

INTERVIEW:  
YEAR:

Baber, James Koehler  
2004

**NEW YORK STATE MILITARY MUSEUM ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

**NAME:** James Koehler Baber  
**DATE:** October 21, 2004  
**PLACE:** New York State Military Museum, Saratoga Springs, New York  
**INTERVIEWERS:** Wayne Clarke and Mike Russert

**BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:** James Koehler Baber, born in Kansas City, Missouri enlisted in the United States Army in 1939. Mr. Baber completed his basic training at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri before being assigned to the Sixth Armored Infantry. During maneuvers in the Southern United States, Mr. Baber met General Patton. Mr. Baber was deployed to Europe and wounded at Normandy. Upon recovering, Mr. Baber went to Saratoga Springs where he began formally courting the young lady he had been corresponding with during his service. She would later become his wife and they would settle in her hometown, Saratoga Springs, New York.

**SUBJECTS DISCUSSED:** Boot camp and Basic Training in the United States Army, maneuvers and war games; World War II, Pearl Harbor, General Patton, Normandy, casualties. Life after service, love during wartime, the impact of World War I and World War II on American families.

**VIDEO:** DVD

**LENGTH OF INTERVIEW:** 36 minutes

**TRANSCRIPT:** 5 PAGES

**James K. Baber**  
**Narrator**

**Wayne Clarke & Mike Russert**  
**New York State Military Museum**  
**Interviewers**

**October 21, 2004**  
**at the New York State Military Museum**  
**Saratoga Springs, NY**

**WC/MR:** Could you give me your full name?

**JB:** James Koehler Baber.

**WC/MR:** And your date of birth and place of birth, please?

**JB:** Born in Kansas City, Missouri. That was in 1920.

**WC/MR:** What was your educational background prior to entering the service?

**JB:** I went to grade school and graduated in 1939. There were hard times then, all over the country. People couldn't get jobs and such. Just getting out of school, I dropped into one of the stations that they had, where you go sign up for military service. One day, after I had walked by several times, I just stopped in there to see what was going on. I spent sometime in there and when I came out I was already signed up. I was nineteen years old.

**WC/MR:** This was 1939?

**JB:** This was 1939.

**WC/MR:** So you joined the army?

**JB:** I joined the army. Yes.

**WC/MR:** Where did you go for Basic Training?

**JB:** Jefferson Barracks, Missouri.

**WC/MR:** How long was your training?

**JB:** About a year or a year and a half. At that time the war was already going on over in Europe. We, the United States, hadn't gotten involved yet. We were in basic training.

**WC/MR:** In basic training, did you still have the 1903 rifles and the WWI helmets?

**JB:** Yes, we had the 1903 bolt. It was very, very shortly after that, that we got the Garand Rifle. The 1903 was history and everyone in the services got the Garand automatic.

**WC/MR:** Did you receive any specialized training after boot camp?

**JB:** After boot camp, which as I told you was done at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, they sent the Sixth Infantry, which I was in, down to Fort Knox. They were just forming the first armored divisions in the

country. The training down there was working the foot infantry along with the tanks, to see the way they worked together. For example, the tanks would take and move it on something and then the area would be stationary and occupied by the foot infantry. They would come in and hold it and take it over. We worked that way. We had artillery and then the tanks all working together-- the foot infantry in back of us, after the armor had pushed the enemy back and out of place. Then we would take over and seal up, or secure, what they had taken--so we had captured it.

**WC/MR:** You had a lot of war games and maneuvers?

**JB:** Yes, we did. We went down to the southern states and we had, what they call "half tracks"-- half track and half wheels. We used to ride them, that was our vehicle. After we had taken any length of land, the half track would move us up as far as they could. Artillery or anything like that would stay behind and we were strictly on our own-- the foot infantry. The regular infantry was for fast work. The artillery would soften everything up and then after they were done, the foot infantry would move in and occupy that land.

**WC/MR:** Do you remember where you were, and the reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

**JB:** Yes. I was up Pine Camp, New York. Today it is called Fort Drum. We woke up that morning and the Japanese had already bombed Pearl Harbor.

**WC/MR:** Do you remember the reaction from yourself and other men?

**JB:** I guess we all kind of just knew something was going to happen. With Europe at war, we knew that England and France and countries like that were like we were, that view. And the enemy really was the Japanese and the Germans. Gradually, everybody knew who they were with and who they were against. There was some confusion at first, but it didn't take long to iron that out. It was after that, we went down south in the States on maneuvers... All through Texas and Arizona, New Mexico. After several months, going onto a year, we just knew we were going overseas. I forget the exact year. It was forty or fifty years ago now, but it doesn't seem that far. We did go. We were put on ships.

