John W. Brokaw, Narrator

New York State Military Museum
Interviewer Michael Russert

Interviewed on February 12, 2002 at Latham, NY

MR: It's approximately 1:00 p.m. Could you tell me a little bit about your background, where you were born and raised?

JB: Born and raised in Ithaca, NY. Went to school in Ithaca and entered the Army from Ithaca through the local Selective Service Board as a volunteer.

MR: How old were you when you enlisted?

JB: Twenty-three.

MR: Why did you select the Army?

JB: At that time it was a situation where you went in for a year and you were supposed to get out. Well, it didn't work out that way.

MR: You went in in what year?

JB: November 30, 1940.

MR: Where did you go for basic training?

JB: Fort Dix, NJ.

MR: How were you trained?

JB: Basically we were assigned to Basic Training and when we completed that, we were assigned to C Company, 174th Infantry, which was a Buffalo-Niagara Falls National Guard unit.

MR: Did you go for any additional training?

JB: Not at that point.

MB: Why don't you tell the story of being at President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's inauguration.

JB: In Basic Training we had a situation where President Roosevelt was being inaugurated and the parade was going on in Washington. They wanted to have a provisional battalion of basic infantrymen such as myself and they started out with well

over 400 people, but eventually they started coming down with measles so we started having losses and they wound up adding people and quarantining the whole unit so that they would have that many people. So we had people quarantined that actually had measles. Then they sent us to Washington by truck and put us in a schoolyard with a fence around us to keep us away from the other people. Then we went out for the parade and we wound up parading behind a cavalry unit which was not a lot of fun [laughs]. It was quite an experience to be included in that.

MR: When and how did you learn about Pearl Harbor?

JB: That's another very interesting situation and quite unique and one that I'm glad we went through. We had gone through a lot of maneuvers in the Carolinas and Virginia and we were on our way home and we stopped and camped in Gettysburg. That was when Pearl Harbor happened. We were in Gettysburg on the way to Fort Dix. That ended our theory that we were going to get out at the end of a year; we were automatically extended indefinitely.

MR: How did you hear of this? Radio?

JB: Radio.

MR: What were your feelings?

JB: Not anything disastrous one way or the other. We were pretty well acclimated to military life. I thought that if I was going to be involved in something, I was glad that I went in early because by the time that happened, I was a sergeant and I'd much rather be a sergeant than a private going in.

MR: After the war broke out did you have any additional training?

JB: After the war broke out we convoyed all the way down the east coast by two-and-a-half ton truck in the wintertime. When we started out it was below zero. I happened to be with another sergeant and we were responsible for all of the prisoners that were in the stockade at Fort Dix—they were going with us. When we got into Philadelphia, the truck broke down. It was very cold and those steel beds on the two-and-a-half ton trucks get very cold. The Salvation Army came along, took us in, gave us something to eat and drink, and kept us there until the truck was repaired. We continued on to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. From Claiborne after a short period of time, we wound up on trains and headed for Fort Lewis, Washington. I was assigned there initially to patrolling along the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Before we left there, I was assigned to a reception center, training new people who were just coming in, which was quite an experience. We had a lieutenant with us by the name of Mulholland from the Buffalo-Niagara Falls area and he really taught us what leadership was. We were in the barracks one night, we had a lot of people and some of them were Indian extraction, American Indians, and they were having trouble with some of the fundamentals like falling down with a rifle and going into a firing position. He did it with his dress uniform on and those floors were oiled. He

took a tremendous risk of injuring himself and ruining his uniform, but he did it. From that point on, those people would do anything for him and to me that was real leadership. All he had to do was ask and explain, he didn't have to go into much detail, but he got everything he wanted from those men.

From there I went back to the company and I was selected for OCS (Officer Candidate School) at Fort Benning [Georgia]. I went down there with winter uniform in the summer. I got down there and about 80% of the people who were graduating from OCS wound up going to Africa. I was going with a girl at that time from Trenton, New Jersey. We'd been going together for about a year so I wrote her and said, "If you come down here, we'll get married because I think I'm going to Africa." [laughs] She came down and we got married and after a week I sent her home because we had mandatory evening classes as well as daytime classes and I never got to see her except on the weekend. So I sent her back home and then I told the company commander that I'd gotten married. He was a little bit flustered at that because nobody asked permission. [laughs] He said, "Where's your wife?" and I said, "I sent her home so I could study." He said "Fine." I think that saved me because otherwise I might have been thrown out. [laughs]

MR: So you were an officer?

JB: I got an Infantry commission at Fort Benning.

MR: Then where were you assigned?

JB: I was assigned to the 184th Infantry which happened to be in the Presidio of San Francisco. I took my wife with me and I left her in a hotel in San Francisco with not a lot of money. I had no idea where I was going to go, if we were going to stay there or move someplace else. It turned out that we were sent to a small town called Clyde, about 40 miles south of San Francisco. I called her and told her, "This is where I'm going to go. Catch a bus and come down." She was about out of money. She said, "If you hadn't called today, I would have been on a train going back." [laughs] She went to Clyde, small town, and we did patrolling from there, stuff like that. From there we went to Fort Funston, which is just outside San Francisco. She got a place on the beach so we weren't too far apart. After leaving Fort Funston we went down to Fort Ord but I have to say that the battalion commander again was very generous to us. I had been sent to northern California on a mission with another officer and while I was gone, he moved the battalion to another spot. He arranged to move my wife, another nice gesture which I appreciated very much. So when I got back, she was on the beach and I was at Fort Funston. As I say, we went to Fort Ord and we really went into tropical training down in the desert. While we were there, the Rose Bowl came up. I asked her if she wanted to go down and she said yes. So we got a reservation on the train and we went down the night before. It was just like being in a bar at night—you couldn't get out, you were on the train all night. We get down there and get into a hotel and the next morning we come out, the day of the game, now how do we get there? Every bus and anything else in the way of transportation to the Rose Bowl was loaded. We were standing next to another couple and my wife and this

other guy's wife went out in the middle of one of these little islands, standing there, raised their skirt about that much. A car stopped and all four of us jumped in. That's how we got to the Rose Bowl. [laughs]. The University of Georgia and UCLA were playing. It was a good game, 9 to nothing, I think it was. UCLA won. We had no trouble getting seats. All the scoring was down at our end of the field, we were lucky there. When we got out, these people were waiting to take us back into town. So it was another experience that turned out just fine—didn't know we were going to have it, but we enjoyed it thoroughly.

