. The couple of girls that I knew real well said, “Oh, no. Japanese girl date black man, we shun her.” “Oh.”

DePue: So even the other working girls would…

Blanchette: Yeah. They didn’t want anything to do with them.

DePue: Do you know why?

Blanchette: No. I just figured it was none of my business.

DePue: Looking back in that experience and military experience you have, especially being in Japan during the Korean War, do you think the United States did justice to the occupation duty in Japan?

Blanchette: Occupation duty in Japan was good duty. I cannot say a bad word about it. I enjoyed every minute of it.

DePue: Do you think in terms of our relationship with the Japanese people and the Japanese government, was it a successful occupation?

Blanchette: I think it was. I really think it was, because we seemed to get along. In our part of Japan, we got along real good. No, there weren’t any bad experiences as far as the Japanese authorities where we were concerned. It was good and they didn’t try to gouge you on pricing. In fact, they’d give you a break, bend over backwards for you. And you couldn’t find a more courteous nice people.

DePue: What’s your impression of Korea? Was that worthwhile? Were our efforts in Korea worthwhile?

Blanchette: No, they were not. We should not have stopped at the Yellow River. We should have gone right on the way MacArthur wanted to do it and we wouldn’t have all this garbage going on now.

DePue: You mean we should have gone all the way up to the Yellow River?

Blanchette: We were at the Yellow River.

DePue: Yeah.

Blanchette: We should have not stopped there. We should have went into Manchuria and got those Chinese.

DePue: Oh.

Blanchette: We talked about that. The old heads—I’m talking guys that were in Korea several times—our first sergeant and gunnery sergeant said, “If we hadn’t stopped there, we wouldn’t be where we’re at now. When they removed

MacArthur, you don't know how many of us wanted to get on board ship and go home." But it didn't happen.

DePue: Disgusted because MacArthur had gotten canned.

Blanchette: Yes.

DePue: Do you still feel that way today?

Blanchette: I do. I am still to the point where I don't think we would have had Vietnam. Oh, I don't know about Iraq; that's another can of worms. But I don't get involved in it, don't argue it with people. Could care less. They don't want me. Use me for cannon fodder, maybe, and that'd be about it.

DePue: How do you think your experience in the military, and especially that couple years that you had in Japan changed your outlook on life?

Blanchette: It made me a little more open in my perspectives. I didn't expect people to give me anything. I thought I'd have to work for it. If I didn't work for it, I didn't deserve it. In the service I worked for it. I got it. I would have had another stripe if I'd stayed in because I worked for it. I felt the more I did, the better off I was.

DePue: So looking back, are you happy you had that experience?

Blanchette: Yes, very much. Very much. My grandsons think I can walk on water. Well, you saw the medals which took fifty years to get, but that's the military.

DePue: Explain that a little bit, because these are…

Blanchette: I knew I had United Nations, National Defense, Good Conduct, and Korean Service. I knew I had four. I didn't realize the president of Korea had issued a special medal for our outfit for something we had planned on doing. That, I had no idea. When Congressman LaHood's office called me and said, "We have some medals here for you." "What?" He said, "Yeah." I went up there, and got the ones I showed you. I didn't know what to do with them, and David said, "Well, why don't you frame them?"

DePue: Your son, David?

Blanchette: Yeah. "Why don't you frame them?" I went downtown to the frame shop. She said, "Oh, yeah, I can do that. Ninety-one bucks." "You're kidding?!" "Oh, no." Special glass, and this and this and this. "Do it; get them off my back." Then Marilyn said, "You didn't take that out of the house account, did you?" It's our business account.

DePue: (laughter)

Blanchette: But I knew I had four coming. Good Conduct—I knew I'd earned it, and on my discharge, it didn't even have it. I wasn't about to argue that day when they handed me that paperwork. I wanted out that door.

DePue: So you left the service, didn't have orders for any of these medals, but knew that you had earned them?

Blanchette: Three of them were on my discharge…

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: …and I knew I'd earned them, but I also knew I had earned a good conduct, and it wasn't on there. Not going to worry about it.

DePue: Was it just kind of a fluke that somewhere along the line, the Marine Corps figured out that they hadn't awarded you these things? Or had you asked LaHood to look into it?

Blanchette: No, I think it was some kind of an internal audit that brought it to light. I'm not sure.

DePue: Okay.

Blanchette: And like I said, I don't care. I got 'em, I earned 'em, and they're on my wall. And I think David's planning on scrapping them and selling them for metal (laughter) the day I die. He keeps worrying about my health.

DePue: We should probably mention that your son David is the—I'm going to not get his official title right. He's the Public Affairs Officer for IHPA [Illinois Historic Preservation Agency] or for a couple agencies at the state now.

Blanchette: Oh, three or four now. Yeah.

DePue: Does a super job for us.

Blanchette: They're happy with him; I know that.

DePue: You have some other children?

Blanchette: Daniel works for Blue Cross Blue Shield here in Springfield as a recovery specialist on claims where Blue Cross has paid and it turns out the person has other insurance, also. He goes after the other insurer to get the money back to Blue Cross. Then my daughter is senior purchasing manager for Sara Lee for meat and dairy products. She was with Wrigley for fourteen years and just before Wrigley was sold to Mars, she quit and took the job with Sara Lee.

DePue: Any of them have any military experience themselves?

Blanchette: No, no. I would have sworn David would have been gung ho, because he and I hunt—bow hunt, shotgun, rifle, pistol and muzzleloaders. He made muzzleloaders we hunted with. He was just always gung ho on anything to do with a gun. But then when he got in college, everything changed. He found out it was party time.

DePue: When was he in college?

Blanchette: He was at McMurray College—oh, boy—he's got four years in there, and I don't remember the years.

DePue: Was that after the Vietnam years, though?

Blanchette: Oh, no. It was before. He's been out of college almost thirty years.

DePue: Let's finish off with just one or two other questions for you. I would ask you to reflect back on your life and give you an opportunity to offer up some wisdom for those who might listen to this in the future. What advice would you give to your children for the future?

Blanchette: Oh, boy. For the future, they better start saving now, because they're not going to be able to afford to live. The way things are going, our government is going to take everything away from you and not going to give you anything. We're going to keep electing people who you can't trust from one hand to another and sit back and gripe and moan about it and not do anything about it. So they're going to have to look after themselves and their neighbors and hope their neighbors look after them. That's all I can say about it.

DePue: Any final words for us?

Blanchette: I hope this sells a million copies…

DePue: (laughter)

Blanchette: …so my commission will be good.

DePue: I'm not sure I can guarantee you that, Paul.

Blanchette: Darn. I was looking for a contract here that said how much, and I never did see it.

DePue: I think the contract said you gave this, lock, stock and barrel to the library.

Blanchette: That was blood I signed that in?

DePue: (laughter) Okay, well, Paul, it's been wonderful to interview you, and I certainly enjoyed it. Hope you did, too.

Blanchette: I'm going to call son, David, tell him this poor old guy can't make it back to Jacksonville without him buying lunch.

DePue: Okay, sounds like a deal. Thanks, Paul. (end of interview)