

Donald E. Briggs
Narrator

Mike Russert and Wayne Clark
Interviewers

Interviewed on October 6th, 2006 approx. 10:00am
at the Holiday Inn, Kingston, New York.

Q: This is an interview at the Holiday Inn, Kingston, New York. It is the 6th of October, 2006, approximately 10:00am. The interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clark.

Could you give me your full name, your date of birth and place of birth please?

A: Donald E. Briggs, July the 30th, 1924 at the Kingston Hospital in Kingston, New York. Home is in High Falls, New York.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

A: I graduated from Kingston High School in 1942 and spent one term and started a second term at Clarkson in 1943. At that time, I was drafted and rejected because of a heart murmur and that I wore glasses.

A year later in July of 1944, I went for the next physical and passed with flying colors and ended up in Camp Croft, South Carolina for basic Infantry training.

Q: So you were drafted then into the army?

A: Yes.

Q: What was basic training like?

A: It was sixteen weeks of vigorous training. We had good chow. I went from 168 pounds to 186 in sixteen weeks of basic training. I guess I was keeping regular hours.

Q: You mentioned that you were a pretty prolific letter writer during the war. You kept in contact with everyone at home?

A: Yes.-friends and a couple of girls and my sister.

Q: How many letters did you say you have between yourself and your parents? Do you know?

A: I had written 37 letters to my sister over the two year period and in Christmas of 2004 she returned all of the letters to me. I would guess between two and three hundred that my folks might have in a big box which now I have and they are to go to my second daughter Joanne.

Q: After your basic training, where did you go?

A: After basic training, fortunately I was home for Thanksgiving and then went back after ten days or two weeks, I don't know what it was. It was during deer season. I just had to go deer hunting with Chet Gunterman (sp?) who later became my brother in law. Then I went back to Fort Meade, Maryland and we were shipped out of Virginia, Hampton Roads I believe it was. We were fourteen days going across in convoy. We landed in Naples, Italy Christmas Eve of 1944.

The replacement depot near Caserta (?) and was reported to have been Count Ciano's dairy farm who I think was a nephew of Mussolini. That's the story that we got.

I was there for twenty one days. It rained eighteen and snowed the other three. Then, the Battle of the Bulge had come along at that time. Fortunately, we were put on a ship – a Liberty ship – and shipped across the Mediterranean to Marseille.

I can be very thankful that I didn't have to try to dig fox holes in rocks and stones of Italy. About the middle of January, I was assigned as a replacement rifleman to B Company, 397th Regiment in the 100th Infantry Division in France, Alsace Lorraine. I forget the name of the town. It was Saarbrucken of somewhere in that area.

Q: Has that unit been involved in the Bulge?

A: No, they weren't in the Bulge. They had only been put on line I believe it was in October of 1944. They had received quite a few casualties. They were under the division of General Withers "Pinky" Buress. He was the General in charge of the 100th Division. He had been with it from its founding.

I went as a rifle replacement. The squad that I was assigned to had only seven members which should have been a twelve member squad. Two of us were assigned to that squad. I think there were five replacements that went up that day. We never had more than eight in the squad the whole time until after the fighting was over and they started preparing for the war in Japan.

We were stationed in Stuttgart, Germany at that time. We found a hill outside of Stuttgart in a regular German (unclear) where they had the barracks built around the parade ground and so forth.

Q: When you went into this unit, did you have full winter gear?

A: No. I had an overcoat, field jacket, wool pants, three or four pair of socks. We didn't have any parkas. I had only ordinary combat boots. We didn't have any shoe packs or anything.

The story was that everybody from the port had everything and if there was anything leftover, it got up to us. I think that was about the truth.

Q: What kind of weapon did you carry?

A: M1 Rifle.

Q: You mentioned here that you were a scout with your unit?

A: I was second scout. Of course, when I first joined the outfit in Alsace Lorraine outside the little town by the name of Urbach (German name for town) which was abandoned at this time, I was assigned to a fox hole with a fella by the name of William Bilby (spelling not sure) and Chet Kerns who had been with the outfit. They had been there about two weeks in this position. The three of us lived in that foxhole for thirty eight days.

Then we moved back in reserve and got ready for the push which came about the middle of March when they started off the push to go on to Germany.