We were at Salinas for quite a while which is just outside of Fort Ord and then we started getting word that we were going to be shipped. It looked like it was in the Aleutians but there was no definite target that we knew about.

MR: So you knew that your objective was not in a tropical area?

JB: Right. We started out with the idea that we were going up there but we didn't know where and we did some work on amphibious landings and landing craft. Those things are very nice but you have to be careful with them. In the training we had, there was a lot of coral around and coral is poisonous. If you get a bad case of coral poisoning it can kill you, so we had to watch for that. We got on board one of these Kaiser ships; they were used to carry about a battalion of people, and we headed north. The weather, for some reason, going out of San Francisco is always rough. For two days out of San Francisco it was a miserable trip. A lot of us got seasick, even the crew.

MR: This was your first time on a ship?

JB: Right. On ship they had barrels of oil which would make it more difficult anyway for a person who was susceptible to seasickness. The water would come in and go right down past where the galley was and then you'd go up on the other side with your food. Well, there was about a foot of water on the floor of that thing and even the cooks were seasick. By the time you got your food and see all the guys heaving their cookies, you were not in much of a mood to eat. After a couple days it turned out alright and we wound up in Adak, a smaller island just further inland along the chain. It gave us a good opportunity to become accustomed to the weather, the terrain [breaks off]

MR: Did you have uniforms for the climate?

JB: We had pretty good uniforms. We didn't have the boots at that time. I had a couple of good sergeants and we found out that they were going to take [the men] over to the supply area and I said, "Look around and see what they've got." They found boots, these mukluks, they are a really good boot for that type of climate. They wound up securing enough boots for the company and hid them. So we were the first company to get the boots and when we got ours, they had to issue all of them right away. If you didn't have that sort of boot, your feet would become waterlogged and you'd have a lot of frostbite as a result of it. That happened to the people that went into that first island up there. When we got into the island itself, Kiska, there was one small fellow with us, under five foot,

who was a professional jockey. We had rucksacks and other equipment and when we went off the landing craft, he went right out of sight. We had to pick him up and carry him in. It was an awful way to start a landing, for him anyway. Going up into the island was not that difficult except for the fact that it was a big climb and everything had to be hand-carried. No trucks could get up in there. My particular assignment at that point was to make a trip to the left flank of the army to see that there was nobody over there to give us any trouble. So we had these Alligator amphibious tanks [LVT-1] and I had six of them. We went up into the lake and patrolled the left flank but the fog got so thick that we became disoriented and had difficulty finding our way back. There was nobody over there to bother us so it didn't matter anyway.

MR: What happened between the Canadians and the Americans because of the fog? You mentioned it to me earlier.

JB: The Canadians had a unit and they were very good soldiers. They were tough soldiers and they enjoyed what they were doing, and you couldn't ask for any better. The fog was so heavy they couldn't see who they were shooting at and we couldn't see who we were shooting at so we wound up shooting at two friendly forces. It took a little while to straighten that out. It was a little difficult but nobody got seriously hurt that I know of. The fog—and this was in *Life* magazine, my wife saved it for me—in 17 minutes it could go from bright sunshine to total fog; you wouldn't be able to see your hand in front of your face. At night we would have to lie down facing the direction we wanted to go in the morning. We didn't have a lot of night up there because it was that time of year, there was more daylight than anything, but you had to stop and rest once in a while. The fog was a real hazard. We actually had no trouble getting up where we wanted to go except for the arduous task of carrying equipment up. Everything had to be hand-carried. All of the smaller tracked vehicles we had—they called them Weasels [M29], made by Studebaker—were not very heavy at all or durable. The tracks came off, the tracks broke, they tipped over and everything else. At the end of two days we had no Weasels, they were all shot. At the end of the four or five days we were in there, we got to a place at the top of the hills where we knew that everything else was gone, we knew that the Japanese had pulled out so we started getting ready to leave the island.

From there we went down to Honolulu, Hawaii. That was good duty; I enjoyed it. I met some people there from California so I had an opportunity to go visit them while I was there, and if I wanted a car, I could take their car and go where I wanted to. I had a Hawaiian drivers' license and I was MTO (Motor Transport Officer) for a while. Hawaii was good training. There's a lot of rugged ground in Hawaii and it rains almost every day, but the sun comes out and dries you off very quickly. We got into using the amphibious trucks. The idea was to put a 105 [mm howitzer] in the truck so when it hit the beach, you'd have artillery on the shore. The first attempt, the 105 went right to the bottom. You had to be very careful how you did it. We had to practice those things. One of them tipped over and one man, I don't know whether he died or not, but he was in very serious condition because of the coral. The coral is poisonous and he got a bad case of poisoning.

I think that during the time I was in the Army, I spent more time on ships than many Navy people because of the practice landings and transporting from San Francisco to the Aleutian Islands to the Hawaiian Islands to Manus and down to Leyte and Okinawa and Korea and back to California again.