**WC/MR:** Now what was your unit? Were you still the Sixth Infantry?

**JB:** Yes, as far as I can remember. The Sixth Armored Infantry is what they called us. They were moving the troops over at that time. The year that we went over was not the first year that the Japanese bombed, but the year after.

**WC/MR:** 1942?

**JB:** I'd say, yes.

**WC/MR:** Where did you go?

**JB:** France. We had some more training over there, just to keep us moving. Like when we were down south doing maneuvers, just to practice our job.

**WC/MR:** Did you go to England first? Before you were in the Normandy Invasion?

**JB:** Yes, we shipped out of England.

**WC/MR:** Did you do maneuvers there also?

**JB:** Basic stuff. Not an awful lot there. But before we first got there we had become familiar with the rifle and working together with the artillery and the aircraft. Maybe they would fly over first and soften up

the area, then they'd move the armored infantry in and occupy the land. It was in steps. First Air Force, then artillery, then occupation with the infantry. That was the method, the pattern.

**WC/MR:** Do you remember how long you were in England before you went into France?

**JB:** Eight or nine months, close to a year.

**WC/MR:** Were you in the Normandy Invasion?

**JB:** Well, the Normandy Invasion consisted of the aircraft first of all. Softening up the lines, bombing and then heavy artillery moving in. Softening it all up, waiting for us to move in. So, it was the aircraft, then the heavy artillery with tanks and the stuff that helped make a landing there...securing the land for occupation. After those 3 steps, the ground troops were firing the artillery to soften it up—then the Foot Infantry would move in and occupy that land. That was the thing—all the way through to Germany.

**WC/MR:** Do you remember when you landed at Normandy?

**JB:** I was not in the first wave of occupying because I was in the Armored Infantry. We weren't ready to let our tanks go in there. Maybe there would be a reverse and they would push us back? Then we'd have to leave a tank or something. We had to be sure that the land was occupied. The first wave was just plain foot infantry—after the artillery and everything had been through. It must have been about three or four days after the beach head was taken and established. We knew it was going to be ours. As they kept moving, it was slow. Penetrating through, deeper and deeper into France. It must have been the third or fourth day that our group moved in and I got hit. I got hit by shrapnel. I got a good dose of that. I got it in the head, in the chest, in the legs. With that stuff... when it hits, it spreads. God knows you're just lucky if it doesn't kill you right then and there. I was one of the fortunate ones. Right away, that was the end of me in France. I was hospitalized. I was taken back by our medics, along with other guys that were hit by shrapnel or artillery fragments... Eventually, I was taken to England where the United States had a hospital. I stayed there maybe three or four months and then I was sent back to the United States. I was through with active service. I went to the hospital in New York, a really famous hospital, I can't think of the name of it, but it was for G.I.s. I spent some more time recuperating there. I was in the service until 1945. From June of thirty-nine up to 1945, total of a little over six years.

**WC/MR:** You spent quite a bit of time hospitalized in England and the United States?

**JB:** All together, my hospital time was about six months.

**WC/MR:** What happened to you after you left the hospital?

**JB:** Before all of this, I was corresponding with this young lady right here [gestures off camera]. She was in High School. A friend of mine, in the service, showed me her picture and I liked the looks of that picture. So, I wrote her a letter. When I came back, the first place I went was her house. She lived here, in Saratoga, with her family and sister. I took the bus after they let me out of the hospital and came to her house. Well, she had a dog. She didn't come down *with* him, she sent him down there. I just got off the bus and I looked down the street and I didn't see anybody coming. She knew I was coming, I'd sent her a letter... I just see this dog up there. I said to myself, "I'm not looking for any dog." But the dog came all the way down to where the bus was. You'd think he was human being! I got off the bus and I was the only one that got off at that stop. He was a very friendly dog...just sniffing around...very quiet. He just turned around and started going back. Her house was about a block or two up the road. The dog, every once in a while, would look back to see if I was coming and I followed him up to her house.

