

**John Harnes
Veteran**

**Bob Kirk
Interviewer
NYSMM**

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At the Baldwinsville, NY VFW
by The Baldwinsville Messenger
and the Baldwinsville Public Library**

Bob Kirk: Uh good evening, were here at the VFW hall to talk to D-day veteran of June 6th, 1944. I'm Bob Kirk, a member of the VFW here, and I'm going to interview John w. Harnes, how do you do Mr. Harnes?

John Harnes: Nice to meet you Bob, I've seen you for a long time, nice to meet you.

BK: Same here, could you give us a little of what you were doing at that time or a little experiences before d day, how you got into the service, where you came from and give us a little background on that.

JH: I entered the service in September of 1941 and spent the first six months in Cheyenne Wyoming with a friend of mine who has since passed away. We joined the airborne, went to the parachute training school in Fort Bennington Georgia. We came out of there, he went to the 82nd airborne and I went to the 101st airborne. Our training in Fort brag North Carolina. From there I went to England and he went to North Africa. It's been almost a year in England preparing for the invasion.

BK: When did you get to England approximately?

JH: It was in 1944 and I can't remember, it was early spring, I remember, I remember going over on boat, a big English boat it took us 30 days because we had engine problems and ended up in Newfoundland for approximately three weeks, the whole division.

BK: Would you correct that maybe to 1943 because the invasion was June 6th 44, you said you were about a year so, so I imagine you got there probably in 1943?

JH: It very well maybe.

BK: Yeah, yeah our memories aren't too good. It's hard going back to that long ago.

JH: That's true.

BK: Where were you stationed in England?

JH: In a little town south of London, I want to say Litchfield and I'm not real positive of that but we lived in small huts then, perhaps 12 or 14 men.

BK: Were they Quonset huts?

JH: They were Quonset huts, they called Quonset huts two yes, we were very near, actually walking distance of an airfield.

BK: And did you find the people friendly and live good over there?

JH: The English people treated us very very nice, yeah. They were fine.

BK: And then did you have any training over there for the amphibious landing?

JH: Well not for the amphibious, but we had several jumps, in fact our first night jump we had ever made were performed over there prior to

BK: Yeah, I missed both. You weren't part of the amphibious you were a part of the 101st airborne, and when did you know first you were going to be in D-day, what was your reaction like that?

JH: Well I think we had built up to it and of course there were always rumors and all of a sudden we were to be in a staging area, I don't know what the timeframe was here but we eventually got into a staging area and as I recall we had some of the best meals. We had fresh T-bone steaks, the night before we jumped into Normandy, I'll never forget that because it was quite, quite good. K rations up to that point weren't so good.

BK: Originally was scheduled for Monday June 5th, the weather conditions postponed it for one day, was that pretty hard on you?

JH: It was. We were in a staging area, in fact, we didn't board the planes but we had our chutes on and we were in line if you will. And it was called off because of the weather conditions, yes.

BK: And then what time in the morning on June 6th did you?

JH: Jumped approximately 2am.

BK: 2 am that morning?

JH: Yeah, yes.

BK: And where was an area where you drop in?

JH: We were this side of Sainte-Mère-Église, on the channel side if you will, back toward the channel. And we were quite scattered, it took us quite a while to get even 8 or 10 of us together. But we did and we did as much as we could at that time.

BK: Would you say that was east or behind Omaha beach?

JH: It was between Omaha beach and Sainte-Mère-Église, were approximately in the middle about halfway to Sainte (blank).

BK: The other way was Utah beach, wasn't it?

JH: It was, it was north of us.

BK: Oh it was north of you?

JH: It was, yes.

BK: It would be, yes. And how many were in your outfit that jumped?

JH: Well of course we went by plane loads, and there were approximately 16 of us in the plane I jumped out of.

BK: So what's it, the whole division?

JH: The whole division was involved in (blank).

BK: And how many in a division?

JH: At that time the airborne was about 12,000

BK: Oh 12,000, yeah and all 12,000 went over right?

JH: Yes the entire division went over

BK: And how many would get in a plane, would you say?

JH: Well in my particular case, there were 16 men.

BK: 16 men. So you need a lot of air....

JH: Lot of planes.

BK: Probably be close to thousands I would imagine.

JH: I wish I could remember how long we flew a round, getting all of this Armada together to take off if you will. It was a lot of time involved in the staging Time of this.

BK: Where did you personally come down, what was your experience, were you hurt coming down or anything like that?

JH: I wasn't hurt coming down, it was sometime during the following day that I was hurt the first time.

BK: were you hurt because of the fall or were your hurt because....

JH: No, no, no, no, in total, between mortar and machine gun I was hit eleven times.

BK: Eleven times??

JH: On two different occasions.