MR: How long were you in Hawaii?

JB: We were there about a year before we wound up going to Kwajalein. Kwajalein is a horseshoe type of an island and very flat because it was an atoll. The vegetation there was primarily coconut trees. When we made the landing [breaks off]

MR: Can you tell me the date of your landing over there?

JB: I believe it was February ’44. The nature of the landing, the way they set it up was: We had airpower to break down some of the things and we had Navy power, and we took adjacent islands that were close to the main island of Kwajalein and set up our own artillery. We used those as direct fire support. It was a very effective type of operation. We were told that we were supposed to finish the operation in five days and we did, but they gave us pills to help us stay awake for five days because they wanted to get it out of the way. We were told that when we were done we’d get out, somebody else comes in and cleans it up. With all of the weapons used, it made it an awful lot easier for the infantry—not completely easy but it was not as hard as it might have been. Everything was chopped up and it was very difficult to see where your opponents were or even keep in contact with your own men. Sometimes you can get lucky. I know we were moving one night and I went down the road to be sure I had everybody out and something said ‘turn left.’ So I turned left, I don’t know why, and just as I did a tracer bullet went right down past my hip. If I hadn’t have turned, I would have been a casualty. There were so many instances in the total career of combat where things like that happened, there’s no rhyme or reason for it but I wound up with only minor wounds and amoebic dysentery and coral infection. The Kwajalein operation was completed in five days. The Japanese were very strong and they fought till the end. They’d kill themselves rather than be captured. Most of the people we captured there were Korean laborers that were assigned to the island.

MR: You mentioned to me earlier how the Japanese hid from the American Army?

JB: The Japanese used every conceivable thing, places you wouldn’t imagine. The one that gave us the most problems—they would get up in a coconut tree in a cargo net and fire at you after you had gone past their position. When you’d turn around and fire back, they’d stop firing and you wouldn’t know whether you’d hit them because even if you hit them, they wouldn’t fall. So we wound up blowing up the trees to get them down. Afterwards the government had to replace all the trees, I think. [laughs] They would use bunkers and the only way we could to get them out—we had interpreters but they wouldn’t all come out—so we would put in gasoline and ignite it with grenades to force them out or kill people that were in there. I don’t recall anybody ever coming out of a

bunker that we got into. They had some concrete ones but we had some tanks that blew them up pretty good so we didn't have to worry too much about them.

We got off of there and onto the ships. We were almost five miles out at sea and you could smell the stench from the island because you're only five or ten degrees from the equator and that was very hot, and the bodies would bloat and burst. It's one horrible smell that you never forget. But we were able to get in there and get out, do the job, and go back to Hawaii. We didn't know where we were going to go after that but in the meantime, we picked up a battalion commander who was the best I've ever seen, or ever heard of. He was a defensive tackle for the Chicago Bears with an ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) commission out of Oregon. He knew what the infantryman needed and he would get it for you and he would be with you all the way. In fact, he was with me one time on Okinawa and I said, "Colonel, you'd better get the hell out of here because we're only 25 yards from that line of Japanese and we've got a grenade fight between the two." He left. [laughs]

MR: What was his name?

JB: [Delbert Leonard "Del"] Bjork. He was a professional football player, Chicago Bears. We used to have a touch football game on New Year's Day, our own little bowl game you could call it. I thought I could run pretty fast and pretty well because I had done a lot of track in high school and college. He weighed about 250 pounds and I only weighed about 170—he caught me. I didn't think it was possible but he caught me and I'd hate to have him hit me. Fortunately it was only touch football. [laughs]

After that we got ready to go further down toward Manus in New Guinea. From everything I've heard, read, and from people I know who were there, I think New Guinea must have been the worst place in the world to fight. You had the enemy against you who was in strong defensive positions, and you had terrain against you, and you had weather against you. At that point, there was no cure except quinine for malaria. At one point, one whole Marine division was evacuated to Australia because of illness and it was a year before they got back. It was that bad. Later they came out with Atabrine and when it first came out it didn't have a coating and it was a very bitter pill to take. We were very insistent that the people take it and they did, religiously, and not one of my company came down with malaria as a result of it. They eventually coated it so it wasn't bad to take but when we crossed the equator, there's a ceremony bringing you from one thing to another—Shellbacks and Pollywogs. We got rid of the Pollywog thing and became Shellbacks but the ceremony was that they took a glass about this big and it was filled with liquid Atabrine, uncoated. It was the most god-awful tasting stuff you've ever tasted. We had to drink it unless you had been over before and been initiated and could show your card. We got our card that way but it was a mess.

But going down there—again talking about things that there's no rhyme or reason for—the transport was travelling at night with no lights, no radio communication, in convoy. It was hot so a lot of us went up on deck to sleep and we were practically nude. I was on the

edge and had my arm hanging over the side of the ship. Something woke me up and I looked and about that far away [holds hands approximately 12 inches apart] was another ship, adjacent to where my arm was, and nobody could signal anybody. Eventually we got the word back that there was a ship there and they pulled away without hitting us. But it was so close that I could have lost an arm very easily. One of the accidents that happen that nobody's to blame for, but it does happen.

