

**Justus Rathbone Belfield**

**3 April 2012**

**Delmar, New York**

**Marilyn Kaltenborn Interviewer**

**Janice Irwin Camera Operator**

**MK:** Hello, welcome to our program "My Days in The United States Cavalry". I am Marilyn Kaltenborn and today, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, I'm going to interview Justus Belfield about his days in the United States Cavalry. We are at the studio of our local public access television station. It is located in the Bethlehem public library, Delmar, New York. I would like to thank Janice Irwin who is here with us today, operating the camera and providing us with technical assistance.

Mr. Belfield lives in Glenmont, NY with his wife of 70 years. I met Mr. Belfield this January; we both volunteer in an after-school program for students grades 6 through 12. Mr. Belfield, is it okay to call you Jay?

**JB:** Why sure! That's my name.

**MK:** When were you born and where were you born?

**JB:** I was born June the 27<sup>th</sup>, 1916 in Utica, NY.

**MK:** When you were a child, did you dream of going into the cavalry?

**JB:** Not necessarily the cavalry, but anywhere that they had horses. And the cavalry was the best place that I could find.

**MK:** And how did you know that you liked horses?

**JB:** I didn't.

**MK:** You didn't like horses?

**JB:** I liked horses, but I don't know how I... Oh, I found out when the bread man's horse used to come up on our lawn and try to get in my front door.

**MK:** And what other people came by with horses in those days? To your house?

**JB:** Bread man, milkman, iceman, garbage man, they all had horses. There were no cars then yet.

**MK:** And do you remember whether the streets were paved, or were they dirt in those days?

**JB:** They were newly paved.

**MK:** Newly paved.

**JB:** Newly paved.

**MK:** How old were you when you joined the cavalry?

**JB:** 19.

**MK:** 19. And what year was that?

**JB:** Oh dear. You would ask me that, wouldn't you? It was 1936.

**MK:** Very good. And you were in the cavalry for about three years?

**JB:** Four.

**MK:** Four years.

**JB:** Pretty near five. I went '36 to early '40.

**MK:** Now when you joined the cavalry, how did you do it? Did you go to a recruiting station? In your hometown?

**JB:** No. I went to, right directly to the troop and talked to the First Sergeant.

**MK:** And how did you get there? Did you walk?

**JB:** I took a bus.

**MK:** You took the bus. And then did you sign some papers?

**JB:** Yes. I signed my life away. You have to agree to go where you have to go and do what you have to do.

**MK:** I believe you brought some equipment that was issued to you while you were in the cavalry today. Do you want to show us what you brought?

**JB:** Why sure. I have here a pair of spurs, one on each foot. And my original boots.

**MK:** Now, um...

**JB:** I'm amazed at those boots, the shoestrings are still good after all these years.

**MK:** So the boots and the spurs are 70 years old. Is that correct?

**JB:** Approximately.

**MK:** What were you doing before you went in the cavalry. You were working at that time?

**JB:** I sure was. I was flipping hamburgers.

**MK:** Where? At a local restaurant?

**JB:** Yep.

**MK:** And what made you decide to join the cavalry?

**JB:** Horses. They didn't ride anything but horses, and I wanted to ride a horse.

**MK:** Can you tell us the name of the first horse you had when you were in the cavalry?

**JB:** Why sure I can! Good old Gringo.

**MK:** Tell us a little bit about Gringo.

**JB:** Gringo was a horse that was 30 years old. He was on the Mexican border chasing Pancho Villa back into Mexico. And the commanding officer of the whole kit and caboodle was Colonel John Pershing, who was later the commanding officer of the American troops in France in World War I.

**MK:** My goodness! Wow. What were your responsibilities with respect to Gringo?

**JB:** Well, I, anybody that owns a horse should... I had to brush him down, wipe him down clean. Take away the exhaust [laughter]. The old dog, the horse, he just loved me. He'd stick out his tongue whenever I came around. He wanted to give me a kiss. But he knew what that was because I'd put a sugar cube in my mouth and he'd come and take that sugar cube out with his mouth, with his tongue. So I'd go [taps his lips with his index finger] and he'd give me a kiss.

**MK:** When you were in the cavalry how did you keep in touch with your mother at home? Did you call her up or did you write letters?

**JB:** Oh, when I was away I'd write letters to her. When I was at home I'd either call her on the phone or come home.

**MK:** And when you were in the cavalry, where were you stationed?

**JB:** Well, in Utica, primarily. But we also went on maneuvers at what is now Fort Drum, was Pine Camp back in those days. Pine Plains. And I was up at Plattsburgh in the big 1<sup>st</sup> Army maneuvers in 1939 with General Hugh Drum who later got his name affixed to the Pine Camp.

**MK:** So that's why it's now called Ft. Drum.

**JB:** That's why it's called Ft. Drum.

**MK:** And then, were you also stationed in Vermont at some time?

**JB:** Yes, yes. Well, we spent some of our time when we were on maneuvers at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry home in Winooski, Vermont.

