

**Joseph E. Byer
Veteran**

**Michael Aikey
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New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

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Michael Aikey: MA

Joseph Byer: JB

MA: Mr. Byer, where did you grow up?

JB: I grew up in Rochester

MA: You were born when?

JB: March 31, 1899

MA: What is it like in Rochester back then?

JB: Well, of course the night that I was born they had the worst blizzard that they ever had, and this was Rochester.

MA: Well that was quite a greeting wasn't it?

JB: Yeah, course it didn't make a difference to me, I didn't know what it was all about.

MA: You grew up in the city?

JB: Yes

MA: Where did you go to school?

JB: I went to school in the Rochester schools, and graduated from (unclear) High School.

MA: And, when World War I broke out what were you doing?

JB: Well, I was a student

MA: And what did you think about what was going on over in Europe?

JB: Well, you know I graduated- we had two graduation dates in that time from High School. One was in January and one was in June. So, at the time that I graduated, I was 17 years old, and my birthday was going to be in the end of March. I knew that I would be drafted. Well, the

government started this program in some of the colleges throughout the country called the Students Army Training Corps. The purpose of that program was to develop students to become officers in the and it was training college and talking specific subjects. So I was fortunate enough to get into a unit that was started in Rochester in that particular year. They had just a barracks, they had (unclear) 60 students.

MA: Where was the barracks located?

JB: On the campus of the college.

MA: Which college was it?

JB: University of Rochester. It was unusual for colleges small as that to have one of those units. But I think it was really the influence of Rush Rhees, the President of the University of Rochester and George Eastman, in order to develop one in Rochester.

MA: What was the program like?

JB: You go to college in the mornings and you take the regular college course, which is designed so that it is completed by 1 o'clock PM. Then from 1 o'clock you'd go under military control, and you'd do your military problems and your various duties for the rest of the day.

MA: What year did this begin?

JB: It began in 1917

MA: And did you like the program?

JB: Yes, the program was very good. Of course, they gave you the opportunity of majoring in whatever you thought would be your preference when you got into the army. The program consisted of your choice of the branch, and also of picking the particular part of the army service that you thought you would like, and I chose communications.

MA: What was that program course like?

JB: Well, for the first six or eight months all you did was study electricity, and the army manual, and the other army duties consisted of drilling and the various types of things you would get if you attended an army training camp.

MA: Were the army officers part of the regular army that were doing the instructions?

JB: Yes

MA: They weren't National Guard?

JB: No, not the National Guard.

MA: Regular Army?

JB: Yes, and when you enlisted in this program you had to agree to serve at least three years active service when you graduated.

MA: Now how long was the coursework for?

JB: Well, it was a regular college, 4 years. But, the war was over 1918. November 11, 1918 the war was over. Well, you had your choice. You could get an honorable discharge from the United States Army or else you could continue with your college course, and when you graduated you would be put on the active reserve.

MA: And what did you choose?

JB: I chose to take an honorable discharge.

MA: So you were discharged in 1918?

JB: That's right.

MA: So what did you do after you were discharged?

JB: Well, after I was discharged, our family had financial problems. So, I was unable to finish the rest of my college course. But, I was active in the reserve. For five or six years, every weekend I would have to go in for some training.

MA: What was it like being in the reserve in that period?

JB: Well, the war was over. It wasn't bad. It was a nice group of people to spend the weekend together.

MA: Where did you initially train?

JB: Either in Watertown or Fort Dix

MA: That was Pine Camp at that point?

JB: I don't think it was called Pine camp. I don't remember what its official name was up there.

MA: What was it like during wartime in Rochester?

JB: Well, wartime in Rochester was no different than wartime in any other city. Don't forget that the First World War was a war in the trenches. I mean, the general population was not affected like it is now, by air raids and things of that kind. Citizens were more or less protected. But if you were in the trenches, it wasn't too good, because it there was a trench opposite you, and when you wanted to advance, you would send an artillery barrage ahead of you to the trench that was opposite you, and then you would charge by foot. At that time, there was a lot of (unclear) fighting.

MA: Now, was there rationing in Rochester during the war?

JB: I don't remember World War I rationing.