We got down to Manus and had a little time to swim and drink some 3.2 beer which was nice to have around. We got on the ship and they told us that there had been a change in plans. We were going into the Philippines. So we got new charts and new landings, and in due course we made the assault invasion of Leyte. Our regiment didn't have any trouble on the beaches, but up further north around Tacloban they had a lot of trouble. We got inland about five miles the first day and we had a road, which helped. The other regiment on our right ran into a lot of very deep grass, suffocating. They lost a lot of people to heat prostration and that sort of thing. You couldn't see where you were going or what you were running into. In the tropics you almost have to go until you hit something before you can find it and that's deadly because somebody's always going to get hurt. It was difficult as an operation all the way around. We lost more people by disease and medical problems, heat prostration and that type of thing, than gunshot wounds. All sorts of liver flukes because you're in the water a lot. You never got to change your shoes or socks and an infantryman always carries spare socks. We got in about five miles and I was able to pick up a Filipino guerilla as a guide and he gave us a lot of information about where things were, and he stayed with me until we got out of his area. We eventually turned south and that was out of his area and you're almost, from county to county, running into a different dialect of the language. He went back home. He gave me a bolo knife and it was very handy for cutting grass, just to make a trail. That thing was that long, it was a good knife, real sharp steel. Cutting coconuts, coconuts are fine but don't try to eat too much of that coconut milk or you'll come down with diarrhea [laughs]. It's very good but very deadly.

We eventually went south then crossed over to the other side of the island and we had a lot of problems up there with the Japanese. There were houses there and we had to go through the houses. That's something I never want to do again if I don't have to because you never know what you're going to run into. One house that I went into—I always carried the bolo knife with me. I had a carbine, but I carried the bolo knife, too. I opened the door of a bedroom upstairs and I saw something in the way of a figure out of the corner of my eye. I took the bolo knife and started to go like this [leans over] to stab it and it turned out to be a statue of Jesus Christ. [laughs] I was that far [six inches] from sticking the statue with the knife. You don't know what you're going to run into, that's the point, and it was that way all the way through. The Japanese fought very hard going up through there; they caused us a lot of trouble. The 77th Division made a landing in front of us in a town called Ormoc. They cleaned that town out and then they went on but they left all the booby-traps around and we were moving into that area. I was involved in cleaning out booby-traps that they left behind. There were trip wires, Bouncing Betties,

stuff like that. It was a very treacherous job. You couldn't see them until you were right on them because some of it was piano wire.

MR: What is a Bouncing Betty?

JB: It's a bomb that has a trigger and it will bounce up into the air when you pull the trigger. It was not a pleasant thing to get involved with but we didn't get any casualties because we had three people, myself and two sergeants, who knew what we were looking for and it worked out all right. Near the end of it, we were in a company perimeter one night and I came down with diarrhea. It was a small perimeter because at that point I only had 19 men left out of the whole company. I took my weapon and a shovel and went outside the perimeter to stay by myself because I was miserably sick. It was going both ways, up and out, not down and out. Next day I got ahold of the medics and they gave me some paregoric sulfaguanidine. That eased it a little bit. Later on when I got home at the end of the war and I was going to school, I used to get a reoccurrence every year. I told him what the history was and he asked what the Army did. I told him and he said "Well, try that." I tried it, it didn't work. He said, "I tried their way and now you're going to try my way." He gave me a stiff dose of castor oil and I've never had any trouble since. He cleaned me out for sure. It was the best remedy, I wish the Army had done it. [laughs]

We wound up leaving Leyte after 80-90 days, enough to take a lot of your weight and energy out of you. We were cleaning up and getting replacements and getting ready to go to another operation and somebody found out that we were going to go into Okinawa. Believe it or not, this word got to people who had been in the company and been wounded and evacuated and they were scattered all over the South Pacific. They hijacked, hitchhiked, you name it, any way to get back to the basic company so that they could be with the same fellows that they knew. When you think about it, it makes a lot of sense. If they had stayed there, they would have wound up in a reception center someplace as individual replacements, then assigned to some unit that they knew nothing about and maybe didn't have the training we had.

[Tape change]

JB: After Leyte these people started showing up, coming every which way to get back to their parent organization and be assigned to people they knew. That speaks to how much togetherness and professionalism you have in the basic unit. Without that, it's so easy to lose an operation. You're just totally destroyed because you don't have the confidence of the people next to you. An infantryman has to know who is beside him and whether he can depend on him. If you can't depend on him, then you lose confidence and everything breaks down. These guys came back and when we landed on Okinawa I had one guy who had a broken leg, he was still on crutches. We took him. He subsequently fractured the thing again but we took him along with us; he wanted to go. We landed on Okinawa on Easter Sunday and there was no opposition where we landed. The Japanese preferred to consolidate further down at the southern end of the island rather than stop us at the beaches. Maybe they figured they would lose a lot of people from our Navy and our Air

Force before we did that. We wound up going straight across the island and heading south. A Marine unit went to the north to clean that out which was smaller units. The island got progressively harder because Okinawa had been used as an artillery training area and they had every conceivable spot zeroed in for artillery and they had very good, very strong defensive positions. Some of the hills were quite high and they had caves three stories deep. You think you've got them out of one place and they're in another place. It took a lot to get them out of the caves. There were days when you measured your gains in yards rather than miles. You might take it today and lose it tomorrow. They were a very dogmatic enemy. We also got into a lot of rain where we were immobilized as far as transportation was concerned. So you really couldn't go because you couldn't get supplies up; you're running out of artillery shells and everything else. Let me tell you, we had some of the best artillery in the world. We had a battalion of all Mormons in the division artillery and I used them very effectively in one assault. We had to go up a valley with hills on both sides. It had to be frontal, we couldn't maneuver in any way and we had close to 500 yards to go. I used the whole battalion firing and following it all the way up and we still lost 22 men. It was all small arms, machine guns and stuff like that. We had confidence in the artillery to follow a rolling barrage all the way up to the top of the hill. I told the battalion commander that we had 22 men that need to be evacuated. He sent some ton-and-a-half trucks up and took them out. The trucks were more exposed than we were when they went up. But he got them out. That was the first, biggest skirmish that we had. After that, it was getting them out of holes, getting them out of hills.