The 100th Division had been outside the citadel of Bitche in Alsace-Lorraine and that, I believe, was part of the Maginot Line. They had an underground barracks with all kinds of trenches built and everything. They tried to take that in the fall of '44 but were not successful. So they moved back in reserve waiting for this spring offensive which was about the middle of March.

Q: What was it like to under combat for the first time?

A: When we were first in this position, there was concertina wire with flares in front of us and a valley. About 500 yards away, the Germans were dug in on the opposite valley. Of course, we were on the backside of the hill and they were also. When the sun came out, some of those fellows would come out. They'd get a little sunshine and we could watch them. There wasn't much action.

The biggest action was at night there were some livestock and sheep in the field. The sheep would get into the concertina wire which had trip flares in it. A few flares would go off and we would think there might be an attack. There was never any enemy action while we were in that holding position.

Q: When you were in that foxhole for 38 days, what kind of food did you have? Cold meals all the time?

A: K-rations. Occasionally, we would get a hot meal that the cooks would bring up to the platoon CP (Command Post). They would bring in hot meals and a thermos and so forth. That was rare. Mostly K-rations.

Q: Were you ever able to shower at all?

A: No. When I joined Bilby and Kerns had been in the hole for about two weeks. They smelled a little bit to me. After my 38 days there, I guess we all smelled about the same. But then when we went back to reserve we did get a chance to go back to a shower unit. You dropped your dirty clothes and

took your valuables with you, went through and picked up clean uniforms on the opposite side.

Q: Did you change your socks all the time because of trench foot?

A: Yes. I always had two or three pair of socks between by woolen undershirt and my nice wool army shirt. I changed my socks probably two or three times a day. During the day time, I would loosen up the combat boots and maybe take them off for a while. I always had them on at night laced and ready to move in case we had to move. Bilby and Kerns kind of indoctrinated me regarding what was the best procedure.

Q: What were your officers like?

A: We didn't see much of the officers. The whole outfit was pretty short of officers. I don't know how many we had. Our Captain was Captain John Hine who was a graduate of West Point – a soldier and a gentleman. He was wounded twice that I know of. In fact, it was a little bit later on – I forget where we were – that I was sent back as a runner to bring up some replacements. I had, I think, five replacements to come up. Captain Hine had been wounded with shrapnel from an 88. I don't know if it was a mortar or an artillery shell. He was on a stretcher. I came up and told him I had five replacements. He told me which squad/platoon to take them too. I delivered them. When I came back, he had been removed back to the hospital. He was gone for I guess it might have been two months.

We had another Executive Officer, Lt. Kirkland, who was in charge as the Executive Officer, 1st Lt. He was in charge of Company B. The next time I saw Captain Hine was after we had been through Heilbronn. We were five or six days taking the city of Heilbronn which was on the Neckar River. Our company, I think, was the second company to go across the Neckar in the wooden boats. The engineers furnished those.

There were prisoners on the side where we landed. Most of them were pretty young. I would say in their mid to late teens. I didn't see many older maybe some real old German soldiers. As we would get out of the boats, they would put the prisoners in and take them across the Neckar.

They tried to get a bridge across to get some armor over but the Germans had their artillery or mortars had it pretty well zeroed in. They were not successful in getting any armor across the river so they kept bringing the infantry over in these little wooden boats.

Q: Were you under fire while you were doing this?

A: Artillery fire yes. Then we moved on into Heilbronn and we were kind of in a factory district. It was pretty well abandoned. There was a (unclear) plant there where they made food and so forth. The artillery had hit a tank of molasses or sugar. One street we went across, the molasses was to the top of the curb probably five or six inches deep. We went across and it tasted pretty good (laughs).

We went on into the factory district. One of the buildings we went through there was a pile of horse hoofs. I don't know how many. I guess they had butchered the horses for food and so forth.

Then we were house to house in Heilbronn for several days. We lost our Lt. Kirkland who was killed by a sniper. A couple of our other officers were wounded. They sent an officer from A Company over because we didn't have any commanding officer. I think the guy's name was Captain Kimball (sp?) who came from A Company to take charge of B Company because we didn't have any officers left.

