

Justus Rathbone Belfield

9 June 2012

Delmar, New York

Marilyn Kaltenborn Interviewer

Janice Irwin Camera Operator

MK: Hello, I am Marilyn Kaltenborn and today, June 9, 2012 I am once again talking to Justus Belfield about his days in the United States Army during World War II. In April of this year, Jay, as he likes to be called, told us about his days in the United States Cavalry. Then, in May, he told us about his years in the United States Army during the beginning of World War II. Once again, we are at the studio of our local public access television station in Bethlehem, New York, at the Bethlehem public library. I would like to thank Janice Irwin who is once again operating the camera and providing us with technical assistance.

One thing I have forgotten to mention is that Jay and I intend to send a copy of these shows that we have been making to the Veterans' History Project, a part of the Library of Congress.

Jay, we learned in our previous interviews that you were born in Utica, NY on June 27th, 1916.

JB: That's correct.

MK: And that you now live in Glenmont, NY with your wife of 70 years.

JB: That's correct.

MK: Jay, in the last two interviews we learned that you joined the United States Cavalry in 1936...

JB: Correct.

MK: ... when you were 19 years old, and that you were honorably discharged from there in 1940.

JB: That's correct.

MK: Then, soon after when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, you, like many men in the United States enlisted in the Army.

JB: But I did that for a reason.

MK: Go ahead.

JB: If I'd waited till I got drafted, I'd have been a private.

MK: Oh, then...

JB: But by enlisting, I went in as a corporal.

MK: Oh, very interesting.

JB: Yes.

MK: And then you told me, and our audience, in our last interview that you were in the reserves for a year after you enlisted, before you were called to active duty.

JB: That's correct.

MK: And then, at the last interview, you mentioned to us the various army installations where you were stationed in the United States before going to Europe. And what ship did you go to Europe on?

JB: I went on the USAT (United States Army Transport) Borinquen which was a wooden ship, the last wooden transport in service. And my trip over to Europe was its last trip over. When it came back it was decommissioned.

MK: Okay. Very interesting. And then at the end of our last interview you had told us about the train that was operated by the Nazi sympathizer, that you were not on. And it was a miracle that you were not on that train. You and your men were originally assigned to be on that train, but due to a mix up, you were on trucks and other soldiers were on the train.

JB: Actually, that was no mix up. What happened was, we got off the ship first.

MK: Oh.

JB: And it was dark out already when we got off the ship. Now, we crossed the...

MK: English Channel?

JB: ... English Channel from Portsmouth Southampton to Le Havre. And we stood on the wharf at Le Havre for hours, and hours, and hours with our clothing. And it was cold, it was winter. And I was beginning to get, I was beginning to turn into an icicle. And somebody said, "I wish they'd get us out of here." Well, we didn't know why we were waiting. We were waiting to get on the train. "Well", they said, "the second company is not ready to get off the ship yet, so you take their place on those trucks over, which are theirs. And they will take your place on the train."

MK: Okay. Thank you for clarifying that Jay.

JB: So then when the train, well, you can go on with the story.

MK: Right. And then, last interview you explained about the accident with the train.

JB: It was no accident.

MK: Well, the uh, exactly. That the engineer intentionally accelerated the train such that it ran into a wall or an embankment...

JB: Into the station.

MK: ... into the station. And it killed or injured many soldiers.

JB: Well, most of them were the ones that took our place on the train.

MK: Right. And then at the conclusion of the last interview, you were about to tell us about another experience you had with trains and, uh, that were operated by Nazi sympathizers.

JB: Yes.

MK: So, do you want to tell us that story?

JB: Yes. When we got located there, we were at Saint Valery, France. And we were there for about a week, maybe two. And we were loaded on 40 and 8 cars again, to go on from there.

MK: Now explain to the audience what a 40 and 8 car is.

JB: Oh. Well, a 40 and 8 car is like a, it ain't a boxcar and it's, yet it's built like a boxcar, open on the sides a little bit, so you can get some fresh air in it. We needed fresh air. 40 and 8 are 40 men or 8 horses. And the car I got onto, they forgot to take the exhaust out of the car.

MK: The horse exhaust.

JB: Well, of course the horses' exhaust. And so we had to clean out the car before we could get in and whoo! [puts finger over nose to indicate the smell] But we got in there and it cleared itself out.

And we already going, started moving. I think to myself, "We ain't going north. We're going south." I keep thinking to myself. And I look out the side and I could see we're going south. So I looked out and I see the Eiffel Tower! Hey! That's Paris. That ain't no Belgium, that's Paris. We're supposed to be going to Belgium. So I hollered up to the captain, to the sergeant the next car up to tell the captain we're going towards Paris.

Well, the captain was confused, confounded and he didn't know what to do. I, "Easy. Pull the chain. I won't pull it, you pull it." And he pulled it and it stopped. Stopped that train quick. He told, "Get that" I won't use his language, "Get that engine off of there and on the other side of the train. We want to go north." But it took about two hours, but they did get it around. And we started north. Well, it took us a little longer, of course, because we were so far south already. And the next I know, it was close to midnight again, and we ended up in a little town in Belgium called Alseberg. And all the people in the town, I guess, there were probably 12 or 14 of them there, came out to see the Americans getting off the train. All "Viva le Americans! Viva Americans!" They were so happy to see us coming in there.