We'd bring our ammunition up at night. Grenades, rifle bullets, and what have you. I had a case of grenades about as far from here to that chair. It was dark and they threw in a lot of stuff. One of them hit the case of grenades. The bomb didn't go off and the grenades didn't go off. Here I am, five yards from the damn thing and there was a lot of noise, shake you up, but nobody got hurt. Looking over afterwards, that case of grenades had no pins in them. Where that happened, I don't know, but it had to be in the manufacturing, some place along the line. Again, you have to check and know what the hell you're doing. There were a lot of little things like that, that mean an awful lot.

We eventually went up to the end of the main Shuri line, they called it. Some people called it the little Maginot Line. About four divisions, two Marine and two Army, tried to take it and couldn't, and they tried several times. There was just no way you could get it head on. So the Army commander and everybody below him, including my battalion commander, got together looking for suggestions on how to break the line. They fiddled around and my battalion commander was going up and down, shaking his head, couldn't believe the nonsense. They'd been batting their heads there for days and days. They noticed what he was doing so they asked him, "Colonel, what would you do?" He said, "I would go up at night." This is something we didn't do very often at night and they thought about it and they said yes. So the Army commander says to the division commander, to the regimental commander, to my battalion commander, to me, and I got the lead job going through. We went around the line. We went through Yonaburu at night

and somehow the photographers got ahold of the story and they wanted to send a photographer with a private for 24 hours. He was with us when we made the assault. Going around and through Yonaburu we were fine. We were watching for booby-traps, they could be on the dead bodies or anything. Going up the side of the hill there were a lot of caves and monuments for somebody buried there. He got up there and he wanted to take a picture and he got up on the other side, taking a picture down, away from the enemy, and he got hit right in the face. He was evacuated; that was the end of him. Every photographer that I've ever had anything to do with in a combat zone, I said, "Get lost." I didn't want anything to do with them because they only bring trouble; they want to get a picture and they expose everybody including themselves. They're nice guys but I don't want to go with them. [laughs] Anyway, we got up to the top of the hill and then we started playing king-of-the-hill in the morning. That was kind of a rough situation.

MR: Was this where you were awarded the Silver Star?

JB: Part of it, yeah. The Japanese had a bunker on our left front—we were talking about some of these recruits that came into Fort Lewis—we had a lot of them from Oklahoma, Tennessee. They were squirrel shooters and they were really good soldiers, strong soldiers, would do anything. A head comes across the skyline, all you could see was the head. He reaches over and grabs his rifle and catches him on the fly, right in the head. That's the kind of a guy he was. We got through that alright and then we got pulled back into the reserve company. Another company went through and they started going up against an escarpment which was the next objective, probably 300 foot high. There were a lot trees on the left side and there was a sniper up in a tree. Before anybody could catch on to what was going on, he had killed all but one officer of the lead company going through. The company commander was hysterical; he had nobody left. So they gave me the job of going up and taking the escarpment. I didn't want to go the same route he did so we went further to the right and got around them. Rather than go up over the end of it, we looked for some way we could climb the escarpment. We found a little fissure about that wide and we went up through that. It was booby trapped but we cured that and went right up on top right into the trenches of the Japanese. We got up there and had a pretty exciting time for a while. We had artillery with us so we laid artillery in front of us too. That night they had three counterattacks on us. We were in their trenches and they wanted them back. We used machine guns, we used flamethrowers, and the flamethrowers were the most effective. I kept moving it around so they wouldn't know where it was because they were trying to get the flamethrower. We withstood three counterattacks that night and the next day, they evacuated. They'd had enough. They went further back. That was a miserable thing. They just kept coming and coming. We didn't know in the beginning, in the morning, we were scheduled to have an advance at 7:00 o'clock the next morning but the battalion commander sent another company around our left and outflanked the position they had. They went up and it was foggy, it's five minutes to seven and you couldn't see where they were coming. I was all ready to give the order to fire when out of the clouds came the company commander, and if we had

fired, we would have fired right into their company. The timing was so close; it could have been disastrous. That's the nature of the beast sometimes.

We had another incident: We had a mission of going down into a round hole in the ground—it was a huge hole—you could probably put this building in it. There were tunnels that went out to the side and we wanted to be sure they were clear. I didn't think there were any Japanese in there. There might be some civilians in there hiding. We couldn't find a way to get down from the top of it. We wound up climbing down through the trees, from the top down, and then going into the caves. Grenades went off. One guy fell, startled I suppose, and he fell into an underground canal. We didn't know until we got out that he was missing. I didn't want to go back in at that point; I figured he was a casualty. We went back to where we were originally and several days later we went back down and looked for him. He had fallen into this canal and come out on the other side and lost his bearings and didn't know where he was. He'd been in there almost a week and the only thing he had was water to keep him alive. And not knowing which way to go. He didn't want to go in any deeper because then you'd get even more lost. But we got him out. A photographer heard what we had done and wanted to take our pictures, he wanted us to recreate this thing. I told him "No thanks, I've been down there twice and I'm not going again." [laughs]

You ran into a lot of things. That was the beginning of the breakup of the whole Japanese army. They'd fought well, they were good soldiers, but their leadership below the noncommissioned level was not that good. In our case, we were down to no officers in one case that I know of, and the noncoms could carry the load because they were trained to do that. The Japanese soldier was not, to our knowledge and experience anyway. They were rugged and they could stand a lot of tough times but they were deficient in that category. The units began breaking apart and more and more you'd see stragglers, they'd come out and give themselves up. When we got close to the end of the island, we knew that this was going to come. I was the only officer left and believe me, I was dead tired.

MR: How many days had you been in action?