At that point, they sent two or three of the sergeants back and they got battlefield commissions. One of those sergeants was from our platoon – a fellow by the name of Burrows(sp?). It was pretty close to the General's name but it wasn't. He was a southern boy. There was another fella by the name of Bill English. They sent him back and made these fellows Second Lieutenants. A couple days later they came back and were assigned to the different platoons in B Company.

Two members of our platoon were lost – a fellow by the name of, a young man from down in Missouri and another fellow from New Hampshire. I can't quite remember their names.

Finally, we got through Heilbronn and started to push. The day we got out of Heilbronn, Captain Hine came back. He had been in the hospital and recovered and came back and was assigned to B Company. He commanded B Company from then on until the end of the fighting.

I think we were in a little town by the name of Almandine (sp?) on May 7th or 8th when the war was declared over. I remember that we had kind of a parade in this little town. Captain Hine kind of led the parade. That was the end of the fighting. From then on, we were stationed in a few different towns in Germany. After that, we would move to a different town and the military government burgomaster they would command a few houses and would ask the people to leave so we could billet in the house. Previous to that, most of the towns that we were in, we would usually have to dig in on the outside of the town and setup a defense around the town.

The digging wasn't too bad. We had our regular pack shovels and also had some full size short hand shovels and picks. It would help dig some of the holes.

Q: Were you ever aware of concentration camps?

A: No. Not in any of the areas we were.

Q: You told us that there was an unusual place that you stayed. You stayed in a bank at one time?

A: One time we were in a bank. I think it was in Eislingen, Germany. This was the 6th of July 1945. They were afraid that people might run on the bank so we were there as guards. The bank was in operation. We billeted in the bank and were guarding the bank. In there I confiscated some of the paper. It was kind of onion skin paper (shows paper to the camera) and I wrote a letter home on that paper which I have copies of it here.

My mother and dad saved all of the letters that I wrote home. I think that they had between one hundred and two hundred letters in a box at home. One of my daughters, through the association, got some maps of the area that we traveled through and I am going to try to go through the letters, arrange them in chronological order and plot my trip through there (laughs).

But, there's too many other things to do. Maybe I better get our daughter Joanne together (laughs). The only trouble is she lives in Arlington, Texas.

Q: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt?

A: That was in April of '45, April 12th was it? I don't remember. I could look back through my letters that my parents have saved and probably tell where I was. I remember getting the news but I don't recall what town we were in.

Q: How did you feel when you heard about that?

A: (unclear)

Q: He had been the president most of your life.

A: Yes. I guess I had to be 18 before I could vote. I was born in '24. It was 1942 the first time that I had voted. No, it would be 1940 the first time that I voted. You had to be 18 right?

Q: I think back then, I think it was 21 to vote.

A: So I probably hadn't even voted yet (laughs). The next election would have been in '44. In '44, I would have been 20. I don't know if I was home on leave during election time or not. I think it was a little bit later before I got home from basic training.

Q: You said that you had a brother in the Air Corps that got killed?

A: I had a brother Bill who was eleven months younger than I. He graduated from high school in 1943 and went directly into the Air Force and had been stationed in several places. He had been in, I think, Greenville, South Carolina and in College Station, Texas. Then he was in Frederick Field, Oklahoma flying B-25's training to be an aviation cadet.

He and another pilot were piloting at night and they crashed outside of Frederick, Oklahoma. Both he and the fellow with him were killed in the crash on the 13th of February, 1945. He was to graduate as a pilot about the first of March. I don't recall the group that he was in.

I was over in France at that time. One of his classmates, John Anderson, from Minot, North Dakota came home with the body and the funeral was at our home in High Falls.

Q: Were you able to come home for the funeral?

A: No. I was not home. I received word. My dad wrote me a letter sometime after that that the plane had crashed. They didn't have word yet about what had happened. They knew the plane crashed. Then a couple days later, I got another letter that my brother was killed.

A few days after that, a message came up that they wanted me to come back to the, I think, it was company headquarters. So, I hustled my way back there on foot. The chaplain was there. Of course, I had an idea what he was there for. I had the letter in my pocket from dad. He explained to me what had happened. I read the letter and we had a chat and a few prayers and that was that. I think I could have been relieved from front line duty at that time but I chose not to and to stay with (my unit) and I did from the 13th of February until the war was over with on the 7th of May, 1945.

Having only a few points – of course, we were in occupation with the 100th for a while. Then we were stationed in Stuttgart and started training for the Pacific.