BK: Where were you hit in your body, legs or what?

JH: My legs and my arms.

BK: But not mortally or anything?

JH: Not mortally, no.

BK: Did the medics take care of you?

JH: I have one medic that I will see again in July in Nashville of this year that took care of me the first time, and we have some laughs over that.

BK: And what chemical, or what was that they gave you, or keep you from having...?

JH: It was morphine.

BK: Morphine right?

JH: Each of us had a shot of morphine, they were given to us prior to our jump, and we had that in our jumpsuits.

BK: What's that quinine something you took with you to prevent infection?

JH: No, I have, I remember, recall no, we had a sulfa pad.

BK: Oh sulfa pad, right.

JH: It was a sulfa pad and this little packet of morphine, and they'd hand us a needle, I forget how it was packaged but you broke it away from the needle and you could yourself, inject if you will.

BK: What was your role when you hit the ground and you're an infantry man right? Basically?

JH: Basically, Yeah.

BK: And what was it, machine gun, rifle or what?

JH: It was rifle, we had machine gun we had rifle and we even had 75 millimeter howitzers, our carry pieces.

BK: What did you carry?

JH: I carried, no, I carried a carbine, a 30 caliber carbine, and a 45 revolver pistol if you will.

BK: The carbine is a lot lighter cause the m1....

JH: No, no cause in the airborne the stock was folding, it was a wire, a heavy wire, not like most wood guns if you will and it folded. The whole piece was perhaps about that long and it was secured by a belt and it just hung down your leg.

BK: How many clips did it hold in one? 8 or 10?

JH: I wish I could remember bob but I can't tell you.

BK: I was talking to my son the other day, for the m1 and I said there was 8 but he said he thought there was 10 but he wasn't sure.

JH: I'm really not sure.

BK: I can't remember, 50 years is a long time to remember that.

JH: You don't think about it.

BK: How did they get you out of there then?

JH: First of all, the third day I was taken as a prisoner. I couldn't go any farther anymore because of the wounds I had. They took me to a small building, and long behold. I saw one of my buddies there that had been hurt quite badly. We were there, and this is this side of Saint Lowell, we were there a very short period of time, and then they moved us back to Cherbourg. Within a given period, if this was two three weeks, I really can't remember, the infantry came through and in effect, they recaptured us if you will, and I came back on one of the LST boats and went back to England to a hospital and had three operations.

BK: Did they treat you well, the Germans?

JH: They were good to me, when we got to Cherbourg, it was more of a hospital setting, not that it was a hospital, but it was more of a hospital setting. I saw mostly medical people.

BK: They did treat you and take care of you?

JH: They did for me what they could do.

BK: How did you communicate with them?

JH: They talked English.

BK: They talked English? But you couldn't speak German right?

JH: At the time no I couldn't, no.

BK: Can you now though?

JH: No I still can't, even though I'm German descent. I just never learned the language.

BK: It's a tough language to learn I think.

JH: I think French is worse but, I wish all our children in school would be required to learn a foreign language.

BK: Then after, this is three days after our infantry come through, and one over in Normandy, and you were taken back, Cherbourg didn't fall at that time though didn't it?

JH: No, it held out quite a while, what happened was, everything passed it and then it came back to it, it circled back.

BK: Cherbourg was a port city?

JH: It was. A large port city.

BK: And we tried to get that in our goals to get there as soon as possible as I recall. And it took us what? 6 weeks?

JH: I'm not sure of the time frame again but.

BK: We have the book here, which I have reviewed and I imagine you read it one time or another, June 6 44. The longest day, Cornelius Ryan is the author of the book. And it's a very very good book and it brings it to mind today because it's 50 years almost since the battle, it'll be 50 years Monday.

JH: That's right.

BK: Yeah, then did you go back to England?

JH: I went back to England, and spent several weeks in the hospital three different, operations and then I went to a rehab camp and then joined the outfit again and it wasn't too long after that then into December that we went to the battle of the bulge, with the entire division went up there.

BK: Then you came by truck to go to there...

JH: No, no, no, we went from Cherbourg, in that area if you will by a truck to Bastogne.

BK: And that was a real real tough battle wasn't it?

JH: That was a tough battle in that the weather was one of our enemies obviously and it was, it was cold, there was a lot of snow, we were completely surrounded no matter which way we went, we encountered someone if you will.

BK: Who was the Commander of the 101st At Bastogne? And what was his famous words?

JH: Ah, nuts to the Germans.

BK: Yeah when they asked for the surrender, he said “nuts”

JH: Yes he did.

BK: They were surrounded and looked hopeless but fought on right?

JH: Yes, yes.

BK: And what was your final outcome?

JH: The back of the Germans if you will, was broken, they did go around us, and almost went to the coast. But somewhere in between there that was all broken up, and that was the beginning of their downfall.