MA: Remember any of the war bond drives? What were they like?

JB: You know, they had gatherings, they had people going out, and they have occasions and they have people gather together with the purpose of buying bonds in order to help the war effort.

MA: Was Rochester pretty supportive of that?

JB: Well, yes, same as the rest of the country.

MA: SO the country was pretty much behind the war effort at that point?

JB: Well, there wasn't any opportunities to know whether they were behind or not. The war was there so you took it as it was.

MA: Any of your friends go into the service overseas?

JB: Yes, when the Student Army Training Corps became known, there was a very large number of applicants, because of the fact that people would rather go into the service as an officer rather than as a private. And, of course, if you chose your own branch of service, then at least you knew that you were doing something that you would like.

MA: Now did many of your classmates continue with college after the war?

JB: After the war was over, the government suddenly decided that they didn't need any more officers, so they put them all on inactive service- Nobody went overseas or anything.

MA: Did many stay in college?

JB: Most of them took the honorable discharge, there were a few, and the ones that took it got their college education, and they didn't have to serve.

MA: When World War II came about, what were you doing at that point?

JB: I was a sales representative at that time. And, there was a program at that time that was sponsored by the government where they were looking for people that were qualified to operate (unclear). So, I was married at that time but I didn't have any children. So another friend of mine and myself applied for that particular program. So we were interviewed, and the captain interviewed us. He said that he thought we had the qualifications, but we were with the wholesale end of the business instead of the retail. He didn't know whether we were qualified. So, he said he would let us know. Meanwhile, this other friend of mine, found out that there was another interview in Cleveland, so we went down there to apply. And over there they didn't say anything about the difference between wholesale and retail. They said that they'd let us know. A year later I get a telegram, telling me to report to Fort Dix at such and such date and at such and such hour for a physical. My wife at that time was three months pregnant. When she found out

about it, she was very much disturbed. She said, “You can’t go away now when you’re gonna have a child and leave me alone.” So, I ignored the telegram.

MA: And nothing happened because you ignored it?

JB: Well, I wasn’t in the army, I hadn’t been signed up or anything, there was no reason why I had to go in, unless it was voluntary.

MA: So you stayed in sales during the war?

JB: Yeah

MA: Was the attitude of the country different during WWII?

JB: I think the attitude was a lot different. After all, that was a different type of a war. We were fighting a war against aggression, a war against power and you know the First World War was really indefinite because of the fact they called in the war to preserve democracy. And I don’t know how successful they were in promoting democracy. Wilson was elected president during the early part of that war, and the motto at that time was “ He kept us out of the war”. And about six months after he was elected, we were in the war.

MA: What did you think of that?

JB: You know, I think the reason we got in was that our convoys were supplying the Allies with war supplies and with what Germany did at that time, their submarines were damaging and sinking American ships and I guess that was the immediate cause of our entry. But I think we were on the verge anyway.

MA: So after WWII, you stayed in sales until your retirement?

JB: No, I did various other things. My father took sick when I was (unclear) years old. He was a painting contractor. And his doctors thought they knew what was the matter with him, but they didn’t know what caused it. So after five or six years of experimentation and operations and one thing or another, they sort of gave up. He gave up too, so we were in a financial problem. I had three other sisters. So my mother and my sisters, we all got good educations and we developed a huge debt. There was no medicare, no social security, no medicaid , and those debts were sacred debts, because of they were made with friends or relatives, and if the person that took out the debt wasn’t able to repay it, the children did. And that was the way welfare was conducted.

MA: Well do you have anything else you would like to say about WWI or WWII? Your experiences?

JB: Well, as I said, I didn’t have much real experience in the war. My warfare duty was strictly training. And, I appreciated the fact I got the opportunity to get the two years of college, and it wasn’t easy, because of the fact that if your grades dropped below a B, you were put on probation. And if they didn’t improve by the next term, you were on the front lines in six weeks.

MA: That was incentive, wasn't it?

JB: Yeah

MA: that kept your grades up?

JB: Well, it was a good experience for me, I fully expected that I would be over in France fighting.

MA: Did you make some friends in the program that you stayed friends with?

JB: Oh, yes.

MA: Well, thank you very much Mr. Byer.