MK: Right.

JB: And we didn't last, now they had trucks there for us and we were out of there in nothing flat. And we went to, let's see... Where'd we go?

MK: Well, we can...

JB: Brussels, we went to Brussels. And that's where I had my first house in Brussels. It was a big, beautiful villa. And all my men and I occupied the villa. The other end of town, the end of the field, was a field house and there was like, pool tables and all that kind of stuff in it. You know ping pong...

MK: Right.

JB: And the field between was a soccer field. And they lived up there, and I lived down there and I'm glad I didn't because the old man and his lieutenants stayed up there. The old man was a captain, by the way. And we stayed there, it was beautiful, beautiful. I loved it there.

MK: Now, I want to ask you, did you ever have soldiers work for you, or with you, who were physically injured...

JB: Yes.

MK: ... or mentally distressed?

JB: Yes, I sure did.

MK: Would you tell us about that?

JB: Well, they gave us, they gave them to me mainly because I asked for them. These men that were physically or mentally impaired came to me and said, "Sergeant Belfield, we hear that you're a good guy to work for. Will you take us in?" I said, "Well, I'll put in a word. It's up to the First Sergeant. He'll put you where he wants you." So first I got this Joe Sedenak [unsure of spelling] from Steubenville, Ohio. He was in the Aleutians in the, the Japs shot his muscle right out of his arm. They had steel bullets and they took the whole thing. So he couldn't salute, he couldn't do anything. It just hung.

MK: Right.

JB: That's all. And he was always, entirely in trouble all the time because he couldn't salute. He couldn't do this, he couldn't do that. And he was right handed. And he asked me, he says, "Could I go to work for you?" I says, "Sure. I'll take you in. I'll find a job for you." So next thing you know, I got Joe. Then another guy, was from Mississippi, a real old reb. Man, he couldn't hardly talk [Imitates southern accent] Well, I guess he did somehow, because he said to me, "Sergeant Belfield, I shore wish I could work for you." I says, "I sure wish you could work for me too." So what happened was, he was in the 1st Armored Division in North Africa, and it almost got wiped out. He was one of the few survivors. And he was as shell-shocked as they come. Well, you know, that's a word that we called, shell-shocked. And guys used to take, go into the messhall and they'd drop their trays on the floor and old White would dive under a table. Couldn't help it.

MK: Right.

JB: And I got on 'em for that. We got over that hump real quick. And when he wasn't working for me, I had no say. But as soon as he came to work for me, I told 'em, "No more of that!" And old white boy, he'd do anything in the world for me, see? Then I got a, I had some other ones too. That were not quite as bad as those two, but they were bad too.

MK: And why were they not discharged? Why didn't the army discharge those men?

JB: I, you know, to this day I don't know the answer to that one.

MK: Uh-huh.

JB: I can't answer that one.

MK: Now, I believe you had, you had some prisoners of war working for you, when...

JB: Much later.

MK: ... oh, much later. But would you tell us about that experience?

JB: Let's see. How do I get from where we were, where we are, to where we want to go? I changed posts...

MK: Uh-huh.

JB: ... and I got into another unit. And the other unit says, "Do you know anything about small [arms]?" I said, "I'm a small arms repair man." Said, "Well, would you be interested in taking over at the railhead where all the armaments come in?" They were cleaning up the battlefield. I said, "Sure I'll take a shot at it." "Well," they said, "you'll get 150 Italians to work for you." So I said, "Okay." Well I might as well as had 150 people that were from the North Pole. Because they didn't know, didn't want to know anything that I said, didn't want to do anything. They'd just sit there half the day. Well, wasn't long, I got rid of them. And they gave me 150 Germans. Well, the Germans, the minute they got there, they were fast workers. They'd work. We got all the whole yard all cleaned, the railhead, all cleaned up. It wasn't long at all.

And they still were Germans, and they were doing a little talking behind my back, about me.

MK: In German.

JB: In German. They're talking about this stupid sergeant, he don't know too much, or he wouldn't be able to get away with, and so forth. And so one day, they said something about me I didn't like. It was something about, something nasty in German. But it so happens I knew what it was. And I turned around and I said to them, "Ich sprechen die Deutsch." You want to see faces fall, Boom! And these guys that were talking, they said, "He speaks German." Talking in German now, "He speaks German." Says, "How do you speak German?" I said, "My mother was German." I said, "My grandfather and grandmother spoke German in the house all the time and I under, I can speak it." I said, "But they wouldn't

“speak it outside the house.” And he said, they said, “Oh. Then you’re half German.” I said, “Yes, I’m half German.” Well, from that day on I didn’t have to do anything. Those Germans bowed down every time they went by me. And they said, the major came by and he saw them sitting around, a few of them sitting around. He says, “You can’t have those people sitting around like that.” Says, “They all gotta be working.” I said, “Well, they’re working so fast that there’s nothing to do for the day. We gotta wait until the new load comes in.” So he said, “Well, you gotta get rid of some of them then. If they saw that, they have you be in trouble.”