BK: Bastogne never fell?

JH: Bastogne never fell. No, no it was ours.

BK: Was that the same commander that you had on D-day? Or did it change?

JH: Don't ask me.

BK: You can't think of it?

JH: Isn't that awful? He was the youngest four star general in the US army at that time.

BK: Was it Gamo?

JH: You're coming close.

BK: Yeah, he's a west point man.

JH: Oh yes, he was a west point man.

BK: West point man and he was famous and everything.

JH: I'm embarrassed to be able to not say his name.

BK: I am too because I know by memory, pretty sure of the names though. Did you want to add anything else? Your wounds, you were hit 5 or 6 times?

JH: 11 times in total.

BK: Eleven times in the D-day battle, right? Not on D-day but the next couple days, And so forth. But when they took you back to England they were able to bring you back and everything and make you fit or did they bring you back when you hadn't healed completely?

JH: No I was pretty well healed when I left the hospital, but I spent the next two weeks in a rehabilitation camp and from there went back to the unit. No, I was pretty good shape by then, really.

BK: Yeah, and was that after Bastogne, were you in any more after that?

JH: I wasn't wounded in Bastogne.

BK: I mean did you fight any more battles after that?

JH: Yes we went to, aw gracious, it's in the south part of Austria. And we followed them the entire to Berchtesgaden.

BK: Was that the cologne battle of Saint Marie in like that?

JH: Yes, and then we wound up in Berchtesgaden, in Austria, where Hitler's redoubt was, if you will.

BK: It was a lot easier in Bastogne though wasn't it?

JH: Well it was, the conditions were better.

BK: And the Germans were on the run right?

JH: They were on the run, yes. It was a different kind of thing then.

BK: And what year did you enter the service?

JH: 1941, June of 1941.

BK: June 41, when were you discharged?

JH: In September of 46.

BK: So it was a year after the war ended? September 2nd, 45 was the official ending of both wars.

JH: of 45?

BK: 45, yeah. You'd happen to have points to get out at that point, id imagine.

JH: I did have, and I did get out in September of 45.

BK: Yeah I thought possibly you did. Because all of the troops at that point were being sent home.

JH: Most of them, some of them...

BK: For a occupation.

JH: Were scheduled to go to japan.

BK: If they didn't have enough points, and you needed 85 points at the time.

With the number of time you add, you get one point for every month in the service, one point for every month overseas.

JH: You remember the points huh?

BK: 5 points for every... well I know because I had enough points to get out in September.

JH: Okay.

BK: I was lucky to get out then.

JH: And that's when I got out.

BK: Yeah.

JH: Yes.

BK: Yeah if you had enough points you could get out or else you'd have to just stay right in.

JH: Absolutely, discharged in fort Sheraton Illinois.

BK: Yeah, now is there anything else you could tell about the experience you regret? Being in this? Or how do you feel 50 years later?

JH: Like most experiences in your life, if you survive them and thankfully have this built in, your memory quite doesn't serve you that well and it's just as well. Like someone said you know this is well you can't remember everything, and then there's certainly no point to do well, if I were to say anything to, of that experience, I'm still very regretful that any young man had to lose his life over there. This man's inhumanity to man for me is very hard to justify.

BK: Yeah.

JH: We lost a lot of good men, a lot of good young men.

BK: Was there any psychological we'll say kick back against you?

JH: No, I don't think so, no cause I, if you want to get a little more personal if you will, my father died when I was 9 years old and my mother died when I was 12 years old. So it meant that I had to do, and no matter what came along, you did the very best that you could and dawning on something that was unhappy or tragic if you will, you have to go on.

BK: Would you have any idea in the 101st, what the casualty rate was or anything like that?

JH: No, uh I really don't, uh of the 80 some fellas in my company if you will, I see about 12, in our, I'll see one less this year as well, in our national reunion, which again I said to you earlier, which is being held in Nashville, Tennessee this year. Although there is approximately 12-14,000 people attend this, but it's the wives and children. The actual veterans from that, they're not that many left. I have no idea what the percentage is.

BK: I mean well there were replacements, like at the time you were hit, they had to replace you with someone else, and so if you start out with 12 thousand, maybe they turned over completely. How many were still with your, that were with you on D-day. Do you have any idea? There were a lot of different faces weren't there?

JH: Oh there's a lot of different faces, yes, yes if I had more time to think about this I might be able to come up with a figure, um between fellas that were taking as prisoners and we had several, a lot of them that that had happened to, besides those being wounded, and being wounded bad enough that they weren't sent home. I'd have no idea of the number, what the percentage is.

BK: Right here in Baldwinsville, for the Memorial Day parade which is coming up next Monday, you are one of the, what did you say? The honor guest?