JB: All told, about 40. That's a lot of days because you don't sleep. You're working physically all the time. He [the battalion commander] noticed that I was having a problem and he says, "I made arrangements for you to out on this ship. I want you to go out and cruise up and down and see what's on the other side of this cliff because that's where we're going to go." I got on the ship and went to sleep and never woke up until it was time to get off. [laughs] He never asked me what I saw and I never told him. But he was that kind of a guy. He sensed that I needed some help and he gave it to me. For which I was forever grateful; Colonel Bjork, I love you. [laughs]

We had a stream going up behind our position one night and you never know what you're going to get. There were two bodies that came up the stream and we saw that they were carrying satchel charges with them. They turned out to be two females with satchel charges that were looking for targets to blow up. Well, we blew them up instead. But they

were female nurses I presume as a part of their unit, I don't know who else it could have been. So you had everything under the sun.

The last big place that was a problem was a hill with a lot of coral and apartments three stories high where they could have supplies and people and ammunition and other stuff. There were little chunks of coral, maybe only as big as that chair; they would dig a hole behind it and when you'd go by, they'd come out and fire at you. You couldn't tell unless you turned around and looked at it. So what we did finally was take flamethrowers and burn every one of them. That was an oily substance that would coat it, and whoever was inside was not going to come out. That's the only way we got up in there. The caves themselves, we closed some of them with ammunition and satchel changes and blasted them all. We used water and we used flamethrowers on tanks, just run the hose up to the top of the hill and throw it in the thing and burn them out. That's the only way you could do it; they weren't going to come out. When we got down closer to the end of the island, there were tons of them that jumped off the cliff rather than be captured. That was about the end of Okinawa. We came out of that and went into a rest area and the war was over. The Navy was out there sailing around and firing tracers all over the place. They were going through our tents even. [laughs] We got into the holes real quick. They were celebrating but we didn't want to celebrate that way. The only celebration we had was when we left Hawaii, all the officers in the battalion chipped in some money to buy some liquor and when we get to the end of the road, whoever's left is going to get the liquor. I wound up getting 21 bottles of whiskey. I shared it with the men, not kosher, but I shared it. I said "Just don't drink it all at once." They didn't get that sort of stuff very often; probably knock them for a loop. When we got through there, we wound up getting ready to go to Korea in occupation. The war was over. Nobody knew what we were going to run into.

We went in at Inchon where [General Douglas] MacArthur went in and the tide drops 20 foot, a horrendous drop. We had to get in and get the ships out, otherwise they'd be beached. We got the men in but we didn't get supplies in until a week or so later. MacArthur did it and got his troops on the way to Seoul in one day. He did a hell of a job getting those people in there; nobody can appreciate what the tide will do to you. And he did it under fire. The trains that took us into Seoul—I had never seen people on trains like that before. The train was round with people hanging on the outside. The trains were loaded. [Anything] to get away from where they were. The number of people coming back into Seoul was unbelievable, any way they could get there, and the train was the best way. Seoul and Korea itself at that time was a very dirty country. Human waste was used for fertilizer in the fields and they collected it in honey carts up and down the street. They have sewer lines now, I'm sure, but they had no sewer lines then. It was just a bad place to be living. The terrain is awfully tough. We were one of the first companies into Seoul [breaks off]

MR: What year was this?

JB: 1945. We had sectors that we had to check. If there was a bank in your sector, you had to check to see that nobody was taking any money, put guards up in different installations. We went down and we parceled it out and I'm the only guy left with a driver. Everybody else had an assignment. I drove by a courtyard in front of a big house and I look in there and see a whole company of Japanese soldiers. What do I do now? They were armed and I was alone with one driver. [laughs] We went in, met the company commander, very courteous, polite. I accepted his surrender. They piled up their weapons and that was it—never a bit of trouble with them. Another thing, when we first established policemen in Seoul, we had policemen who were South Korean, and we had a Japanese soldier with them, working in teams of twos. We never once had a problem with them. They were so disciplined and that was it. The Koreans hated the Japanese because the Japanese were occupiers for years. But their discipline was unquestionable. What they were told to do, they did, no questions asked. Anyway, I had a YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) in my area as well as a lot of banks. I went in and there was a fellow there that I talked to and he invited us to bring our company over or anybody else who wanted to come. So we wound up going over there quite frequently to play basketball. Finally he says, "How'd you like to play a Korean team?" So we wound up playing a Korean team over there and we were not in shape. Everybody was still tired from Okinawa. Those guys trained by pulling rickshaws. They were small but they could run all day and so they beat us. We had a lot of fun playing with them. In fact we have a picture in here where they presented me a bouquet and I had to give a speech. I tried to reciprocate to the guy and I took him out to dinner. You weren't supposed to take natives in a Jeep so I got arrested by an MP. [laughs] I was separating soon and I had to go before General [Joseph L.] Ready, the division commander then. He had given me an award, the Bronze Star, and he tore the thing up and put it in the basket. There are good guys in the Army, in the chain of command.

So we came back to California. Flew by C-47s, bucket seats, to Jersey City, where the airport is down there. My wife is from Trenton and I called her and told her I'd be in and when the train was arriving. It was difficult for the civilians because we knew what was going on and they didn't. When my father heard what I was doing, it scared the living daylights out of him. There was so little that they did know that it was scary. We accepted it as part of the job and what we had to do, but for the family, particularly the wife—when you get married in the Army, you'd better be sure you know the father-in-law, you know the mother-in-law, you know the wife, and is she mature enough to stand all the travel. I figured out before coming over here that since I got married, I moved 19 times, all over the country. If you're able to do that without the security of your family, you're all right, but if you have a problem with being away from home, then you're going to be in trouble. I think that probably is a lot of the reason that soldiers today have trouble with divorces and what have you. They're not sure of the mental and emotional stability of the person they're marrying. My mother-in-law was a Polish immigrant and I have never known a child who didn't love her, and my wife is the same way. My father-in-law was a Polish soldier and the Bolsheviks were after him and he had to leave with his son or get killed so he came over ahead of time, before his wife came over. With his

background and my background I could do nothing wrong. [laughs] And the wife was a gem.