Then Truman gave the order to drop the Atom Bomb, thank heavens, and that ended the conflict with Japan.

Q: How did you feel when you heard about that?

A: Well, pretty well relieved. I figured if we had to go then I might possibly be in an invasion force in Japan. From all the rumors – I guess they weren't rumors, they were fact – if that happened, it would have been real high casualties on both sides to try to invade Japan.

Then, of course, having very few points in the system to get discharged or sent home, I was eventually transferred to the 518th MP Battalion which was stationed up in Kassel, Germany with a detachment in Cologne, Germany which was in the British Occupation Zone.

That was real good duty. There were only twenty of us there with a lieutenant. The company post was in Kassel, Germany which was a good distance away. You only worked every other day on patrol. We were stationed there to supposedly work on the back market with the GI's and the cigarettes. Cigarettes were worth \$100 American. The coal fields were in Fresen (??) which was just outside of Cologne a ways and all the GI trucks would come up to haul the coal back. The drivers would have plenty of cigarettes to try to dispose of.

We were stationed in a house in (unclear) which was about five miles from the center of Cologne. Cologne was pretty well kaput except the railroad station. The Cologne Cathedral which was down not far from the Rhine River. The railroad station was maybe five road widths from the Cathedral. The station was kaput but the Cathedral wasn't hit. We would patrol down there with the jeep in front of the Cathedral which was quite a hot spot for the sale of cigarettes.

There were also some 500lb. unexploded bombs lying on the curb. I hoped that the detonators had been taken out but we still drove around there on our patrols.

We lived about five miles out and had taken over three houses that we lived in. Cologne stadium was in that area where we were stationed. That was real good duty. We had plenty to eat and plenty to drink. Eventually, they took over a local tavern and hired the owners and their daughter – man, wife and daughter - to run the tavern for us. In the evening, we could go to the tavern. They had movies four nights a week. They had a band the other three nights. A beer was, I guess, a Mark. The hard stuff was five Marks German. I had a barracks bag full of Marks under my bed so spending money was not a problem.

Q: Did you have much contact with the German people?

A: Yes. I got so I could understand German and speak German enough to get by.

While we were in Cologne, Lt. Katman (sp?) who was in charge of the squad there from the 518th MP Battalion said “Briggs, go down to the brewery” – The British had charge of the brewery down the street – “See what you can do about getting some beer for the boys”

So, I went down and made acquaintance with the fellows in charge at the brewery. They said you could get a liter per week per man. He said “How many men do you have?” We had twenty. I said, “We had two hundred”. He said you have to have authorization from your commanding officer. So, Lt. Katman, being one of the best Joe’s I’d ever run into, he’d sign anything. There were 50 liter wooden barrels. That would mean that we would get four of them a week. I took the form back. Lt. Katman signed it. He said, “Do you need any money.” I said, “What for?” He said, “You are going to have to pay for that.” I said that I don’t think I will have any problem with that. I had bundles of fifty Mark notes – fifty in a bundle like they bundle up the singles here.

So, I went down with another fellow and a jeep and got the four barrels into the trailer on the back of the jeep. I asked how much it was. He said it was probably two hundred and fifty Marks or whatever it was. I had these fifty Mark bills in my pocket so I pulled it out and gave him, I think, double what it was. He said that was too much and I said to keep the change and don’t worry about it. I had probably eight or ten bundles of fifty Mark notes. I didn’t have much use for them.

We took the beer back and put the keg on tap. We didn’t have any pumps or anything. It was just like an old cider barrel peg. We set those up on the back porch and had some nice German beer at our convenience.

Q: How long were you in Germany?

A: I was there until the end of May or the first part of June of ’45. I was in Cologne for a long, long time in the British Zone. That was real good duty. Several months I was there and then I got transferred back to the 381st MP Battalion which was in Geisling, Germany. We had gone through that area on the way through with the 100th Infantry Division. There, we stayed in the hotel – the village hotel – and ate in the dining room. They had a bar there

which was open when you were off duty. It was pretty good living. That's where I was until I got word to come home.

From there, I got shipped up to Bremerhaven. I got on a Victory ship and seven days later, we landed in New York.