**MK:** And tell us about the time you came to Plattsburgh for maneuvers.

**JB:** Oh, you mean some of what I saw there?

**MK:** Yes.

**JB:** Oh, okay. One of the first things that happened, and today it's a big item in my mind. I was down feeding my horse and all of a sudden I heard this rumbling noise and it sounded like they were moving hell and half of it was going by. And this guy was hollering at the top of his voice over this rumbling and I, "What is that?" So I looked down the road and I saw there was four tents, er, tanks coming up the road. Little teensy-weensy ones. Little two-man tanks. Looked like, tanks, they called them tanks, but they looked like they were made out of cardboard. And he was standing in the first one, yelling his fool head off. Well, I didn't know who it was at that time. I found out later it was Colonel George Patton.

**MK:** And tell us about how that maneuver worked.

**JB:** Oh. Well, half of the troops were in Team 1, the other half of the troops were in Team 2. Patton and his tanks were in Team 2 and the horse cavalry was Team 1. The object of the whole thing was to knock out one team or the other in the war.

**MK:** Right.

**JB:** But if you could get 'em before they got into the war, so much the better. So we found out where Patton had his tanks and they told us all you had to do was put a big X on the tank, and that meant it was knocked out. So we took the horses and sneaked over into their camp at night and put an X on every tank. That meant the whole four tanks were useless before they even got into the thing. If you ever heard a man curse, he taught me some new words! [laughter] I didn't know they were used. And that was the end of the tanks, and that was the beginning of our job in the maneuver.

**MK:** My goodness.

**JB:** We did well.

**MK:** You did very well. Did your side win?

**JB:** Well certainly! We were winners! We were born winners! Of course. The cavalry is the best.

**MK:** It's the best.

**JB:** The best part of the service is the cavalry. When they took the horses away, they lost the best part of the service.

**MK:** When you were in the cavalry, did you ever carry a good luck piece?

**JB:** Sure did. I carry a good luck piece now.

**MK:** Do you have it with you today?

**JB:** Sure. I have a couple of good luck pieces. [takes something from coin purse and hands it to MK] This one is understandable.

**MK:** This is a cross with a shamrock on it.

**JB:** Yep.

**MK:** This is an angel.

**JB:** Guardian, my guardian angel.

**MK:** Your guardian angel. Who is your guardian angel?

**JB:** I don't know. I didn't ever get her name.

**MK:** Okay.

**JB:** But I think she's probably one of the hens in the henhouse.

**MK:** Now, we have some pictures here from when you were in the cavalry.

**JB:** Yes.

**MK:** What other horses did you have? How many horses did you have?

**JB:** Well, I had Gringo, Grover and... not Gail... Guy Wood. Gringo, Grover and Guy Wood. They were all three 'G' horses. And then I went to an 'A' horse, which was Angora. And I had her for the rest of the time I was in the troop.

**MK:** And was there a significance with the, some of the horses their names began with 'G' and some of them with 'A'?

**JB:** Yes.

**MK:** Can you explain that?

**JB:** When the troop was 'G' troop, all the horses' names began with 'G', down on the Mexican border. When they came back to Utica, they still had the 'G' attached to it, but then they built the armory and they changed to 'A' troop.

**MK:** So the first letter of the horse's name tells you what troop the horse is from.

**JB:** Exactly. There were very few of the 'G' troop horses left so they called all of the new horses that came in 'A', by name 'A'; Arlington, Angel, my horse's name was Angora. You go right on down the list.

**MK:** Right. And you have pictures of many of your horses in this album.

**JB:** Oh sure!

**MK:** Right. And of, many of the men you served with are in this album.

**JB:** Yes. Especially the officers and men that were closest to me in the troop.

**MK:** Right. Now what are these pieces?

**JB:** That is my campaign emblem and we wore them also on our uniforms.

**MK:** And is this the emblem for your...

**JB:** The regiment. It's the regimental emblem. It is very conspicuous in that it tells you a story. The two emblems on the top were the major battles that the troop was in in France in WWI. The line across the center is the uh, oh what's the name of the river down there between the United States and...

**MK:** The Rio Grande?

**JB:** ...Rio Grande River and the star is Texas. They were in Texas on the Rio Grande.

**MK:** Very interesting.

**JB:** That's when they chased Pancho Villa across.

**MK:** Very interesting.

**JB:** Now wait a minute. There's one more on there. There's a, and that was a battle in Belgium. That's a Belgian lion.

**MK:** And that was in WWI?

**JB:** WWI.

**MK:** Very interesting, Jay. And what is this piece?

**JB:** That one goes on this collar [points to shirt], and it's, the 121<sup>st</sup> was the regiment.

**MK:** And it says, "U.S. New York".

**JB:** Yep. The other one says 'A' and it's crossed sabers and that's the cavalry. 'A' troop in the cavalry.

**MK:** Did you have, did you and your friends have any pranks, pull any pranks when you were in the cavalry?

**JB:** Woo... Look in my book. You saw what we did.

**MK:** Explain it to the audience, what you did.

**JB:** Well, in order to be a cavalry man, you didn't just come in. You had to be initiated into the cavalry. And one of the things that we did, one of the things that *they* did, because I was implicated, was they gave you a bucket full of... You know, it wasn't snow, it wasn't mud, it was exhaust. And it was your job to see if you could get rid of all that was in your bucket before the other guy could. Boy I guess the other guy beat me before I got half of mine

[laughter] because I got the whole bucket over my head. [laughter] And that was, yes, it made you feel good.