We had some very hard times. We didn't know until afterwards that we had the RH factor which means that any newborn could have a defect. When we were at Fort Ord she became pregnant. I sent her back home, came back with her. We were just getting ready to go to Kwajalein and the child was born with a defective heart. It died before I could get home, in fact I couldn't get home. They wouldn't let me go. She had family to support her but it still was difficult because I wasn't there and the child was a part of the woman and it was a very difficult thing. Flexibility is one thing you have to have, availability, you have to be courteous. You have to be available physically to do the job and when we were at Fort Ord we trained very hard. We had a unit that went up to Stanford, they have a physical education program up there, and we put on a demonstration of one solid hour of calisthenics with no break. That was quite a feat and they appreciated it. A lot of little things like that.

The other part, when I got out of service, I went into the Reserves and I figured nothing's going to happen now. I wound up going to school, Ithaca College, and they had an accelerated course in physical education which was what I was interested in. We started in January of '46 and graduated in August of '48, a four-year course. Then I went to Vermont coaching high school in football, basketball, and baseball and attended some clinics at the University of Rochester in the field. We always had a clinic at college, Cornell was right up the hill from where we were. I went over to Dartmouth and Yale for football clinics. I got a chance to really study my profession at that point. Korea came along and I got called back for Korea. I had to go in October which meant that the school had to hire somebody else to take my place, there was no delay. I got to Governor's Island just five says after the last group went to Korea. So I didn't have to go to Korea during that; I wound up as unit training instructor for a number of units, one of which was a Selective Service unit.

I'll give you a little background: they started planning for the thing in the mid '30's; they wound up just barely passing the law. These Selective Service units were all military people and the philosophy behind that was that in the event of a mobilization these people are ready to go today. If you have to establish Civil Service status and hire civilians, they may not be available for months. They had a cadre that represented all branches of the service. In Albany we had a National Guard unit and they did their active duty training, two weeks at a state or national headquarters. They knew what the mechanics were. I was assisting them in administration, that sort of thing, and one of the guys had heard that there was going to be a vacancy in Selective Service headquarters in Albany. He spoke to the state director who happened to be an infantryman with experience in the Mexican War. He asked me come up and talk with him. I went up and talked with him and he hired me. I went back to Ithaca, waiting for the orders, and I got a call on Friday, "You don't know it but you're supposed to be on duty Monday." [laughs] I wound up as an operations officer for him. That was good experience. My wife said, "You can take it if you're not going to have to be moved." Seventeen months later I was

in Buffalo and I wound up there for 11 years which was not bad. I wound up as a field officer out there, in charge of western NY.

MR: What year was the Selective Service?

JB: Selective Service was 1952. I had the western district of NY as my area of jurisdiction and when I came back in I was assistant state director, operations officer, and then I was deputy state director. Colonel Boughton was retiring and they made me acting state director and eventually state director. It was rather unusual because usually the adjutant general is the state director of Selective Service and that is because he is available in the event of mobilization. Colonel Boughton was in the training system and working with the Guard so he was General Brown's assistant. I was with him in state headquarters for a long time and I never met General Brown. [laughs] Colonel Boughton was my real boss. As far as politics are concerned, I never had any problem with the governor, who had to recommend me to the Director of Selective Service, or his successor, or anybody up there on the Hill. If there was a problem, they'd call me and say, "Will you check it out and give me the data and write a letter for me." He's sign it and away it'd go. It was a very equitable situation with no political thing.

As far as the organization of the company of the local boards are concerned, we had at least one board in every county. New York City originally was part of the upstate headquarters but when I got to the system, NYC had its own headquarters. So we had 56 state headquarters because NYC was one, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Canal Zone, and I think Alaska and Hawaii were figured in that, but they became states. They all had representatives as state directors and they were run the same way we were talking about. They did their training at state headquarters or national headquarters. The local boards were formed primarily on the basis of the county or subdivision of the county. Where there was a rural area, we always had two boards, one primarily for agriculture and one primarily for those places that were considered communities, cities, or towns. It got large enough so that in some of the bigger boards down in Great Neck and Long Island we had four panels on one board. The boards themselves were selected differently. In one case where it was a very small area up in the Adirondacks, Lowville, the county judge made the recommendation as to who was going to be the chairman of the board and the board members. I don't know whether this would be legal today, but we always had them cleared by the state BCI (Bureau of Criminal Investigation) to see whether there was anything there we shouldn't have.

MR: What years were you director of NY state?