I've got a piece here that they put in the paper what ships were due. This was at New York, Bremerhaven. Wilson Victory was due in New York. They put a piece in the paper as to what the ships were and who was coming back. I guess it was in the middle of June and I finally got home.

Q: Did you ever make use of the GI Bill?

A: Yes, I went to school under the GI Bill. I had been at Clarkson for a term and started the second term before I got drafted. I came back and worked awhile. I went back to high school for one term with the vets and took a couple of subjects. Then, in 1947, I started in Cornell in the mid-term. I graduated in the mid-term of 1951. I studied agriculture.

Q: Did you ever use the 52-20 Club?

A: For a few weeks. Then, I got a job. Maybe four or five weeks I collected on the 52-20 club. Then we bought a house in Hurley and assumed the GI mortgage on the house. We bought a nice house that had five bedrooms. I had been married in 1950. Shirley was pregnant with our first child. We bought a house in Hurley with five bedrooms and two acres of ground and a small barn and a chicken house on it for \$12,500. With a second mortgage of \$2000 which fortunately I could pay off because I saved two bonds per month out of the fifty bucks. I didn't smoke and only drank a few beers. Then, when we got overseas we got a little bit more and then with the combat infantry badge, we got a little bit more and didn't have much need for cash. Cigarettes were a much better form of barter than cash.

I assumed the GI mortgage on the house which was \$39.39/month.

Q: Did you join any veteran's organizations?

A: Yes. I was a charter member of the Marbletown Post. In fact, my dad put me in there. Some of the older vets were trying to form a post. Dad put me in there as a charter member of the Marbletown Post of the American Legion.

Then, later on, I joined the Kingston VFW and here, eight or ten years ago, I transferred from the Kingston Post to the Hurley VFW Post. I am now junior Vice Commander of the Hurley Post and the color guard.

In fact, this afternoon, at 2:15, I have to be at the Hurley Church to be with the color guard which is going to be at the city hall for the ceremony this afternoon.

Q: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone in the service with you?

A: Yes. I did. I didn't stay much in contact with the First Scout Chet Kerns was the one I was in the foxhole with first. He got wounded in Heilbronn. He got shot in the butt by a sniper. I wrote to him a few times while he was in the hospital. Then, I kind of lost track of him.

I think it was in 1988 a letter came to the house and our son John brought it up. He says, "Pop, are you writing letters to yourself?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Here's a letter that looks like your printing."

There was a letter from Chet Kerns who I hadn't heard from since 1946 maybe 1947. He sent me a letter through the 100th Infantry Division Association. He found my address and sent me a letter and so forth. I sat down and answered it that night. He lived in Anaheim, California and was active in the Military Order of the Purple Heart. In fact, I think he had been commander of that.

I wrote to Chet and I said don't wait forty years to answer this or it's going to be too late. Chet and I corresponded for several years. He was about ten years my senior. I finally got a letter back that he had deceased.

I had been active on several reunions of the 100th Infantry Division. The last one was in 2004. My wife and I went to the one which was down in McLean, Virginia which I think was the 55th reunion that they had. There were not too many of the fellows from the B Company left. I think at that convention

there were about six of us from B Company and a couple of widows from some of the fellows who had been in B Company.

I had corresponded with a fellow by the name of Joe (Lyden ?) who has since deceased and also Bill Long who was our acting Sergeant in Heilbronn. He's also deceased. At the last convention, his wife was there with one of his daughters.

Q: How do you think your time in the service has changed or had an effect on your life?

A: Well, I always thought I had halfway decent work ethics and so forth but it was good training and discipline. I don't think I was too much of a rogue. Maybe you didn't do everything that they asked you to do but they made you wish you as hell had done it before you got done with it.

Q: You have a couple of photographs there. You want to hold those up and I can zoom in on them.

You carried a camera with you, you said?

A: I had a 126 camera. I seemed to be able to get some film for it. This picture was taken with it (hold up a picture). This is one of the squads of the platoon that I was in – B Company, 397nd.

Q: Are you in that photograph?

A: Not in this one. I am in the next one.

I'm in this photograph. Let's see. I am down there (points to the corner). My knick name was "Beanie" I acquired that knick name when I was growing up in High Falls because whenever we went fishing or camping or just to go out for a good time and have a picnic or something, I always had a can of Campbell's Beans and raisin bread and a table spoon.

Q: Thank you very much for your interview.