So I said, “Okay.” He said, “I’m going to take away a hun, I’m going to take away 50.” I said, “Oh, that’s fine. Those, 100 will do the job well.” So I had 100 doing the work of 150 Italians, 150 Germans. And that went along for about a week and the major comes down again, and he looks around and he sees some of them not doing too much. Well, he says, “I gotta take some more men away from you.” I said, “That’s fine.” I says, “If you take more men away from me, I have to have four SS troopers in that group.” I said, “How many SS troopers do I have if you take more men away?” Said, “None.” I said, “Take ‘em.” So he did. So I did not have any more SS troopers.

Well, those 75 men I had left would work, work, work, work. They didn’t know the name of anything but work. Arbeiten, arbeiten in German. And I said to them, I went to them, “I’m gonna tell you guys what I’m going to do for you. You guys are such good workers, I’m going to take six of you each weekend, and I’ll take you down to the bar and I’ll buy you all a beer. Whoa! You want to see guys work, then see them. They would work and work and work and work. And so I picked six of the best workers out and I took ‘em down to the bar. Well, it’s not a bar in Belgium, it’s a café. So we went to the café, I walked in, set my German prisoners down, course they’re speaking German to one another. And I said to the bartender, I said, “Get us seven beers.” Well, he says, “You okay. I’m not serving them.” I said, “I’ll tell you what you’ll do. I’ll bet you a free beer that you will do it.” I said, “Take this place apart, and don’t do it slow. Do it fast, like that, macht schnell.” So he looked at me and he says, “No, I’ll bring you six beers for them.” That was the first, last and only time I had trouble with that.

MK: And so every week you took six...

JB: Every week I took my six prisoners, not the same one!

MK: Right. And you had no more trouble with the bartender.

JB: No more. Oh, no. He thought it was great that I was bringing six of them down. He...

MK: Right. Good for business.

JB: Well, good for business and I told him, I said, “The war’s over! You don’t have to get mad at these guys. The war’s over.”

MK: That’s right. You and these prisoners of war were taking care of the armaments that were coming off the battlefield.

JB: That’s correct.

MK: Right.

JB: They're coming back again in 40 and 8 cars. Just loaded to the hilt, all just thrown in there. Rifles, grenades, rocket launchers, rockets. I was afraid to open the door. What might happen. So I used to tell them, "The door." I'd stay back. And, but we never had any accidents.

One day I'm sitting, standing up there watching them work and one German comes up to me, "Sergeant, sergeant, sergeant." I says, "Was ist los?" What's going on? And he says, "There's a car down in the yard there with a lock on it, broke. And some of the things in it are broken open." I says, "What is it?" He says, "You'll see. You'll see. Come with me." So I went down and looked. Brand new .45 pistols, still in cosmoline. And it had been opened and some of the pistols were gone. So I think for a minute. "Hey Jay, nobody'll know the difference." So I took about a half a dozen of them, then I went up and told them to put a new lock on it and send them where they were supposed to go. They weren't even supposed to come to me.

MK: Well, it was a good thing that was many years ago, Jay. Now, I see that we're running out of time again today, so you were discharged, I believe from Ft. Dix.

JB: Yes.

MK: And what was your highest rank when you were in the Army?

JB: Sergeant First Class.

MK: Sergeant... And that's what you were discharged as?

JB: Yes.

MK: Yes. And you came back to the United States from Europe by ship.

JB: Yep.

MK: And do you remember the name of that ship?

JB: The Aiken Victory. Do I remember it? Whoo! I was scared of the wooden ship but at least I had one thing about it, I didn't have to work about. If it did get blowed up, I could grab a piece of the ship.

MK: That's right. The wood would float. [laughter]

JB: But this Aiken Victory, we went through the English Channel it went yee haw, yee haw. I thought it was going to break in half. But we made it.

MK: But you made it.

JB: We made it. Oh yes. I can't walk on water and I'm here! [laughter]

MK: So, as we're winding up, I'd like to point out that you brought The Stars and Stripes newspaper that is dated May 8th, 1945 that declares the victory. And you also brought the Belgian newspaper that declares victory. And that is dated May 9th. And at the top of this newspaper you have the signatures of many of the men in your troop. Right.

JB: No, no, no. Those are Belgians. Belgian friends of mine.

MK: So I would say this is a very rare newspaper.

JB: It sure is.

MK: Well, thank you very much, Jay for coming in today. And I'd like to thank the Bethlehem community network for assisting us. And that concludes our show.

JB: I think they've been wonderful about this. I appreciate it very much.

MK: Well thank you Jay. Happy birthday early.

JB: Thank you too.

MK: You're going to be 96 in a few days.

JB: Yeah.

MK: And that concludes our show.

END DVD 3