**WC/MR:** Where were you discharged?

**JB:** I was in New York.

**WC/MR:** When you were in the armored units in the South, did you ever serve under or see Patton?

**JB:** I certainly did! Yes, sir! I was gonna tell you about him! He was the overall boss of all the units that were on maneuvers down there. He was the over all the other officers in the infantry, artillery and all others. He would go from one camp to another, to see how the training was coming along. When he'd get there, he would say, "I want to speak to the Sargent of the First Platoon of the Sixth Infantry." Well, he didn't know one man from Adam, but that's how he got somebody to talk with. He called my number, my rating and I had a talk with him that way.

**WC/MR:** What did you think of Patton?

**JB:** I thought he... [Takes a deep breath, collects emotions] Well, what did I think of him? I thought he was exceptional. He was upfront with the men. There are lots of stories. One of the stories was that this lieutenant was down on the ground, scanning the area to decide whether to make a charge or not. He was down there, with his field glasses, rightfully so--as that was his job. Well, here comes George! A lot of us used to call him George...not to his face. He saw the lieutenant laying down there with the field glasses and he says "What the hell ya doing down there? You can't see anything down there!" (Laughs). I'll never forget that. He wasn't afraid of nothing. Guys talk about a leader... They'd go anywhere with him. Of course he would never expose his position. But he was up front! I had seen him up there. I have a big display at home. My grandson, Justin, he bought me a great portrait of Patton. He has his helmet on and he's got the three stars. He went higher in ranks later on. He was a man that you'd do anything for. He set an example for everyone. I seen him quite a bit, didn't get to talk to him quite a bit though. I thought he was just...everybody thought—General Patton was everything to the soldiers all the way up to the highest ranks. He was well liked.

**WC/MR:** After you left service did you ever use the G.I. Bill?

**JB:** Yes, I did a couple things... I think they have done great with us. I think they treated us excellent! I think I speak for ninety percent of the soldiers, sailors, marines, and so forth.

**WC/MR:** Did you ever use the Fifty-two/Twenty Club?

**JB:** I may have.

**WC/MR:** Did you join any veteran's organizations after you left service? American Legion or VFW?

**JB:** Yes, yes.. and I am a member of the Purple Heart.

**WC/MR:** Did you stay in contact with anyone that was in the service with you?

**JB:** I did. Especially one person, Pat Kelly. He lived very close to Saratoga. I knew him for quite awhile, but he passed away. He had some kind of heart trouble. He passed away about five or ten years ago.

**WC/MR:** Did you ever see any USO shows?

**JB:** I have seen and enjoyed them. All and all, about the whole time, from the day I went in until I got out—I liked it. I have to say...I think it was great. I think the training I had in there was good and I got promoted up rank to Staff Tech. Sergeant until I got hit by that shrapnel. You knew, in time if you stick with it you will get some kind of rating.

**WC/MR:** Could you take a look at these? [Passes a photograph to JB] This is probably 1945?

**JB:** I'd say this is about 1945. I've got my combat infantry badge. [Holds photo up to camera; Handsome young man in fatigues, smiling for photo]

**WC/MR:** This one was probably taken around the same time. [Passes a second photograph] If you could hold that one up too.

[JB holds up formal portrait of young man in dress uniform]

**WC/MR:** Now who is that? [Passes third photograph to JB]

**JB:** That is from when I went back to where I used to live along time ago, before I went into the service. This is in Kansas City, Kansas. This was the night I ran into a fella that was living next door. His name was Alex Avango. He was in a different unit. I never even knew he was in the army .

**WC/MR:** Thank you very much for your interview.

**JB:** I enjoyed it. I got to tell you, if I can get through it. You gotta know this. My father was in the first World War. I'll make this as short as I can. He was gassed. As we all well remember that Germany used gas in World War One. He got a dose of that and that ended his time over there. He was hospitalized and to sum it up, this was 1917 or 18. Anyway, he lived and was sent back to the United States and he lived until he was twenty-seven years old and he passed away . That was number one. I had a brother, George and he went into the Navy. We were at war with Japan at the time. He was on a service ship and he was transferred to a ship in the Pacific. He went over there and the ship was sunk and we lost him. My young brother at nineteen years old. And you know how the women are taking this. My mother, losing her husband and my brother. I was in France and I got hit. Sure enough, number three for our family. She got the telegram from them. I don't think she was passed sixty when mother... She had to put up with losing her husband, my young brother at nineteen and then she had to put up with the telegram on me. God knowing they have no clue how bad off you are. What always goes through my mind, is these women. Even now, with this going on... It is tough times right now. Do they have youngsters that are going over there? Its just...

END OF RECORDING