JB: From 1969 to 1977 when they closed. We had to ensure that we would have a lawyer on every board; if there was industry in the area, we wanted somebody from industry; if it was primarily an academic thing, we would want somebody representing universities; industry; agriculture. Sometimes we would have a minister but the ministers were the hardest people to deal with because everybody, in their eyes, was a conscientious objector. That was the most difficult problem we had—conscientious objectors or people

who claimed to be. I personally ran into a number of cases where I knew the individual myself and he was no more a conscientious objector than the man in the moon. We would get that man re-evaluated, sometimes physically, sometimes mentally, to see whether he was qualified and to see if he was a conscientious objector also. I think one of the most difficult things: I had two brothers, same family, living together, and they both claimed conscientious objector status. One of them said he would wear the uniform but he wouldn't fire a weapon; that takes him out of the full conscientious objector status. He was able to serve in uniform but not bear weapons. Whether he changed his mind after he got in, I don't know. I felt that the other one was a bona fide conscientious objector and he could perform two years of civilian duty of some value to the country. I had [blank tape for 5 seconds] is the problem because I believe on every college campus there was a group or a person who was trying to teach people how to become a conscientious objector. Illegal, but they were doing it. It wasn't because they were conscientious objectors, but just against the war, period. It's probably the most difficult thing to define and you have to see these people in person. They were seen by the local boards any number of times; in some cases they were seen by the appeals board where they felt it was warranted; and in some cases, I had people go out and check background on the family, on the man, and I've done it myself just to get a clear picture because if you run into a real conscientious objector, he is a very sincere man. We had a chaplain with us, Chaplain Jorgenson, and he would never carry a weapon until one day he was walking down a path in the Philippines and a Japanese soldier popped up and held a rifle to him. Somebody else shot the Japanese soldier but after that he carried a shotgun. How sincere was he? I don't know, he was a heck of a nice guy. Trying to define what constitutes a conscientious objector, when you're being shot at you can change your mind pretty quick. The local boards did a real good job and in almost every case the chief clerk was federal civil service and they treated these guys like mothers. The lady in Buffalo, I spent quite a few years out there with her, and they were having people coming in from Jamestown and Fredonia to be examined and they were rejected and no place to sleep and the busses weren't running. She would see that they got home, she'd pay their way. It was unbelievable, the things these people would do; they would have parties for them, they gave them going away gifts—ditty bags and everything.

It was a tremendous experience for me because I got to meet other state directors. General [Lewis B.] Hershey was unbelievable, unflappable. He was the second director of national selective service and located in Washington. I'll give you an example: He was to be taken over to someplace in Washington for President Roosevelt's swearing-in ceremony. He had a car that was a relic and he was going to drive his government-issued car. The government found out what he was going to do and they wouldn't let him come in it; they were ashamed of it. They went over and picked him up and brought him but that's the kind of guy he was. Another incident: He always furnished a dinner for us and we always furnished a dinner for him. It was at Bethesda and he knew everybody, the non-commissioned people and what have you. They had a table with trays on it and stuff, and they had a long stuffed fish on the table. Something happened and the table tipped and the fish went down on the floor. [laughs] Never bothered him a bit and he talked to

the guy that was in charge, some sort of master sergeant or whatever the equivalent was in the Navy, poor guy was really flustered. The general said, “Forget it.”

I needed a lawyer on my staff one time and I told the general that we were having a lot of trouble with conscientious objectors and I need a lawyer. He said, “OK, you’ve got your hunting license, go get one.” [laughs] I can remember when a state director was scheduled to give a talk to all of us. He went out the night before and couldn’t get up the next morning. He missed his speech. He came in and told the general that he had been drunk that night and couldn’t get up. The general told him to forget it. He was that kind of a guy. He came to NY State on a visit and I was assigned to be his aide. So I spent a couple of days with him out in Rochester, at the Eastman School of Music out there. He was the last speaker on the list and everybody else was very long-winded. He recognized that everybody was getting bored and gave a real short speech. I had time to talk with him the night before and into the night. This man was legally blind, he couldn’t read, couldn’t see. We got talking about the history of the system and he started telling me the history of the system in NY, not the whole system, but he knew all about NYC, how it happened, why it happened. I wanted to know because I wanted to keep NYC separate because the people down in Long Island didn’t want to be a part of NYC again. He told me about it. There was just too much variation between the city and upstate; a different ball of wax altogether. He was a real fine gentleman to know, to be associated with.

MR: You had a long career, almost 32 years in the military. How do you think this affected or changed your life?

JB: It changed my life totally. I had no idea that I was going to be in as a career soldier, I had no idea that I was going to get out and stay out or go back in in 1946 when I got out, but I got called back in ’50 and that was the thing you had to do. Then I got out because I was a father at that point and there was a federal law that said that people who were called back could get out after they completed 18 months. Then I was about to be interviewed for a job in Long Island as a coach when I got the call that I was on active duty, like two days from now. So I said, “If it’s going to be this way, I’ll stay and make a career of it” and that’s the way it worked. I don’t like to think about a lot of things but it certainly broadened my knowledge of human nature, people, and military things. When it comes to military service, if these kids can get in the service for a short period of time, whether it be training or combat or something else, and get indoctrinated—some of them are getting so heavy and it’s very difficult to get them in condition, or the desire to get into condition. You develop camaraderie with those people; they’re your family. When I first went in it was the brown shoe Army, we had brown shoes and leggings. Take your rifle out of Cosmoline and clean that, it was a real mess. Working with those guys and putting your life in their hands. If you lead them and let them know that you are with them, they’ll do it. I got a letter from a staff sergeant that he wrote after he was discharged saying exactly that: We always knew if we got into trouble, you would be there. That was something that I always stressed myself. I was doing a lot of things that probably a good company commander should not do but we had a relationship that was precious, these people were precious to me, and I was willing to take any chance that they

were expected to take. Once you develop that spirit, there's nothing they won't do. Sometimes they get carried away with some of the stuff they do but what the heck? You forgive them and they forgive you; it's a real character building situation.

As I said before, get a good father-in-law, a good mother-in-law, a wife that takes after her mother, and most of them do, and one who's willing to travel.

MR: Thank you very much.

[JB shows Leyte and Okinawa photos and clippings from scrapbook. Mentions that he is in the Infantry Hall of Fame because of his record. Shows clipping of Ernie Pyle and refers to him as a "real GI reporter." Shows clipping of Korean basketball team.]