JH: The Grand Marshall.

BK: The Grand Marshall! Right at the head of the parade right?

JH: Yes, yes.

BK: And there is only 5 that they can locate in this area, am I right?

JH: Is that right? I'm not sure.

BK: Yeah, there's 5 of you, so you are being recognized at your 50 years.

JH: Yes and its rather strange but obviously appreciated.

BK: If you wouldn't mind tell me what rank were you when dropped in?

JH: Corporal.

BK: Corporal? What rank were you when you left?

JH: Same.

BK: And why was that?

JH: I think in that, you used to see advances, where you know were easy because you lost so many, and the replacements were so many, uh it was very much specialized if you will. I think with all the activity me being a PW, I wasn't with it until, we lost our commander, I have no idea, I really don't, were just thankful to come out of there alive.

BK: Well in my own case, I never wanted a promotion, because you had to, and I was a corporal too, with the 28th.

JH: Okay.

BK: If you moved up to be a platoon leader, they were knocked off, the Germans and the snipers and like that would always go for the guys in the lead and everything, there were many offers and I mention the same thing happened with you, you could even get battlefield commissions and like that.

JH: Yes, yes.

BK: But if you took them, you didn't last very long. I think if you're a survivor it's a big thing, right?

JH: It is, absolutely, absolutely, one of the greatest regrets that I have again is all these young fellas, and their mothers, and their fathers, and their sisters, and their brothers waiting for them to come home and they never did. I lost my oldest brother in France, and I just...

BK: What outfit was he with?

JH: He was with the 8th air force.

BK: Oh yeah.

JH: Yeah.

BK: What medals did you win or do you have at this point from your service? You had the Purple Heart of course. How many campaign ribbons?

JH: I wish I knew bob, I lost most of my records were lost in this so called famous "Kansas City fire".

BK: Aw

JH: And I don't have all of the medals, I just looked in to this about a month ago with the discharge paper I have, it lists the medals I should have. And I don't have them so hopefully someday I will be sent those.

BK: Were they sent to St. Louis? Is that where you inquired?

JH: Yeah they weren't sent to St. Louis, yeah.

BK: I sent a few years ago with a copy of my discharge papers and they sent me everything.

JH: Did they really?

BK: Yes they will send you everything.

JH: Oh, marvelous.

BK: And you would also have a brown star.

JH: I do have one yeah.

BK: Yeah, and you would also have probably, you were in Normandy, and the Ardennes's campaign, and northern France too, that'd be three, Germany would be four. And the Rhineland would probably be five. There are five altogether, so you'd have five of them, and you'd probably have the occupation too, am I right?

JH: You remember better than I can bob.

BK: Well I've been going over it lightly preparing for this so.

JH: Okay, right. Our division had so many medals, awards if you will, there were two presidential citations.

BK: Did you get the Croix de Guerre too?

JH: Yes, from France and Belgium, both and it's quite a recollection.

BK: It's quite a recollection.

JH: It's quite a record.

BK: And you're glad you served and with a good background?

JH: Oh yes, I had three brothers, there were three of us in this, my younger brother was in the 17th airborne, again, my oldest brother was in the 8th air force, he lost his life there, and no I wouldn't have any...

BK: How many brothers did you have?

JH: I had three brothers...

BK: There's four of you? And only one dead?

JH: Yes.

BK: Were you the youngest or in between?

JH: I was in between.

BK: Oh, okay.

JH: Yes.

BK: How long, now were at the VFW the post, what is it 153? 153, okay here in Baldwinsville, how long you been a member here?

JH: Since 1956, yeah, when I came here from Illinois

BK: Oh you almost got 40 years.

JH: Yes, I came here from Illinois.

BK: And you belong to the 101st reunion? Don't you?

JH: Yes, yes.

BK: Any other outfits? Did they got by regiments too with the airborne? Like the infantry did?

JH: Oh sure.

BK: Which one were you with?

JH: I was with 377th.

BK: Do they have a reunion too?

JH: Oh yes we have our own separate little end color here if you will and then there is the grand overall, they have two dinners.

BK: How long have you been going to those reunions?

JH: Probably 15 years?

BK: 15 years?

JH: I didn't go at first. I supported all these if you will but physically I just couldn't bring myself to it.

BK: I'm in the same boat, never went to one, I didn't even join the VFW here until after I retired.

JH: Alright.

BK: I just didn't want to face up to it.

JH: I don't think that's uncommon, I think it's a norm with most of us, I really do. Just don't open too many doors.

BK: Well, I think that you have quite an experience and its nice talking to you.

JH: Nice talking to you as well bob.

BK: And just stay here a minute while we turn the camera off, my camera man today is... okay hold on.

JH: Well you're doing a good job, thank you Bob.