**MK:** Made you feel like a member of the whole cavalry.

**JB:** You got it. Cavalry is, was at that time, they still have cavalry, cavalry recon. It made you feel as though you were alone in a unit by yourself. That the other; infantry, artillery, and what-so-ever, weren't quite up to the cavalry.

**MK:** They weren't special.

**JB:** No. Well, they were special. But they weren't quite as special as we were.

**MK:** How many men in your troop?

**JB:** Well, there were 78 horses. Men's horses. There was 1, 2, 3, three officer's horses. So 78, 79, 80, 81 horses. So that'd be 81.

**MK:** 81 men in your troop.

**JB:** Yeah.

**MK:** And do you remember the names of any of your officers?

**JB:** Oh, uh... Right now I'd have a hard... I know the officers, yes. Know all three of them; Captain Glad, Captain Williams, no... Captain Glad, Lieutenant Williams, Lieutenant Knobach [unsure of spelling].

**MK:** Tell us about the food. Did you like the food in the...

**JB:** Oh, we had the best cook in the whole cavalry, believe you me! I ate like a king. In fact, I put on weight. I got up to 156.

**MK:** How much did you weigh when you went in?

**JB:** Oh, about 128-29. What I do now.

**MK:** So you ate very well in the cavalry.

**JB:** Oh, yes ma'am. I ate very good. And you had to, had to eat because you were always, it was tough. It wasn't easy living.

**MK:** Did you ever sleep outside when you were in the cavalry?

**JB:** Yes. When we went on maneuver, say we'd go for 3 or 4 or 5 days, take a ride 30 miles, 40 miles out. We'd pitch camp and we'd go the next day, pick it all up, go on again. Another... You know.

**MK:** Were you in a tent or did you sleep out...

**JB:** No, no. Each man has a half of a tent, you own a half of a tent. Little one. Pup tent they call them.

**MK:** Yes, yes.

**JB:** And somebody else owns the other half. So you put the two halves together then you have to share that with that person.

**MK:** Did you ever sleep with your horse?

**JB:** Oh! I guess I did. I loved to sleep with my horse. My horse and I were good friends. When it got cold, that was the place to go.

**MK:** So you'd rather sleep with your horse than inside the tent?

**JB:** Yes!

**MK:** Did most people in the cavalry do that?

**JB:** No. Most of them were common sense people, they slept under tents. [laughter]. They weren't like me. I loved the horses.

**MK:** Do you have anything you'd like to add, to tell the people who are watching this today? Do you have any stories?

**JB:** I could sit here and talk all night on stories about the cavalry, but I don't think we'd get anywhere. Uh, yes. I'll tell some stories. It's interesting how my horse Gringo, who was 30 years old when I rode him first, knew every signal that you had to know to be in the cavalry. Because in the cavalry they don't give signals by mouth. They don't... It's all hand signals. They'd go down like this, once and then forward like this and that's march, you know move ahead. And they'd do it a second time, that means to trot. They do it a third time, that means to gallop and so forth. And when they hold it like that, come down, that means go back to walking. And so forth. A horse don't... knew every signal.

**MK:** He knew every command.

**JB:** Every command, and they had something like this, right turn, left turn, so forth... He knew them all.

**MK:** So Gringo trained you.

**JB:** Gringo trained me until I got the idea how, what was what. And then I got Grover...

**MK:** And was he smart also?

**JB:** Oh, Grover was... Grover'd shake hands with me. He shook hands with me. He got really friendly with me. He'd shake hands. And Gringo wouldn't do it. Of course, he was so old he had a hard job lifting his paw, er, hoof off the floor. Off the ground I should say, and



uh, Guy Wood, I never bothered with him. But when I got Angora, I taught her every trick I knew.

**MK:** Oh, so you taught Angora all the signals. Most of them.

**JB:** Well, she knew all the signals, but she didn't know them as well as Gringo did. And yes, I had to steer her a little bit.

**MK:** Well, Jay, this has been a very fine evening, or afternoon, to talk with you. And maybe we can come back sometime and talk about your other military experiences.

**JB:** Love to!

**MK:** I think you've been in the military, how many times were you discharged? Honorably, may I add?

**JB:** Seven.

**MK:** Seven. So we have many more adventures to have you talk to us about.

**JB:** I can tell you, tell you some real ones. Yes.

**MK:** So it's been a very great pleasure to be here this afternoon, and Jay Belfield and I thank the public access television station here...

**JB:** Yes. Thank you very, very much. It's my pleasure. I enjoyed telling about this.

**MK:** Thank you, Jay.

**JB:** Oh, thank you. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you.

**MK:** And that concludes our show.

**END FIRST DVD**